

# THE AUSTERITY SCHOOL: GRIT, CHARACTER, AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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## Introduction

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the politics of austerity has centrally involved amplifying the longstanding neoliberal program of gutting the caregiving roles of the state while expanding privatization and deregulation. As David Harvey suggests, neoliberalism has, since the economic crisis of the 1970's, been used by the capitalist class to legitimize draconian policies that restore and consolidate class power by privatizing profit while socializing risk and eroding the power of workers and unions under the guise of fiscal discipline.<sup>1</sup> Public education in the US has been one of the caregiving institutions subject to a steadily increasing neoliberal fiscal starvation, privatization, and deregulation.<sup>2</sup>

Austerity politics informs the structural dimensions of education, such as funding and finance, including a post-2008 intensification of the steady expansion of school privatizations in the form of charters, vouchers, scholarship tax credits (tax subsidies for private schools that drain the tax base for public schools), and union-busting, as public money is siphoned away from children and towards investor profits and business slush funds.<sup>3</sup> Facilitated by the growing charter movement, the closure of public school represents a corporate hijacking of the US public school system. It installs, in neighborhood schools, a system of contracting out and a low-paid, insecure, and inexperienced teacher workforce.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harvey (2010, 10-15).

<sup>2</sup>Saltman (2007), Giroux (2011), Apple (2005).

<sup>3</sup>These privatizations are discussed in relation to both policy detail and critical pedagogical values in Giroux (2010) and Saltman (2012).

<sup>4</sup>See Means (2013).



Austerity politics has included as well an amplification of a three decade long radical remaking of the culture of education by applying the language and logic of business to school culture, district administration, curriculum and pedagogy. Educational accountability imagined through the lens of fiscal discipline has involved expanding market ideals of competition for scarce resources and consumer choice. This has resulted in naming of superintendents “CEO”, justifying privatizations by modeling districts on stock portfolios and launching Wall Street style shell games with test scores, implementing regressive funding formulas typified by “high stakes testing” that replace equity-based Title I funding for poor schools through funding cuts, ceding policy governance to super-rich individuals and philanthropic foundations intent on applying private sector schemes to states, districts, schools, and students.<sup>5</sup> As many critics have argued, the social cost of neoliberal educational restructuring is the humanistic, social, civic engagement, and critical pedagogical possibilities of public education. Instead, schooling is justified through reference to vocationalism, economic instrumentalism, and transmission-oriented approaches to knowledge and learning that do not examine how claims to truth relate to broader material and symbolic contests.<sup>6</sup> These ideological trends are interwoven with the multi-billion dollar bonanza in standardized test and textbook publishing tied to high stakes standardized testing and the standardization of curriculum typified by No Child Left Behind, the Common Core State Curriculum Standards, and their corporate beneficiaries such as Pearson NCS, Houghton-Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, Heinemann, ETS, News Corp and others. Austerity education also sees the newfound embrace of a culture of control in classrooms and direct control over working class and poor students’ bodies. These range from narrow corporeal imperatives such as feet on the floor, hands on the desk, eyes tracking the teacher, biometric devices, to behaviorist cues, scripted lessons, standardization of space and time, to the modeling of entire schools on the prison and military.<sup>7</sup>

Privatized school management typified by the charter school movement and its venture philanthropy backers is responsible for the promotion of “scaling up” homogenous school models that are characterized by a climate of repressive control in schools.<sup>8</sup> The largest for profit education company EdisonLearning and the largest private charter manager KIPP, both of

<sup>5</sup>Recently these trends have been taken up differently by critical theorists and liberals. Critical theoretical discussion of these trends has been taken up in relation to broader questions of power, globalization, ideology, politics, cultural politics, and ethics and an assumption of the desirability of education being implicated in fundamental social transformation by Kenneth Saltman, Henry Giroux, Kristen Buras, Michael Apple, David Hursh, Pauline Lipman, Lois Weiner, Alex Means, Clayton Pierce, Julia Hall, Mark Garrison among others. For liberal literature that largely affirms existing dominant social institutions and is reformist see for example Diane Ravitch, Linda Darling-Hammond, Richard Rothstein, Kevin Welner, and Chris Lubienski.

<sup>6</sup>See for example Giroux (2010) and Apple (2005).

<sup>7</sup>Means (2013); Nolan(2011); Saltman and Gabbard (2003; 2010).

<sup>8</sup>I take this up in detail in Saltman (2010).



which target working class and poor schools for management, exemplify corporate models of austerity thinking in the classroom. They impose highly standardized curricula, tight controls over teacher and student behavior with scripted lessons, the teaching of the same lessons in all schools at the same time, centralized data-tracking of numerical test measures, value-added assessments that measure teacher and teacher educator performance based on student test scores over time, and rewarding success in these measurements over teacher experience, further education, and career security. That is, in the age of austerity subjects are formed through repressive pedagogies. Punitive disciplinary practices and policies including hierarchical surveillance, security apparatus, militarization, and punishment target working class and poor students.<sup>9</sup> A number of scholars, myself included, in the past twenty years have understood such expanded repressive control as part of the broader economic and cultural market fundamentalism that rolls back social investment, support, and care and rolls out new investment in punishment, containment, and coercion, making youth into commodities in the exploding industries of for profit education.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows here, I first further explain austerity education as both a continuation and intensification of longstanding neoliberal restructuring of public schooling by situating it in terms of the insights of social and cultural reproduction theory that highlights how schools reproduce the social relations for the reproduction of capital.<sup>11</sup> Reproduction theory is important to resurrect as one lens to comprehend how it is that school kids, an increasingly disposable labor force in the making, become the means through which capital can be reproduced in the short term and why it is, in the era of austerity, that the most direct forms of repression take such a prominent place in the newest incarnations of public school “reform.”<sup>12</sup> The second section delves more deeply into one manifestation of the growing culture of repression in schools by focusing on the recent austerity-era popularization of “grit.” “Grit” is a pedagogy of control that is predicated upon a promise made to poor children that if they learn the tools of self-control and learn to endure drudgery, they can compete with rich children for scarce economic resources. Proponents of teaching “grit” contend that the poor are biologically and psychologically traumatized by poverty. The trauma of poverty, they argue, can be overcome through learned self-control and submission to authority within the school. “Grit,” proponents allege, is

<sup>9</sup>For a recent brilliant treatment of this topic see Means (2013).

<sup>10</sup>See for example Saltman (2000), Saltman and Gabbard (2003 & 2010), Di Leo (2014), Giroux (2000), Robbins (2008).

<sup>11</sup>Althusser (1994), Bourdieu & Passeron (2000), Bowles & Gintis (2011).

<sup>12</sup>Giroux and Aronowitz rightly criticized the theoretical limitations of reproduction theory in groundbreaking books in the 1980's such as *Theory and Resistance in Education* and *Education Still Under Siege*. These limitations include its mechanistic tendencies, over-emphasis on processes of domination at the expense of a focus on counter-hegemonic cultural production and resistance, and class-oriented if not economic tendencies that make culture a reflection of economic structure.



a new apolitical form of character education in which becoming educated is explained through instrumentalism, efficiencies, and above all submission to authority. My contention here is that “grit” continues the longstanding political project of the right to not merely individualize responsibility for social conditions and life chances but to emphasize promises of subjective control and agency in which the individual’s body and mind become loci of control in the service of what Giroux has discussed as “the disimagination machine.”

The “disimagination machine” is both a set of cultural apparatuses extending from schools and mainstream media to the new sites of screen culture, and a public pedagogy that functions primarily to undermine the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue. Put simply, to become critically informed citizens of the world.<sup>13</sup>

That is, grit actively produces knowledge, forms of selfhood, and political affiliation at odds with self and social criticism and reflection that can form the basis for interpretation and intervention. I finish by contrasting “grit” with Erich Fromm’s diametrically opposite concept of “social character” that emphasizes how the development of rationality is founded in disobedience to authority and a dialectical conception of the self that is socially formed and inevitably imbricated in making society.

### *Education in Austerity*

Since 2008, austerity politics has included simultaneously defunding and privatizing public education while scapegoating it for economic conditions not of its own making. The recent popularization of targeting poor students to learn “grit” represents in part the embrace across the political spectrum of what had been an educational slogan: “methods not money.” The defunding and privatization of public education that has continued since the Reagan administration goes hand in hand with the push to scapegoat teachers and students, blaming them for outcomes caused by radically disparate educational and social investments. Teacher bashing has reached unprecedented levels as a steady message of school failure and teacher blame is relentlessly promoted in mass media. Taking the lead from rightist think-tank ideologists such as Eric Hanushek, the neoliberal venture philanthropy The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation poured money into promoting the idea that the individual teacher is the single most important factor responsible for raising standardized test scores. For members of the professional class benefitting from massive investment in public schools in rich communities, this was of

<sup>13</sup>Giroux (2013, 263).



course reassuring. After all, if only individual teacher behavior matters, then redistributive schemes to equalize the sometimes 1 to 3 spending differences between schools in poor and rich areas respectively are futile and do nothing, they say, but sacrifice “excellence.”<sup>14</sup>

President Obama, Chair of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernanke, and *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman each has responded to the massive job loss by suggesting that if only teachers were doing their jobs the unemployment crisis would be solved.<sup>15</sup> The films *Waiting for Superman*, *The Lottery* and *The Cartel* were joined by NBC TV and countless news items conveying the message that public schooling has failed, individual teachers are largely responsible, and the only solution is the radical embrace of market based experiments, especially chartering. This media blitz incidentally coincided with clear educational policy research for the failure of market based reforms to do what proponents had promised all along – namely, raise standardized test scores.<sup>16</sup> The popularizing of grit in 2012 is significant for marking a shift towards a reinvigorated scapegoating of students for conditions not of their making in addition to the ongoing assault on teachers, public workers and their unions, and secure employment. The new turn to teaching grit has to be understood, as well, as part of a significant shift in the working of social and cultural reproduction that involves making the social relations for the reproduction of capital.

## *Reviving Reproduction Theory for the Age of Austerity*

In the last two decades, neoliberals have succeeded in radically changing the traditional two-tiered educational system into a new two-tiered educational system. Scholars of educational reproduction have long explained how schools reproduce the racialized class hierarchy not only by teaching students of different class positions the skills and know-how for work.<sup>17</sup> Reproduction theorists also explain that different emphases on skills and know-how come wrapped in ideologies of knowledge and social relations crucial for the reproduction of relations of production and their subjectivities.

In the era of industrial production, the US public school system largely prepared professional class students for leadership and managerial roles in the private and public sectors while preparing (male) working class and poor

<sup>14</sup>Per pupil spending in Chicago Public Schools is about \$9000 per pupil while towns in the north shore suburbs spend about \$24,000.

<sup>15</sup>“Interview with Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke” (2010), Friedman (2009), “Correspondent Steve Kroft Interviewed The President” (2010).

<sup>16</sup>I take this up in detail in Saltman (2012, 1-53).

<sup>17</sup>In the US context Bowles and Gintis’ 1976 *Schooling in Capitalist America* was the most significant early elaboration of reproduction theory. After being out of print for decades it has recently been re-released.



students for wage manufacturing labor.<sup>18</sup> Professional class schools prepared students for advanced university education while fostering dispositions of curiosity, dialogue, and debate within acceptable ideological frameworks. Working class schools prepared students with basic skills and dispositions for obedience to authority, an alignment of knowledge with expert authority, and internalized blame for limited educational and work advancement. Sorting and sifting mechanisms—such as grades, testing, and tracking—naturalized, as matters of talent or merit, unequal distribution of life chances and reproduction theorists described this ideological magic as the “hidden curriculum.” (As these theorists also recognized, this ideology work was much more complicated, contradictory, and interwoven with other ideologies including nation, gender, sexuality, race) What was “hidden” in the hidden curriculum was the capitalist basis for the organization of time and space, the practices of teaching and learning that assured an adequate supply of both mandarins for those who owned the society and the exploitable reserve army of labor whose time and labor power could be captured and accumulated as profit by owners. But what happens to this arrangement when capitalist accumulation no longer needs the workers at the bottom?

Since the early 1970s, deindustrialization, the shift to the service economy, advances in computer and transportation technologies, trade and capital deregulation, steady increases in worker productivity combined with steadily declining real wages resulted in a debt and speculation economy and a series of bubbles that popped—stock, dot.com, mortgage-backed security. By the 1990s, the productive manufacturing economy steadily declined as a source of corporate profits while speculation as the basis for corporate wealth steadily surpassed it.<sup>19</sup> As Richard Wolff has argued the decline of wages coupled with upward worker productivity resulted in a situation in which expanded consumption and economic growth could be accomplished by corporations lending unpaid wages back to workers in the form of credit cards, home equity loans, student loans, and car loans.<sup>20</sup> Corporate profits skyrocketed as unpaid wages were returned with interest and corporations awash in cash needed new venues for profitable investment. As the speculative economy overtook the productive economy in the mid 1990s, corporations, flush from decades of upward redistribution, discovered public education for its possibilities as an \$800 billion a year “industry” ripe for the taking.<sup>21</sup> As profit has become tougher to extract in the private sector, corporations and investors look to seize portions of the public sector, through lucrative contracts in for profit school management and a vast array of educational products and services. The profit made by investors drains public resources that would otherwise be spent on educational services. The

<sup>18</sup>For a brilliant discussion of the gendered dimensions of schooling in the service of the economy see Goodman (2014).

<sup>19</sup>Harvey (2010, 22).

<sup>20</sup>Wolff (2008).

<sup>21</sup>Symonds (2002).



standardized testing push of the 2000s was interwoven with the financial interests of test makers and textbook publishers, curriculum producers, and contracting companies, including technology firms. The standardization of knowledge through standardized testing and standardization of curriculum lends itself to the financial pursuits of market fundamentalists who want to treat knowledge as an industrial commodity and use private sector methods for “delivery,” measurement, and control.

The new two-tiered system involves a revised social and cultural reproduction in schools. If the public schools in the industrial era provided a dual labor force for a dual economy, public schools in the post-industrial era can be seen as making a dual labor force for a different kind of dual economy. As Nancy Fraser argues, the era of neoliberal globalization results in a new dual mode of social- and self-regulation.<sup>22</sup> While in the industrial era, control took the predominant form of learned self-regulation, in the post-industrial economy learned self-regulation gives way to more direct control of the body. The time and labor intensive talking cure of the psychiatrist’s couch and the social worker gives way to the mood and behavior modifying pill. The learned self-regulation of the prison (as in Foucault’s panopticon, for example) gives way to supermax and solitary confinement. In working class public schools the models of the military and the prison and old behaviorist and scientific management ideals of controlling bodies are revived and applied to working class kids. For example, KIPP charter school management company which is one of the largest and most celebrated and promotes teaching grit also employs a behaviorist model of body control called SLANT which is an acronym for Sit straight, Listen, Ask a question, Nod your head, Track. Infractions against the behavior code result in being ordered to stand for long periods of time on a black line in the hallway and getting demerit points in a book referred to a “the paycheck.” A common student nickname for KIPP which stands for “Knowledge is Power Program” is Kids in Prison Program. More broadly urban poor predominantly non-White schools receive heavy police presence, metal detectors, biometric ID cards, strict dress codes, strict codes of behavior punishable with not just expulsion but arrest. With the rise of school funding linked to test scores, an epidemic has emerged: drugging kids into attention and out of distracting other kids has been driven by desperate attempts to control the bodies of children to game the standardized tests to assure federal funding.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, professional class youth are being educated to use the instruments of corporeal self-control to make themselves into allegedly entrepreneurial subjects of capacity. In this case, students learn that they ought to use smart drugs such as Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta and other amphetamine stimulants to facilitate attention to compete against others. These more direct forms of corporeal control do

<sup>22</sup>Fraser (2003).

<sup>23</sup>Koerth-Baker (2013).



not replace but supplement the more characteristically industrial-era uses of disciplinary power.<sup>24</sup>

The new social and cultural reproduction creates social relations for the reproduction of capital in education in part by producing a more intensely disciplined future labor force. As Bertell Ollman argues, with the advent of the flexible labor force, the conditions of neoliberal globalization, new pressures on workers, and the business pillage of public schools, the radical expansion of standardization and standardized testing plays a crucial reproductive role of teaching students the new not-so-hidden curriculum of schooling for capitalism.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on student discipline and docility through the enforcement of standardized regimes reveals what Ollman calls the real lessons of testing: obeying authority, understanding truth to reside with those in power, and preparing for work speed-ups. Such discipline becomes crucial in the context of a steadily worsening economy in the US as factories – and with them unionized and secure jobs – have been shipped overseas in the past few decades under the economic dictates of neoliberalism. In the industrial era the time and labor intensive making of future workers for their exploitable labor gives way to the post-industrial pillage of public services for short term profits. What matters is controlling bodies and extracting profit in the short run from those bodies. The new repression in schools is expedient not only for catering to the expansion of the growing low-skill, low-paid work force of the future. The new repression crucially facilitates immediate profit-taking in education through for profit school management contracts, mandated testing, and corporate monopolies for test and text production, real estate deals facilitated through chartering, for profit remediation services, and the security industries. Moreover, as the private sector continues to pillage public education, private sector metrics of quality and value have become the dominant mode of describing school.

Not only have knowledge and learning been subject to being quantifiably measured and declared neutral objects for efficient delivery. Also, all of the new educational reforms – from Common Core curriculum standards to No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, the revised standards for teacher certification CAEP, the revised students teaching standards EdTPA – treat knowledge as needing to be delinked from both student experience and broader social, cultural, political, and economic forces and struggles. Knowledge in this view is meaningful only for its abstract value delinked from how people subjectively interpret it or how it contributes to an understanding and transformation of the objective world. These reforms frame knowledge as meaningful only for its exchange value. It is evacuated of its humanistic aims of individual edification and political value for civic participation and collective self-governance. Standardization has been used by neoliberal reformers in the name of educational efficiencies to wage war on any form

<sup>24</sup>Foucault (1977).

<sup>25</sup>Ollman (2002).





of education that would explain the individual and social contexts in which knowledge becomes meaningful. Knowledge in this view is not understood as being produced through unequal dialogic exchange or being the outcome of struggles. Instead, knowledge is something to enforce.<sup>26</sup>

## Grit

In the new culture of austerity, the disciplinary mechanism is often the student herself. That is, as neoliberal economic reforms promise a withdrawal of the care-giving arm of the state, schools work to privatize responsibility. Making the draconian disciplinary apparatus of the neoliberal age invisible, these schools also make it seem like individuals are failing rather than social supports and public investments. A number of scholars, journalists, education reformers, and charter school proponents have recently popularized the concept of “grit” in US educational reform policy to refer to this individualization of educational effort.<sup>27</sup> Grit refers to “self-discipline wedded to a dedicated pursuit of a goal.”<sup>28</sup> The most publicized proponents commonly define grit as the dedicated pursuit of a passion such as mastering a musical instrument. Yet the “grit scale” that measures grit makes no distinction between intrinsic motivation for a goal and capacity to pursue something that has no inherent meaning to the pursuer.<sup>29</sup> Proponents have identified grit as a developmental character trait that is responsible for academic and work “success” defined by sustained motivation toward the end of task completion. Grit-oriented pedagogies aim to instill rule-following in children. Such pedagogies seek to structure the school environment to remove activities that are not purposive.<sup>30</sup> Grit oriented forms of pedagogy involve heavy doses of corporeal control and physical cues, rapid-fire shallow exchanges between teachers and students.

The popularization of grit relies upon a few key assumptions and fallacies about learning, knowledge and intelligence. Among these are the assumption that mastery of skills and knowledge can be boiled down to putting in enough hours of what grit proponent Angela Duckworth calls “deliberate practice.” Duckworth suggests that if everyone (especially kids)

<sup>26</sup>My earliest two books *Collateral Damage* and *Education as Enforcement* both developed this concept of “education as enforcement” as a distinct transformation in the neoliberalization of public education.

<sup>27</sup>The language of “grit” invokes 19<sup>th</sup> Century American exceptionalism, westward expansion, and a romanticization of a brutal survivalism traded on in recent films such as the Coen’s *True Grit* and NBC TV’s use of the same title in covering grit as character education Rock Center (2012).

<sup>28</sup>Tough (2012, 136).

<sup>29</sup>The “grit scale” was developed by the lead academic empirical researcher of grit Angela Duckworth and can be accessed at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/12-item%20Grit%20Scale.05312011.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup>See for example the website of the program Tools of the Mind (“Self Regulation,” n.d.).



FROMM-Online

learned better self-control, delayed gratification, and goal-setting, more skills and talent would be fostered and individuals would live more fulfilled lives becoming more successful and excellent at what they pursue and the economy would benefit.

Grit enthusiasts claim that grit marks a move away from seeing the student as needing to be filled with knowledge in the empiricist tradition. Yet, because the discourse on grit denies cultural politics of knowledge and embraces standardized testing, it remains committed to a conception of learning that Paulo Freire referred to as “banking education” in which students are empty vessels to be filled with the right knowledge. To this old empiricist conception of education, grit adds a renewed onus on the learner to develop the will and disposition to get filled up.<sup>31</sup> Grit revives the Kantian educational emphasis on learned self-discipline but with the moral and public uses of education stripped out.<sup>32</sup> It also revives the Aristotelian virtue ethics emphasis on character education but with the moral and political dimensions replaced by narrow training and its economic uses.<sup>33</sup>

While character education in the West can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, its contemporary revival in education owes to cultural conservative efforts in the 1980s culture wars to link character development to civic participation. As called for by figures such as E.D. Hirsh, William Bennett, and Allen Bloom this participation depends upon elite, Eurocentric and canonical knowledge. Cultural conservatives elevated character education for a deontological ethics posited against the cultural relativism allegedly threatened by multiculturalism and its valuation of cultural difference. Then in the 1990s, perhaps in response to a presidency defined by allegations of personal immoral conduct, the Democratic Clinton administration further promoted character education, aligning individual moral development with the public good and the values of civic life. However, the new emphasis on character education—or “grit”—in the age of austerity marks a radical break with prior conceptions animated by ethical and political ideals. Rather grit is a strictly economic self-regulatory ideal understood through personal efficiency and productivity. This conception of character accords with the trend of neoliberal educational restructuring in which schooling is seen as a means for individual competition for increasingly scarce economic mobility and schooling is positioned as a means of national business competition on a global scale.

In his book popularizing grit, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012), New York Times journalist Paul Tough explains grit as a new apolitical and amoral form of character education.

<sup>31</sup>The empty vessel version of education really begins with Locke and Rousseau while the fullest exposition of learned self-regulation can be found in Kant and was targeted by Michel Foucault.

<sup>32</sup>See for example, Kant (2009) for the elaboration of learned self-discipline towards moral ends and Kant (2001) on education for the public use of reason.

<sup>33</sup>See Aristotle (2009).



Character in Tough's view involves the disposition to persist in doing what one does not find meaningful or motivating. The poor, according to Tough, ought to learn to endure drudgery better at an early age because endurance of drudgery is a better indicator of both academic and work success as measured respectively by grades and earnings.

The narrative about grit naturalizes poverty and inequality by drawing on biological studies and by stitching them to a neoliberal social Darwinian perspective on the naturalness of markets and individual competition. While some people are alleged to have more grit than others naturally, the rich are alleged to have more grit as a result of supportive environmental conditions that the poor don't have. This is where the alleged "science" of grit comes in. Rich children are alleged to have better "executive function" than poor children. That is, they are supposed to be able to voluntarily regulate their behavior to a greater degree. Tough explains that stressed poor children (just like stressed lab rats) have less memory (which Tough equates with intelligence) than unstressed children. Likewise, Tough explains that the "incentive processing system" and "cognitive control system" which develop especially in adolescence are compromised by the "high allostatic load" (stress) of living in poverty. In Tough's narrative if students could be taught self-control and goal setting they could properly channel their stress towards self-control and discipline for "academic achievement", that is, decontextualized learning and later inclusion into the workforce. Tough and the other proponents of grit are especially enthusiastic about addressing the stress of poverty not by reducing or ending poverty and all of its violence but by teaching children to channel the stress produced by poverty by learning how to endure drudgery for potential opportunity in capitalist labor markets.

Tough draws on neoliberal economist James Heckman to claim that grit, more than intelligence or creativity results in economic mobility and opportunity regardless of class origin. Yet, as Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2013) empirically illustrates capitalism tends towards the concentration of wealth and social inequality. A crucial point long made by the reproduction theorists is that the reproduction of class hierarchy depends not only on the transmission of different amounts of capital from parents to children but on different class based social relationships – that is, differently distributed cultural and social capital.<sup>34</sup> Not only does the teaching of grit to the poor not counter the reproduction of class hierarchy but also it actually contributes to worsening it by teaching working class and poor children the dispositions, knowledge and tastes for subjugation in the public and private sectors. In other words, grit pedagogy is diametrically opposed to the dispositions towards dialogue, questioning, investigation, and dissent that are fostered in professional and ruling class schools charged with preparing future leaders across institutions of power. Grit repeats a tradition of teaching different senses of political and economic agency to different

<sup>34</sup>Bourdieu & Passeron (2000).



economic classes of students. Grit promotes a sense of agency for working class students defined by rule following and submission to authority rather than the assumption of questioning authority and the relationship between knowledge and relations of power. The emphasis on submission to authority is ideal for preparing working class students for political marginalization rather than collective self-governance and for subordinate positions within the economy.

The narrative of trauma and alienation told in the biological discourse about grit presumes that healthy child development is a matter of successfully learning to internalize authority. It offers no sense of how as both Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson's critical human development theories suggest healthy development involves ongoing crises of individuation—that is, the capacities for rationality, questioning, and autonomy crucially involve disobedience and refusal. Alienation in these theories is a prerequisite for reflectiveness about the self and the society. Yet, healthy adjustment involves expanding the capacities of the individual to comprehend and act on the alienating forces.<sup>35</sup> Grit mystifies the social sources of individual alienation biologizing and naturalizing class inequality.

Grit and resilience frame individual and social problems in ways compatible with a politics of austerity that eviscerates the care-giving roles of the state. Grit as character education is inextricably linked to longer standing academic expositions of student “resilience.” Resilience studies in Psychology and Special Education is a field that examines students in schools in poor communities where the majority of students succumb to the ill-effects of poverty such as gang violence, imprisonment, and teenage pregnancy. Resilience studies ask not how the social conditions of poverty and violence can be transformed or how students can learn to comprehend and act to change what oppresses them. Instead resilience studies identifies the rare student who survives, graduates, and goes to university despite the social disinvestment, violence, targeting by the criminal justice system, despair, and poverty. Resilience studies focuses on the exceptional “success against all odds story.” The thinking goes that if only the unique characteristics that allow for resilience can be identified, teachers, by replicating those unique characteristics, can design a course of action that might allow for more students to succeed in spite of the context. Grit shares with resilience studies a deeply conservative refusal to address radical disparities in social investment, the historical policy legacy that reproduces a racialized class hierarchy, the ways there are clear winners and losers and the political pressure that maintains such radically unequal public spending patterns. Grit also shares with resilience studies the idealization of “getting out” of the context of poverty rather than learning to comprehend and confront the forces that produce it.

Grit as character education is also linked to a more recent claim on student agency in which knowledge and learning are radically estranged

<sup>35</sup>See Fromm (1994) and Erikson (1994)



from the subjective experiences and contexts of the learners and from the objective social world. Grit is symbiotic with the above-mentioned banking education on steroids in the age of austerity including the recent expansion of corporate-state coordinated standardized testing and standardization of curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Grit is diametrically opposed to a view of knowledge and learning in the tradition of critical pedagogy and progressive education, both of which treat knowledge as essential to comprehend individual experience, to reflect upon one's action, and to have such reflection become the basis for engaging with problems in the world. Rather, grit treats knowledge as akin to a commodity or money. Knowledge in this view is framed as being meaningful primarily as something that is consumed, regurgitated, and then exchanged – first for academic promotion but then for work, money, and consumption.

Grit can be seen as a kind of behavior code and pedagogical approach that corresponds to the dominant trends in neoliberal education reform. These reforms are grounded in a positivist denial of the framing values, assumptions, and ideologies behind the selection and framing of truth claims and a denial of the values, assumptions, and ideologies involved in acts of interpretation. Grit, like reforms such as the standardized testing fetish delinks knowledge from contexts, subjective experiences of students and teachers, and the broader social structures and formations that inform subjective experience.

Grit reinforces a description of educational processes that underlie consumer culture, that is, a feeling of scarcity in which the student is constantly denied the fulfillment of both desires and needs, though nobody's fault but her own. Both Tough and Duckworth are cognizant of the problem that if the end of self-denial is indulgence (in junk food for example), then most people will take what they can get immediately rather than deferring gratification—especially people who are in a situation of greater stress and insecurity. Both discuss how candy tests of children's capacity for self-denial correlate to higher SAT scores, grades, and later income. Kids who can wait to eat one marshmallow or M&M in order to get a second one later have greater self-control. Duckworth laments that the seductions of consumption and advertising are greater than ever before and so demands on self-denial are greater than ever before.<sup>36</sup> Neither Duckworth nor Tough offer any way of thinking about the development of the subject in ways that criticize the ideology of consumerism or position its easy passivity and hyper-consumption as a form of human exploitation.

The misleading suggestion is that individuals can employ grit to become whatever they desire (musician, Hollywood actor, politician, physicist) rather than being honest about what grit is used to do in schools like KIPP: foster forms of learning defined by docility and submission to authority for the growing low paid, low-skill bottom-tier of the workforce. Grit does not foster

<sup>36</sup>See Duckworth (2012).



dialogue, debate, investigation, and curiosity valued for leadership roles in the public and private sectors. Grit is misrepresented by proponents as opening a world of individual choices rather than discussed honestly as a mode of educational and social control in the austere world of work defined by fewer and fewer choices as secure public sector work is scaled back, unemployment levels continue at high levels. Thinking, questioning, and imagining are relentlessly assaulted in favor of the logic of accountability, standardization, and homogeneity enforced through corporeal control.<sup>37</sup>

What Tough and Duckworth and the other proponents of grit miss completely is that people are motivated by learning that is meaningful and relevant to their experiences and that such meaningful learning promises the power to comprehend and act on social realities. As both Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux have elaborated, learning that is meaningful and critical offers the potential for political agency rather than the consumer agency promised by grit. Unlike earlier conceptions of character education in which self-denial is yoked to the service of broader social, ethical, and political ends and visions, grit starts and ends with the lone individual as economic actor, worker and consumer. If the end of self-denial is consumption then why should anyone defer indulgence in short term pleasurable activities for learning that is only towards the end of yet more meaningless work for the end of consumption?

Grit celebrates and seeks to expand the death of the radical imagination—openness to imagining a future better than the present. Henry Giroux has insisted on the need for formative youth cultures in which radical imagination is fostered.<sup>38</sup> Paulo Freire put it concisely in suggesting that one must learn to denounce existing realities in order to announce an as yet unrealized future. Theory for all of these thinkers provides the means for youth to critically analyze the self and the society. Erich Fromm emphasized that such self and social reflection as the means for social reconstruction begins not with obedience to authority (the core of grit) but rather disobedience.<sup>39</sup>

Erich Fromm's work provides a valuable diametrically opposed counterpoint to the recent popularization of grit. Fromm's developmental theory suggests that rationality depends upon disobedience to authority, that individual character must be understood as inseparable from social character, and that development involves constitutive crises that result from the disjuncture between the development of individual strengths and the process of individuation. Fromm's developmental theory highlights how individual development, that is, character formation, can only be understood in relation to social character. Individual experiences of alienation, estrangement and isolation derive from the process of individuation, yet the social character informs how it is that social relations are forged in ways that foster love and spontaneity, an embrace of others as human subjects rather than objects

<sup>37</sup>See Henry Giroux's recent articles on the assault on critical pedagogy, political literacy, and thinking itself in both education and popular culture on [truthout.org](http://truthout.org).

<sup>38</sup>See for example Giroux (2013).

<sup>39</sup>See Fromm (2010).



to possess, and a treatment of knowledge as dynamic. For Fromm, these developmental crises may be resolved badly in the form of the individual attempting to sadistically control, objectify, and inanimate objects, others, and knowledge, or masochistically abdicating freedom and agency to a magical helper. Or these crises of necessary individuation and alienation may be resolved well through learning to love and affirm spontaneous and free forms of life. While proponents of grit radically individualize alienation, Fromm sees individual alienation as inextricably informed by social forces. Freedom for grit is learned self-control harnessed to knowledge and activity that is beyond question. Freedom for Fromm as well as for Freire involves learning to question in order to learn to live spontaneously and creatively and to control with others those social phenomena that make people less free from domination.<sup>40</sup> Fromm insists that the imposition of authority must be based in reason that is a universal and the acceptance of which does not constitute submission.<sup>41</sup> Rather domination comes from the imposition of irrational authority.<sup>42</sup> It is specifically the imposition of knowledge that is unexamined, the imposition of claims to truth that are beyond questioning that makes grit pedagogy authoritarian in its tendencies.

Austerity education is not only about a turn to repressive control of youth in the interest of amassing profits for the rich, creating a docile and disciplined workforce as the conditions of work and life are worsened for the majority of citizens. It is also about the rightist project of capturing public space such as schools to actively produce politically illiterate, socially uncritical, and un-self critical subject positions for youth to occupy. It involves a project of teaching teachers and students to understand learning and rationality through submission to authority, and miseducating them to comprehend their alienation as a failure of individual gumption rather than as a constitutive part of development informed by a social formation and economy that depends upon the making of alienation.

The turn to grit in educational reform comes at a moment of not only worsening pressures on labor, unprecedented inequalities in wealth and income but a growing consciousness of the utter failure of the promise of school for work. The most important role for public school is, rather, to foster the conditions for youth to imagine different futures of collective self-control that do not involve the pillage of nature and people.

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<sup>40</sup> See Fromm (1941) and Freire (1970) who relies on and develops Fromm’s theory of subject formation.

<sup>41</sup> See Fromm (2010). A similar position can be found in Chomsky (2002; 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Fromm (2010, 8).



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