

# A is for apocalypse

David J. Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, Zero Books, Winchester and Washington DC, 2013. 319 pp., £15.99 pb., 978 1 78099 578 6.

Amidst the recent flood of lachrymose reports on the neoliberal assault upon education, this book stands out for its unflinching survey of the extent of the impending catastrophe and the astute way it gleefully sets about puncturing the few remaining life rafts. The consolation of Blacker's philosophy? '[E]ducational activism does not matter and is a waste of time', and 'those within educational institutions have very little choice but to strap themselves in ... for a continuation of a very scary and uncertain ride that probably ends in death'.

This conclusion is based on an extension of what the book terms an eliminationist project inherent within our current phase of capitalism to the specific domain of educational institutions too tightly bolted on to escape the same fate. It is extrapolated primarily from Marx's hypothesis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall within capitalist production: the long-term structural propensity to replace human labour costs with technological fixtures that constantly leads to a decline of surplus value in production, coupled with a crisis of underconsumption. This failure of 'normal' capitalism to durably turn profits has for a long time been masked by various counter-forces, now approaching their limits. With the automation of the manufacturing and services industries and rapid advance of globalized communications and transport technologies, Blacker argues we have reached what is seen as a 'tipping point' beyond the reliance on human labour, especially in the global North. Under such circumstances, capitalism undergoes a fundamental shift from an 'era of exploitation' to a desperate 'era of elimination', as increasing numbers of the precariously under- or unemployed are no longer required as a 'reserve army' to ensure competition for work keeps wages low but join the masses of a lumpenproletariat: 'no longer seen as resource to be harnessed ... but more a mere threat' to be eliminated.

Crucially, Blacker does not recognize any revolutionary necessity to the playing out of this neoliberal endgame of capitalism, either in Marx or in his own prognostications: what is terminal for capitalism may well be terminal for humanity. This general situation impacts upon the specific analysis

of educational eliminationism, defined as a 'state of affairs in which elites no longer find it necessary to *utilize* mass schooling as a first link in the long chain of the process of extraction of workers' surplus labour' but instead 'cut their losses and abandon public schooling altogether'. The introduction suggests this occurs 'across a number of fronts: crushing student debt, impatience with student expression, the looting of vestigial public institutions, and ... an abandonment of the historical ideal of universal education', subsequently elaborated in three central chapters on 'Educational Eliminationism' subtitled 'I. Student Debt', 'II. Student Voice', and 'III. Universal Schooling disassembled'. It is significant that there is no specific chapter on the third 'front' – the looting of public institutions – since it is here that the book's eliminationist thesis becomes most ambiguous.

Blacker suggests economic eliminationism impacts upon the domain of education either directly, as austerity-driven cuts to public services, or indirectly, as an increasingly haemorrhaging system enters a desperate 'smash and grab' raid on those sectors not yet leached of exchange-value, in order to leverage capital for investment elsewhere. The ruthless marketization of education is therefore perceived as a 'world historical act of desperation' and 'an intensely pathetic phase of the post-debt bubble', equivalent to shaking down the sector for any loose change. Here, Blacker is forced to play down the possibility of what could instead be a period of massive educational *expansionism*, one that corresponds to a broader pedagogization of society and culture, such that not only educational institutions but also galleries, corporations and charities compete with each other over pedagogical outreach projects as a now fetishized ideology of education increases its stranglehold.

If this is the case, it may well be that we will see a complex transformation of the primary functions of education rather than their elimination. If modern, public schooling instilled industrial discipline, privatized education will be required to teach resilience towards increasingly precarious employment. But educational expansionism may in the shorter term also represent a solution to underemployment, however unsustainable, as more students pay off higher fees through services connected to the Education Industry itself. Under such conditions it might even be that certain aspects of commodified education – far from becoming vocationalized, as many currently fear – assume autotelic form as a way of increasing its exchange value: *l'éducation pour l'éducation* (just as bourgeois culture's marketability

has been partially equated with its semblance of imperviousness to exchange value).

When it focuses on student debt, the book suggests that 'the financialized drive to commodify education ultimately resolves itself into a commodification of *oneself*'. Here, the notion of eliminationism is no longer employed literally but corresponds to the metaphorical removal of 'the *human* in human capital', as what Blacker describes as 'existentially indebted' students (because the education they have purchased is inalienable) are tied with their whole being to a production process in which they increasingly resemble the constancy of fixed capital rather than the autonomous labourers of variable capital. This shift contradicts the book's own rejection of what it calls the implicitly neo-Kantian framework of 'canonical left critiques' of education as something



instrumentally dehumanizing. This kind of critique becomes redundant, Blacker argues, when 'the new kind of non-recognition involves not merely reducing people to means but simply wishing them away'. The focus on student debt reverts to a similar kind of *dehumanizing* framework, but one that also implies that the expansion of student debt has to ensure *some* kind of relationship between education and a service to capitalist production which pays off those debts.

In addition, although Blacker argues that capitalism no longer needs skilled and semi-skilled labour because 'the higher the tech, the dumber the worker can be and, ultimately, in the best case neoliberal scenario, phased out altogether where possible', it is also possible to argue, as Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming have recently done in *Dead Man Working* (reviewed in *RP* 180, July/August 2013), that with the growth of service work and new forms of control an increasingly moribund and desperate system is forced to repurpose 'living labour' as it becomes increasingly reliant on human qualities such as social intelligence, imagination and resourceful initiative. Contra shifts towards automating call centres or relocating them

abroad, for example, it is feasible that we will witness a new trend to *rehumanize* (and re-localize) the worker on the end of the line, encouraging them to be more charismatic, spontaneous and off-script in order to better sell their services. Although Cederström and Fleming focus on the new managerial techniques designed to harness human life, it is also possible that the social, creative and critical thinking skills of traditionally 'non-vocational' types of education – most obviously, the humanities – will be re-evaluated for this purpose, and not just in the worst-paid jobs: the UK's minister of state for universities recently celebrated the fact that a third of the chief executives of our top FTSE companies have humanities degrees.

In this context, what is most obviously being eliminated is *public* education. But this concept, as Blacker acknowledges, is itself a relatively recent historical anomaly and an ambiguous one at that (fee-charging 'public schools' in England were independent from both religious restrictions and the residential restrictions of local endowments and were therefore 'public' by virtue of being 'private' in the contemporary sense). At times he suggests that the current infrastructure of public education, largely dependent on cheap fossil fuels, will disappear (here technological experiments in 'flipped classrooms' and MOOCs reveal the advantages of 'home schooling' in the age of austerity), at other times that whilst 'compulsory education as a *mass* phenomenon will ... be eliminated', educational eliminationism may actually involve the continuation and expansion of their infrastructure even as 'these institutions lose any independence and direct autonomy'. As the young no longer require 'education in any substantive sense', the book suggests, so-called 'educational institutions' may transform into sites of mere surveillance and incarceration. At its core, then, the 'falling rate of learning' is about a conceptual elimination of *education*, and Blacker is right to insist that any future substantiation of such a claim depends upon the continued capacity to philosophize what such a concept means, without – it should be added – essentializing any specific historical formation.

The value of the book's analysis throughout is the recognition of modern educational institutions as one of the counterforces that propped up capitalism; its only recourse to nostalgia comes with the recognition that the exploitation which underwrites the traditional system may soon appear preferable to the eliminationism which replaces it. As a result, Blacker is structurally hemmed in to merely legalistic objections to the eliminationism he identifies: student

debt should be written off as *illegitimate* in accordance with the 1956 UN convention against ‘practices similar to slavery’, which includes ‘debt bondage’ of an unlimited or undefined nature and length, while moves to reduce the framework of free speech rights in schools are rejected as *unreasonable* in accordance with the foundational imperative of legal reasoning to stand by previous legal judgments. This nonetheless permits Blacker to develop the most bracing and controversial part of his critique: not of capitalist eliminationism per se but of those educational activists whose idealism provides ideological cover for the broader crisis at hand: ‘One constant thought is that we can *educate* ourselves out of the predicament, the more the better, primarily via an augmented and more equitable distribution of higher education.’ The vanity of educators has to be wounded, Blacker insists, because this heroic gesture is pointless: the education system of late capitalism isn’t fit to be patched up in this way.

In the concluding chapter Blacker proffers a ‘compartmentalized and political pessimism that is direct intra-institutionally’, philosophized via a collectively repurposed version of Stoic fatalism. This is loosely developed through the idea of a ‘counterfactual pedagogy of negative visualization’, which opportunistically builds upon increasingly prevalent experiences of actual loss – but also the trauma imagined via the

zombie dramas and apocalypticism of popular culture – as the best kind of teachers to prepare for the worst and to cling to what remains of the best. In such experiences, he suggests, we collectively confront our own status as the ‘living dead’ of a surplus humanity to be eliminated. We might, however, draw a different lesson from popular culture’s current fascination with zombism: as the expression of capitalism’s fear not of the human life that remains but of an inhuman and undead labour that is immune to educational interpellation and neoliberal vampirism. The ‘survivalism’ the book counsels might therefore have unconsciously adopted capital’s humanist perspective rather than succumbing to the unfathomably new experience of the ‘walking dead’ that stalk the land.

Ultimately, the catastrophic prophecy that animates *The Falling Rate of Learning* is the pedagogical equivalent of such negative visualization. It is a refreshing and effective tactic, making this one of the most readable and radical of recent books on the ‘crisis of education’. Apocalypticism is like comedy, however – all about timing. Even if we ultimately share Blacker’s dark vision of the capitalist endgame, we might have to prepare ourselves for the more worrying possibility that reports of education’s demise have been greatly exaggerated.

**Matthew Charles**

## Kiss ass

Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013. 264 pp., £62.00 hb., £22.50 pb., 978 0 23116 416 0 hb., 978 0 23116 417 7 pb.

This book offers an impassioned response to the contemporary rift between feminism and queer theory through the marshalling of what may seem like a paradoxical set of allies. While Huffer’s feminism is inflected by the work of Michel Foucault, a figure often dismissed by feminists (due primarily to his denial of the violence of rape), Huffer’s queer thinking is inflected by Luce Irigaray, an equally suspicious figure in the orthodoxy of queer theory (due to what Craig Owens notoriously describes as her supposed homophobia). Ignoring these orthodoxies, Huffer develops a vision of ethics as a process of desubjectivation, of unmaking and remaking the self through narrative practices that require careful listening and close reading as much as speaking and writing. In these encounters, finding the balance between

feminism and queer theory involves an ethical commitment both to a capacious and inclusive queer identity that ‘excludes exclusion’ and to a feminist ethics of care that acknowledges harms.

Ironically enough, according to Huffer, the split between feminism and queer theory is at least in part due to the successes of queer theory and to its institutionalization upon the founding myth of its origins. As Huffer retells this myth, ‘a metanarrative has developed in which the fluid, destabilizing queer performance stakes out its difference from that which came before by setting up a stable, fixed feminist narrative as its nonqueer identitarian other’. Rooted in this myth of the anti-identitarian vs identitarian, self-creating vs self-shattering, queer theory has established a new set of binary pairs of old and new,