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Corporatizing the Student Psyche

As one who has succumbed to the pressures of school for over a decade, and continuing, I think I have been endowed with a little bit of wisdom about the educational system. Namely, the values of corporate America are engulfing schools. Thirst for profit, competition, and information acquisition fuel both enterprises; what some now call the "knowledge industry" [1] follows the business and data-driven model of the workplace. Enormous bureaucracies in education measure us by solely focusing on restrictive variables, like teacher and student "success," retention rates, finances, and so on. More generally, schools uphold the maxim of efficiency by reducing the educational act to a feedback loop of information, menial committee work, and data inputting into computers. As a result, the art of teaching has been degraded in nearly all respects; suffice it to say, that teachers are being asked to 'facilitate' data transfer and are forced to assess class time with quantitative measurements. Commanded by administrative bosses, we, the teachers and students on the ground, suffer from the State's top priorities: numbers and finances.

Considered as digital units, what can we miniscule students do when facing the towering power of the bureaucracy and its relentless regimentation of life? And how do we to relate to notions of history and the human person, or anything besides what is current,[2] when pushed along the constant river rapids of information? The noble attempt to "leave no child left behind" might keep us from drowning, but when federal programs like these work, they merely throw us into the totality of working life. "Learn to code and work at the core of Silicon Valley, Apple!"… We, in the heart of the Motherland, might as well see this slogan posted all over campus.

From the data-driven business model, school has become a place where ideological assumptions are imposed on bewildered minds, not a place where the young can become free, responsible citizens. Of central concern is that "information education" controls and restricts our capacity to think. We cannot just brush off this problem as merely an unrealistic hypothesis without "objective proof" when it is so fundamental to the corporate attack on the human person and our experience of life.[3] Two disastrous consequences occur: **1** treated as a commodity the student becomes alienated, and **2** by and large, the nature of humanity becomes robotic.

[1]
Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University.* 5th ed. Cambridge, Harvard University, 2001. pp. 66.

[2]
Nietzsche quite shrewdly noted a commonality between our use of the word "current" in the sense of staying up to date on research and findings, and the word "currency" as it applies to the market economy. Both assume an ethic of emphasizing the utility of things or concepts, and not their true or normative import.
See: Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions.* Translated by Damion Searls, New York Review Books Classics, 2015, pp. 16.

The existential state of alienation, or estrangement from oneself and social environment, can be found in the economic theory of Karl Marx: "[The] external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that *it* is not his own, but someone else's, […] that in it *he* belongs, not to himself, but to another" (emphasis added).[4] For Marx, ordinary life activity under capitalist labor degrades human existence to a kind of thing, or commodity to be bought, sold, and quantified; both the maker and product become objects that function in a system evaluated in terms of 'efficiency'. Under such conditions, and with no job security, the worker lives in a survival mode and one step away from animal existence. Such a situation conforms to the so-called 'reality' of the given economic environment—like animals, to what actually 'is' the case, not to what 'is possible' for the good life.

Although students are not strictly "workers," there is an analogous relation in play: they produce works, essays, homework, tests, etc., under determined time considerations and receive grades in place of wages. Constant information and assignments pile up with a burden like that of the heavens on Atlas' shoulders. With so much work and so little time to live, each assignment with its added pressure becomes more and more meaningless. It seems as though students want nothing more than to finish and get the grade; we long for the experience of life because the work we perform lacks the nutrition the psyche needs. We suffer, like many digital workers today, from the model of labor as information exchange and our being a replaceable part, or function, in an impersonal network. The leaky vessel theory of education, mentioned by Noam Chomsky, explains the data-driven business model: a cracked vessel collects water, i.e. a student memorizes information for an assignment, and in time the forcibly retained water spills out.[5] As an aside, knowing this would parents and politicians still wonder why so many kids find recourse to drugs?

Alienation works, not at the hand of the teacher or boss, but, as Marcuse observes, because of a mechanized, "impersonal, […] rational, [and] effective" system of domination.[6] Fulfilling Marcuse's criteria, the rational apparatus of information education alienates students. The education system today compiles assignments and dishes out grades and diplomas with unprecedented speed and volume; it also requires and applies a quantitative assessment to students themselves. While skills may improve, this apparatus transforms the student psyche into a mechanized instrument destined to fulfill computational functions. Like workers at McDonalds or Google, the commodified students face the reality all too soon; with no alternative, our lives will be subjected to the mechanical, consumer model of the American dream.

Both teachers and students can relate to the example of the essay as an assignment and exercise in BS which fuels the school system. Philosopher Harry Frankfurt puts it this way: "Just as hot air is speech that has been emptied of all informative content, so excrement is matter from which everything nutritive has been removed."[7] To improve composition skills, the teacher hands out a prompt, and students must reach a page/word limit, fulfilling certain guidelines. The pervasive fill-in-the-blank method requires little thinking: students of the Digital Age can easily

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For an in-depth and factual examination of the data-driven model, and how it is imposed on education institutions (focusing on universities), see: Ginsberg, Benjamin. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters.* Oxford University, 2001.

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Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.* Translated by Martin Milligan, 1st manuscript, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1959. pp. 30. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.

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Chomsky, Noam. "Education: For Whom and For What?" *YouTube,* uploaded by The University of Arizona, 8 Feb 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_EgdShO1K8&t=618s. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.

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Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization.* Boston, Beacon, 1966. pp. 89.

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Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit.* Princeton University, 2005. pp. 43.

cut and paste, incorporate quotes without reading the text, and use a Thesaurus for the appearance of subtlety. Like the worker who becomes another mechanism in the industrial machine, the techno-literate student becomes a piece of information in a feedback loop from classroom to administration. The mechanism of the school system impresses upon those involved in BS that gathering and inputting information is an 'end in itself', to be desired on its own, and not a 'means' to what José Ortega y Gasset called "finding oneself in 'circumstances' or in the world around us."[8] Similar to the laborer's experience in the workplace, inputting information lacks the conditions for thoughts of one's own and a self-led, fulfilled life. For the system mandates that students memorize information, which, on its own, is hollow excrement without truly meaningful content.

The meaninglessness of the "dead" classroom, where students just sit and passively listen to the teacher, is another symptom of alienation. Most students are obliged to stay for the credits and some stubbornly refuse to participate; there are also those who think themselves most wise and decide to show up only on test day. However, a legal obligation forces the teacher to continue babbling to students who honestly could not care less. At this point education becomes the mere transfer of information from one data receptacle to another. Alienation arises when the teacher must comply with online assessment procedures and measure the qualitative existence of the student with numbers and quotas. But how can one quantify an intersubjective relation between student and teacher without essentially changing the experience?

To remedy the problem, our technological explosion in Silicon Valley is happily flooding schools with apps for the 'smart classroom' and its fancy, 'interactive' PowerPoint slides and laptops. Although the process might speed up information transfer, it further separates students from the teacher and each other; all are on their own screen. The classroom now becomes a space of 'collective solipsism', or being alone in a group, which gives the conditions for the emergence of the 'loner' (school shooter). Left in the fog of information with a screen which responds to every desire, the vulnerable student psyche may congeal because of a political ideology, views that one already agrees with; the psyche acquires a narcissistic subjectivity too attached to one's own likes and concerns, like one's favorite sites, music, bands, and so on. Schools fail to open students to a world of thought in order to 'see' what the full experience of life is, or educate in the most true sense. Perhaps it is for this reason, and now with the help of technology, that Ivan Illich so starkly contrasted school from education.[9]

Accidentally or not, teachers increasingly show students advertisements in the technology-driven classroom without a moment of reflection. The classroom should exist as a place between teacher and student, or master and mentee, to challenge thoughts. Rather, it is relegated to a center for indoctrination where students become subjects of a vast propaganda industry and the corporate reality of information overload without question. In the void created by the information-oriented classroom, advertisements rush in to fill the existential incompleteness of students with products we desire. And we students likely rest satisfied

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Ortega y Gasset, José. *The Revolt of the Masses.* Anonymous Translation, New York, Norton and Company, 1964. pp. 41.

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Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society.* New York, Marion Boyars, 2000, ch. 1.

and content…for the moment. Nevertheless, the problem of a totalitarian, hegemonic power has not dissipated. On the contrary, the apparatus further bombards us. Oversaturated with technology in the space that was once for teaching, learning, and questioning, we learn no escape from the so-called reality!

The 'real' value in education today lies in the attainment of a diploma as a means to a job and "success." Students no longer relate to any wider field of meaning. Because education is reduced to information exchange in the 'now', it is antagonistic to the examination of history, the critique of the present, and the possibilities for change in the future. Rather, a structure is given, and the business of schools is to mold the students to adapt to circumstances that change along with the market economy.[10] However, the problem of alienation remains: the individual, who now understands his/her subjectivity as an information processor in an impersonal network, can no longer see that this subjectivity belongs to something else.

Teachers, or "knowledge workers,"[11] are forced to treat teaching as merely passing on information to bodies of objective measurement. Race to the Top, a federal education program, defines "student growth" as "the change in student achievement between two or more points"—numerical measurements of progress![12] Moreover, teachers, and entire schools, receive more money or are punished based on these numerical variables of "student growth" and test scores.[13] The list goes on and on, but the central point is that an overpowering administrative apparatus organizes how students and teachers think. As Marcuse says, both are valued based on "standardized skills and qualities of adjustment" rather than "autonomous judgement and personal responsibility."[14] The highest concern to those in power is the numbers the teachers produce. Hence, it should come as no surprise that, most importantly, one must raise the numbers, not care for the student's psyche!

As it stands, the individual develops from a familial biological unit to a social atom, but the process of individuation—largely the purpose of education in a democratic society—has not occurred.[15] Individuation is similar to maturation: subjectivity, rather than remaining static or merging with societal norms, is a building process of life. One's experience of the world changes with this process of individuation, and responsibility plays an increasing role as one grows. However, the data-driven business education model programs students to accept the reality of the technological working world; we are conditioned by performing various computational, calculative tasks. Responsibility and care for the psyche, loved ones, the city, and the global economic reality is relegated to performing spurious functions at the command of a technological power far greater than any one individual. Students are taught to interpret the plethora of information mostly for statistical analysis, but not to help locate them properly into their historical world of thought. This latter goal, while difficult to accomplish, is necessary for truly individual action.

Controlled by the bureaucratic machine, the school system promotes the rule of technological domination, and the developing child has to accept his/her own regimentation into the technological

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For an essay on this topic specifically, see another article in this magazine: Robert Lee, "Schools for Simians." The Gadfly: Education in the 21st Century. San José, 2019.

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Jerald, Craig D. *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education.* National Governors Association, 2008, www.corestandards.org/assets/0812BENCHMARKING.pdf. Accessed 21 Feb. 2019. pp. 27.

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Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization.* Boston, Beacon, 1966. pp. 96.

regime. Such becomes obvious with the rise of the STEM educational project—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. The STEM system is Obama's attempt to bring the U.S. back to world power in the technological age. One should take the acronym in the most literal sense: these fields of study comprise the "stem," or backbone, of American society and progress. Or, as Obama said, scientific progress is "in our DNA."[16] At the root of the educational stem is our American belief, which students directly experience in schools, that is, that information and objective data ought to be the measure of labor and progress. The initiative, which starts in elementary school and continues through graduate school, pushes kids to drop artistic and humanistic studies, or 'pastimes', and comply with the current social obligation to be scientists and engineers.

Surely, education should have "practical" or economic and technological effects and people should consider the finances and data of educational institutions, etc. However, a society cannot center the goals of education upon such flimsy grounds—the obsession with the present technological reality of data and economic exchange—without confronting the disastrous consequences of a homogeneous totality *(1984).* Totalitarianism sneaks in with these seemingly good intentions; the reduction of the educational act to information exchange and the alienation of those involved effectively distracts us from critical intellectual activity and freedom of thought beyond calculation and commodification.

At this point, many readers probably have a sneaking suspicion about this criticism; it seems to ignore quite blatantly that what really goes on in the classroom is more colorful than the mindless, mechanical view proposed. A common experience actually proves otherwise: in most classrooms, especially concerning the humanities, teachers allocate time for students to discuss and express their own opinions. Many teachers create a "safe space" and facilitate what may seem like differing points of view. Does not this practice undermine the argument that education is merely quantitative and mechanical when students shout out their different beliefs?

This concern, while of great importance, cannot be fully examined within the parameters of this essay. But in short, what happens with the "facilitator of opinion" view of teaching is that teachers promote an extreme subjectivity and thoughtless spirit by simply having students express themselves with polite disagreement, or usually none at all. Told to accept one's subjectivity as it is, the student does not learn to critique neither him/herself nor society. One's subjective desires are then in danger of becoming a mechanical reaction ("I like!" "I dislike!") and, as seen through numerous school shootings, an ideological cause of violence!

Further, the contemporary classroom-circus as a "safe space" for diversity of opinion presupposes the belief that reality consists of facts (objective data known through science); as already established, the data of grades and testing have priority over the actual classroom experience. Besides facts, there remain copious expressions of subjective emotions or opinions. Put another way, our information-oriented schools teach us that there is no alternative to the "real world" of labor as various information

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Ibid.

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Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President at White House Science Fair." White House Science Fair, The White House, 23 Mar. 2015, East Room. Speech. obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/23/remarks-president-white-house-science-fair. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.

analyses and computational performances; at the same time, we are entitled to our opinions, which are thought of as being no better or worse than any others are. But these opinions—concerning important issues like gun control, the gender wage gap, and self-expression—distract us from examining the control of our totalitarian system. In this way, this practice sets people up for the reality of automated life: get a tech job at Facebook and feel comfortable with your opinion about, say, the national implementation of transgender bathrooms![17] (But the reader would do well not to misinterpret the present writer as transphobic).

The question to ask is not whether practical, scientific education programs are good or bad, for we of course need to understand technology and its relation to humans and the earth. However, we must be concerned with how too much information and calculative thinking occlude a world of thought and freedom. As labor becomes more specialized, we students have less of an opportunity to live our own lives, but act more in accordance with the demands of the current reality. We must conform to a constantly unstable, fluctuating apparatus which survives on propaganda and menial robotic functions. The regimentation of the psyche to computational performances, with the exclusion of history, the ideas upon which our freedom was founded, and autonomous responsibility, makes it impossible to separate totalitarianism from American schools.

What project must we students now take on, then, to lift the future of education and hence the life of American citizens for generations to come? There is no quick-and-easy answer to the threat that the human condition is becoming parasitic on a technologically progressed machine. Out of my own ignorance, and feeling of helplessness, I have no intentions, nor ability, to provide a systematic answer to the question, …but only introduce some thoughts which the explorations in this essay have been concerned with: before the human person becomes totally absorbed into the medium of its own making, our education must address the matters of the human person and our unquestioned faith in technology; further, it must bring about in students a humble fidelity to the lessons of history, a skepticism of the present, and, most importantly, an affirmation of both the uncertainty and possibility that is the future.

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I make this comment in light of a recent letter by Silicon Valley executives, including Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, to a governor concerning the discrimination of transgender people in regard to public bathrooms. *North Carolina CEO Letter,* Human Rights Campaign, 11 April 2016. assets2. hrc.org/files/assets/resources/NC_CEO_Letter_(3). pdf?_ga=2.236995783.676689029.1550623183- 103161153.1550623183. Accessed 19 Feb. 2019.

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