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The Education Commodity Proposition

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The education commodity proposition first appears in institutional cultures as a simplification of decision procedures. It is comparable to the simplifications in decision-making that accompany what political economists call the "labor commodity proposition" (Bowles & Gintis, 1986). One of the foundations of the capitalist economy is the idea that individuals are free to sell their labor as a commodity that is fundamentally no different from other commodities, being part of a marketplace with price competitions governed by supply and demand. The labor commodity proposition (i.e., that labor is just like any other commodity) justifies, among other things, the persistence of efficiency-oriented decision procedures and data-driven management strategies in which labor is represented as if it were simply another purchasable component in the production process, to be sought for as cheaply as possible and utilized with maximal efficiency. It is the labor commodity proposition that provides the terms for justifying the existence of sweatshops and not providing a living wage.

Of course, labor is actually unlike other commodities (such as a TV or car), because labor is *inalienable* from the person who "sells" it. You cannot separate the laborer from the labor. When I sell you my TV in exchange for a sum of money, you walk away with the TV and I walk away with the money. But when I sell you my labor, I must live through the work to be done. The valuation of my labor (assigning it a numerical, cash value) and my fulfillment of the employment contract (exchanging my labor for what it is deemed to be worth) implicate me both physically and psychologically in a way that the exchange of my TV for cash does not.

The analogy between labor and other commodities breaks down once the economy is understood not merely as a system of exchange, but also as a system of employment. It is not just *things* that are caught up in market dynamics; there are also *people* being exchanged, their capacities and time being purchased. Framing economic issues in terms of the analogy "labor is a commodity" removes considerations about the human side of the labor-exchange relationship, simplifying its representation in terms of monetary units, and depoliticizing it by turning it into an impersonal relationship (like the selling of a TV) to be negotiated and determined in terms of what the market will bear, as opposed to what justice requires due to the involvement of *persons*. An oversimplification similar to the labor commodity proposition accompanies the use of large-scale standardized testing infrastructures. It is this oversimplification that I have referred to as the *education commodity proposition* (Stein, 2016; 2019).

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Testing can be used to put a number on a "unit" of education, giving it a quantitative value and making it amenable to certain kinds of decision-making calculations, such as cost-benefit analysis and the estimation of returns on investment. That is, testing allows educational processes to be conceived as if they are no different from other commodities, simplifying their representation to monetary transactions that can be considered in terms of economic efficiencies. I discuss the education commodity proposition in both of my books. In this guest column I offer only an overview of the problem space.

On the Return of Investments in Education

The clearest examples of the education commodity proposition involve those who *invest* in educational processes, such as governments, philanthropies, and venture capital. Simply put, if the *amount* of education you are getting for your investment is represented (only or predominately) by the numbers generated on tests, then moving these numbers becomes the only way to "see" those changes in the value of the educational process, which is the intended result of the investment. If you do not measure it you cannot monetize it, and if you cannot monetize something then you cannot technically "see" if an economic investment has worked. This summarizes the main problem facing governments that invest tax dollars in public education and are then required to demonstrate that this public money was well spent. The watchword here is "accountability." In these situations test scores are used to translate (or re-represent) the value of educational processes in economic terms. The same kind of decision procedures are used by philanthropic donors and venture capitalists, both of whom must demonstrate due diligence when putting money toward the improvement of education. Improvements can only be monetized if they can be measured in ways amenable to quantitative demonstrations of return on investment.

The education commodity proposition also frames the decision-making of those who are responsible for organizing educational institutions. It impacts the thinking of school leaders who are concerned about their own budgets and the effectiveness and efficiency of their internal policies. For example, the value of a new math curriculum is easily turned into a question about the relationship between its cost and the test-score gains that result. If the math curriculum that produces the best scores is too expensive, then the next best affordable option will be chosen, often irrespective of other salient differences between the two curriculums. Curricular decision-making becomes guided by the calculus of cost-benefit analysis, which removes a wide variety of complex considerations from the table by distilling the problem down to its "essence": economic efficiency. More importantly, suppose this next best curriculum produces test-score gains but causes students to dislike math, creates misunderstandings not detected by the test, or results in teacher burnout. These are just a few examples of differences in educational value that easily and regularly escape measurement and therefore are not included in the official calculation of what a curriculum is "worth." Because of the ubiquity and pressure of economic issues in schools, even the most well-meaning leaders often find themselves trapped by the terms and "logic" of the educational commodity proposition.

On the "Value-Added" by Teachers

Teachers occupy a unique position in school systems because, according to the terms of the education commodity proposition, they can be understood as selling a distinct type of *educational labor.* That is, they exchange their ability to teach for the means of their livelihood. This is important because above all other educational goods potentially conceived as commodities (from books to computers), it is *teaching*

that has the most potential to add value to educational processes. It is also one of the most *expensive* aspects of schooling. Therefore, teaching is (and has been since the late nineteenth century) one of the central focuses of testing-intensive determinations of the value of educational processes. Yet like all forms of labor, teaching is *inalienable* from the teacher. Unlike improved school buildings, lunch programs, or technologies, determinations of the educational value-added by a teacher concerns the work done by an individual who can adapt the nature of that work to the methods used to determine its value. Teachers often come to understand their own work according to the measurement categories used to determine its value, which can distort educational processes in profound ways.

The problem of determining the educational value-added by individual teachers easily lends itself to simplification through cost-benefit analysis via testing. Two cheap inexperienced teachers whose students show moderate gains can be hired for the price of one veteran teacher whose students show gains that are only slightly larger, controlling costs while providing for twice the number of students. Of course, there are countless *undetected* forms of educational value provided by teachers that are not factored into such calculations, such as their ability to foster independent thinking, deal with interpersonal struggles, or bring hope and humor into the lives of their students. Likewise, bad teachers can raise test scores while off-loading the collateral damage done by their pedagogy onto *unmeasured* facets of students' lives by creating toxic levels of stress, promoting mind-numbing test prep approaches to learning, or by simply focusing attention only on those students whose improvements are key to raising the aggregate class score (e.g., ignoring the top of the class who will score well regardless, as well as the bottom who will score poorly even if they show gains).

This is how the education commodity proposition comes to structure the thinking and actions of teachers: *they adapt their teaching to the terms used to quantify it*. The full range of educational values made possible through a teacher's abilities cannot be represented in terms of test-score gains, so teachers put their energies toward those values that can be. While tenure and seniority can limit the impact of this approach to quantifying educational value, they do not eliminate it. This is because students (and their parents) and administrators often perceive a teacher's value according to the terms of the education commodity proposition, even if the teacher does not (Ravitch, 2013).

On Students as Consumers and Products

Students themselves are subject to the terms of the education commodity proposition in more complex and ethically fraught ways than any other participants in the educational system. According to the terms of the education commodity proposition, students are cast as consumers of educational goods who are free to make complex judgments about the value of the institutions they choose to enter. Of course, younger students technically have no choice because their parents or guardians choose for them as proxies, but the idea remains that families have an interest in making informed decisions about the value of their educational options. Because school systems are routinely ranked according to test scores, test results often determine what neighborhood or suburb a family chooses to live in; the more affluent the family, the easier it is to make that educational criterion a top decisive priority.

Regardless of where students go to school and the range of options that are open to them, in the United States they are forced by law to spend a large portion of their waking hours in school until the age of 16, or 18 in some states. Even at the college level, where students are finally free to choose for themselves where to go or whether to go at all, the economic drawbacks of not attending college are perceived to

be so great that it has become a kind of forced choice. Those who do not attend typically describe themselves as unable to go (usually for financial reasons); they do *not* describe themselves as unwilling or as not wanting to go (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This means that the marketplace for education is unlike the marketplaces that exist for other goods. Markets for the vast majority of other goods are not predicated on legally mandated consumption or long-term negative drawbacks resulting from a failure to consume (notable exceptions are the health care and insurance industries). The contemporary rhetoric concerning "school choice," which leans heavily in favor of a privatized school system that functions more like a "true marketplace," tends to ignore the fact that the vast majority of marketplaces are entered and exited voluntarily (Ravitch, 2010). However, educational primary goods are not commodities, they are entitlements—access to these goods is *a basic right*—and their just dissemination requires decision-procedures that transcend but include those emphasized by the education commodity proposition (Stein, 2016).

Student loan debt in the United States alone constitutes one of the largest speculative bubbles in modern times. To get a sense, I simply used a common Internet search engine to answer basic question about the state of student indebtedness. The debt crisis is no secret and does not require special research skills, and our complacency is yet another sign of how the education commodity proposition has saturated into our culture. Currently the total student loan debt in the United States is estimated to be approximately $1.5 trillion and growing daily (close to $3,000 per second by some estimates). The average individual owes over $37,000, but a growing percentage owe over $150,000. The average monthly payment is $393, but ranges up to over $1,000 for some private loans and/or combinations of loans across multiple financial service providers. Student loans are paid off over an average of 20 years, with many only finally being settled in old age, if ever. Approximately 5 million federal student loan debtors are in default, a number that is also growing daily. At any scale this is a lot of money. More disturbingly, at the rate things are going it appears that much of the educational debt currently owed will never be repaid. A loan is taken out to get certain skills, which then lead to a job providing reimbursements insufficient to repay that loan. This pattern is systemic. This is why I called the student debt situation a speculative bubble. All parties are banking on the diploma being worth a certain amount on the labor market, but often it is not.

Understand also that many schools and colleges are themselves in various forms of debt. The same financial institutions loaning to schools that want to build new classrooms are also loaning to students who want to fill those new classrooms. The schools take the student loan money and use it to pay off debt, essentially paying the bank back with the bank's own money. At the end of the day it is the students who are paying interest for decades after graduation, essentially footing the bill for the whole operation. This is similar in structure to the speculative real estate bubble that contributed to sinking the U.S. economy in 2007–2008. In that case it was the same banks financing developers to build houses that also financed the mortgages of people who wanted to live in those houses. These schemes all work fine until one of the parties fails to come through, which is inevitable. It is usually the person taking out the mortgage or the student loan who pays the price when the spreadsheets need to balance out (Harvey, 2016).

The point here concerns the broad injustice and inefficiency of running a debt-based system of education, which requires that vast populations take on personal debt to gain access to basic educational goods. Thoughts of future debt payments influence how students choose their major and

then their job, and prospects of taking on more debt limits access to graduate school. Those who attend school do so knowing that the cost is perpetual indebtedness. This encodes a monetary logic into the educational experience—the "logic" of the *education commodity proposition.*

The role of student-as-consumer undermines the role of student-as-learner. When a consumer has taken out a loan to make their purchase, they tend to be quite concerned about their return on investment and will often pull "the customer is always right" card. This blurring of the distinction between student and consumer is the root of some difficulties on college campuses, where students are increasingly seeking to censor the ideas they disagree with. They are aware that each moment they are on campus is costing them future income and freedom; they are consumers going into debt to be in school. They are thus entitled to "have it their way," as they would when purchasing any other commodity. Where the *consumer* is always right, the *learner* is actually interested in being proven wrong and in benefiting from that experience. Because education is presented as a commodity (and not as a basic right) some students understand themselves merely as *consumers* of educational goods.

As important as these reflections are, the idea of school choice and the related analogy of the student-as-consumer can sometimes obscure the fact that students are also the *product* of the educational system. Children are not mere customers in the market for educational goods, they are also the product or "output" of the educational system. School systems want to measure the quality of their output, so test scores are used to objectively represent changes in students' abilities (i.e., "learning" is understood as test-score gains). The terms of the education commodity proposition allow us to literally represent students' psychological lives as objects with quantitative properties that can be monetized. When an educational process is evaluated in these terms students are understood as an "outcome" or "product" of the educational system. Students are the depositories of the value-added by investments in a new curriculum or teaching staff. It is in student's skills and capabilities where the value-added measurement must be detected. If more money is put into a school, then better students ought to come out. In order to know *how much* better the students are, their intellects and skills must be rendered quantifiable. This way of thinking characterizes students as a kind of "raw material" that is worked over as it makes its way through production processes. This way of thinking provides a framework for efficiency-oriented educational reforms, which can proceed as if schools are factories or start-up companies (Stein, 2013; 2019). This way of thinking gives roots to the growth of testing-induced injustice, which penetrates the very structure of our thought and action.

Towards a Decommodification of Educational Relationships

Once the "logic" of the education commodity proposition becomes clear, the situation appears unacceptable. In the interest of efficiency and objectivity, educators have been measuring, quantifying, and redescribing students as if they are commodities. This view of the situation would have part of educational reform focus on *the decommodification of education*. This begins with the disentanglement of economic incentives from educational activities, as Socrates argued long ago in his debates with the Sophists. An educational relationship, like the relationship between parent and child, is not reducible to a market transaction without it becoming fundamentally distorted. When the sons (sic) of the ruling class paid the Sophists to teach them rhetoric, it was solely for the return on investment it provided in the realms of commerce and politics. Socrates was interested in actually teaching these young men

what they needed to know (which is that they truly know nothing); he was opposed to merely teaching what is useful to know and thus worth investing in, which is not true education but mere sophistry.

Some of the most important work educators must undertake involves insulating their work from being reduced to a transactional and exchange relationship. The realms of teaching, learning, and student life are realms in which non-strategic and non-instrumental forms of relationship should be primary. We must be cautious about the degree to which the measures and "logic" of the education commodity proposition colonize the lifeworld of educational institutions (Habermas, 1987; Young, 1990). This means working to design new practices for the organization of school governance, curriculum and assessment, funding structures, and a host of other major social systems (as I outline in Stein, 2019). However, these things take time. Students, teachers, and administrators can begin right now to understand themselves and each other differently.

Let us explicitly address the elephant in the room: teachers, students, and administrators are all subject against their will to the terms of the education commodity proposition. The politics of education are no longer really about within-school conflicts between students, teachers, and administration (and all various combinations and alliances), as it has been since the 1960s. Today the situation is one in which everyone involved in education can embrace a shared concern about the encroachment of approaches that are hyper-quantified, over-financialized, market-driven, and pedagogically naive. The education commodity proposition is the keystone of the broader framework of *reductive human capital theory*, which I discuss at length elsewhere (Stein, 2013; 2019). If the keystone is removed, the whole edifice crumbles. Innovations in the decommodification of education are potentially massively powerful leverage points for social change.

About the Author

Dr. Stein's interests are in the practices of justice and education. These involve his specializations in developmental psychology and ethics. He studied philosophy and religion at Hampshire College, and then educational neuroscience, human development, and the philosophy of education at Harvard University. While a student at Harvard, Dr. Stein co-founded what would become Lectica, Inc., a non-profit dedicated to the research-based, justice-oriented reform of large-scale standardized testing in K-12, higher-education, and business. Dr. Stein has published on a wide range of topics including the philosophy of learning, educational technology, and integral theory. His work has appeared in a variety of academic journals including, *American Psychologist*, *New Ideas in Psychology*, *Mind, Brain, and Education*, *Integral Review*, and the *Journal of Philosophy of Education.* He has taught classes at Harvard University, Meridian University, and JFK University. His invited speaking engagements span a wide range of venues, from the National Security Agency to off-the-grid spiritual retreat centers.

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