

Book Review

CLASS DISMISSED: WHY WE CANNOT TEACH OR LEARN OUR WAY OUT OF INEQUALITY.
By John Marsh. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011.

Hardly a week seems to go by without a new study or book published cataloguing the sins in the American university system. In part, this is heartening, because it shows that people still care enough about the system to be enraged when things are, to use the title of one such study, 'academically adrift.' Yet within this emerging set of new public institution and policy literature, outside of a narrow band of scholars such as Marc Bousquet and Henry Giroux, relatively little about education's relationship to production reaches the public eye, the newsroom floor, or congressional hearings.

It is therefore wonderful that John Marsh, an English Professor at Penn State, presents a timely and accessible discussion deflating the promissory potential of education as a luck neutralizing policy tool. Applying his sharp eye and close reading skills to education econometrics Marsh demonstrates how the consensus on higher education is a confluence of the various forces that create the neoliberal mode of governance. As his analysis applies to prospects for equitable social change, he reckons that this burden of hope is too much for education alone to carry. Lastly, and perhaps the best element of the book, Marsh demonstrates that humanistic training can stand toe-to-toe with the policy wonk crowd.

To give an overview of the book, *Class Dismissed* addresses the prevailing inequality in the United States and the lack of public engagement over the role of class in determining the allocation and quality of life chances. Instead, most stakeholders obses-

sively concentrate on the efficacy of education at the expense of examining the differentials of, and interest in, economic power. Even well-regarded economic commentators believe "outsourcing, immigration and the gains of the super rich...are diversions from the main issue [which is] largely one of (a lack of) education." (15) The consensus is that inequality is the byproduct of poorly formed, or executed, policy.

Any doubts of this consensus are quickly brushed aside by pragmatic politics. Despite the hostile antagonistic impasse that is formal American politics, all parties agree that higher education is vital to growth and prosperity. Here the university system is regarded as being reasonably democratic (relatively accessible) and reasonably meritocratic (a four year ranking). This provides just enough to satisfy all; conservatives, because it provides justification not to support those that fail; and progressives because it provides access to opportunity that can overcome starting gate inequality. The arrangement therefore permits inequalities for which you are said to be responsible. But this is too vulnerable to moral luck, and is perhaps the worst version of luck-egalitarianism for it fails to address the actual prospects for success, which for those familiar with Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works*, will know is unlikely for students when the system is rigged.

Marsh proceeds to show that when structural issues are discussed in educational policy, it is often under a neutral technocratic rubric of matching teaching to economic needs. The current thought in

education policy is that the university system should provide workplace preparation through professional degree programs, the cost of which is born by the individual themselves as businesses are unwilling to carry the costs of vocational training. Given that high school attempts to develop a well-rounded learner capable of functioning within the society, but that the new economy requires hyper-specialized knowledge and skills, universities have been tasked to signal that the person is vocationally competent. The proliferation in professional master programs is testament to this process.

While some might have concerns with the university bearing a vocational mandate, Marsh's direct concern is not this per se (although he does think that universities are best positioned to cultivate intellectual maturity, and not vocational skills). Rather, he plainly points out that vocational training as a means to economic mobility is misplaced because that path soon becomes bottlenecked as everyone attempts to take that route. Furthermore, to quote Marsh, "the US economy, despite claims to the contrary, will continue to produce more jobs that do not require a college degree than jobs that do. A college degree will not make those jobs pay any more than the pittance they currently do." (20) This sentiment is neatly expressed by the best line in the book, "A PhD working as a bartender earns bartender wages, not a professor's salary." (20) One might add, this bartender would be burdened by enormous student debt which greatly hinders the chances of upward economic mobility.

As an alternative policy prescription to inequality Marsh proposes the sufficiency of a living wage. It is a little bit unclear whether he means a citizen's wage, a basic income grant, or raising the minimum wage, but all three aim to improve working and living conditions which is generally Marsh's point. To make this politically possible he thinks that Americans require an honest dealing with structural economic arrangements. But Marsh is also under no illusions that concessions will be given without contention. For this reason he taps organized labour as the instrument by which to fight for economic rights and gains. Marsh, though, is also a realist, and acknowledges that a labour renaissance still confronts the lack of political will to do what is required to greatly reduce inequality. If such will existed, then progressive redistributive taxation and other mechanisms would already be in place to promote widespread human flourishing.

After reading this book some might quibble that Marsh is not radical enough, or that his appeal to preserve the liberal university rings of a self-interested humanities faculty member, or even that union organizing is not good enough in the present circumstances. But criticisms of this sort forget that Marsh is constrained by his context, and his appeal to particular audiences. These criticisms also unnecessarily make the good the enemy of the perfect. More measured responses should seek to build upon what Marsh has provided.

In sum, Marsh has crafted something magnificent. *Class Dismissed* deserves to be one of the most read and talked about books this year.

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