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A new social contract, a new social criticism

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> 'The liberty of man in society is to be under no legislative power except the one established by consent in the commonwealth. . .'
> —John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 4, para. 22

The social contract has always been a myth, but this has not diminished its importance and value: it has sustained the prevailing part of the politics of the modern age, and it has enshrined a conception of human nature and social relationship. With the End of History,[1] it has spread through the economic sphere in the form of neoliberalism on a global scale. In education this has extended through cultures of accountability and performativity (and hence into the most practical matters of the curriculum), legitimated through supranational organisations such as the OECD and the World Bank. Its apotheosis has brought with it unprecedented changes in technology: social media, Big Data, and the acceleration of Artificial Intelligence has laid the way for new channels of social control and stratification. All these factors have shaped education in ways only partly understood. Their coincidence with the global threat of the climate crisis—a coincidence that is scarcely a surprise, given the licence market economics provides for carbon emission—shows that something has to change. At the same time, their strange contemporaneity with the Covid-19 pandemic has created the biggest disruption since the Second World War to patterns of work and social life, the effects of which on education have been wide-ranging.

The phrase 'the new normal' has come into general parlance as an anticipation that things will never be quite the same. What this phrase refers to is in part the palpable (and residual) effects of the pandemic, especially where forms of public gathering, for work or recreation, were suspended, with schools and universities closed and working from home commonplace. To some, this brought benefits, not least avoidance of the daily commute during the rush-hour; for others—surely the many—it was experienced as a kind of claustrophobia, with the rise in mental health problems that comes with social isolation. But, especially in view of the

[1] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Recently he has written: 'The philosopher Hegel coined the phrase *the end of history* to refer to the liberal state's rise out of the French Revolution as the goal or direction toward which historical progress was trending. For many decades after that, Marxists would borrow from Hegel and assert that the true end of history would be a communist utopia. When I wrote an article in 1989 and a book in 1992 with this phrase in the title, I noted that the Marxist version was clearly wrong and that there didn't seem to be a higher alternative to liberal democracy' (*The Atlantic*, 17 October 2022. Online at: Francis Fukuyama: Still the End of History - The Atlantic. Accessed 20 April 2023).

massive public borrowing that this closing down of the economy required, the 'new normal' has undertones of a less tangible, potentially more disturbing shift in human experience: it implies that, for some time at least, there will not be a normal, that things are going to be unsettled for the foreseeable future, and that perhaps they are changing irrevocably. It comes also with a real threat to democracy, as is evident from the resurgence of populist politics, fuelled by fake news: Brexit exposed a profound rift in the United Kingdom, while the United States seems to be embarking on a cultural civil war. . . And yet, these admonitory sentiments, the earnest sense of responsibility they evince, are these just words, the endless commentary to fill locked-down lives in front of the screen? As John Updike once remarked, 'We cannot imagine a Second Coming that would not be cut down to size by the televised evening news, or a Last Judgment not subject to pages of holier-than-Thou second-guessing in The New York Review of Books.'[2] And, given that his reference is mostly to the US, it is worth recalling also the adage that, for many Americans it is easier to imagine the End of the World than the end of the American way of life.[3]

That the contemporary crisis is somehow tied up with education is not really open to doubt, and it is widely held that education is crucial to the ways out of it. Less attention is given to the possibility that education may be part of the problem. I propose to examine this convergence of the unsettling of democracy and the climate crisis in relation to education, with a view to determining what a new social contract might mean. On the strength of an elaborated account of criticism and judgement, I shall argue for a shift not merely in the values guiding policy and practice but in the way education is conceived. To lay the way for this, let me draw attention to two recent and highly influential books that reflect on the broader political signs of our times.

A direction of travel for future policy?

Minouche Shafik is a leading economist and Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Apart from holding a number of academic positions, she was Deputy Director of the International Monetary Fund (2008-2011) and Deputy Governor of the Bank of England (2014-2017). Since 2020 she has been a cross-bench peer in the House of Lords. Her book, *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract*,[4] constitutes a penetrating analysis of the present crisis, especially in terms of economics, and it is a powerful plea for a more humane social order. She overtly positions herself in a line of reformers that have come from the LSE, starting with Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the founders of the Fabian Society and LSE itself, and including William Beveridge, Friedrich Hayek, and Anthony Giddens. Plainly there is no common line to this series of thinkers, but each

[2] John Updike (2012) *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (Random House), p. 216.

[3] See Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. xii; and 'Future City,' *New Left Review* 21 (May/June 2003), 76.

[4] Minouche Shafik, *What We Owe Each Other: A New Social Contract* (New York: Vintage, 2021).

has had a profound influence on social and political reform, an influence that has extended through much of the world. Each has responded to a particular political crisis or impasse. Now, Shafik claims, there is again need for a new paradigm:

> Profound changes in technology and demography are challenging old structures. The climate crisis, the global pandemic and its inevitable aftermath have revealed the extent to which our existing social contract is no longer working. This book is an attempt to understand the underlying causes of these challenges and, more importantly, provide an alternative view on what a social contract fit for the twenty-first century might look like. It is not a blueprint but I am hoping it is a modest contribution to fostering debate and providing a direction of travel for future policy.[5]

Shafik begins her final chapter, entitled 'A New Social Contract', with reference to a speech by President John F. Kennedy at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on 4 July 1962, American Independence Day. Kennedy called for a 'declaration of interdependence'. Countries increasingly depended on each other, and mutual gains were to be made from cooperation. In similar spirit, Shafik concludes the book with a plea for 'a social contract that delivers a better architecture of both security and opportunity for everyone, a social contract that is less about "me" and more about "we", recognises our interdependence and uses it for mutual benefit'.[6] She brings together her ideas under three main priorities: security for all; maximum investment in capability; and efficient, fair sharing of resources. The proposals she elaborates in the light of these principles, including far-reaching changes in taxation, attempt to show how such change might be realised.

She devotes one of her eight chapters to education, and the titles of the others (including 'Children', 'Old Age' and 'Generations') indicate clearly her sense of the moral importance of the legacy of present generations for those to come. She does, however, appear to accept uncritically a number of received ideas, ideas that would surely benefit from closer scrutiny. What makes education valuable, she argues, includes ensuring children's physical, cognitive and emotional development, shaping us into citizens with common values, and helping individuals to discover their talents and how they can best contribute to the world. 'In terms of the social contract,' she writes, 'education also fulfils the vital economic role of preparing the workforce of the future by equipping us with the skills we need to find employment, be productive and thereby contribute to society'.[7] She emphasises that global investment in education has paid off handsomely:

> In economic terms, we can calculate a rate of return on education by dividing the benefits it produces—measured in the form of higher wages, minus the costs of providing the education—by the number of

[5] P. xiv.
[6] P. 163.
[7] P. 49.

> years of education received, which results in an annual percentage yield, similar to a return on a savings account or shareholding.[8]

She identifies two challenges on the horizon, one demographic and the other technological, and claims that these will require both making education more widely available and changing the systems through which it is provided. There are questions not only about *what* is taught but also about *when* it is taught.[9]

> Traditional education systems often place major emphasis on rote memorisation. Teachers transmit information and students do their best to retain it and reproduce it in various tests. But today most educationalists recognise that this is a waste of time: we are in a world where 3.5 billion people have access to smartphones with search engines at their fingertips and almost infinite access to information. More important now is the ability to sift through information, make critical judgements about its validity and come to a view about its implications. Education should focus on equipping children with these abilities.[10]

In all countries, she asserts, cognitive skills such as being able to come up with a new solution to a problem, are being valued by the labour market. In recommending flexibility in the provision of education, she has in mind the provision of well-timed second-chance education and opportunities to 'retool at various stages in a working life'.[11] She also stresses the importance of fostering the ability to *acquire* new knowledge and skills: in fact, the best education has always been about 'learning how to learn'.[12] Regarding the role of teachers, this means 'shifting "from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side", as the saying goes in current educational parlance'.[13] She goes on to recommend 'andragogy' over 'pedagogy', on the grounds that adult brains are less efficient at learning than children's. Moreover, in the experience of children there is usually a hierarchical relationship with the teacher, with learning organised in series of sequential steps: 'Adults, by contrast, work best in a collaborative environment where they are equal partners in the process, and learn better through active participation and problem-solving.'[14]

What we have here is a string of stock ideas and clichés that were familiar enough almost half a century ago. The crude contrast between 'traditional education' and skills of learning-how-to-learn blatantly obstructs more serious thinking about these matters, playing into the hands of the neoliberal managerialist take-over of education that, for most of that half-

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[8] P. 50.
[9] P. 52.
[10] P. 53.
[11] P. 54.
[12] P. 54.
[13] P. 54.
[14] P. 61.

century, has been well underway. Shafik does rather better when it comes to the importance of early years education, in relation to which she amasses a persuasive collection of evidence and argument; but then this importance is not widely contested, and she offers little, though this is more understandable, in the way of suggestions as to what such an education might be like. She can certainly be supported in her claim, at the end of the chapter, that governments need to be put in place measures to increase spending from their current inadequate levels. Her emphasis, however, is on supporting individuals through career transitions in which adaptability to a fast-changing workplace may well be more important than experience. 'These kinds of educational opportunities, which prepare citizens for their new reality,' she writes, 'must lie at the heart of a new social contact'.[15]

These qualities may be important, but is this really what lies at the heart of the matter? If this is the place of education in that contract, what does it say of the society it represents? My criticisms may seem unforgiving, for what Shafik sets out to provide is primarily an *economic* analysis. But that means the social contract, old or new, will be understood primarily in economic terms. How far does that hide the problem? The recent analysis of the contemporary crisis provided by Michael Sandel in *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*[16] answers more fully to these concerns.

The last acceptable prejudice?

Central to Sandel's discussion is his claim that the idea of merit that prevails in contemporary society has severed its link to morality: merit is understood in technocratic terms. He deplores the present state of American society, where, over the past four decades, technocratic modes of government have presided over political stagnation—with deregulation of the financial markets, growing inequalities, decaying infrastructure, high rates of incarceration and futile wars, and a 'system of campaign finance and gerrymandered congressional districts that makes a mockery of democracy'.[17] These changes have narrowed the civic project, with the common good coming to be understood in primarily economic terms. When what passes as political discourse replaces public debate with shouting matches, with the proponents talking past one another, political disaffection is understandable. Meanwhile the practicalities of government are being carried out by administrative agencies, often captured by the industries they regulate, by central banks and by corporate lobbyists whose contributions to campaigning are tantamount to a buying of political influence. '[T]he reign of technocratic merit,' Sandel writes,

> has reconfigured the terms of social recognition in ways that elevate the prestige of the credentialed, professional classes and depreciate

[15] Pp. 69-70.

[16] Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2021, with a new Prologue; first published by Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2020).

[17] P. 29.

> the contributions of most workers, eroding their social standing and esteem. It is this aspect of technocratic merit that contributes most directly to the angry, polarized politics of our time.[18]

The outsourcing of moral judgement to markets, experts, and technocrats has created a vacuum of public meaning, leaving spaces quickly filled by 'harsh, authoritarian forms of identity and belonging'.[19] Sandel's efforts are directed towards retrieving more humane and less inflamed forms of social recognition.

The high-point of Sandel's argument is reached in Chapter 7, 'Recognizing Work', via his contrasting of consumerist and civic conceptions of the common good. A consumerist conception of democracy can be realised whether or not its citizens inhabit a common public space: they can live in their private enclaves, in the company of their own kind. But a civic conception, although it does not require complete equality, cannot be indifferent to the public character of common life, because the space it provides for the encounter between a variety of ways of life, of values and priorities, is crucial to how we learn to live well with our differences. Merit becomes tyrannous when it is severed from morality and when it comes to be conceived, in quasi-religious terms, that the achieving of success is a matter of just deserts and not, in some measure, a matter of luck. Resisting all this, the book concludes with an answer to the question of why those who succeed owe something to those who do not:

> [F]or all our striving, we are not self-made and self-sufficient; finding ourselves in a society that prizes our talents is our good fortune, not our due. A lively sense of the contingency of our lot can inspire a certain humility. 'There but for the grace of God, or the accident of birth, of the mystery of fate, go I.' Such humility is the beginning of the way back from the harsh ethic of success that drives us apart. It points beyond the tyranny of merit toward a less rancorous, more generous public life.[20]

The tone of these concluding words is clearly at some distance from Shafik's eulogising of upskilling and social mobility. They are at odds with the way most people think. It is not just that democracy is mocked—by the Chinese government, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump, and by leaders around the world riding on new waves of populist personality politics: the moral deficit has wormed its way into otherwise enlightened political thinking. The words of the pop song, 'You can make it if you try', Sandel tells us,[21] were repeated 140 times by Barack Obama during his presidency, and they epitomise the delusions that the meritocratic ethic brings with it. Consider, in this light, the Olympic gold medallist who, having been asked to describe the struggle she has had to reach this

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[18] P. 29.
[19] P. 31.
[20] P. 237.
[21] P. 23.

pinnacle of achievement, turns to the camera and evangelistically proclaims, 'If I can make it, anyone can', apparently blind to the fact that, in circumstance where success is a product of competition, if anyone can make it, there will be no it to make.

The problems that so strongly motivate Sandel's identification of the tyranny of success are not entirely new, and he acknowledges anticipation of some of what he has to say in Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.[22] 'Every selection of one', Young writes, 'is a rejection of many. Let us be frank and admit that we have failed to assess the mental state of the rejected.'[23] Extending the critique of John Rawls that he has mounted over some decades, Sandel recalls the salience of Young's focus on the failures of recognition and the damage to self-esteem:

> Social esteem flows, almost ineluctably, to those who enjoy economic and educational advantages, especially if they earn those advantages under fair terms of social cooperation. Liberals might reply that, provided all members of society are accorded equal status as citizens, the allocation of social esteem is not a political matter.[24]

The idea that justice might relate not solely to distribution of wealth, however, but to matters of public office and honour goes back at least to Aristotle, and it is reflected in the resentment and frustration of today's working-class voters. '[I]t is folly to suggest', Sandel continues, 'that the condescending attitudes of the credentialed, professional classes toward the blue-collar workers is a matter of social norms that politics cannot or should not address. Questions of honor and recognition cannot be neatly separated from questions of distributive justice.'[25]

A marker of the sense of superiority or self-righteousness in question is to be found in the vocabulary of 'acting smart' and 'acting dumb', whose colloquial light-touch covers a weight of condescension falling on the less educated: 'credentialism', Sandel writes, 'is the last acceptable prejudice' (p. 95). Hubris is its characteristic vice. Sandel imagines how a wealthy CEO might justify their advantages to a lower-paid worker (advantages gained under circumstances of Rawlsian fair competition):

> I do not morally deserve my superior pay and position, but I am entitled to them under fair rules of social cooperation. And remember, you and I would have agreed to these rules had we thought about the matter before we knew who would land on top and who at the bottom. So please do not resent me. My privileges make you better off than you would otherwise be. The inequality you find galling is for your own good.[26]

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[22] Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1958).
[23] P. 15.
[24] Sandel, p. 145.
[25] P.145.
[26] P. 144.

Throughout his discussion, Sandel relates his analysis of the present-day preoccupation with merit to shifts in religious worldview, in which the question of just deserts is prominent. He refers at various points to the Calvinistic doctrine that the Elect are already determined and that nothing we do can alter our chances of salvation. We live our lives as if behind a veil. It is because we may be saved that we should act as if we deserved salvation; given that we may not be, we should act always with humility. There is an eerie symmetry with the ideal of equality advanced in Rawls's theory of justice. Sandel, however, is at pains to point to other ways in which we might conceive that our fate exceeds our control. We might think of the grace of God, the vagaries of fortune, or the luck of the draw.[27] Such ideas can bring with them less calculative notions of desert and greater humility.

In 2001 Young wrote: 'I have been sadly disappointed by my 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. I coined a word which has gone into general circulation, especially in the United States, and most recently found a prominent place in the speeches of Mr Blair.'[28] The word had been recruited to the very cause he condemned, notwithstanding his careful account of the genesis and history of the meritocratic society and his satirical prognosis of its future, od which Blair was apparently unaware. Much of Young's diagnosis had proved accurate. He identified the 1870s, when, in England, schooling was made compulsory, as a moment in the rise of the meritocracy: this laid the way for a kind of social revolution in which schools and universities were harnessed to 'the task of sieving people according to education's narrow band of values'. Education had, he continued, 'put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of disapproval on the many who fail to shine from the time they are relegated to the bottom streams at the age of seven or before', and the new class largely had the means at hand to reproduce itself. Young acknowledged that it was good sense to appoint people to jobs on merit, but the problem came when those judged to have merit hardened into 'a new social class without room in it for others'. 'It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit', Young observed, 'to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.' In a process that had caused partial disenfranchisement, education had even deprived this underclass of those who would have been their natural leaders: this was exemplified by such leading figures in the Labour government of 1945-1951 as Herbert Morrison, who had left school at fourteen to be an errand-boy, and Ernest Bevin, who had left at eleven to work on a farm. With meritocracy coming so much into vogue, it had become possible for those who were successful to believe that their advancement had come from their own merits: they deserved whatever they could get. They were 'insufferably smug', more so than if they had been beneficiaries of nepotism: they could actually believe that they 'had morality on their side'.

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[27] P. 193.
[28] Michael Young, 'Down with Meritocracy', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2001.

The substantive form taken by this new politics has depended in large part on principles of equality coupled with new understanding of a universal human need for recognition.[29] This need has two facets. One the one hand, it pertains to a person's distinctive characteristics and capabilities; on the other, to a more general principle of human worth. How do these twin principles play out?

Recognition and demoralization

The mantra of 'Those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to rise as far as their talents will take them',[30] as Sandel illustrates, has comfortably served both the centre-right and the centre-left: the beneficiaries of such thinking have become tone-deaf to the resentments of those who are missing out and blind to the 'implicit insult in the meritocratic society they were offering'.[31] However enlightened a meritocratic society may be, there are problems with two of its central principles. First, the eulogising of social mobility ignores the fact that, in any competition of talents, there must be downward social mobility too. The second is whether there can be, in Blair's words, 'a society that is open and genuinely based on merit and the equal worth of all'.[32] There is tension, if not outright conflict, between principles of meritocracy and equal worth for all. Under the pressures of the primacy given to talent and achievement, and especially in the absence of a religious framework, or of a Kantianism not just accepted in principle but seen and felt in the fabric of extant social structures, it becomes more difficult to see in what the equal worth of all might consist, especially in the eyes of those who are least well off. The effective disenfranchisement of this sector of the population—in economic regimes extending globally, where the priority is not to frighten investors—fundamentally jeopardises the credibility of the social contract.

Generational inequalities make the situation significantly worse. Two factors are of particular salience. First, it is likely in many countries that the economic prospects for younger people will be worse than they were for their parents. Demographic reasons for this include dramatic growth in the global population and pressure on resources, as well as burgeoning numbers of old people who will need to be supported by those in work. Second, there is the more imminent threat of the climate crisis, in relation to which it is blatantly clear that the interests of young people are different from those of the old. The present-day precariousness of measures to limit climate change is a

[29] Young is surely not suggesting reversing the policy of schooling for all, any more than Sandel is arguing that merit should be discarded for some earlier system of 'honours and offices'. That phrasing carries at least a faint echo of the *préférences* of pre-revolutionary France, against the background of which Charles Taylor identifies the rising of a new politics of recognition (*Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[30] Sandel, p. 153.

[31] P. 153.

[32] Tony Blair: 'a society that is open and genuinely based on merit and the equal worth of all' (in Sandel, p. 152).

continuing reason for younger people to wonder whether they have a future at all, comparable perhaps to the fears of nuclear devastation aroused through the decades of the Cold War; of course, those fears have never gone away, and they have gained a new significance in global politics today. While the threat then was one of chilling immediacy, the present danger takes the form rather of a gradual slipping into irreversible, devastating environmental decline. The drastic reduction of carbon emissions needed to avert this cashes out in reduction of consumption and, as far as it is reasonable to conjecture, lowering of living standards for future generations. It can be seen readily enough, then, that this second factor in generational equalities feeds back into the first. There is every reason why the relative apathy of older generations in relation to these threats should aggravate the resentment felt by the young, and so this redoubles the demoralisation and disenfranchisement. Of course, this is no clear-cut division of generations, and younger people can be seduced by short-termist populist politics too, especially where the promise is for recognition and the restoring of self-esteem.

Environmental education for the generation most under threat is no bad thing, but it pales into insignificance in relation to the 'education' needed for the politicians, captains of industry, speculators, share-holders and others with a stake in keeping things as they are. In fact, greening the curriculum in schools risks hiding the ways that contemporary education itself, with its culture of achievement, promotes in young people the attitudes of competition and consumption that fuel the problem. It would be ludicrous to deny that competition has always been a factor in institutionalised schooling in some degree, and sometimes this has been accentuated by make-or-break examinations at key moments in its course. There have been attempts to alleviate this pressure, and yet these have gone hand-in-hand with a spreading of testing processes, comparison, and performance-monitoring such that they have come to permeate learning, altering the understanding of what education *is*. At the macro-level, the OECD has been a means of generating new forms of competition between countries, and this has been replicated in competition at more local levels, between schools and among teachers themselves. At university level, forms of teaching and learning, on the one hand, and research, on the other, have come under new kinds of scrutiny and management, extending competition in ways that generate pressure, cause excitement for some, and increase 'output'. But fuelled by uncritical notions of 'impact', such measures amplify the university's cult of celebrity and probably do little to enhance the quality of academic work itself. These are inflammations of academic esteem.[33]

The culture of achievement in universities is extended in mutual relation with ideas of success in society, as Sandel's book repeatedly shows. In a different vein and with a more specifically educational purpose, William

[33] Some of these trends are anticipated well in Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep*[34] critically examines the situation of students in elite universities in the US, who seem overwhelmed by the pressure to build success on success. In Deresiewicz's view, the accumulation of academic capital in the form of certificates and awards equips the students for successful careers in large corporations or the law, but drains them of their intellectual vitality and individuality. Any attempt to find their own voice or question their experience is frustrated by the relentless pressure to get good grades. Deresiewicz's lament echoes in many respects the warnings sounded with such bravura in Allen Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*[35], a critique of the changing culture of the more renowned universities in the US, which, against the odds, became a best-seller. More recently, Deresiewicz has identified a related malaise in the preoccupation with social justice itself. The bland and insidious alignment of mission statements and research projects under this banner has replaced the 'salutary adversarialism' that was characteristic of intellectual life: 'Students and professors now are social justice warriors together, marching in lockstep, wreathed in clouds of self-congratulation, for the one true cause.'[36] In filling a void that is moral as well as intellectual, social justice offers instant meaningfulness. It tells students (and teachers) what to think, which is invaluable in an age of social media where having opinions is essential to the presentation of the self: 'The process of forming them is aided immensely if you already know where you're supposed to stand on every subject, including ones you haven't heard of yet.'

Critics such as Bloom and Deresiewicz can sound relentlessly conservative, and they are to the extent that they seek to retrieve a quality of education that has been diluted and is under threat. If the animus in their writing lapses sometimes into aversion to anything fashionable or new, this should not obscure the pertinence and importance of their criticisms. If we are serious about the future of education, it is necessary to question the values to which it is increasingly in service—that is, to recognise how it has been co-opted for the neoliberal cause. Neoliberal thinking extends through schooling and university—through the goals they promote and the procedures and substance of their governance and curricula. Does it follow, then, that the wrong values are guiding educational policy and practice? If we can work out what the appropriate values or priorities are, and what the ends of education should be, we can develop practice accordingly. Surely that would be an improvement! Yet this may still be to get things wrong.

Culture and criticism

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[34] William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* (New York: Free Press, 2014). For further discussion, see Emma Williams in this volume.
[35] Allen Bloom *The Closing of the American Mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
[36] William Deresiewicz, American education's new dark age: Colleges have abandoned real learning for wokeism. *Unherd*. 2022. Online at: https://unherd.com/2022/03/american-educations-new-dark-age/

In a 1944 essay entitled 'Education and Practicality', the Scottish philosopher John Anderson takes issue with trends in thinking about education and asserts that it is 'unpractical' to harness education to external ends:. He writes of culture as involving 'critical attachment to the abiding forms of human achievement'.[37] These forms are realized and become available within *subjects* – that is, forms of thought and practice to which contributors and students are in service or subject. Thus,

> while the contemporary attack on subjects and concern with the 'ends' of education are symptoms of educational decline, there are countervailing tendencies; and the person who thinks he can harness education to 'welfare' is unpractical, as well as untheoretical, in his misunderstanding of his material. A training dominated by the conception of utility, by the treatment of certain conditions of life as peculiarly *ends*, is a training in gullibility; but, in having any sort of subject-matter, it cannot entirely exclude criticism, even if it falls short in the *exposition* of critical method and exposure of prejudice.[38]

The guiding thought here is the intertwining of culture, criticism, and the forms of human achievement. It is not that there are ends to which these are in service; rather it is from with this relationship that ends, if such there be, are formed. Eugene Kamenka recalls the power of Anderson's conception of education. He urged his students to think beyond the provincialism of their age. Like Matthew Arnold, he thought that to see things clearly you had to 'get yourself out of the way':

> he stressed that the cultural life, the life of criticism and investigation, is a life of struggle, or enterprise and its consequent uncertainties and insecurities—a life lived in the knowledge that there are no guarantees of rightness or success, that its task is permanent protest, criticism and self-criticism, and its reward that of social and political hostility or exile. The life of prudence and precaution was, for him, a mean and base existence; the search for authority, for comfort and consolation, he saw as fundamentally philistine, opposed to the cultured and creative life, an exemplification of ethical evils. Culture and education did not aim at the guarantee of certainty or at self-satisfaction and did not produce them. They rested on the constant willingness to inquire further: they required intellectual discipline and moral intransigence.[39]

[37] John Anderson. *Education and Inquiry*, Ed. D.Z. Phillips, p. 157 (Oxford, Blackwell, 1980).
[38] Pp. 157-57.
[39] Kamenka, Eugene. 'Anderson on Education and Academic Freedom', in John Anderson, *Education and Inquiry*, ed. D.Z. Phillips, pp. 20-1 (Oxford, Blakwell 1980).

Comfort and consolation, self-satisfaction in achievement—these 'philistine' values are not remote from the default, apparently benign assumption today that the fundamental aim of education is wellbeing (in some ways a recasting of Anderson's 'welfare').

In a 1943 essay Anderson's criticism is directed most sharply at a series of pamphlets issued by the Australian Council for Educational Research under the title of 'The Future of Democracy'. He draws attention to the familiar tendency of contributions to the field to fall into a kind of advocacy: they press a favoured recommendation without the dispassionate concern for truth, the hallmark of critical enquiry. Similarly, he is suspicious of prevalent projects identify the 'ends' of education on the grounds that this manifests lack of reflection on how the very idea of ends might be conceived as well as acquiescence in the assumption that educational institutions must serve purposes beyond themselves. He dismisses the idea that educational practice must be planned with those ends in view.

No doubt these views will arouse immediate criticism, if not incredulity. It is undeniable that educational institutions constitute a vast public investment, and so it is appropriate to consider what the return will be. Moreover, it seems reasonable, does it not, for any institution to ask what purpose it serves and to account for what it does? But to accept these responses is to fall prey to two dangers. First, there is failure to consider adequately the concept of an end and the different ways in which means and ends can relate. A glimpse of this is provided if it is asked, say, what the ends of football are. To answer such a question within the crude framework of an 'internal' activity and an 'external' end will fail to understand the practice. Yet dominant forms of thinking do proceed with tacit assumptions of this means-ends schema, perhaps especially in an age of managerialism.[40] Second, the objections just considered may reflect a kind of parochialism. What can easily be forgotten when thinking about education today is that the institutions we take for granted are relatively recent on the scene: schooling for all has been the norm for considerably less than two centuries. Education itself is as old as civilisation. Alert to these dangers, we can see education in a more accurate, broader way, less as a function of society than as the ground from which society's institutions and self-examination can grow.

How, then, does critical attachment to the abiding forms of human achievement sit with the importance now attached to critical thinking? Recall the stress Shafiq puts on making critical judgements about the validity and implications of information, on cognitive skills to solve problems and on learning-how-to-learn. In fact, Anderson himself often uses the expression 'critical thinking', but what he has in mind connects only partly with prevailing conceptions of the idea. Of course, blatant fallacies in reasoning must be avoided, but the qualities of criticism to be cultivated are characterised more by careful objective attention to the substance of enquiry. Criticism does not function in a vacuum, and any possibility of its

[40] It is for good reason that MacIntyre, in *After Virtue* (1983), refers to 'the Manager' as one of three archetypal figures of the age.

transferability would be in tension with the attention to content out of which it is formed. Education thus effects a freeing of thought: this is its liberal nature.[41]

In Anderson's terms, there is surely something anaemic about the more recent development of the idea of critical thinking. In prevalent conceptions of transferrable skills, more or less independent of the particular substance of enquiry, there hovers the image of critical thinking as something like the RAM of the computer, efficiently searching and manipulating the knowledge content in its ROM. The analogy is not casual, for so much in contemporary educational practice has styled itself algorithmically. Programmed learning is the most explicit example of this, but there are ways in which teaching and learning practice is aping the searching, selection, and mixing, and the step-by-step sequencing at which computers are adept. Such practices dovetail with assessments of efficiency and wider aspects of quality control. In the process of successfully meeting these demands, the very idea of what constitutes education is changed, for teachers *and* their students. In fact, these issues acquire a new urgency with the advent of AI. It would be blinkered, to say the least, not to welcome the extraordinary benefits AI is bringing to education. It is important, however, also to consider the historical context in thinking about education in which these developments are taking root. If the argument presented above is sound, the prevailing educational landscape is seriously depleted. Landmark features of its history pertinent to AI's development can be traced—from B.F. Skinner's teaching machines and 'programmed learning' in the 1950s, through the new influence, also in the 1980s, of computers in the administration and assessment of education, through the Internet's advent in the 1990s, and with the rise of social media in the 2000s. These developments have shaped conceptions of what there is to learn, what it is to teach and learn, and how all this is appropriately assessed. These in turn subtly reconstitute how human being and society are understood and, hence, how it is possible to *live*—with serious implications for the possibilities of recognition. All this reconfigures the social contract.

Educating judgement

Critical thinking, then, clearly contrasts with the account of criticism being advanced here and with what is needed to confront this rising sea-change in

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[41] Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the large modern university, with its comprehensive orientation, loses the sense of cultural coherence and institutional purpose that would make possible the conduct of intellectual and moral disagreement between rival and antagonistic views (see Standish,1999, Centre Without Substance: cultural capital and *The University in Ruins*, Special Issue on globalisation, *Jahrbuch für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 83-104).

the human condition.[42] Crucially, criticism depends upon judgement. This is not a matter of judgement of weight or of height, matters about which machines achieve the accuracy we seek. What matters is judgement without a rule. This is epitomised by literary and more broadly aesthetic judgement but extends through the range of our response to other human beings. In this sense it is fundamental to our world, more fundamental than the more abstract or universal kinds of understanding sought by the physical sciences. This puts the humanities and the arts on a footing that does not deny but is other than the appeal to aesthetic satisfaction often made in their defence. It is important that the humanities and the arts alike relate to the meaning-making aspects of human being.[43] While this is obviously true of art-works and their appreciation, it is true also of, for example, history: the objects of study in history comprise human action, and this requires interpretation in open-ended ways. It is certainly not that anything goes: disciplined approaches involve the giving of reasons, the laying of one case alongside another, readiness to be drawn to aspects one had not noticed before, and sometimes the undergoing of a complete change of view. The meaning of the events in question is, furthermore, inevitably subject to what later happens, just as an artwork's significance changes in the light of subsequent works, new criticism, and events. Hence, there is no room for a definitive account, insofar as this means that there is nothing more to be said.

If such judgement is to be developed, this is best pursued in relation to objects worthy of attention, those that repay the effort of growing familiarity. The knowledge and judgement in question is not well understood as a combination of information and skills: it is the product of sustained and guided experience with the object of enquiry. The criticism thus enabled also has a wider significance: the arts and humanities can reflect on the meaning and value of things more broadly, including on science and technology themselves—examining their provenance, considering their historical role, and raising philosophical questions about their *raison-d'être*.

Criticism of this kind requires more of the student than their faithful and accurate production of correct answers. The exercise and defence of judgement means they must think and speak for themselves. If in some subjects this is less apparent, in aesthetic judgement it is paramount. We can imagine an apathetic student preparing for a physics exam through exclusive reliance on Sparknotes. Whether the student ends up bored or not, she may well, in the process, actually learn some physics. An equally

[42] My line here differs also from the case pressed recently for 'post-critical thinking', a key formulation of which is the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* by Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe, and Pyotr Zamojski (2017, Punctum Books). I sympathise with their aversion to critical pedagogy's one-tracked, negative, debunking style, which adopts ideas of Michel Foucault within a politics of suspicion. But why accept this appropriation of the idea of criticism when richer traditions abound?

[43] Fundamentally, this is true of the social sciences as well, but their approaches and methods, especially within educational research, have often aped those of the physical sciences..

apathetic student cribbing on Sparknotes for ways to answer questions in the literature exam on, say, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* may be successful in the exam, even if she has never opened the novel itself. She may end up bored too. But the point is that whereas the physics student has acquired some genuine knowledge of physics, the literature student's experience is essentially void: she has not been engaged in literary appreciation at all! There is something irreducible about acquaintance with the artwork in question: the object in the case of science does not require this. In physics the student's commitment to the subject is highly desirable but not essential; in art appreciation her genuine response is of the essence. Hence, the student will need to find thoughts that she can mean, finding herself in words as they come to her and strike her. 'Yes, that's how it is, isn't it?' —such a response embodies a kind of personal development, not as the accretion of experience on an already formed subjectivity but in a finding of herself through her finding how the world is. She gives attention to what is out there, beyond herself, and risks her thoughts about it.

Such judgement, and the finding of oneself in such judgement, models what is needed in a democracy, the basis of which is no more than what we, each of us, can think and say to contribute to that community. It reveals in the affective aspect in the idea of political consent, something easily hidden where this is reduced to the signing of a contract or the marking of a ballot-paper, but crucial to understanding the demoralisation and disenfranchisement of our times, And judgement is needed—sometimes more so, sometimes for health and sanity—in regimes that are *not* democratic. Finding one's thoughts in criticism, feeling that one's voicing of experience matters, will be the best defence against the considerable commercial and political forces in whose interests it will be to tell us what to say and think, as well as against those inflamed forms of recognition that social media bring.

This is neither to extol nor to decry the kind of expression exemplified by, say, Extinction Rebellion: the point is more subtly and pervasively important. Earlier parts of this discussion drew attention to the lowered economic prospects for the coming generation and the stark threats of global warning. The former instils insecurity in a generation schooled to expect something different. The latter approaches not with a smooth shift to bicycles, veganism, and responsible recycling but with fire, floods, drought, and food shortages, leading to new waves of migration and political upheaval. Promotion of green thinking is reasonable enough, and carbon emissions must be reduced. But a more profound educational change is needed. Its institutions need to be retrieved from the destructive effects of obsession with competition and credentialism, with their corrosive effects on developing subjectivities. The fundamental objection is not that such values constitute an unfair distribution of educational benefits but that they threaten the very heart of education. The duty to the future, if young people are to be enabled to think best about what matters in their lives in the world that is in the making, is not just to *school* but to *educate* young people in liberating forms of criticism.

This criticism is not just a sophistication of reasoning skills but a refinement of judgement, attachment, and appreciation, in ways that open

different possibilities of experience. Anderson's account may give the impression, however, that criticism must issue in the articulation of reasoned argument in speech and writing, rather than in the exercise of judgement in thought and action in less explicit terms. Such an intellectualist tendency would obscure the diverse ways in which judgement is refined, experience is shaped and accumulated, and education is advanced. It would miss the variety of human experience. Once again, this is exemplified in art experience, for practitioners and critics, but it extends through the diversity of craft practice; it is crucial to many aspects of the service industries, including medical and social services, and the caring professions; it is also a dimension of our daily interactions with one another, and so fundamental to the familial, social, and occupational lives we sustain; and in the end it is integral to living with ourselves and what we make of our lives - a part (with its failures) of our continuing education, whether we like it or not.

So what if the notions of criticism and judgement were expanded in these ways? What might this mean for the social contract?

Constitution and the return to society

The social contract depends upon the consent of the people. Yet when was this given? When was the contract made? Are we simply to accept that the contract is tacit, as Locke says? Better to recognise that the contract is happening now—that our continuation within democratic political regimes is, at some level, an acceptance of them. Maybe there will be a time when it is right to reject the contract, to leave or rebel. There will never be a time when all seems right. Contending with these conditions provoked much in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau.

Thoreau pressed at the limits of acceptance through his civil disobedience—the night in the prison cell and the essay of this name—and through the larger 'experiment in living' that is *Walden*.[44] On the 4 July he began to build his hut at Walden Pond, where he would live for most of two years. At first sight, his book may seem a back-to-the-woods anthem to environmentalism. If the gift-shop at Walden Pond is anything to go by, it has surely been read that way. But a closer look reveals a more pervasive examination of the values his fellow citizens live by. The opening chapter, 'Economy', by far the longest of its eighteen chapters, incites his neighbours (and readers) to show what counts for them in their lives—that is, to make public their accounts, to account for themselves. He indicts them for their petty vanities and the unnecessary wealth they accumulate. These folk are 'said to live in New England',[45] which questions whether they are living at all: they live lives of 'quiet desperation'.[46] The different economy Thoreau demonstrates is no blue-print but an indication of the possibility of living differently. Near the end of the book, Thoreau explains that he left the woods for the same reason that he went there. It was time to try something new.

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[44] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; and Civil Disobedience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).
[45] P. 46.
[46] P. 50.

Again this is not a recommendation that one drift for or flit from one experience to another, but that one live with a lighter, more receptive touch. Observation of nature instils an acceptance of its rhythms and seasonal change, and that change allegorises the human condition. But the beauty of nature is not the book's message, and it is to the town that Thoreau returns. In a crowded world, most will need to find their Walden in town, perhaps in a city high-rise or the sprawl of nondescript suburbs. This turning back to the town indicates that Thoreau is writing his *Republic*—that is, pondering the conditions of constitution, for the individual and for the *polis*.

In Emerson's essays, the guiding thoughts are presented in more prosaic form. The greatest vice is conformity, where this is a bland acceptance of the way things are (of the accounting that prevails); there is a continual turning away from the society as it stands in order to turn back to it with a different view. The Constitution itself is questioned with the thought that America has not yet been discovered: it remains unrealized, in a state of denial—denial about the injustice on which it was first created, and about the shameful state in which it continues to exist. This notion of constitution is not confined to legislation but permeates the fabric of ordinary life. Emerson's aversive thinking—demonstrated in the substance of his writing—is directed to an amending of the constitution of life and language, for the individual and the state.

Turning to the ordinary takes us back also to Sandel and the many who lose out in the prevailing social contract.

Beyond credentialism

In the Prologue to the paperback edition of his book, Sandel quotes from an interview for ABC News with James Clyburn, whom he identifies as the highest-ranking African American in Congress: 'Our problem is too many candidates [for high political office] spend time trying to let people know how smart they are, rather than trying to connect with people.'[47] Democrats put too much emphasis on a college education. What does it mean, he asks, 'when a candidate says, you need to be able to send your kids to college? How many times have I heard that? I hate to hear that. . . I don't need to hear that. Because we've got people who want to be electricians, they want to be plumbers, they want to be barbers.'[48] As we have seen, the credentialism of contemporary education leads to new patterns of recognition and esteem, reinforcing the demoralisation of those who do not succeed. The point applies with similar force to the British context in that the massive increase in university education over the past three or four decades has not been matched by similar development in further education (that is, the vocational or community college sector). The change both reduced the value of degree-level qualifications and increased the deficit in cultural capital for those who lacked them. Moreover, it led many into academic forms of study who might have found further vocational education more enriching. Public expenditure at the non-advanced level would have produced greater returns, in terms of both finance and recognition.

[47] Sandel, p. 5.
[48] Sandel, p. 5.

Clyburn’s remark does not, however, go far enough. In the foreseeable future, there will be continuing need for the trades he refers to. But what of the skilled and unskilled workers in the ‘rust-belt’ or the United States whose trades are obsolete? What of coal-miners? Obsolescence feeds into demoralisation and lower prospects for younger people today. So this again gives credence to the view that different ways of living are required, with different expectations of what might constitute a good life. Thoreau’s experiment in living answers more fully to this need, exposing the ‘false necessities’ by which we live and revealing sources of fulfilment in a life rich in different ways. No model is offered for that life, but, at the least, a *via negativa* comes into view: the culture of achievement and credentialism, ethics of competition and consumption, reinforce the paths of demoralisation and frustration, draining lives of meaning. They jeopardize the consent upon which a healthy politics depends.

This essay began by considering Shafiq’s vision of a new social contract, which was found to be enlightened in economic terms but sadly lacking in its conception of education. Sandel’s analysis of the demoralization within contemporary democracies of large sections of the population laid the way for more direct reflection on the collusion of educational institutions with meritocratic neoliberalism. Ways beyond these depleted forms of education were suggested with reference to such critics as Bloom and Deresiewicz, while the turn to Anderson initiated an extended account of the centrality in education of critical attention in service of content worthy of study. Intellectualist bias in this was countered, however, through acknowledgement of the varieties of human experience and the diversity of things of value upon which attention can be focused and critical judgement refined in a human life—that is, the variety of ways in which education can come about. Education is not an adjunct to a human life, the means of social advancement, but a dimension of the human condition. The allegorising and allusiveness in Emerson and Thoreau serve to unsteady the boundaries between thought and action, between nature and culture, and between economic accounting and the meaning-making that would account for our lives. Fundamentally they address questions of constitution and consent. The constitution of human subjectivity is in the end intimately linked to the constitution of the political realm, the affective development of subjectivity integral to the consent upon which democracy depends. Any defensible idea of a new social contract must take cognizance of this.