
Democracy & Education

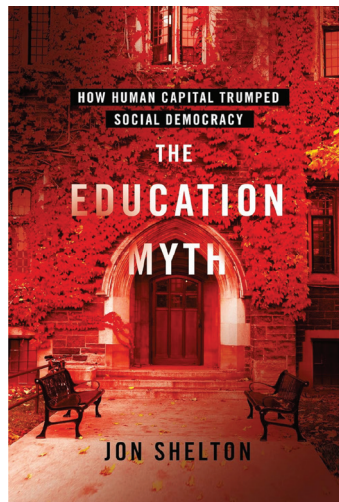
Myths Economic and Civic.

A Book Review of *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*

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IN THE FIRST quarter of the 21st century, the United States has experienced historic levels of economic inequality and political polarization, inspiring some observers to label this moment a “Second Gilded Age” (Karp, 2021). One difference between the Second Gilded Age and the first is the existence today of universal compulsory schooling through the high-school level. This difference is significant because the American K–12 public education system emerged largely in response to the social problems of the Industrial Revolution and the First Gilded Age. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformers envisioned a mass-schooling system with the dual goals of providing equal opportunities for individual prosperity and cultivating civic competence for democratic self-government. In other words, public schools were to convert raw labor power into human capital while molding intelligent and cooperative citizens—a nifty solution to America’s mounting social problems, to be sure, but perhaps too large a burden for one institution to bear alone. More than 100 years later, K–12 public education does not appear to be actualizing its dual goals of leveling the playing field and harmonizing the polity. In fact, the United States is nearly as unequal and at odds with itself as it was at the time of public education’s great expansion. What explains the coexistence of mass schooling with runaway inequality and polarization? Has the traditional vision for U.S. public education passed its expiration date?

Historian Jon Shelton attempts to answer these questions in *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. Shelton is chair of the Democracy and Justice Studies program



at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay and the author of the 2017 book *Teacher Strike! Public Education and the Making of a New American Order*. Shelton’s latest account of modern U.S. educational history centers the contest of ideals between “human capital,” a policy vision in which education goads the individual to enhance the competitive value of their labor power, and “social democracy,” a policy vision in which education is but one among many welfarist goods provided by the

state to support individual and collective flourishing (Shelton, 3–4). The book’s main claim is that, for well over half a century, U.S. education policy at the federal and state levels has been favoring the human-capital theory over the social-democratic theory to the detriment of America’s economic and civic well-being. According to Shelton, human-capital policy is premised on a pernicious “education myth” in which schooling possesses the alchemical power of fixing the economic inequalities created by capitalism. Instead of edifying individuals against competition by delivering robust welfare guarantees (of which education would be but one of many), human-capital policies ask individuals to lift themselves up without additional support beyond the school. Social-democratic education policy, by contrast, eschews the “education myth” and

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puts schooling in its proper place as a provider of social welfare and a molder of democratic citizens (10–11).

Shelton calls his book a political history of the “education myth,” narrating its development from the early 20th century to the present day. The introductory chapter traces the social-democratic vision to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Economic Bill of Rights and the human-capital vision to Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, explaining how the latter came to prominence because of the Democratic Party’s generational failure to instantiate the New Deal as permanent policy. Since the Great Society, directing public education toward human capital has perpetuated a meritocratic mythology in which schooling’s “winners” deserve lifelong prosperity and its “losers” deserve far less. Furthermore, human-capital education has devalued the democratic project of civic and political engagement, creating an America where government primarily serves to facilitate marketable education and citizenship is defined not by one’s overall contribution to their community but by their ability to spin their education into economic prosperity.

The book’s first two chapters tell the prehistory of the social-democratic and human-capital theories. Chapter 1 argues that structural shifts in American political economy between the founding and the industrial era—specifically, the shift from “economic independence” through land ownership to “economic security” through wage work—threw open the Overton windows for both social-democratic and human-capital policies. Chapter 2 recounts how close America came during Roosevelt’s tenure to establishing a well-rounded social democracy that promised basic economic goods like housing, nutrition, jobs, social security, and public education. Instead of making these goods permanent, however, the Democratic Party compromised with the right-wing reaction to the New Deal, reversing or relenting on many of their previous commitments. One major result was that public education became the go-to policy substitute for the retreating welfare state.

Chapter 3 brings human capital to the foreground as Shelton analyzes the policies driving the War on Poverty during the 1960s. Johnson-style Democrats viewed public education as the antidote to economic inequality, passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (which included Title I funding to low-income schools) to target the “ignorance” behind mass poverty (Shelton, 64). By the end of the 1960s, human capital had one-upped social democracy but had not quite vanquished it. Chapter 4 tells of the resurgence of progressive educational thought in the 1970s as Jimmy Carter’s administration tried to revive a flailing economy. In Shelton’s savvy telling, we learn of a lost “educare” policy program, proposed by Carter’s teacher-union base, that aimed to combine numerous social-democratic benefits into a holistic package to be distributed by the now-extinct Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Unfortunately, Carter let his base’s ambitious “educare” proposal die without a real political fight, paving the way for the Reagan administration’s acceleration of human-capital policy.

Chapter 5 pivots to the 1980s and the Department of Education’s infamous “A Nation at Risk” report that blamed teachers and local schools for American children’s educational

underperformance and launched the market-driven standards movement that persists to the present-day. Chapters 6 and 7 move on to the Clinton administration of the 1990s. Here, Shelton shows how the president’s “what you earn depends on what you learn” theory solidified human capital as Democratic common sense (Shelton, 122). Early in his administration, Clinton tied Title I funding to increased state standards and later passed crime and welfare-reform bills, ratcheting up the pressure on public schools to provide the economic and social security that the shrinking welfare state now withheld. Chapter 8 begins at the turn of the 21st century with George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act and the subsequent explosion of standardized testing, conditional federal funding, performance-based accountability for teachers, incentives for charter school expansion, and more.

Chapter 9 caps off Shelton’s political history of the education myth with a flyover view of how the Obama and Trump administrations advanced human-capital education. Shelton reviews how Obama doubled down by promoting market-oriented charter schools and college prep, while Trump appointed a billionaire fundamentalist and anti-public-schooler, Betsy DeVos, to head the Department of Education. According to Shelton, these policy moves motivated a new anti-human-capital, pro-education resistance movement spearheaded by teacher unions promoting social democracy (Shelton 189–93). The book’s epilogue envisions a possible social-democratic future in which public education fortifies the American welfare state by focusing on its civic mission of nurturing democratic citizens.

The Education Myth makes a valuable contribution to the critique of market fundamentalism within U.S. education policy. It is an inspired history aimed at the contemporary issues of economic inequality, fiscal austerity, school privatization, anti-unionism, and more. Its most important insight is that the so-called “education myth” is a bipartisan delusion that constrains the policies of both major parties. That said, although the book explains the roots of public education’s economic problems very well, it could engage more substantively with the roots of its civic problems. For, just as universal public schooling has not solved economic inequality, neither has it cured the political polarization that perennially divides American democracy. Shelton consistently faults the human capitalists’ education myth for diverting public schools from their civic mission of molding an engaged citizenry. But without fully connecting the causal dots between human capital and civic underperformance, how can we be sure that this is the correct explanation? It seems plausible to argue that there is a civic education myth in addition to the economic one that Shelton highlights.

A compelling next installment in Shelton’s history would thus be to acknowledge this other education myth that offloads American democracy’s perennial problems onto K–12 public schools. Explaining how these twin economic and civic myths entwine with and codetermine each other would deliver a genuinely dialectical analysis of the current educational juncture and more clearly map the terrain on which K–12 public schooling can be defended in the 21st century. By relinquishing the unreasonable

expectations that U.S. public schools will be both economic equalizers and civic harmonizers, we will be able to defend them on the basis of the actual goods they deliver.

References

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