BOOK REVIEW: ***The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money*** by Brian Caplan, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 395, $29.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-691-17465-5.

Seeking to demonstrate that 'our education system is a big waste of time and money' (p.1), *The Case Against Education* presents a controversial argument that public funding for education at all levels should not only be reduced, but ceased altogether (with the exception of a means-tested voucher system at primary level) culminating in a 'separation of school and state' (p.6); bankruptcy of unprofitable educational institutions becomes an example of 'market correction' rather than 'market failure' (p.216) under this model. Authored by a libertarian economist and self-described 'whistle-blower' (p.xiii), the book will surely be cat-nip to those conservatives who favour so-called 'small government' and its concomitant reduction in public spending. Not surprisingly, the book's central thesis will also seem outrageous to those who view education as a kind of 'public good', rather than simply a means to a (well-paid) end.

Caplan's primary aim is to set forth a protracted case for understanding education as 'signalling' - that is, merely as a kind of tool that demonstrates what he describes as the intelligence, conscientiousness and conformity of graduates to potential employers:

> …despite the chasm between what students learn and what workers do, academic success is a strong *signal* of worker productivity. The labor market doesn't pay you for the useless subjects you master; it pays you for the pre-existing traits you reveal by mastering them. (p.13)

From the outset, Caplan positions himself against what he describes as 'human capital puritanism' (but without engaging directly with the proponents of this approach), and attempts to convince the reader that the vast bulk of education does not teach useful skills for employment; instead, employers seek highly educated employees because their education sends the right kinds of 'signals' about their productivity and, thus, suitability for employment. For academic readers familiar with Bourdieusian analyses of education, the powerful, symbolic aspect of educational credentials is hard to refute; yet while Caplan is engaged in a process of critique himself, far from dismantling the elitism inherent in educational systems that reproduce privilege (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), his argument appears to re-entrench social divisions.

Attempts by Caplan to quantify the proportion of 'educational returns' down to mere signalling - estimated by him at 80% (p.192) - are based on guesswork 'because candor trumps caution' (*ibid*.):

> Crunching numbers on the return to education is not like measuring Planck's constant. All our calculations require guesswork, yielding averages or "expected values", not precise predications. But don't be alarmed. Whenever possible, guesswork builds on canonical data and careful academic research. (*ibid.*)

What follows throughout the book is a rather curious methodological mix: dogged attempts to quantify the often un-measurable, are presented alongside anecdotal material, and the cherry-picking of data and existing studies to help lend credence to Caplan's political philosophy (although, in all fairness, Caplan would hardly be alone in this regard).

From Chapter 1, Caplan foregrounds his instrumental view of the purpose of education, insisting that the 'humanistic benefits of education are mostly wishful thinking' (p.6), and so his ranking of subjects into high, medium and low 'usefulness' in Chapter 2 is based purely on their perceived utility to the labour market as opposed to, say, participation in society and citizenship: 'These ratings are my

personal judgment drawing on forty years in school' (p.32); not surprisingly given his understanding of the purpose of education, Caplan deems foreign languages, arts, history and social sciences to be of 'low usefulness':

> How do you know Latin, trigonometry, or Emily Dickinson won't serve you on the job? A man told me his French once helped him understand an airport announcement in Paris. Without high school French, he would have missed his flight. Invest years now and one day you might save hours at the airport. See, studying French pays!' (p.38)

Predictably monikered 'Mickey mouse' subjects are later dismissed as 'unpaid chaff' (p.79), and Caplan ultimately advocates closing 'impractical departments at public colleges, and mak[ing] impractical majors at private colleges ineligible for government grants and loans. […] If students refuse to stay in school unless they're allowed to waste public money, taxpayers should call their bluff' (p.206).

His analogy of amassing knowledge with 'hoarding trash' (p.38) best sums up his attitude to the type of 'learning for learning's sake' so often championed by those involved in teaching, and this leads neatly into an examination of the effects of education on earnings, which seeks to challenge received wisdom on the subject by interrogating 'ability bias'. Caplan's argument rests on the belief that since education is predominantly 'signalling' (and does not teach useful skills for later employment), then the higher salaries graduates can expect to command compared to their uneducated peers is reflective of their natural ability.

This is where, I believe, the most troubling of Caplan's assertions begins to emerge: it quickly becomes apparent during the course of the book that ideas about *who* is educable are underpinned by notions of hereditary ability (p.75), while the social context in which notions of 'ability' are constructed and the factors which then determine whether young people are deemed 'able' are neglected. For those readers interested in *cultural* economy, Caplan's biological determinism will be highly problematic. For example, Caplan states: 'Imperfect though they are, IQ tests are a good-faith effort to measure how smart people are, and predict success inside and outside the classroom' (p.73) - an attitude which fails to take into consideration the well-documented influence of 'race' and other social factors on IQ test performance (see, for example, Mendoza et al. 2016). 'Drop-outs' are dismissed as 'precocious troublemakers' with 'low IQs and poor grades' (p.177), and in his discussion of the effects of education on crime, the 'criminal personality' is strangely reified as Caplan proclaims: 'Future criminals, like future dropouts, are impulsive, aggressive, and defiant – and act accordingly' (p.177); not surprisingly, then, there is no awareness of the social construction of criminality, or of the 'prison industrial complex' (see, for example, Davis 2003).

As happens repeatedly throughout the book, however, Caplan tries to head-off any objections to his approach:

> My counsel rubs many the wrong way. Some dismiss it as "elitist," "philistine," or "sexist." The correct label is candid. It'd not my fault education's rewards hinge on graduation. It's not my fault fine arts degrees pay poorly. It's not my fault married women profit far more from education than single women. It's not my fault so many graduates don't work full time. I am only the messenger. My job is to honestly report the facts, especially unwelcome facts of great practical importance. (p.161)

Yet, aside from displaying what many social scientists will find to be deeply unpalatable attitudes towards groups who have historically - and continue today to be socially - marginalised and discriminated against, Caplan's presentation of material is also misleading: arguments influenced by behavioural genetics are presented as indisputable 'fact', and the highly contested nature of this field

of study (see Panofsky 2014) remains unacknowledged: 'The genes your parents give you at conception have a much larger effect on your success than all the advantages your parents give you after conception' (p.181).

Such an understanding, then, helps to explain Caplan's view on working-class participation in higher education: concerned with the effects of 'credential inflation' and advocating for 'assign[ing] dollar values to everything you care about' (p.164) when faced with educational choices, he argues that 'Poor Students should not go to college, period' (p.161) – an analysis that pivots on calculating educational returns, rather than attempting to capture the transformative potential in the process itself (see, for example, Loveday 2015). For Caplan, 'the root problem with education is not too little access but too much attendance' (p.211) and the raising of tuition fees is seen as one way in which students can be deterred from embarking on a university education (p.209) - a conclusion that does not seem to have been borne out in the medium-term within the UK context after a substantial hike in the costs of tuition from 2012 (see Bolton 2018, pp. 13-14). Since Caplan's thesis is built on a conceptualization of education as 'signalling' – and his analysis of the costs and benefits of education throughout the book are calculated in purely monetary terms – it is unsurprising that the crux of his argument is:

> To be maximally blunt, we would be better off if education were less affordable. If subsidies for education were drastically reduced, many could no longer afford the education they now plan to get. If I am correct, however, this is no cause for alarm. It is precisely because education is so affordable that the labor market expects us to possess so much. Without the subsidies, you would no longer need the education you can no longer afford. (p.6)

Caplan's position appears woefully naïve: undoubtedly, society's most privileged will continue undeterred to marshal their resources into ensuring their children receive expensive, elite educations, and so measures to reduce the affordability of education serve to re-embed existing divisions; it is unclear how long Caplan believes it will take for the labour market to adapt so employees 'no longer need the education [they] can no longer afford'. Caplan does, however, attempt to discuss alternatives to a university education, although his advocacy of child labour (from what age exactly is unclear) seems deliberately provocative: since students are not paid to go to school, he asks 'why hold firms to a higher standard?' (p.231); in line with his libertarian position, he advocates for 'deregulat[ion] and destigmatiz[ation]' and 'parental oversight' (p.233): 'Before using taxpayer dollars to jumpstart apprenticeships, government should get out of the way and take stock of all opportunities the labor market provides' (*ibid*.). Caplan's assessment of the potential of vocational education to provide tangible skills would seem like a much more reasonable proposition, yet - once again - working-class students are referred to as 'crime-prone' (p.229) and the possibility of gaining new skills is simply framed in terms of productivity, rather than a more thorough 're-valorizing of vocational and working-class knowledges' as Diane Reay (2012, p.592) has urged.

Towards the end of the book, Caplan attempts to confront the less tangible – and potentially transformative - aspects of learning, seeking to respond to 'anyone who defends actually existing education as good for the soul' (p.242). His response to the 'humanist critique' (p.238) of economistic understandings of the purpose of education involves an examination of 'worthy content', 'skilful pedagogy', and 'eager students' – all of which he contends would make education a 'merit good' (p.240), but which he predictably finds to be lacking. Without having himself conducted empirical research in educational contexts, and with students' voices noticeably absent from the book (aside from the fictionalised characters presented in the imagined scenarios in the final substantive chapter), the reader comes away with no feel for how students make sense of their own participation in education – that is, apart from Caplan's own educational experiences:

> Autobiographically, my doubts about the social value of education long predated my discovery of political philosophy. What undermined my faith? Firsthand experience. Soon after starting kindergarten, I started to realize, in a childish way, that I'd never use most of the material my teachers taught (p.217-218).

Much can be said – and has, indeed, already been written – on the flaws inherent in both the UK and US educational systems; in this sense, Caplan's critique is one amongst many. Yet it is the presumptions on which the scaffold of his argument is constructed that lead to the fundamentally flawed conclusion that 'education in grossly over-rated' (p.285). Caplan presents himself as a lone pioneer facing off against a 'megachorus' (p.289) crying out for educational reform: 'Once you calmly review your experience through my lens, I bet you'll admit I've got a point' (p.6). Yet far from being persuaded by Caplan's thesis after finishing the book, I found myself even more convinced as to the value of education as a public good and the need to work towards meaningful reform, particularly with regards to the democratisation and 'de-colonisation' of higher education (see for example Santos 2017); this is – no doubt – in part because of my own background, educational journey and positioning within the university. The book is aimed at a general, non-specialist readership, and so it is precisely the presentation of Caplan's argument through *his own lens* – that is, from the authoritative perspective of a white, male university professor who describes his father as having had a PhD in electrical engineering and who notes in the dedication to the book that his own children are home-schooled – that matters here; as Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 252) notes, 'Epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues'. If we choose to look at the education system from Caplan's perspective and trust his presentation of findings, then we also run the risk of endorsing a set of assumptions not only about the functioning of the education system itself – as contested a domain as any - but about the nature of who is educable.

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