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## Is the liberal defense of public schools a fantasy?

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we offer a Leftist critique of standard liberal defenses of the public school. We suggest that the standard arguments employed by mainstream liberal defenders of the public school are generally inadequate because they fail to provide a credible representation of their historical object, let alone effective remedies to our current problems. Indeed, many of these narratives, in our view, are grounded in fantasies about what public schools, or teaching and learning, are or could be, as much as they are grounded in the historical realities of public schools or the realities of so-called privatization. We speculate whether the self-identification of the proponents of this cause as ‘progressive’ is not part of this ideological construction and if the underlying political agenda is not in fact more conservative.

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There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something that he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.

- Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the philosophy of history* (1968, p. 131)

Over the past two decades, liberals have bewailed the ongoing assault on the public school by the forces of neoliberal privatization in its many guises (Lipman, 2013; Saltman, 2007; Watkins, 2012). Liberals and conservatives alike resemble Benjamin’s angel of history, their attention focused on what they perceive to be the present ‘rubble heap’ of education, colored by a nostalgia for a lost Paradise and by the yearning to ‘awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed’. As they back into the future, they often appear willfully blind to the concrete historical circumstances of those whose lives literally depend on schooling, and to the real obstacles to social justice that the least advantaged persistently face in becoming educated.

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Debates about these and other matters are especially polarized in the Anglophone world, where public and private often are both rhetorically and politically pitted against one another in debates concerning space, investment, distribution and governance. But we will not take up the arguments of anti-public conservatives in making a critique of the liberal positions in these debates. As the foregoing remarks make plain, *that* is a battle already being waged. Rather, in this article, we will offer a Leftist critique of the liberal defense of the public school, as it is, or as it is imagined to have been.

Thus, it should go without saying that we do not side with those who would like to privatize everything. The inequities associated with highly variable funding schemes, teacher shortages or neighborhood segregation will not be solved by providing every parent with a voucher or 'charters' urban districts. The claim that 'privatization' is the answer to the problems of our educational or political systems makes no historical or ethical sense. In our view, quality schools should be public in the best sense of the word: free and available to all, everywhere, at the point of entrance; challenging and appealing to the intrinsic motivation to learn in all children; and entailing the cultivation of knowledge, dispositions and competences necessary for preparing young people to engage with the wider world. We therefore make no common cause with those seeking to undermine or replace public institutions or with critics who delight in reviling those whose task it is to teach and administer in public schools.

In this article, we will argue that the standard arguments employed by most liberal defenders of the public school are themselves inadequate because they fail to provide a credible representation of their historical object, let alone effective remedies to our current problems. Indeed, narratives suggesting that the 'sky is falling' tend to be, in our view, grounded in fantasies about what public schools, or teaching and learning, are or could be, as much as they are grounded in the historical realities of public schools or the realities of so-called privatization. This contention is not unrelated to the observation that the liberal defense of public schools is most often undertaken by those with economic, social and racial privilege 'on behalf' of the variously disadvantaged, who may or may not share the same loyalty to these institutions.

This lends the liberal, and often paternalistic, defense of the public school an air of the ideological, in the sense of defending one's own interests in the (unconscious) guise of protecting something else. In this article, we speculate whether the self-identification of the proponents of this cause as 'progressive' is not part of this ideological construction and if the underlying political agenda is not in fact more conservative. Which is perhaps just to recall an earlier claim of the radical Left that liberals are in league with the devil.

### **The school as public institution**

Few public institutions generate more discussion and debate than schools, and it is not difficult to see why. In most industrialized countries, the vast majority of children between the ages of 5 and 17 attend public schools; more often than not attending school is mandated by law; schools staff tens of thousands of administrators and teachers on public money; teacher unions are a powerful political force; together with local school boards, states decide what children will or will not learn; testing regimes implemented by schools decide the fates of millions of young people; schools are places

where most of us first come into contact with others whose backgrounds and beliefs are decidedly different; and schools are the institutions most likely to have a lasting impact on the lives of those who, in most cases, spend the better part of their youth and adolescence attending them. Arguably no single other public institution has such a direct and lasting impact on the lives of millions of citizens. It is therefore not possible to overstate the significance of schools.

But as we indicated earlier, public (or state) schools are also politicized and polemical institutions, either demonized as monopolistic, or else believed to embody the very best of what a liberal democratic society concerned with the 'public interest' can achieve. In this article, we are concerned mostly with this latter claim.

To illustrate a standard defense of the public school ideal, consider a recent article in the Leftist weekly, *The Nation*, entitled 'How to Destroy a Public-School System'. Denvir (2014), the author of the piece, depicts a struggle of a group of embattled parents and teachers at a local elementary school in Philadelphia which had been slated – due to persistent poor academic performance – for charter conversion, under the aegis of the Mastery Charter Schools foundation. The article goes on to chronicle the campaign to convert Philadelphia's 'failing' schools into successful charter schools, and the economic leverage wielded against teachers unions, the district and those community members who chose to defend their 'community' schools. The report concludes with a snapshot of a Philadelphia high school plagued by violence, under-performance and staff and student alienation. For those defending public schools against privatization, this school's problem boils down to resource inequity. The most salient positive characteristic of the public school system that Denvir and others wish to save is its connection to community and its unfulfilled promise of democratic governance within individual classrooms, schools and across the district.

A similar example from *The Guardian* (incidentally also left-leaning) in the United Kingdom reinforces this pattern (Monbiot, 2013). The leadership of Roke primary school in Croydon – a multiethnic community just south of London – was identified by Ofsted, the national evaluative entity, as inadequate, and the Department of Education ordered that it become an academy operated by the Harris Federation, a not-for-profit charity not dissimilar in mission from the Mastery Charter Schools of Philadelphia. Parents resisted the takeover, preferring a relationship with the local secondary school as the remedy to their 'failure', but in the fall of 2014, the school was officially reopened as Harris Academy. The elementary school was thus 'divorced' from the local school authority, as would have been the case in Philadelphia. The author of the story describes the academy movement as 'the razing of state provision throughout the world. In the name of freedom, public assets are being forcibly removed from popular control and handed to unelected oligarchs'. In a related *Guardian* story, another author suggests that it is the teachers, students and parents that make a school what it is, not the authorities running it. Notable in the British context is the emphasis again on local 'community' control as an aspect of democracy, undone by the State and its corporate clients. Schools are depicted as public goods, not private commodities.

These narratives from the liberal press echo an academic and quasi-academic discourse about the 'Life and Death of the Great American School System' – to borrow the title of Ravitch's (2011) bestseller – which has provided at least an air of legitimacy to these arguments. Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine (2012), for instance, two well-

respected and progressive researchers, describe the hunger strike of Latino parents in Chicago demanding changes to their local high school, an action that eventually led to the construction of the most expensive public school building in Chicago history in one of the city's most economically challenged areas. But their choice of exemplars is very instructive of the double-bind in which liberal defenders of *the* public school find themselves. First, this is a highly atypical history of how public school systems respond to the demands of minority parents, and a highly atypical example of how minority parents voice, or more often, don't voice their interests. Second, Fabricant and Fine are attracted to the idea of a local ethnic, disadvantaged community choosing to advocate for an innovative schools-within-a-school design, a design choice supported in part by funding from the Gates Foundation, the source of much of the rationale and funding of the charter networks liberals love to hate. Similarly, Ravitch herself cites the English class in the high school she attended in Houston in the 1950s as an exemplar of the public school she would like to save, but mentions only in passing that hers was a Jim Crow segregated school, from which Blacks and Hispanics were barred. Across the board, in this fight to save *the* (or their) public school liberals must resort to a discursive strategy of nostalgia, an evocation of 'the way we never were' in Koontz's (1992) apt phrase, to evoke the kind of education they prefer, or long for (see e.g. Egan, 2002; Reese, 2013). Progressivism in this usage loses much of its utopian quality and instead, falls back into an ideological conservatism.

The liberal defense of real or imagined public schools, and its real or imagined heritage, is not limited to the Anglo-American context. The specific forms of this defense vary according to the particular histories of state-provided education in different localities, including the different purposes that citizens tend to believe are best or necessarily fulfilled by *their* public schools. Public schools in France and Japan are meant to instill loyalty to a shared French or Japanese culture, so as to produce citizens respectively loyal to France or Japan; American public schools are meant to provide individual opportunity for social and economic advancement, to be the engine of the fulfillment of the 'American dream'; schools in most countries – from Singapore to South Africa – are believed to promote democratic citizenship, social cohesion, workers for the labor market and so on. But these defenses also usually partake of a familiar set of general propositions about what constitutes the public sphere generally, and why schools in particular ought to embody certain positive aspects of 'public-ness'. So in what does 'publicness' consist as this bears upon education?

### **The ideal public school**

To begin to answer this question, consider a recent, robust defense of public schools from the liberal side of the political spectrum. In *Publics for Public Schools* (2013) Kathleen Knight-Abowitz defines public schooling in terms of the criteria necessary to ensure political legitimacy for the public, the degree of cultural support for an institution or 'an account of the justice of political arrangements'. There are two basic sources of this legitimacy: that schools are fulfilling their purpose of teaching students accepted necessary skills and knowledge; and that schools have political legitimacy, that is related specifically to the democratic premise of a society.

Knight-Abowitz maintains that fair participation in shared governance is the first requirement for public schools, something we understand to mean that the issues entailed in decision-making should be accessible to the relevant public, whose informed preferences and opinions about how schools operate also should be taken under advisement. But Knight-Abowitz admits that representative and aggregative participation – the model in the United States of voting for the local school board, for instance – has been largely a failure with respect to engaging broad participation. A small percentage of voters turn out for such elections, and those who represent either majoritarian or special interests dominate school boards (Kirst, 2008; Newman, 2009). These public institutions are also notoriously unresponsive to the ‘interference’ of the public, like parents. With the consolidation of school districts over the past century, leading to districts encompassing multiple communities and neighborhoods, the distance between school boards and their constituents has grown. Knight-Abowitz recommends a cure of deliberative democracy in which teachers, parents, older students and other community members are encouraged to create parallel governing structures. However attractive this remedy might appear, it would seem to depend, in the end, on fantasies about local communities and citizen organizations, and their possible relationships to totalizing bureaucracies like the public school system.

For the sake of legitimacy, public schools also must respect liberty and pluralism. At a minimum, respecting liberty entails accommodating a certain amount of choice with respect to parental and student preference; respecting pluralism, too, would require that schools be sufficiently diverse both in structure and organization in order to accommodate a range of interests and needs. But Knight-Abowitz admits that public schools do not and have not for the most part respected either. Conflicting demands between majority and minority values almost inevitably disadvantage minority students, despite laws that attempt to ensure freedom of expression and nondiscrimination (See Fossey, 2008, for the case Abowitz employs in her argument.). Her remedy is a ‘bi-focal’ view of school governance through which competing demands might be negotiated. She suggests that the views of the local majority can sometimes be trumped through consideration of minority values, as well as through consideration of the law. But the ‘rights’ of minorities, in this view, must still be weighed against the preferences of the majority. In any case, the preferences of the majority – buttressed typically by politicians, school boards, school administrators and the national culture itself – always structure the everyday practices of public schooling. Neither ‘integration’ nor ‘value-neutral’ curricula have been sufficient to ensure consistent respect for the nonstandard persons who populate public school buildings: even when schools are almost completely segregated by race/ethnicity/class, the controlling mindset informing educational norms tends to be that of the dominant class, expressed through the structures and administration of schooling, *even when the children of that class are permanently absent.*

For Knight-Abowitz, equal opportunity is the third condition for the political legitimacy of public schools. The ideal is perhaps most commonly associated with public education and is meant to denote fair access to a level playing field on which all children, irrespective of ability or social standing, have a fair chance to receive an education sufficient for personal success and social advancement. But if that is the condition of legitimacy, the vast and persistent inequalities of opportunity and outcome in schools across the world might then indicate that public schools are not legitimate

public institutions. Knight-Abowitz lays blame for the admittedly pervasive inequality on neoliberal policies that have decreased school funding and redistributive practices generally and on propaganda that maintains that poverty and discrimination are not more powerful than teachers in accounting for achievement. The preferred solution is an increase in tax revenues and higher investments in education, along with a return to active desegregation and anti-poverty government action. But even if one agrees with the critique of neoliberal divestment in public education, and agrees that government might take a more active role in relieving segregation and poverty, there is more than a little wistfulness in forgetting that before there was the 'new poverty' of neoliberalism there was an 'old poverty' and in most places even deeper, with more overt inequalities.

The fourth pillar of democracy in public schooling would be full attention to political education for democratic life. Knight-Abowitz suggests that this would entail both curricular attention, across disciplines, to the role of citizens in decision-making, and to the creation of 'democratic schools' in which students and teachers could actively practice democracy. The active promotion of democratic goals in curricula and pedagogy tends to run up against the problems of respecting liberty and plurality, but from the other direction. Many parents, teachers and students take school to be the place where individual goals of social and economic betterment can be pursued and are not motivated to give their time to 'political education for democratic life', which they tend not to see as promoting their own interests. The fantasy here is that 'citizenship education' – however valuable we might find it or however much we wish our own children would receive it – is not a central feature of most public schools. In fact, we would maintain that a very different kind of 'citizenship education' – one inclining toward materialism and consumerism (Molnar, 2013; Norris, 2011) – is very much part of the everyday life of schools and tends to lead to the very kind of disengagement in public life that those at the top of the field of education routinely lament.

Knight-Abowitz cites the professionalism of teachers as the fifth component for the political legitimacy of public schools, normally involving training and certification necessary for ensuring high quality standards among staff. But professionalism of teachers has an uncertain relationship with those ideal/imaginary aspects of public education that are democracy-promoting. Many teacher educators are ambivalent about promoting professionalism because it conflicts with other beliefs about who teachers are and what they (ought to) do. On the one hand, increased recognition of teachers as professionals seems to legitimate teacher education itself, to constitute an argument for better compensation, to increase the symbolic capital of teachers generally, and probably to increase the learning and development of students. Professionalization of teachers may also compete with the 'expertise' of local parents and community values, and potentially erodes the possibilities for democratic community organizing based on shared interests and status. Also, and perhaps more important, it is arguably difficult to sustain the identity between the 'professional teacher' (the expert, the technocrat) and the 'caring teacher' who acts as a parental surrogate. The demand for professionalism also conflicts with reluctance of citizens of education schools to recognize differences between teachers, to acknowledge the existence of a continuum of ability, motivation and competence among teachers, even among themselves, at the top of the hierarchy of teachers. But if the expertise of teacher educators does not ensure the professionalism of teachers in public schools, then the struggle for

status within the Academy, always a losing proposition for the perennially marginalized ‘ed-school’, is further complicated.

### The real public school

Everywhere there are enormous challenges in realizing the political legitimacy of public schools, and this is no secret to educational scholars and policy makers. Indeed, these phenomena are documented year after year in dozens of countries and appear in hundreds of publications, popular and academic, and the problems are usually the same that were present at the historical beginnings of public schooling. Nor should any of these well-documented dysfunctional features of public schooling come as a surprise to Knight-Abowitz, whose ideas we canvassed in the previous section, or for that matter the liberal professoriate *tout court*. The systemic injustices of public schooling are what this professoriate routinely and unapologetically teaches its students about the history and theory of schooling. Nor should it be surprising to said professoriate that increased and more justly distributed funding, better teacher preparation and better teacher pay, progressive curricula and pedagogy, democratic governance, cultural inclusion, free lunch – all of which we would likewise embrace for our own children and those of others – have not generally made state-public schools less unsatisfactory than they are and have always been for a large proportion of the students who attend them.

Indeed the inclination to rally to the defense of the public school is curious to observe considering how celebrated and canonized among its defenders radical critics of the public school system are. Leftist critics of renown include A.S. Neill, John Holt, Paulo Freire, Paul Willis, Herbert Gintis, Ira Shor, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Jacques Rancière and Noam Chomsky, just to name a few. From *Deschooling Society* (1971) author Ivan Illich, for example, we read:

Curriculum has always been used to assign social rank [...] Even now many people wrongly believe that school ensures the dependence of public trust on relevant learning achievements. However, instead of equalizing chances, the school system has monopolized their distribution (p. 12).

A few pages later, he adds,

The equal right of each person to exercise his competence to learn and to instruct is now pre-empted by certified teachers.<sup>1</sup> The teachers’ competence, in turn, is restricted to what may be done in school. And, further, work and leisure are alienated from each other as a result: the spectator and the worker alike are supposed to arrive at the work place all ready to fit into a routine prepared for them (1971, p. 22).

If those sentiments sound either too discouraging or jaded to the reader, consider Phillip Jackson’s arguably tamer *Life in Classrooms* (1968), where we find the following observation:

teachers may [insist] that they operate ‘democratic’ classrooms, but in a very real sense their responsibilities bear some resemblance to those of prison guards [and] in schools, as in prisons, good behavior pays off (pp. 31, 34).<sup>2</sup>

It would not be a stretch to say that Jackson’s book – one we both were assigned to read in our own graduate school training – is a kind of lament about the travesty

institutionalized schooling had become by the 1960s. And remarkably, in the decades since these scathing criticisms, the barrage of criticism has not abated. Perhaps even more remarkable, the most unrelenting criticisms of the school system come not from advocates of ‘privatization’ or of homeschooling but rather from folks who have labored for many years within the system, folks like John Taylor Gatto, 30-year veteran of public school teaching in New York and twice awarded ‘teacher of the year’. Echoing his radical comrades from decades before, it is worth quoting him at length:

School is about learning to wait your turn, however long it takes to come, *if ever*. And how to submit with a show of enthusiasm to the judgment of strangers, even if they are wrong; even if your enthusiasm is phony. School is the first impression we get of organized society and its relentless need to rank everyone on a scale of winners and losers; like most first impressions, the real things school teaches about your place in the social order last a lifetime for most of us. Work in classrooms isn’t important work. It fails to speak to real needs pressing on the young. It doesn’t answer burning questions which day-to-day experience forces upon young minds. Problems encountered outside school walls are treated as peripheral when in truth they are always central [...] Think of school as a conditioning laboratory, drilling naturally unique, one-of-a-kind individuals to respond as a mass, to accept continual ennui, envy and limited competence as only natural parts of the human condition (2009, pp. 63–64).<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps the most enduring critic of the ‘public school’ from the 60s onward is French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: his ‘reproduction’ theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) remains absolutely central to most understandings of how social institutions work to sustain ‘distinctions’ or, to put this another way, inequalities. ‘Reproduction theory’, as it came to be called, depends crucially on the ideas of *habitus* and *illusio*, notions developed over the long course of Bourdieu’s career. The habitus can be understood as a system of dispositions underlying the motivations, cognitions, beliefs and actions of any social subject. The habitus (of individuals) is both structured by the social structures characteristic of the existing social environment, which it in turn re-structures through its actions in the world. Bourdieu has likened habitus to libido, insofar as it is constituted primarily as a system of interests and desires, not consciously represented as such. It is through habitus that a social subject gains a ‘sense of the game’ (*illusio*), which allows one to play his or her part in the social field ‘naturally’ (See Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) for a relatively concise exposition of these concepts.)

The naturalness of the game for its players is the precondition also for a kind of *symbolic violence*, whereby those in a dominated position (like teachers in a public school, for instance) tend to perform in ways required of one in this position without question or resistance, even when these performances do not benefit them socially. Often subordinates perform their subordinate roles with a distinctive passion, seemingly unaware that these performances serve to legitimate their subordination. In fact, the very lack of conscious consideration of terms of costs and benefits is the essence of ‘playing the game’, which is always played, as it were, for its own sake. In the educational milieu, this concatenation of rituals and valuations organized around mutual positions in a field of power, tend to guarantee the ‘passing of the mantle’ from the privileged to the privileged, and the ‘passing of the porridge’ from the dis-privileged to the dis-privileged. While the system permits some to rise above their

station and others to fall from theirs, for Bourdieu, the school is the ‘cognitive machine’ that permits and encourages this reproduction of the social order (Bourdieu, 1988).

The point here is that each of the liberal critics we have cited – not to mention literally scores of critical pedagogues and ethnographers – has *always* been critical of the public education system, and that their texts are the meat and potatoes of foundations of education courses in universities across the world, presumably because they succeed in identifying what is chronically wrong with so much of public school education. Despite what appears to be consensus about the shortcomings of public schools, those who declaim the ‘death of the public school’ appear not to have learned the lessons they themselves have preached and continue to advocate remedies that have been historically ineffective. Indeed, the accounts we offered earlier of the educational crises in Philadelphia and Croydon call for these very same ‘fixes’.

While there are many proposals on the table – local control of curriculum and state control of curriculum, more testing and less assessment, more rigorous teacher training and the elimination of traditional teacher training – they invariably include discourse about *resources* and *teachers*. And who, for instance, could disagree with the idea that schools should be funded equitably? Or who could disagree that we need a committed army of teachers who are well-trained but also unfailingly committed to educating our children? Moreover, who wouldn’t agree that teachers ideally should be equitably distributed throughout an educational system so that all, rather than only some, children have the chance to be adequately challenged? Given their centrality to the public school defense, let us briefly look at these two items a bit more closely.

### **Resources**

Equitable funding is an important contribution to educational justice and as such strengthens the case for a robust public education. Children born into adverse circumstances or with extra challenges to overcome should have extra resources available to them in order to close the distance between them and those whose parents are able to do so much more for them outside of school. Yet by itself, funding does not solve many problems. First, school systems are notoriously inefficient in distributing financial resources to those most in need of help. Second, extra funding may purchase specialized staff, new buildings, libraries and computer labs but still leave disadvantaged children alienated from learning if other resources are absent. Those resources will include things like strong leadership, positive school climate, appropriate discipline, nurturing teachers, a motivated peer group, involved parents, role modeling, career guidance and consensus on academic goals. Third, unequal resources, usually conceived exclusively as unequal *financing*, goes to the very fabric of public education, certainly in large countries where local control is paramount. But irrespective of the country or the specific context, it is a truism that local knowledge often is the best kind of knowledge for addressing the needs of local school children. Part and parcel of this favoring local control is to see ‘top-down’ approaches as anathema.

None of this is to say that resources do not matter. It goes without saying that without money there is no school, there are no teachers, there are no books, computers and so on. Moreover, and equally important, resources should be equitably distributed. As an ethical rule of thumb, within the same geographic area one school in location *x*

should not be able to spend twice as much on the education of their pupils in location  $y$ . Inequalities, however, are not necessarily inequities. What matters is not whether actual per pupil spending amounts are exactly the same but whether they are adequate to address the pupil populations they serve. In many countries, funding schemes are systematically allocated on the basis of need. Accordingly, schools serving more children born into poverty or with special educational needs frequently are eligible for additional pupil funding. Therefore, schools serving high concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds often have more resources at their disposal to use the money as they see fit. Yet, while extra financial resources may keep a school from slipping further down the league tables, or enable some schools to hire badly needed staff, it is common wisdom that much more hangs on the success of any given school than the size of its budget. Even in advanced democracies with relatively high standards of school funding, with schemes for redistribution of resources according to need, achievement gaps have not been overcome and in many cases, have widened (Merry, 2013; Pfeffer, 2008). The expansion of both the urban charter school movement in the United States and the academy school movement in the United Kingdom has at least in part been motivated by the insight that traditional state-public schools are not effective in leveraging increased resources to the benefit of the disadvantaged students they serve.

### **Teachers**

Undoubtedly one of the most crucially important resources essential to any child's education is a good teacher. Good teachers matter. Unfortunately, however, good teachers are not in abundance; indeed most countries struggle with a significant teacher shortfall, and even when there are enough teachers to go around, relatively few will be above average. And, typically, it is a truism that schools serving high concentrations of disadvantaged children are more likely to have teachers with less experience and fewer qualifications. Pupils with less experienced teachers are more likely to be in schools with poor behavior management in place, and pupils with teachers who have fewer terminal degrees in their area of teaching are less likely to be adequately challenged. Compounding these problems, many of these schools struggle to retain their teachers and principals, adding to the sense of instability with which many high-needs schools struggle (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2007; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). One way to change this is to offer better teachers strong financial incentives to work in schools with more challenging pupils.

Equitable teacher distribution – assuming it can be feasibly devised and sustainably implemented – represents an important contribution to educational justice and further strengthens the case for a robust public education. But again, on its own teacher distribution can only do so much if the conditions necessary to support and retain high quality teachers are absent. Retaining teachers under adverse conditions is an uphill battle. As Jackson (2009, p. 214) aptly puts it, 'teachers have little financial incentive to teach at undesirable schools. Since observably better teachers will be hired over weaker teachers and all teachers are likely to apply for the most desirable jobs, schools with undesirable working environments will have teachers of lower average quality'. But even if we were to solve the distribution quandary, we still

would be faced with formidable challenges concerning how best to train, support and assess teachers.

On the other hand, in many circles to even broach criticisms of public school teachers is tantamount to launching a full-on assault against public education itself. Here, we encounter a myth about who or what the ‘public school teacher’ actually is, namely, an autonomous, student-centered agent. Contrary to this myth, teachers most often serve as agents of the state, and as such are entrusted with carrying out the aims of the state, which include using pre-selected course materials, administering standardized tests, advising for class placement and carrying out disciplinary procedures. Even those, like Darling-Hammond (2006, 2010), who champion teacher education (reform) and enhanced teacher agency, as the main levers to increasing public school success and legitimacy, are acutely aware of the perennial shortcomings of traditional teacher education. But the reforms that Darling-Hammond and others have managed to enact, built on intensive assessment and model of the professional, that is effective teacher tends to perpetuate the notion that teachers are and must be ‘in control’ of their own classes, while simultaneously subjecting teachers subject to the reformers’ hegemonic vision and regulatory schemes. This may signal a return to an underlying message of compliance that has been characteristic of teacher education for the past century, rather than the dawn of new era of ‘agency’ (Labaree, 2004).

### **Is the liberal defense of public schools a fantasy?**

As we earlier pointed out, the challenges associated with improving schooling for all students, and especially those with the greatest needs, should come as no surprise to the liberal defender of the public school. Each succeeding year’s academic scholarship testifies again to the lack of freedom and plurality, equal opportunity, shared participation, democracy and professionalism – to return to Knight-Abowitz’s list of legitimating factors – endemic to public schooling. One might submit that most scholarly careers in education have centered around documenting these daily features of public school life, where those who have documented the failures of public schools are the most keen to circle the wagons against any perceived threat to the institution of public schooling itself. In light of this seeming paradox, might we then argue that the defense of ‘the state-public school’ is just misguided nostalgia for a state of grace that never was, or a utopian fantasy in which capitalism really doesn’t produce intractable disparities of wealth, power and opportunity? And could it be that this misguided nostalgia is the inevitable corollary to an ideological frame that valorizes an imaginary – versus a real – public?

Not necessarily. For instance, it could be the case that we simply have an instance of the insider-outsider dynamic, where it is perfectly acceptable to complain and criticize one’s *own* system but not for others to do the same. For example, a religious ‘group’, say, persons of Muslim descent in western Europe, may exemplify all manner of internal difference, dispute and strife among their own members but with outsiders assume a united front in the face of stigmatization, discrimination or fear-mongering. Similarly, citizens may routinely vilify the serious imperfections of their public health-care systems, yet then proudly defend and even celebrate them to outsiders (as was the case concerning the National Health Service at the 2012 Olympics in London), the point

ostensibly being that a deeply flawed system is better than no system at all. There is something to this insider–outsider explanation, but it is questionable whether the analogies work quite so well in the case of public education. As we have argued, many of the criticisms of the public education system come not from outsiders but rather from those who are badly served by it. Indeed, many of the struggles to find alternatives to what ‘the local public school’ has to offer one’s own child have been launched by the marginalized and poor.

It could also be the case that one’s defense of the public school is motivated by the concern to *reform* rather than to relinquish it to the arbitrary machinations of the free market. For example, staff of a hospital, environmental agency or housing bureau may find their respective institutions to be poorly managed and inefficient. In that case internal reform is a sensible response, even when the steps one must take are time-consuming, exasperating, expensive and difficult to implement. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine the actors in any of these scenarios being opposed to *alternatives* to the services that they provide, let alone profound structural changes that may bring about an entirely different way of more effectively providing those services.

Yet again, that kind of openness seems to us hard to find among many of public education’s most vocal defenders. Two sets of actors – university researchers on the one hand and teachers/administrators on the other – typically are employed by state-funded institutions that are indissolubly committed to their own legitimacy and maintenance. Could it then be the case that both sets of actors are too much a part of the dominant model to recognize that an unwavering defense of public schools *no matter how poorly they may perform* is simply an untenable stance? The dominant model, as reformers willing to look inside as well as outside the system point out, is of course one encompassing legislation and massive investment from state governments, but also politicians, academics, teachers, administrators and social workers (to name but a few). And notice that all of these actors, to one degree or another, are dependent upon this leviathan of a system and hence are keenly (if unconsciously) invested in maintaining the status quo. As Gatto (2009, p. 84) observes: ‘school is too vital a jobs project, contract giver, and protector of the social order to allow itself to be “re-formed” [...] Even reformers can’t imagine school being much different’.

Again, our aim here is not to repudiate the idea of a public as this concerns important political ideals, or for that matter, essential features of the education system. Instead, we remind the reader that we are taking issue with the circle-the-wagons defense of ‘public education’ against any and all criticisms. Indeed, the knee jerk defense of ‘the public school’, and the concomitant fondness for *what never was*, engages in a strange kind of disavowal, a psychological rationalization that indefensibly reconciles what educational research has been saying for nearly 50 years with what needs to happen to begin to correct it. Taking always the ‘idealistic’ view (which again incidentally opposes the history and theory commonly taught in university education departments) in each case motivates liberal advocates of the public school to reject all manner of reform as a threat to ‘the public’. These views together represent a fantastical take on the ‘public sphere’ sharply at variance with more critical understandings. Moreover, to the extent that fanciful notions of this public are rhetorically invoked as cures for what ails us now, in our view these defenses merely exhibit bad faith, and as such approximate Baldwin’s (2010, p. 103) more general observation about modes of

domination: ‘We have constructed a history which is a total lie, and have persuaded ourselves that it is true’.

### The imaginary public

We have asked whether the defense of the public might not actually serve the interests of those most negatively affected by public schools and further, whether there might be a willful blindness to the many structural failings of the public school system. Additionally, we surmised the possibility that in this blindness, there also was a kind of denial about how particularistic, non-inclusive, coercive and unequal public schools are. In other words, how is it that this knowledge of the *real* is so consistently eclipsed by appeals to an *ideal*, or an imagined essence? But the fact is that most contemporary defenders of the public school do not seem so much interested in developing a normative theory of public education – where the distance between the ideal and the real can be explained sociologically, philosophically, economically or through some other disciplinary logic – as they do in simply promoting faith in a kind of transcendental, that is imaginary, institution.

The imaginary has an important place – as distinct from, but not opposite to, the ideal, the real and other social–psychological categories – in the theoretical constructions of several influential twentieth-century theorists, including most notably Marx and Freud. Arguably, the most important modern theorist of the imaginary is Cornelius Castoriadis who combined both Marxist and psychoanalytic concepts in his extensive writings on ‘imaginary institutions’. For Castoriadis, the imaginary is the foundation out of which all symbolic activity, rational and real, is generated. The meanings of the imaginary are both cultural and social, like those associated with the foods ‘we’ prefer and the foods that ‘we’ find disgusting. Another part of the meaning of the imaginary derives from personal associations and attachments, most often unconscious. In bureaucracies, it is readily apparent that the common rituals, forms, functions and values that characterized everyday institutional life are always already invested with high degrees of libidinal energy disproportionate to what could be attributed to their ‘objective’ meanings or functions or even their idealizations.

The signifier *public school* refers, in this scheme, first – at the level of the manifest appearances – to actual physical structures and the social institutions contained therein. *Public school* also signifies the social functions of the school and the network of social roles constituted by schools. But these concrete referentials and first-order symbolic representations of the school hardly exhaust the range of significations flowing from *public school*. ‘The modern view of the [public school],’ to paraphrase Castoriadis (1998, p. 131),

is only partially correct. To the extent that it presents itself as *the* truth about the problems of the institution, it is only a projection. It projects onto the whole history of the institution [e.g., public school] an idea taken not ... from the actual reality of these institutions ... which, despite the vast movement of rationalization, have never been and are still no more than partially functional, but from what this world *would like* its institutions [e.g. public school] to be.

*Public school* in the imagination of a person invested in social and psychological ways to its survival – in the same way that this person might be attached to the survival of family or country – means more, and something different, than what a disinterested observation of the neighborhood school would suggest.

Castoriadis saw the institutional imaginary – meaning both the institution (school, prison, hospital) as an integrated whole with its own productions, and the actors who inhabit the institution and moment by moment make it what it is – as the displacement of the *is* by the *ought*. That is, an institutional actor imagines her world according to how the institution presents itself, historically, rather than according to how the institution actually functions, not to mention its effects on society, on its own agents and on its clients, or students or patients. To place this dynamic, as it relates to the individual, within a properly psychoanalytic framework, we might speak of the subject inclined to see herself in the reflection of the institution, so that in order to avoid narcissistic injury the institution must be imagined in such a way that the subject's worth is preserved.

And with respect to the institution itself, representations of the public school as democratic, liberty-enhancing, equitable, participatory, democratic and professional – emanating from the broader field of public education itself – are imaginary inasmuch as they project what defenders of the public would like public schools (and their own academic bastions) to be, rather than what public schools in fact are. These imaginary institutions are also self-representations, and the sense of the integrity of the self for those within the field of the public school depends on the 'survival' of this institution in its imagined form. In everyday terms, people tend to see themselves as mirror images of the institutions and organizations in which they have invested not just their time and energy, but their sense of identity. Denizens of this educational field – professors and teachers, who of course themselves were once school-attending students – find themselves now in a situation Bourdieu called *hysteresis*, when dispositions are out of line with the field and with the 'collective expectations' of its normality. In situations of crisis or sudden change, especially those seen at the time of too-rapid movements in social space, agents often have difficulty holding together the dispositions associated with different states or stages, and some of them, often those who were best adapted to the previous state of the game, have difficulty in adjusting to the new established order (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160). Confronted with momentous changes in institutional conditions – the rise of charter schools and other alternative challenges to traditional public schooling, the politicization of teaching, economic pressures caused by neoliberal 'reform', new technologies and dramatic demographic changes within schools – educational professionals find that accustomed and time-honored ways of practice and understanding are no longer functional.

This internal disruption can be understood, on one hand, as the motivation for reform, and on the other side, as the motivation for circling the wagons against the external threat to 'the way we do things here'. The imaginary is the psychological apparatus through which one might do both at the same time: change with the times while preserving the past. Hysteresis, thinking and behavior during a period of stressful transition phase, results in actions and discourse that, like neurotic symptoms, are not strictly functional or compliant to the reality principle. Historical reason is rendered as nostalgia, for example. Here we can again conjure the Angel

of History, who, backing into the future, imagines a past that was better than the present and projects this nostalgia onto the world at his back, which he is not yet ready to see for itself or to confront in hopeful or constructive manner. The local communities in which schools are supposed to be grounded were not what they are supposed to have been, in the past. Accordingly, to attempt to construct a future on that basis, to reconstruct these imagined communities in a real world, probably will not deliver the imagined justice.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, we have attempted to better understand the sense of crisis surrounding notions of the public within the educational domain. We have demonstrated that there is something deeply suspicious about the rhetorical public that many of its advocates ardently defend, particularly as this pertains to standard defenses of the public school. Accordingly, we have argued that the defense of the public is an imaginary one, imaginary because said defenses suggest a willful blindness to the dramatic shortcomings of public education systems almost everywhere, shortcomings, as we have shown, that used to be the staple of Leftist critique of the State. Our goal has not been to impugn the value of a public education or to cheapen the heroic efforts of ordinary teachers doing the hard day-to-day work in public schools. Rather our aim has been to make sense of the conditioned defense of public schools by looking closely at the rhetoric liberal defenders of the public school use, and bringing these, in fact rather conservative, representations into contact with the undeniably persistent historical reality that public schools are usually particularistic, non-inclusive, coercive and unequal.

Additionally, we have argued that the sort of defense most often heard concerning the public often entails preserving and reproducing the institutions from which its defenders stand most to benefit. Of course, to defend that which butters one's bread is neither irrational nor wrong per se, but it might just cast a shadow of doubt on the integrity of a defense of institutional norms that align so closely with one's self interest. At a minimum, a self-interested defense should give one pause when said defense of a public 'under threat' so often seems intransigently opposed to any substantive reforms, or pragmatic alternatives, no matter how bleak the current state of affairs.

Nothing in what we have argued leads us to repudiate public schools, or indeed public institutions writ large. To the contrary, we again underscore our own unstinting support for public education for each of the reasons we delineated in the essay's introduction: schools should be robustly public in facilitating universal access to challenging instruction, to social opportunities to interact and learn from one's differently positioned peers and to meaningful and realistic possibilities for upward mobility. The fact that public schools may continue to fall short of their ideals is no reason to cease supporting and improving them. But as we have tried to show, even the strongest support for public education should not lead us to a reflexive and hence uncritical defense wherever and whenever a critique is launched against it. Nor should our love for the public incline us to retreat into fantasies about what the public is, effectively denying what in our heart of hearts we know to be the case, and in any case that which is consistently contradicted by empirical research. If we take the public ideal seriously,

we will recognize that a commitment to the public also entails an equally strong commitment to its critique.

## Notes

1. Illich continues, 'Skill teachers are made scarce by the belief in the value of licenses. Certification constitutes a form of market manipulation and is plausible only to a schooled mind'. (1971, p. 15).
2. Jackson continues, '...school is a place where things often happen not because students want them to, but because it is time for them to occur [...] Here then are the four unpublicized features of school life: delay, denial, interruption, and social distraction. Each is produced, in part, by the crowded conditions of the classroom'. (1968, pp. 13, 17).
3. Gatto continues, 'most historical accounts of schooling are so negative [that one has] to wonder how this exercise of pedagogy ever passed the test of time with its original parts nearly unchanged' (2009, p. 100).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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