**Revisiting Adorno on the “Dialectic of Enlightenment” in Education “After Auschwitz”**

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**ABSTRACT:**

In our paper we explore how Theodor Adorno applied key insights from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – his influential collaboration Max Horkheimer – in articles and interviews concerning education. These works, we hope to show, are startlingly relevant to the interface between pathologies of contemporary capitalism – ecological crises, the new nationalist populisms, deepening intersectional inequalities, and pitfalls of technology and the culture industries – and the predominant institutions and practices of education. In “Education After Auschwitz,” Adorno contends that the primary responsibility of education is to help ensure “that Auschwitz not happen again” ([1967] 2003, 19). This task, he insists, “is not a question of psychology, but of society” (22). Nonetheless, he envisions a vital role for education to counteract the “lack of reflection” exhibited by “those who unreflectingly vented their hate and aggression” on others; and he argues, "The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection” (21). The implications of these ideas reach farther than “the recurrence or non-recurrence of fascism” (22), which Adorno prioritized, to encompass how education might work to either empower or inhibit people’s capacities for critical self-reflection and democratic action on the myriad moral-political challenges of our time. Moreover, Adorno’s thoughts on education and the “dialectic of enlightenment” speak powerfully to the threats posed to educational institutions themselves insofar as they aim to foster critically reflective citizens – e.g., market-driven pressures favoring instrumentalization, commercialization, and vocational relevance; neo-liberal and populist challenges to “liberal arts” education and “critical” pedagogies; and the promise and pitfalls of new technologies and mass media (PCs, cell phones, the internet, web-based learning systems, social media, etc.) as sources of information, misinformation, opinion, and distraction.

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Every thought which is not idle … bears branded on it the impossibility of its full legitimation, as we know in dreams that there are mathematics lessons, missed for the sake of a blissful morning in bed, which can never be made up. Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.

– Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1947)[[1]](#endnote-1)

[I]t is conceivable that a university rationalized as a factory would exert an influence on cultural self-understanding and on the norms of social actors indirectly and without being conscious of its own role in doing so.

– Jürgen Habermas, “The University in a Democracy: Democratization of the University” (1967)[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Introduction**

There is a tradition of philosophical and political theorizing about “crises of education” in complex modern societies.[[3]](#endnote-3) At issue is not only the importance of education for political, economic, and cultural life, but also the extent to which educational institutions are enmeshed in the hopes and contradictions of democracy and capitalism. Higher education alone faces multiple challenges in our time, particularly insofar as it aims to equip students not only to be economically productive members of society, but to think critically as citizens about the complex moral-political challenges we confront. Students face intense economic pressures to pursue post-secondary education, but with an emphasis on gaining “practical” vocational skills that promise economic benefits after graduation; there are declining enrollments in and declining institutional support for the humanities in many countries[[4]](#endnote-4); colleges and universities are enmeshed in deep class, racialized, gendered, and colonial inequalities that have shaped the modern world; and colleges and universities are grappling with distracting and potentially destabilizing new technologies in and beyond educational institutions, starting with the pervasive use of computers, the internet, online learning platforms, and the rise of artificial intelligence technologies like Chat GPT.

These issues bring us back to concerns that Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno raised in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They argued that while social freedom is dependent upon enlightened thought, the lack of critical reflection on the ever-increasing human capacity to dominate nature – itself a legacy of the European Enlightenment – risks great harm to human life and to our planet. Horkheimer and Adorno warned about the eclipse of the cultivation of critical reason and judgment in education and in society more broadly. They feared that an ever-intensified focus of fostering means to “dominate” nature and maximize production is displacing efforts to cultivate critical thinking and democratic decision making. Instead of fostering reflection on what we should do, how we should live, and how we should organize what Marx called our “interchange with nature,” higher education in late capitalist societies is instead tasked with managing the cyclical crises inherent to the capitalist mode of production.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Adorno in particular went on to analyze how this dialectic applies to challenges in the field of education. His analysis, we contend, is startlingly relevant to the interface between pathologies of contemporary capitalism – ecological crises, the new nationalist populisms, deepening intersectional inequalities, and pitfalls of technology and the culture industries – and the predominant institutions and practices of education. In “Education after Auschwitz,” Adorno contends that the primary responsibility of education after the Holocaust is to help ensure “that Auschwitz not happen again.”[[6]](#endnote-6) This task, he insists, “is not a question of psychology, but of society.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Nonetheless, he envisions a vital role for education to counteract the “lack of reflection” exhibited by “those who unreflectingly vented their hate and aggression” on others.[[8]](#endnote-8) The implications of Adorno’s analysis reach farther than “the recurrence or non-recurrence of fascism” to encompass how education might work to either empower or inhibit people’s capacities for critical self-reflection and democratic action on the many moral-political challenges of our time.

In what follows, we focus on Adorno’s analysis of the challenges of education “after Auschwitz,” which for him crystalized the dangers of instrumental reasoning becoming unmoored from critical reflection and judgment. We begin, however, by situating Adorno’s thought in relation to three critical analyses of twentieth century capitalist societies that anticipate Adorno’s analysis of the challenges of education “after Auschwitz”: Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of the general contours of institutionalized national education systems in capitalist societies by the early twentieth century in the *Prison Notebooks*, which highlights basic tensions in the democratic promises and inegalitarian actualities that loom over these systems; Herbert Marcuse’s related examination of challenges to “democratization” at the interface of “technological” and “critical rationality” in the use of new technologies of production and consumption in capitalist societies; and how Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s understanding of the “dialectic of enlightenment” as it relates to education in contemporary capitalist societies. We then turn to Adorno’s analysis to flesh out its salience for grappling with contemporary challenges in education and offer some tentative conclusions.

**I.** **Gramsci and Marcuse on the Genesis of Modern Rationalized Education Systems**

Writing in the early 1930s, Antonio Gramsci elaborates an incisive radical democratic critique of then emerging national education systems in capitalist societies. These systems were in the process of being widely institutionalized and in the 21st century they have largely retained – despite national variations – the basic form that Gramsci outlined and critiqued almost a century ago. He highlights what he regards as an “educational crisis” in how the basic character of these national educational systems in capitalist societies clashed with the egalitarian aims of democracy.[[9]](#endnote-9) While Gramsci was not yet encountering new technologies that would exacerbate the “dialectic of enlightenment” in education, he highlights key power dynamics and a mode of class division that shape the challenges poses by these technologies. Moreover, his analysis represents one version of a democratic-socialist perspective that foreshadows Adorno’s emancipatory perspective, although in a more programmatic way.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Gramsci observes that the increasing complexity of modern industrial capitalist societies – e.g., diversification of goods and services; assembly line production and new forms of the division of labor; new technologies of transportation and communication; a burgeoning professional and managerial class – has generated new modes of specialization and class stratification in educational systems, with a “fundamental division into classical and vocational (professional) schools”:

in modern civilisation all practical activities have become so complex, and the sciences so interwoven with everyday life, that each practical activity tends to create a new type of school for its own executives and specialists and hence to create a body of specialist intellectuals at a higher level to teach in these schools. Thus, side by side with the type of school which may be called “humanistic” – the oldest form of traditional school, designed to develop in each individual human being an as yet undifferentiated general culture, the fundamental power to think and ability to find one’s way in life – a whole system of specialised schools, at varying levels, has been being created to serve entire professional sectors, or professions which are already specialised and defined within precise boundaries.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The resulting educational crisis “is precisely linked to the fact that this process of differentiation and particularisation is taking place chaotically, without clear and precise principles.”[[12]](#endnote-12) This a “crisis of the curriculum and organisation of the schools, i.e., of the overall framework of a policy for forming modern intellectual cadres, is to a great extent an aspect and a ramification of the more comprehensive and general organic crisis.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Gramsci highlights several key threads of this fabric. First, it involves a reified class division between a larger class of people – the would-be working classes – who are directed vocational schools, and a smaller class cohort of people who are directed toward “classical” schools. The former are taught practically-oriented vocational skills that will enable them to carry out basic production, transportation, and sales jobs at the base of the economy under the direction of others. The latter gain more or less exclusive access to the kind of “humanistic” education that equips them with “the fundamental power to think and ability to find one’s way in life.” Consequently, they are prepared to undertake managerial, professional, leadership, and entrepreneurial work.

Second, this means that the crucial “deliberative” work of deciding what should be done and how it should be done is restricted to the professional-managerial and capitalist classes. This division involves a problematic bifurcation of activity within major social institutions, such as businesses and government, “into two ‘organic’ aspects: into the deliberative activity which is their essence, and into technical-cultural activity in which questions … are first examined by experts and analysed scientifically.”[[14]](#endnote-14) One important example, Gramsci explains – in a way that echoes Max Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy – concerns the increasing degree to which expert, “more or less disinterested” bureaucrats “selected variously from industry, from the banks, from finance houses” have increasingly come “to control the democratic regimes and parliaments.”[[15]](#endnote-15) This tendency toward bureaucratization, guided by putatively value-neutral technical expertise, is “being organically extended” into the sphere of private business enterprise, “which thus comes to control both régimes and bureaucracies.”[[16]](#endnote-16) What this involves, Gramsci explains, is the rationalized integration of “personnel specialised in the technique of politics with personnel specialised in the concrete problems of administering the essential practical activities of the great and complex national societies of today.”[[17]](#endnote-17) In short, what are properly “deliberative” (moral) decisions (What should be done? What is right or good?) become subordinated to technical imperatives – for instance, what is the most efficient way to achieve goal X,Y, or Z?

Third, this class stratification within educational systems has undemocratic implications under a veneer of pseudo-democratic diversification. It involves the illusion of democracy through the multiplication of choices concerning specialized schools and future vocations, but not democratization of power and decision-making. “The multiplication of types of vocational school,” Gramsci says, “tends to perpetuate traditional social differences; but since, within these differences, it tends to encourage internal diversification, it gives the impression of being democratic in tendency. The labourer can become a skilled worker, for instance, the peasant a surveyor or petty agronomist."[[18]](#endnote-18) This is not democracy, however, because democracy does not “mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every ‘citizen’ can ‘govern’ and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this.”[[19]](#endnote-19) What robust democracy requires, then, is not an educational system that merely enables people with different talents and abilities to fill the needed jobs in society, without most of them having a meaningful share in self-government, but that all people are educated not only for self-chosen vocations but also to share meaningfully in deliberative practices of self-government. Accordingly, a system of education that cultivates democracy and democratic citizens must be reoriented, involving two basic features:

First, a common basic education, imparting a general, humanistic, formative culture; this would strike the right balance between development of the capacity for working manually (technically, industrially) and development of the capacities required for intellectual work. From this type of common schooling, via repeated experiments in vocational orientation, pupils would pass on to one of the specialised schools or to productive work.[[20]](#endnote-20)

This framework would allow citizens, when the time is right, to move on to “specialised schools or to productive work” as they see fit; but at the same time it would foster in all members of society capacities for critical reflection needed the “intellectual work” of democratic self-government.

On the surface, we might conclude that this is just the sort of system that is typical of contemporary democratic societies, but this would be mistaken. While these systems tend to focus on teaching basic skills in elementary and secondary schools, they offer little for most students in the way of a humanistic education that cultivates critical thinking. Moreover, even for those students who pursue post-secondary (“higher”) education, current trends – in ways that Horkheimer and Adorno anticipated – devalue humanistic classical “liberal arts” education; market pressures and social and economic vulnerabilities increasingly push students to pursue more practical vocational paths.

That is not all, however. As Herbert Marcuse observed in 1941, not long after Gramsci advanced his analysis, new technologies of production and consumption – the emergence of a technological society – appear to promise a ‘democratization of functions’ where “technological” and “critical rationality” meet. “The system of production and distribution,” he writes,

has been rationalized to such an extent that the hierarchical distinction between executive and subordinate performances is to an ever smaller degree based upon essential distinctions in aptitude and insight, and to an ever greater degree upon inherited power and a vocational training to which everyone could be subjected. Even experts and “engineers” are no exception.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In principle, a democratization of functions is feasible due to how “[t]echnological rationalization has created a common framework of experience for the various professions and occupations.” These developments involve “an array of more or less standardized techniques” that give “the various intellectual activities a common denominator.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

Yet, this democratic promise has not been realized. Class hierarchies have been reconstituted. There is an evident gap between “those who design the blueprints for rationalization, who lay out production, [and] who make the inventions and discoveries which accelerate technological progress.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Even so, this hierarchy is based more on “the division of power” than on “the division of work”: “The hierarchical distinction of the experts and engineers results from the fact that their ability and knowledge is utilized in the interest of autocratic power.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Differences in education and training thus play a key role in buttressing the new class hierarchy in production, with claims of “social leadership” and bureaucratic expertise being used to thwart the potential democratization of functions that could “close the gap between the governing bureaucracy and the governed population.”[[25]](#endnote-25) In our era, mythologies about visionary “genius” of billionaire entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk fit this pattern: they rationalize their autocratic power by suggesting that their knowhow and leadership is matchless.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Echoing Gramsci, Marcuse elaborates that narrow vocational education

implies fitting a man to a particular job or a particular line of jobs, thus directing his “personality,” spontaneity and experience to the special situations he may meet in filling the job. In this manner, the various professions and occupations, notwithstanding their convergence upon one general pattern, tend to become atomic units which require coordination and management from above.[[27]](#endnote-27)

He adds that “technocracy implies a deepening of the gap between specialized and common knowledge, between the controlling and coordinating experts and the controlled and coordinated people.”[[28]](#endnote-28) These developments are institutionalized through practices that quantify “the qualitative features of individual labor and standardize[] the individualistic elements in the activities of intellectual culture.”[[29]](#endnote-29) A democratic alternative would insist that the hierarchical division between the bureaucratic elite and ordinary worker-citizens be democratized; that “the various intellectual activities” of economic and political life can be made broadly comprehensible”[[30]](#endnote-30); and that virtually everyone can be educated to share in what Gramsci called the “deliberative” work of deciding what should be done and how it should be done – including important questions concerning human uses of technology and how to regulate our interchange with non-human nature.

**II. Horkheimer, Adorno, the “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” and the Aims of Education**

Writing in 1944 in the midst of the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer address a more pervasive deterioration of this “deliberative” function of education in relation to their notion of the “dialectic of enlightenment.” They discern a pervasive eclipse of critical reflection alongside ongoing, instrumentalization of educational processes – even in institutions of “higher education” – and parallel tendencies in the culture industries of capitalist society.

Even prior to his work on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer attempted to document some important aspects of what he described as a “crisis” of science.[[31]](#endnote-31) In “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Horkheimer describes the “assiduous collecting of facts” being carried out in “all the disciplines dealing with social life” as reflective of “a society dominated by industrial production techniques.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Instead of situating historically located social practices within complex systems of power, language, and material production, turn-of-the-century sociology, per Horkheimer, narrowly relied on the mathematized tools of an overstated positivism. The supposed “facts” of life are given; it is the role of the ”savant” to “discover” them: “the savant's role,” Horkheimer complains, “is to integrate facts into conceptual frameworks and to keep the latter up-to-date so that he himself and all who use them may be masters of the widest possible range of facts.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Horkheimer further recognises, as did Gramsci, that “the scholar and his science are incorporated into the apparatus of society; [their] achievements are a factor in the conservation and continuous renewal of the existing state of affairs.”[[34]](#endnote-34) In this sense the endeavors of the scholar are intimately connected to the reproduction of the moral, cultural, and economic life of society. Just as Horkheimer was attendant to the interrelations between the material reproduction of a society and its educational and intellectual outcomes, we want to reaffirm the general spirit of this critique. Today, it would seem that the principal goal of the university is to mechanically produce “masters of the widest possible range of facts.”

Horkheimer and Adorno extend this critique of an unreflected positivism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There Adorno and Horkheimer take “the side of enlightenment” and try to make sense of its own internal failures.[[35]](#endnote-35) “We have no doubt,” they argue,

and herein lies our *petitio principii* – that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today. If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate. By leaving consideration of the destructive side of progress to its enemies, thought in its headlong rush into pragmatism is forfeiting its sublating character, and therefore its relation to truth. In the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to nationalist paranoia, in this uncomprehended senselessness the weakness of contemporary theoretical understanding is evident.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The regressive moment crystallised in the administrative murder of millions in Germany and fascism in Italy, Spain, Austria, and beyond; the Palestinian Nakba; the extermination of over a million Armenians; and entrenched forms of colonial domination both within and beyond the borders of settler states. It gave way to the unchecked expansion of instrumental and objectifying thought, often centered on the human domination of nature, in all spheres of society. Reason became synonymous with classification; aesthetic and moral judgement were outed as merely subjective faculties of no ‘real’ use. “Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process,” they contend,

aping the machine it has itself produces, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine. Enlightenment pushed aside the classical demand to “think thinking” … because it distracted philosophers from the command to control praxis…. Mathematical procedure became a kind of ritual of thought. Despite its axiomatic self-limitation, it installed itself as necessary and objective: mathematics made thought into a thing—a tool, to use its own term.[[37]](#endnote-37)

With the machine as its model, thought forfeited its capacity to “think thinking” – or to “think what we are doing,” to borrow a phrase from Hannah Arendt.[[38]](#endnote-38) When thinking becomes a mathematical procedure, thought itself loses sight of its relation to praxis and moral judgment. As long as enlightened thought remains severed from critical reflection – that is, “if the enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment” – the fundamental conditions that enabled society to relapse will go on unchanged.[[39]](#endnote-39) The recovery of the liberating promise of enlightened thinking, Horkheimer and Adorno maintain, demands reflection on its complicity in regression if it is to avoid “seal[ing] its own fate.”[[40]](#endnote-40) This would entail, they suggest, a renewed focus on cultivating faculties of critical thought and moral judgment, coupled with a constant struggle to bring the conditions that enabled the relapse “to consciousness of itself.”[[41]](#endnote-41) We want to insist, like Horkheimer and Adorno, that education is and still can be a means to bring the “uncomprehended senselessness” of the word to consciousness.

Adorno in particular worked to ensure that catastrophes past and present do not go unnamed. Adorno began the radio address now published as “Education after Auschwitz,” to which we turn next, by speaking truth to how the murder of “well over a million Armenians,” orchestrated by Talaat Pascha and Enver Pascha, was willingly kept secret by “the highest German military and government authorities.”[[42]](#endnote-42) “Herein lies, not least of all, the danger that the horror might recur,” Adorno continued, “that people refuse to let it draw near and indeed even rebuke anyone who merely speaks of it, as though the speaker, if he does not temper things, were the guilty one, and not the perpetrators.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Adorno’s point, which has important implications for the classroom today, is that critical reflection is not an isolated exercise. Critical reflection entails dialogue and humility in equal measure; it demands that we think what we are doing. As Adorno himself acknowledges, “critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge” – the civilizational struggle against all forms of fascism and unreflecting hatred – “as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Horkheimer and Adorno first announced the twin struggles against “self-satisfied contemplation” and “reified,” objectifying instrumental thought in their preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “Intellect’s true concern,” they argue,

is a negation of reification. It must perish when it is solidified into a cultural asset and handed out for consumption purposes. The flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once. What is at issue here is … the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed. What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes. Today … the past is being continued as destruction of the past.[[45]](#endnote-45)

By framing the task of critical thinking as the “negation of reification,” Horkheimer and Adorno signal the potential for thought to think beyond its own conceptual barriers. When the “intellect” is “solidified into a cultural asset and handed out for consumption,” however, the act of thinking becomes synonymous with the consumption of established facts. In this sense, the parallel developments in the culture industries of contemporary capitalist societies and the technological mediation of education go hand in hand: both are delivering a prepackaged commodity.

Taken together, Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s staunch commitments to restoring the promise of the enlightenment points to a multifaceted interplay of power and knowledge relations at play within the classroom and beyond. Today, we worry that education “merely confirm[s] the victory of technological reason over truth.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Instead of cultivating important democratic capacities for self-determination and moral judgement, education increasingly is transactional and modeled on the structure of commodity exchange. New and supposedly accessible online educational platforms have pushed a pedagogy centered on instruction and exploration to the side; today, automated forms of evaluation and student management reign supreme.

**III. Adorno on “Education after Auschwitz”**

While Horkheimer and Adorno recognised limits to what education on its own can achieve in fostering critical reflection and moral judgement, they nonetheless held that it could play an important role in this regard. “Education and enlightenment can still manage a little something,” Adorno insists in “Education after Auschwitz.”[[47]](#endnote-47) He contends that the “premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again.”[[48]](#endnote-48) In *Negative Dialectics*, which went to press the same year “Education after Auschwitz” was delivered as a radio address, Adorno expands on this injunction: “a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree-mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”[[49]](#endnote-49) If society is to resist the temptation to relapse into barbarism, education would have to transform itself into a form of democratic social praxis oriented toward critical self-reflection and moral judgement.

A transformed education, Adorno envisions, would be measured by its capacity to combat the social conditions – hardness, the fetishization of technology, indifference to the suffering of others, the “cult of action” – that gave rise to Auschwitz in the first place.[[50]](#endnote-50) To uproot these conditions, an “education toward critical self-reflection” would have to intervene at the level of the subject.[[51]](#endnote-51) “Since the possibility of changing the objective – namely social and political – conditions is extremely limited today,” Adorno concedes, “attempts to work against the repetition of Auschwitz are necessarily restricted to the subjective dimension. By this I also mean essentially the psychology of people who do such things. … The roots must be sought in the persecutors, not in the victims who are murdered under the paltriest of pretenses.”[[52]](#endnote-52) The psychology of the perpetrators, Adorno argues, can only be confronted within the interlocking constellation of social, material, and historical forces that shape the lives of definite individuals. In this sense, Adorno’s “turn to the subject” is *not* an admission of political defeatism, but, as he puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, an attempt “to use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Education, which Adorno understood to be situated at the precipice of the subject and society, retains the potential to disrupt the fundamental conditions that have given rise to fascism through the “power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating.”[[54]](#endnote-54) Therefore, Adorno’s vision for a transformed education after Auschwitz is not a reactionary call to memorialise the victims, but a proactive injunction to “work against the repetition” of all forms of fascism, unreflected hatred, and the fetishization of technology inherent to modern capitalist societies. A transformed education would not attempt to “break free of the past,” but theoretically articulate its continuity in the present in order to halt its reproduction in the future.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Adorno understands this task to require at least two distinct levels of engagement. “When I speak of education after Auschwitz,” he explains, “I mean two areas: first children’s education, especially in early childhood; then general enlightenment that provides an intellectual, cultural, and social climate in which a recurrence would no longer be possible, a climate, therefore, in which the motives that led to the horror would becomes relatively conscious.”[[56]](#endnote-56) A renewed focus on early education is an important feature of Adorno’s program insofar as he regards those years as formative in the development of the “ideal of being hard,” and the “blind compulsion to identity with the collective.”[[57]](#endnote-57) On the “educational ideal of hardness,” which Adorno declares “is utterly wrong,” he is concerned with the link between a pathological “virility” and the presumption that “ability to endure pain” is an admirable quality.[[58]](#endnote-58) Instead of cultivating vital forms of resiliency in and beyond the classroom, however, “being hard” only “means absolute indifference toward pain as such.”[[59]](#endnote-59) On the temptation to blindly conform to the collective, Adorno regards this as a form of turning away from the world. From *The Authoritarian Personality* to “Education after Auschwitz,” he describes those who seek to “extinguish themselves as self-determined beings” as the “manipulative character.”[[60]](#endnote-60) The manipulative character-type is one who is substantively incapable of experiencing guilt – let alone “identifying with others”[[61]](#endnote-61) – and is driven by an “overvalued realism”; the “cult of action, activity, [and] efficiency.”[[62]](#endnote-62) “This dangerous state of consciousness,” Adorno warns, is “above all a consciousness blinded to all historical past.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

This sort of “delusional *Realpolitik*” severed from reflection on the content of one’s actions is precisely what a transformed education would have to combat.[[64]](#endnote-64) Today, however, we fear that the expanded technological mediation of education, coupled with the progressive mathematisation of all thought and the extortion to produce something of immediate value, has only further entrenched a *Realpolitik* devoid of thought. This reduction of thinking to a mathematical procedure shut off from the history of the present is precisely what, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through to *One-Dimensional Man* and beyond, early Critical Theorists describes as the reification of consciousness. In “Education after Auschwitz,” Adorno further explores the connections between the reification of thought and its relationship to technology. “A world where technology occupies such a key position as it does nowadays produces technological people, who are attuned to technology,” Adorno maintains. He adds,

There is something exaggerated, irrational, pathogenic in the present-day relationship to technology. This is connected with the “veil of technology.” People are inclined to take technology to be the thing itself, as an end in itself, a force of its own, and they forget that it is an extension of human dexterity. The means – and technology is the epitome of the means of self-preservation of the human species – are fetishized, because the ends – a life of human dignity – are concealed and removed from the consciousness of people.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Today, amid the frenzy over artificial intelligence (AI) in and beyond the classroom, Adorno’s somewhat cryptic warning of a world administered by “technological people” seems to be taking on a life of its own. Already in the 1960s, Adorno foresaw the extent to which the professor was becoming “a peddler of knowledge.”[[66]](#endnote-66) Technology now deludes thinking people into accepting the premise that technology peddles its own knowledge. In “Taboos of the Teaching Vocation,” Adorno even warns that “perhaps teaching machines will release the teacher from a human demand he is prevented from fulfilling.”[[67]](#endnote-67) While AI – hopefully – will never fully supplant human instruction, the basic contours of the teaching vocation have already been changed by it. Only a general culture of enlightenment that pervades all spheres of social life would be up to the task of combating the stultification of thought in all its vicissitudes. Education at every level, Adorno insists, “must labor against this lack of reflection.”[[68]](#endnote-68) In doing so, “education must transform itself into sociology” and “teach about the societal play of forces that operate beneath the surface of political forms.”[[69]](#endnote-69)

**IV. The “Dialectic of Enlightenment” in Education Today**

In several important respects, tensions in the aims and challenges of education today exemplify core elements of the dialectic of enlightenment. These tensions, as Gramsci underscores, extend to elementary and secondary education as well as all varieties of higher education. With respect to national systems of public education (elementary, secondary, and post-secondary), schools are generally understood as means to achieve egalitarian goals in two areas: (1) civic education that supports democratic self-government; and (2) “equal opportunity” for all to develop the skills and abilities they need to choose career paths, succeed in modern economies, and pursue their own ideas of the good life.[[70]](#endnote-70) In this section, however, we will just focus on tensions in how these goals are pursued in higher education. We will further delimit our scope to the “democratic” capitalist societies that Adorno addresses “after Auschwitz,” and the type of society in which we are situated in North America.[[71]](#endnote-71) We are chiefly interested in how the aims, purposes, and tensions of institutionalized higher education are integrally linked to the larger tensions of “democratic” capitalism. These tensions revolve around the fraught relationship between the egalitarian promises of democracy and the inequalities generated by capitalism in its basic workings. Indeed, the latter raise basic questions about the depth of *democracy* in these societies.[[72]](#endnote-72)

The relevance of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in relation to the challenges of realizing the egalitarian aims of education are evident when we consider how these goals are pursued and the extent to which they are achieved or elided in higher education today. Basic tensions in the aims of higher education were already laid bare in the “student revolts” in North American universities in the 1960s, particularly the student protests at the University of California at Berkeley. As John Schaar and Sheldon Wolin write, taking stock of these events in 1969, “Today, undergraduate education is a shambles. Traditionally it has had the task of general education, of defining and transmitting the knowledge appropriate to a ‘well-educated’ or ‘cultivated’ man.”[[73]](#endnote-73) This task has become outmoded – and in some ways for the better – as both the size and diversity of student bodies has expanded consistently since the Second World War. At large public and private universities – institutions that UC chancellor Clark Kerr, the first chancellor of the UC Berkeley, called “multiversities” – the tasks of teaching tens of thousands of undergraduate students and thousands of graduate and professional students has only further complicated these goals.[[74]](#endnote-74) Tenure-track research faculty members combine their teaching with research, and they are joined in teaching by tenure-track teaching faculty, instructors, sessional instructors, graduate student instructors and teaching assistants, and, sometimes, undergraduate teaching assistants. Wolin and Schaar explain in an earlier assessment,

The architects of the multiversity simply have not solved the problem of how to build an institution which not only produces knowledge and knowledgeable people with useful skills, but which also enriches and enlightens the lives of its students – informing them with the values of the intellect, preparing them to serve as the guardians of society’s intellectual honesty and political health, arming them with the vision by which society seeks its own better future.[[75]](#endnote-75)

Achieving this latter objective, they insist, is what “distinguishes a genuine educational community from a mere research factory and training institution.”[[76]](#endnote-76) This challenge has only intensified and taken on new dimensions as ever more students feel pressed to pursue higher education to find lucrative careers or at least well-paying jobs, and as new technologies have transformed various aspects of teaching and learning.

Using the United States as a point of reference for the expansion of student bodies, only about 6.4% of US students graduated from high school in 1900 and only about 2% graduated from college.[[77]](#endnote-77) By 1960, 41.1% of the US population had at least graduated high school and 7.7% of the population had attained a college degree or more; and 45.1% of high school (or equivalent) graduates went on to postsecondary study.[[78]](#endnote-78) In 2021, 91.1% of the US population had at least graduated high school and 37.5% had attained a college degree or more.[[79]](#endnote-79) According to one recent report, in 2020, 62.7% of high school (or equivalent) graduates went on to postsecondary study, and “[s]ince 1960, the rate of enrollment among high school graduates increased 46.8%,” or 0.8% annually; in 2022, around 20,031,000 students were enrolled in higher education in the United States – at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.[[80]](#endnote-80) Additionally, it is clear both that social inequalities – notably those rooted in class, race, and gender – affect inequalities in educational attainment, and that inequalities in education attainment shape inequalities in income, wealth, authority, and social status.[[81]](#endnote-81) “Between 1940 and 1970,” Nathan Heller notes, “the percentage of the American public that received at least four years of university education nearly tripled, sharpening the university’s democratic imperative” – and, we would add, sharpening its democratic contradictions.[[82]](#endnote-82)

As for new technologies, the internet, personal computers, and various systems of artificial intelligence (AI) all postdate the 1960s battles over the aims and purposes of the university. Further, new teaching technologies (e.g., PowerPoint, Zoom, online learning management systems) and new, sometimes unsettling forms of AI (e.g., Chat GPT) are being developed and disseminated at a rapid pace. In 1965, students certainly sometimes had their thoughts elsewhere while sitting in classrooms; in 2023, many (if not most) university students sit in classrooms with personal computers and cell phones. Many are routinely and tangibly elsewhere while they sit in classes – surfing the web; on social media; connecting with friends through email or text messaging, etc. Meanwhile, lectures increasingly are mediated by audio and visual technologies, for better and for worse.

In light of these considerations, we highlight two particular problem areas wherein larger social, economic, and political pathologies of contemporary capitalist societies generate tensions in the aims and purposes of the university. First, and perhaps most importantly, there is the increasing *vocationalization* of higher education, which echoes the increasing vocationalization of education more generally. As Horkheimer argues in his essay “The Concept of Education” (*Der Begriff der Bildung*, 1952), universities previously were expected, in eras of more limited enrollments, not only to prepare students to fill various jobs or occupations, but also – as epitomized in the concept *bildung* from the German classical intellectual tradition – to develop their full humanity.[[83]](#endnote-83) This was what Gramsci meant by the kind of “humanistic” education that would equip students with “the fundamental power to think and ability to find one’s way in life.”[[84]](#endnote-84) Horkheimer’s concern, Per Jepsen explains, is that the aim of developing the full humanity of students, including their capacities for critical reflection and judgment, was being displaced by the demand for useful knowledge and a focus on instrumental reasoning, where “everything else becomes a means for human beings.”[[85]](#endnote-85) These trends are evident today in at least two notable ways: (1) the increasing proportion of college and university students who eschew the “liberal arts” in favor of more vocationally oriented fields of such as engineering, computer science, and business; (2) decreased funding and institutional support for scholarly research, teaching, and graduate study in arts and humanities fields such as history.[[86]](#endnote-86) These trends are exacerbated by the fact that even as major universities remain not for profit, they are “increasingly run as private businesses."[[87]](#endnote-87)

Economic pressures, including prevailing notions of achievement and “success” and increasing costs of higher education, push many – if not most – students in contemporary capitalist societies to focus on gaining vocational skills and “useful knowledge.” Jürgen Habermas has dubbed this the “achievement ideology” underscoring education in contemporary capitalist societies.[[88]](#endnote-88) This in turn leads students to prioritize instrumental reasoning over broader, less tangible intellectual abilities, such as critical reasoning and moral and aesthetic judgment. The essayist Paul Goodman highlights these pressures, which he argues were hindering “student maturation and independence,” in his reflections on the students protests at UC Berkeley in 1964-65:

First, the frantic career-drive, spurred by the anxiety of middle-class parents, leading to conformism, and willingness to submit to scheduled mis-education, credits, and grading, in order to get a diploma quick. Secondly, the students are not financially independent; tuition is exceedingly high, so that it is impossible to opt for independent poverty; scholarships and loans put the student under administration control.[[89]](#endnote-89)

These pressures of students have only intensified in the neo-liberal era that followed the 1960s, and not only among middle-class families.

Goodman goes on to level a more radical criticism of the prevailing education system in the United States. He suggests that the “most important” problem is “universal compulsory school-going without alternative choices.” [[90]](#endnote-90) This idea is worth pondering, but for now we are more inclined to the view that the key issue is the quality and character of education rather than a problem with compulsory schooling *per se*. To abandon compulsory schooling without plausible alternatives would risk deepening class-based and other social inequalities that are heightened by inequalities of education; it would make it harder to ensure that, as Goodman hoped, all members of society are treated “as human beings and not manipulated” in their work lives and civic lives.[[91]](#endnote-91)

Here we arrive at the second set of problems we want to highlight: the extent to which new technologies of teaching and learning in the classroom, along with new technologies and media that permeate society and breach the walls of the classroom, exacerbate the dominance of instrumental and objectifying thought. In their analysis of the culture industry of modern capitalist societies, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “Entertainment is prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. … The only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time.”[[92]](#endnote-92) In too many respects *education* today is the continuation "of work under late capitalism.” It is sought not “to escape the mechanized labor process,” but to succeed within it, bound by its current logic and in ways that might enable “adaptation to it in leisure time.” As Horkheimer and Adorno observe elsewhere in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Social and individual education reinforces the objectifying behavior required by work and prevents people from submerging themselves once more in the ebb and flow of surrounding nature.”[[93]](#endnote-93) In this way, they foresaw a crisis of instrumental-objectifying thought supplanting moral and aesthetic evaluation of practical concerns oriented toward mutual decision making; at the same time, they discerned the decline of people’s capacity to be present in self-reflective ways within the expanding matrix of technological control. Today, the challenges confronting students and faculty within the classroom are mediated by the culture industries outside of the classroom in a way that Horkheimer and Adorno anticipated but could not have fully imagined.

Education could be – and sometimes is – oriented to foster critical reflection about the justice and character of our modes of production and exchange, our modes of social interaction and our self-relations, our educational practices, and our collective “interchange with [non-human] nature.”[[94]](#endnote-94) Our goal is not to categorically dismiss the potential for new educational technologies, coupled with new forms of mass-media, to contribute to these educational goals. Nonetheless, it is clear to us that given current circumstances these same technologies often reinforce the objectifying forms of speech and action required by work in contemporary capitalism. In short, the current uses of these new technologies too often support the human domination of non-human nature and the domination of some groups and classes of people by others. We have mistaken their capacity to disseminate information and to enable people to announce opinions for instruction and dialogue; in doing so, we have serially conflated information with understanding and speaking with communicating. A transformed education would have to challenge the hypocrisy of the former while instilling a sense of humility in the latter.

**V. Conclusion**

Reflecting on the state of higher education in 1969, Schaar and Wolin declare that “the great intellectual task of the present is the task of rethinking every aspect of technological civilization.”[[95]](#endnote-95) “That this civilization inherently moves toward self-destruction is now clear,” they contend,

and any radical rethinking must start from the premise that its manifest destructiveness will not be stopped by a broader distribution of the values or a more intensive application of the methods and processes which constitute and sustain the evil itself. If the universities were to dedicate themselves to this rethinking, then they would not only serve society in the most valuable way possible, but they might even save themselves.[[96]](#endnote-96)

In view of the ecological catastrophes unfolding in real time, Schaar and Wolin’s warning has proved prescient. Climate change is already disrupting many regions of the planet and portends ongoing habitat destruction, climate migrations, species extinctions, and economic instabilities amid deepening intersectional inequalities and fast, unsettling technological change.[[97]](#endnote-97) This new constellation of challenges has spurred the rise of new nationalist populisms even as these issues have a transnational character that demands international cooperation. As Horkheimer and Adorno underscore, such political challenges are not amenable to strictly technical solutions. While educational institutions cannot by themselves resolve these issues, they have an important role to play here as the dialectic of enlightenment looms ever larger. Due to deep socially structured inequalities of power and resources generated by modern capitalism, vast human power to dominate nature – including new means to potentially reshape what it means to be human[[98]](#endnote-98) – remains integrally bound up with the power of some groups and classes of people to dominate others; and these dynamics continue to shape the promise and pitfalls of higher education in our time.

In this light, our analysis of the tensions suggests some tentative conclusions concerning the two sets of problems that we identified earlier where tensions in the aims and purposes of the university reflect larger social, economic, and political pathologies of contemporary capitalist societies generate: (i) the increasing *vocationalization* of higher education; and (ii) the extent to which new technologies and new media inside and outside of the classroom exacerbate the dominance of instrumental and objectifying reasoning. Regarding the first set of problems, the vocationalization of higher education – along with the dwindling attention to arts education and critical thinking in elementary and secondary schools – must be challenged on multiple fronts. As Gramsci and Adorno both recognized, the vocationalization of higher education is bound up with class inequalities – and, we must add, interacting inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, and coloniality – that shape the interface of elementary and secondary education and post-secondary education, and even “pre-school.”[[99]](#endnote-99) This is evident in such things as the battles over adequate public funding of pre-school (or child-care), elementary and secondary schools – including struggles concerning the relatively low (under-valuing) salaries paid to pre-school and elementary and secondary school teachers – and higher education; disturbingly politicized struggles over school curriculum (in the US, Hungary, and elsewhere[[100]](#endnote-100)); and how elementary and secondary schools serve, in large part, as tracking vehicles, that direct some students to higher education and others to vocational schools in ways that support the meritocratic “achievement ideology” that holds sway in contemporary capitalist societies.[[101]](#endnote-101)

Paul Goodman, again reflecting on Berkeley in the 1960s, highlights “student efforts to get an education befitting free [people],” and he endorses a view of students as “young adults who are *capable* of knowing what they ought to get.”[[102]](#endnote-102) This is an important point for democratic societies, particularly insofar as treating students as “capable” of knowing frames education as the collective act of cultivating certain democratic capacities for speech, action, and understanding. It further suggests that students are capable of developing a sound understanding of “what they ought to get” within the nexus of early childhood education and their communities outside of the classroom. Yet, this idea can lead, and sometimes does lead, to an impoverished consumerist vision of education. Students expect to get what they want based on wants and attention spans they have been shaped by the culture industry, social media, and consumerist ideas of the good life in ways that may block their critical reflection on these very tendencies. Professors and sessional instructors are judged more in terms of ease, relatability, style, and charisma (say as gauged by student evaluations of teaching or ratemyprogfessors.com) than in terms of rigor, acuity, and substance. Treating students and colleagues alike as capable, self-determining beings – which we should be doing – must not culminate in uncritically placing the administrative stamp of approval on every idea that has “arrived.”[[103]](#endnote-103)

At the same time, treating students too uncritically as young adults who are *always already* *capable* of knowing what they ought to get can translate into pandering to their immediate (or “half educated”) preferences rather than their considered judgments.[[104]](#endnote-104) As technological change increasingly reconfigures and displaces existing industries and jobs, it is as crucial as ever that all students receive an education that is not merely *vocational* – that is, oriented to preparing them for existing or even anticipated jobs and careers. Rather, as Gramsci and Adorno both insist, students must be educated in a broadly “humanistic” way that empowers them not only to adapt successfully to a rapidly changing world, but to also to share as democratic equals in shaping the common world, including our uses of technology, our efforts to negotiate our differences, and our interchange with non-human nature.[[105]](#endnote-105) In this light, there are good reasons to insist that humanities students acquire a basic understanding of the natural sciences as well as that science, engineering, computer science, nursing, and business students acquire a substantive understanding of the social sciences and humanities. One promising approach might be to encourage, if not required, all college and university students take a course that addresses one or more key issues of the day, such as climate change or AI, from the perspective of both the natural sciences and the social science and humanities. This could help students to appreciate how many crucial issues of our time concern both technical or scientific knowledge and understanding and moral and aesthetic judgment.[[106]](#endnote-106) Moreover, the task of negotiating our differences in just ways demands an appreciation of how present social and political realities – including our ways of dealing with “diversity,” inequality, and environmental injustices – have been shaped by the historical past.[[107]](#endnote-107)

The second set of challenges – the impact of new media and new technologies on teaching and learning – are perhaps no less consequential. From our teaching experiences, we can attest to issues of distraction and fractured attention among students, particularly in large lecture classes, as well as the extent to which these tendencies are unequally manifest among them. Gramsci already noticed unequal dispositions toward learning among different classes of children in Italy in 1930s that, he maintained, needed to be understood in relation to the class divisions of capitalist societies: “In a whole series of families, especially the intellectual strata, the children find in their family life a preparation, a prolongation and a completion of school life; they ‘breath in’ … a whole quantity of notions and attitudes which facilitate the educational process properly speaking.”[[108]](#endnote-108) This point still holds true to a considerable degree. At the same time, Gramsci was not yet facing the pervasive distractions – inside and outside the classroom – of new contemporary culture industries, technologies, and social media. Not unrelatedly, it is also clear that receptiveness among students to critical thinking (including “critical theorizing”) about existing society varies among students – at least in part – in relation to their initial political orientations (e.g., conservative, liberal, libertarian, feminist, anti-racist, socialist/ anti-capitalist, environmentalist, or combinations thereof, etc.).

In this regard, Horkheimer and Adorno offer good reasons to challenge the idea that new media and new technologies of teaching and learning are always progressive. There is a pressing need to scrutinize new – as well as old – technologies, media, teaching practices, and online learning platforms in terms of the extent to which they cultivate robust understanding and critical reflection as opposed to encouraging mere mastery of facts and formulas. Here again, it is important for universities to treat students as “adults who are *capable* of knowing what they ought to get,” as Goodman says; but in an era when students spend hours online on personal computers and smartphones, there are good reasons to resist simply catering to students’ initial half-educated preferences and expectations about what they should be taught and how they should be taught. This might entail such practices as insisting, as a general rule, that students pack away their computers and cell phones when classes are in session; avoiding oversimplification of complex ideas; working to engage students without pandering to them; and, at the same time, conveying to students the basic theoretical rationale behind such practices. In short, the way to treat students as adults and cultivate their autonomy, as Adorno says, is “not simply to kick against every kind of authority” in the course of their educations.[[109]](#endnote-109) Instead, a transformed education would be one that has realized its own historical potential to act as a freedom-enhancing form of authority. Adorno’s dictum for thought “to be woken … by the memory of what has been missed and … transformed into teaching” remains the basic prerequisite for reinvigorating the unfinished project of the university as well as elementary and secondary education.[[110]](#endnote-110)

Moreover, such an approach to education cannot be value neutral. The existing modes of education already are bound up with existing capitalist modes of life, work, and consumption that demand critical scrutiny as well as – arguably – radical transformation to create a humane and ecological world.[[111]](#endnote-111) As the students protests of the 1960s and recent debates about “free speech” on campus remind us, while colleges and universities have always in some ways been sites of privilege, they have also been important sites for critical analysis by faculty and students about the problems and injustices of their societies. In Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s summation with reference to the United States, although with wider resonance, “this much is true in the United States: it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment.”[[112]](#endnote-112) We need to continue on multiple fronts the struggle to dismantle the legacies of privilege and to ensure that the legacy of critical thinking survives. Insofar as education aims to cultivate autonomy and moral judgement, it must bolster students against the barrage of media messages that work to deceive them. As Adorno himself once put it, “there can be no normal democracy which could afford to be explicitly against an enlightenment of this kind.”[[113]](#endnote-113)

**Notes:**

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1947), 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jürgen Habermas, “The University in a Democracy: Democratization of the University,” in Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Anti-Education* (originally titled, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, 1872), ed. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon; trans. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2016); Antonio Gramsci, “On Education,” in Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education” (1954), in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*; The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, a Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education United States Department of Education, April 1983; Habermas, “The University in a Democracy”; Jürgen Habermas, “The Idea of the University – Learning Processes,” *New German Critique* no. 41 (Spring - Summer, 1987), 3-22; Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987); Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses,” *Social Text*, 79 (volume 22, number 2), Summer 2004, 101-115; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Nathan Heller, “The End of the English Major,” *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2023, 28-39 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, ed. Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, [1894] 1967), 820. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Theodor Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” in Adorno, *Can One Life after Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, pp. 19-33 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1967] 2003), 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Hoare Quintin and Smith Geoffrey Nowell (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. We leave aside the question of the affinities and possible dissimilarities between Gramsci’s “communism” and Adorno’s democratic socialism. Gramsci’s democratic commitments – his idea of a democratic society – are evident in his analysis of education. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 27-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Herbert Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” in *Technology, War and Fascism*, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 1, ed. Douglas Kellner (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 55-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For critical perspectives on this, see Bruce Baum, “Occupy Wall Street, Steve Jobs’s ‘Genius,’ and Mad Men: Reflections on the American Democratic Imagination,” in Baum, *The Post-Liberal Imagination: Political Scenes from the American Cultural Landscape*(New York: Palgrave, 2016);Anand Giridharadas, “Elon Musk Is a Problem Masquerading as a Solution,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2022, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/26/opinion/elon-musk-twitter.html?searchResultPosition> (accessed March 10, 2023); Hélène Landemore, “Democratize Firms … Why, and How?,” in Isabelle Ferreras, Julia Battililana, and Dominique Méda, *Democratize Work: The Case for Reorganizing the Economy*, trans. Miranda Richmond Mouillot (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 47-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 57, 58-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” 3-5 in *Critical Theory*. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 190-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction,” xii in *Aesthetic Theory*. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., xvi [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” 34 in *Prisms*. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 20-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past,” 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 25-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 27. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno describes “the manipulative type” as “potentially the most dangerous one, [which] is defined by stereotypy as an extreme: rigid notions become ends rather than means, and the whole world is divided into empty schematic, administrative fields…a compulsive overrealism which treats everything and everyone as an object to be handled, manipulated, and seized” (767). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Adorno, “Taboos on the Teaching Vocation,” 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. See Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life,* trans. Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Axel Honneth, “Education and the Democratic Public Sphere: A Neglected Chapter of Political Philosophy,” in *Recognition and Freedom: Axel Honneth’s* *Political Thought*, ed. Jonas Jakobsen and Odin Lysaker, 17–32 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004287341_003>. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. That said, these dynamics appear to be fairly widespread, occurring as well in places like mainland China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). See Diane Ravitch, “The Myth of Chinese Super Schools,” The New York Review of Books, November 20, 2014, at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/11/20/myth-chinese-super-schools/> (accessed March 22, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. See Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985); Robert Dahl, *On Democracy*; Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought* (1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. John H. Schaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Education and the Technological Society," *The New York Review of Books*, October 9, 1969, at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1969/10/09/education-and-the-technological-society/> (accessed March 2, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Sheldon S. Wolin and John H. Schaar, “The Abuses of the Multiversity,” in *The Berkeley Student Revolt: Facts and Interpretations*, edited by Seymour Martin Lipset and Sheldon S. Wolin (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 350-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Wolin and Schaar, “Abuses of the Multiversity,” p. 361. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. “U.S. High School Graduation Rates**:** An Historical View,” <https://www.safeandcivilschools.com/research/graduation_rates.php> (accessed March 3, 2023);“The First Measured Century: Book: Section 3.1, Educational Attainment,” <https://www.pbs.org/fmc/book/3education1.htm> (accessed March 3, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. # Lyss Welding, “College Enrollment Statistics in the U.S.,” BestColleges, February 23, 2023, <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-enrollment-statistics/#fn-16> (accessed March 3, 2023).

    [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Erin Dufflin, “Educational attainment in the U.S. 1960-2021,” June 10, 2022, at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/184260/educational-attainment-in-the-us/> (accessed March 3, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Melanie Hanson, “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics,” EducationData.org, July 26, 2022, <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics> (accessed March 3, 2023). The US is not an exception here. Habermas, writing in 1987, noted a parallel expansion of the number of students enrolled in universities in post-WWII West Germany, and he cited UNESCO figures concerning Western industrial societies indicating “that, in period between 1950 and 1980, secondary school attendance rate went from 30 to 80 percent; the corresponding university rates jumped from barely 4 percent to 30 percent.” See Habermas, “The Idea of the University,” pp. 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. See S. E. Mayer, “The relationship between income inequality and inequality in schooling,” *Theory and Research in Education* 8, no. 1 (2010), 5-20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509356346>; Greg J. Duncan, Richard J. Murnane & Phi Delta Kappan, “Growing Income Inequality Threatens American Education,” *Education Week*, March 28, 2014, at: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-growing-income-inequality-threatens-american-education/2014/03> (accessed March 4, 2023); Kunsoo Paul Choi, PhD, “Income Inequality and the Earnings Gap Between Educated and Non-Educated Workers,” December 9, 2021, at: <https://www.uagc.edu/blog/income-inequality-and-the-earnings-gap-between-educated-and-non-educated> (accessed March 4, 2023).   [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Heller, “The End of the English Major.” [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. See Per Jepsen, “Critical theory and the future of humanity: A reply to Asger Sørensen,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol. 48, no. 2 (2022), 166-67, summarizing Horkheimer’s argument, from Max Horkheimer, *Der Begriff der Bildung*, in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8, p. 409. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Jepsen, “Critical theory and the future of humanity,” p. 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Jennifer Schuessler, “As Historians Gather, No Truce in the History Wars,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2023, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/08/arts/american-historical-association-james-sweet.html> (January 10, 2023); Daniel Bessner, “The Dangerous Decline of the Historical Profession,” *The New York Times,* January 14, 2023, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/14/opinion/american-history-college-university-academia.html> (accessed March 23, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Heller, “The End of the English Major.” [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. See Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 48, 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Paul Goodman, “Thoughts on Berkeley,” in *The Berkeley Student Revolt: Facts and Interpretations*, edited by Seymour Martin Lipset and Sheldon S. Wolin (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), p. 318. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Paul Goodman, “Reply to Glazer,” in *The Berkeley Student Revolt*, pp. 323-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Ibid., 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, p. 820. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Schaar and Wolin, “Education and the Technological Society,” 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. As Schaar and Wolin say, “The evidence of the destructiveness [of consumer capitalist society] is all around us, both in the realm of nature and in the realm of that ‘second nature’ which is culture” (Schaar and Wolin, "Education and the Technological Society"). [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Here we are thinking of such things as new CRISPR gene editing technology, which raises the possibility of deliberately altering human DNA. See Carl Zimmer, “CRISPR, 10 Years On: Learning to Rewrite the Code of Life,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 2022, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/27/science/crispr-gene-editing-10-years.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article> (accessed March 23, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. See Adorno, “Taboos on the Teaching Vocation,” 183-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. See Felix Schlagwein, “New curriculum raises eyebrows in Hungary,” March 31, 2020, at: <https://www.dw.com/en/new-school-curriculum-raises-eyebrows-in-orbans-hungary/a-52964617> (accessed March 28, 2023); Michelle Goldberg, “Florida Could Start Looking a Lot Like Hungary,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 27, 2023, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/27/opinion/desantis-higher-education-bill.html?searchResultPosition=1> (accessed March 28, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 48, 122; Bruce Baum,“Governing ‘Democratic’ Equality: Mill, Tawney, and Liberal Democratic Governmentality,” *Political Research Quarterly* 65, nos. 4 (December 2012): 714-731. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Goodman, “Thoughts on Berkeley,” 317, 316. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno speaks of the conventional wisdom passed on “by an anthropology that has ‘arrived’” (124). [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Horkheimer and Adorno write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “the half-educated reach out stereotypically in their fear for the formula which suits their need, now to justify the disaster which has happened, now to predict the catastrophe still to come, which is sometimes disguised as a regeneration” (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 162). [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. See Theodor Adorno, in Theodor W. Adorno and Hellmut Becker, “Education for maturity and responsibility,” trans. Robert French, Jem Thomas and Dorothee Weymann, *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no. 3 (1999), 21-34, at pp. 28-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. One model for this approach is a University of British Columbia course, ASIC (Arts and Science Integrated Course) 200, Global Issues in the Arts and Sciences, which has been co-taught by David Ng (Director, Advanced Molecular Biology Laboratory) and Professor Allen Sens (Political Science). The course focuses on global environmental issues. As they explain on their course syllabus, students explores such global issues “from the perspective of both the physical and life sciences and the social sciences and humanities. The fundamental philosophy of the course is that global issues cannot be fully understood or addressed without a functional literacy in both the Sciences and the Arts.” See David Ng and Allen Sens, course syllabus for ASIC 200, Winter session 2019-20, at: <https://myasic200.wordpress.com/outline/> (accessed March 30, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 31. See also SPN, p**.**42. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Adorno, in Adorno and Becker, “Education for maturity and responsibility,” p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. In Fred Moten and Stefano Harney assessment, "The university works for the day when it will be able to rid itself, like capital in general, of the trouble of labor. It will then be able to reproduce a labor force that understands itself as not only unnecessary but dangerous to the development of capitalism. Much pedagogy and scholarship is already dedicated in this direction. … Later, these students will be able to see themselves properly as obstacles to society, or perhaps, with lifelong learning, students will return having successfully diagnosed themselves as the problem" (Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons,” 104) [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons,” 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. Adorno, in Adorno and Becker, “Education for maturity and responsibility,” p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)