

Book Reviews

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Class Dismissed: Why We Can't Teach Or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality

by John Marsh. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011. \$19.95 CAN, paper. ISBN 978-1-58367-243-3. Pages: 1-217.

Review by Peter Brogan¹

In *Class Dismissed*, John Marsh critically deconstructs the myth or common trope that education is the panacea for alleviating poverty and economic inequality. Drawing on a wide-range of both qualitative and quantitative secondary literature, Marsh makes the case that economic inequality and poverty are rooted in economics and politics, not formal education or the lack thereof. Arguing that it is still important what happens in classrooms across America, Marsh contends, “equality of educational opportunity may not lead to greater equality of outcomes, but that does not mean it has no value” (202).

The book is organized into three parts. The first draws on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative economic and sociological research to detail the depth of the divide between the rich and poor in the United States, which is the widest its been since the 1920s and among developed countries. Here, Marsh demonstrates why the default position of using education to address economic inequality has failed. The second part of the book examines why, when, and how education has come to dominate discussions about “opportunity, prosperity and poverty in American life” (21), as well as alternative ways Americans once imagined they could advance in society (e.g. through collective struggle and a more expansive welfare state) has been pushed out of public policy debates. Marsh also suggests that despite a plethora of evidence to the contrary, many Americans continue to believe that they (and anyone) should be able to learn their way out of poverty. Marsh contends that the belief in the transformative power of education flows from a core desire of many people to want to think that we live in a just world, in which people get what they deserve if they work hard enough and apply themselves in school. However, little effort is made to offer supporting

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evidence or interrogate the cultural mechanisms through which such an ideology takes root in the American context.

In the third and final section of the book, Marsh analyzes economic literature discussing what else it would take besides, or in addition to, a good education to reduce poverty and economic inequality. The author tends towards an explanation of increasing inequality resulting from a decrease in the bargaining power of workers, and unions in particular, therefore placing an emphasis on rebuilding and expanding union strength as the key to genuinely addressing economic inequality and poverty. In this section Marsh also tries to answer why in spite of all the evidence, the “United States has done and appears poised to do so little to act on this consensus [in the sociological and economic literature]” (22). He then turns to a discussion of what ways an education might be beneficial for addressing economic and political problems rooted in social inequality. He makes the case that the best way to improve educational outcomes is by decreasing poverty and inequality in the first place: “The point of this book is that we need to cultivate a new modesty regarding education, to stop believing that it is a magic potion for the poor or for anyone else. Only after we’ve cleared the deck of these mistaken beliefs can we embark on a serious effort to fix these problems” (22).

While it may be the case that “some people may escape poverty and low incomes through education the problem arises when education becomes the only escape route from these conditions – because that road will very quickly become bottlenecked” (19), Marsh argues that despite claims to the contrary, the US economy continues to see an expansion of employment that does not require a college degree. He writes that a “college degree will not make those jobs pay any more than the pittance they currently do...What will make those bartending and other unskilled jobs pay something close to a living wage – if not a living wage itself – constitutes...one of the major public policy challenges of the twenty-first century. Education, however, is not the answer” (20).

Alternatively, Marsh argues that education should be focused on learning for its own sake, rather than seeing a direct correlation between learning for earning. Thus, a good education (however we may define it), according to Marsh, cannot be the solution to economic woes without the necessary expansion of useful, secure, well-paying remunerative jobs. “We should not make economic rights, or economic security more generally, dependent upon how far one goes – of how short one comes up – in exercising his or her right to a good education. Rights are requirements” (203). Concurrently, Marsh is clear that education should serve

the working classes, the poor, and the marginalized, hence we should not completely disregard the impact that schooling can have on one's economic fate. "For it remains the case in the United States today that if someone wants a living wage, if she wants her family to not live in or on the edge of poverty, she had better go to college" (209).

Perhaps the biggest weakness of *Class Dismissed* is that it concludes with too brief a discussion of solutions to poverty and inequality, if not how to improve the substance of education. In general, Marsh points to the expansion of union numbers and strength as key to a more serious strategy for addressing these problems. He also offers a number of moderate proposals to public policy, but does not substantially address the politics of achieving even modest changes. Another limitation is that while Marsh dismantles the mythology of education as the key to upward social mobility, while at the same time acknowledging that education can still have a major positive impact on individuals, he fails to interrogate the relevance of education (broadly conceived) for political struggle, or schools' roles as both sites of ideological reproduction and contestation.

While scholars (such as the late historian Christopher Lasch) have been making similar arguments to that of Marsh for quite some time, the claim that education is the primary vehicle out of poverty continues to dominate public policy across the US and Canada. With an eye to deconstructing these taken-for-granted assumptions, Marsh's book is likely to be of interest to scholars and activists interested in an introduction to education justice.