



## What's It All For? Against Schooling in the Modern University

Chris Land

**review of:**

Stanley Aronowitz (2008) *Against Schooling: For an Education That Matters*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. (PB: pp. 216, \$24.95, ISBN: 9781594515033)

Published as part of Paradigm's 'Radical Imagination' series, this book brings together a series of essays written by Aronowitz during the 1990s and 2000s. The essays all deal in some way with the question of education and schooling, with a clear focus on Higher Education (HE) in the USA, although there does not seem to have been much effort to rework the papers into an integrated thesis. This leaves the book feeling a little disconnected and, in some cases, such as when describing political struggles, slightly out of date. For example, chapter 6, which explores the role of unions in resisting the corporatization of universities, includes some interesting empirical details of the struggles against managerialism at the City University of New York (CUNY) where Aronowitz works. Unfortunately the chapter is a reprint of a book chapter first published in 1997 and the results of the struggles outlined, how effective they were and how they evolved in the following decade, is not discussed, something of a missed opportunity to my mind. The following chapter, which also addresses the question of union activism in higher education, is from 2007, so the reader has to make a bit of a jump to follow the development of the struggles being discussed. Despite these complaints the book has much to recommend it and does have a degree of consistency running through the different chapters that comes together to form the overall argument emerging from the book: whilst 'schooling' is, or has become, problematic for a number of reasons, there remains the possibility of another form of education that will avoid the twin traps of the academic, elitist imposition of knowledge upon students (the traditional university model) and the capitalistic, corporate university model of markets, consumption and employability.

This 'other' education is not simply conceived in terms of pedagogic methods or alternative structures for the university, but recognises that 'education' is a widely distributed phenomenon that takes place outside of, and often against, or in spite of, formal schooling. For example, drawing on the work of Paul Willis (1977) Aronowitz points to the role of family, class, popular culture and peer-group socialisation in

'educating' students, often in practices of classroom resistance and anti-intellectualism. By recognising that 'education' takes place in this broader social sphere, Aronowitz's arguments concerning the university are always already inextricably linked to wider issues of social change. As he puts it in his chapter on Freire, the issue of 'education' is never just one of method or pedagogy:

[Freire] means to offer a system in which the locus of the learning process is shifted from the teacher to the student. And this shift overtly signifies an altered power relationship, not only in the classroom but in the broader social canvas as well. (Aronowitz, 2008: 162)

This is, perhaps, the main contribution of this book. Aronowitz, through his analysis of the current situation of HE in the USA, through his discussion of the role of Trades Unions in universities, and through his theoretical mobilization of Gramsci and Freire, consistently places education at the forefront of more general struggles for social change. As such he not only raises the stakes of struggles over university education and schooling, but also shows how much more radicalised resistance must become to achieve a really substantive change.

### **Study in the Corporate HEI: Learning as Preparation to Work**

So, why is change needed; what exactly is Aronowitz's problem with 'schooling'; and why does he, as a professor of sociology in a large North American university, feel the need to take a stance 'against' it? Aronowitz's main concern, outlined in the introduction, is the subordination of education to credentialism and employability. As in the UK and other countries, the USA has seen a thoroughgoing subsumption of 'education', through formal schooling, into the service of capital. In public policy discourses Higher Education has become at best a process of preparing students for work, at worst a cynical means of keeping down unemployment statistics (Aronowitz, 2008: 26; 109). Against employability, Aronowitz holds out an idea of education for citizenship. For a democratic state to function in any meaningful sense, the *demos* must be capable of understanding their world and participating in decision making at all levels, both in the public sphere and in their everyday life. Unfortunately, as Aronowitz notes, questions such as what a student needs to know to participate effectively as a citizen are neglected by an educational regime that "privileges job readiness above any other educational values" (2008: xii). Given that the workplace is, on the whole, one of the least democratic of our social institutions, this focus on preparation for work could even be seen as anti-democratic.

A secondary concern is that the contemporary focus on credentialism has led to an increased emphasis on testing at all levels of the educational system. As curricula are increasingly standardised and set by governmental authorities, teachers are subjected to the kind of rationalisation and deskilling process that Braverman (1974) observed in other professions years ago. Instead of a creative education, designed to enable students to realise their potential in diverse ways, perhaps even in ways determined at least partly by themselves, the rationalisation of education has subjected students and teachers alike to a pre-determined, standardised curriculum where employability and testing are the overarching principles. A general education that would facilitate a critical understanding of political process, social theory, rhetoric, composition and literary

criticism has been replaced by a more technical education, where the teacher has become an administrator, rather than a creative professional.

For Aronowitz it is not just the content of schooling, however, but also its form that stifles its educational potential. Indeed, he suggests that the technical 'content' of education is almost irrelevant. For a handful of elite universities and schools the main benefit to students is the social capital they gain with an education, the people they meet and networks they develop. For the vast majority of university students, however, the function of schooling is primarily disciplinary and "achieving a credential signifies mainly that the student is more or less reliably integrated into the work-world system... shows up on time, hands in assignments according to the instructions, and sits for exams" (2008: xiv; 12). In these sections of the book it is clear that Aronowitz sees higher education today in a similar light to Foucault's (1979) description of the school timetable at the start of *Discipline and Punish*, albeit with a more explicit critical-functional emphasis on the production of docile students to feed capitalist enterprises' hunger for manipulable labour-power. I will return to this point below as I feel that it signifies both the main critical vantage point of Aronowitz's analysis and one of its potential weaknesses.

Alongside this shifting social function of schooling, Aronowitz bemoans the organizational and structural fate of the North American university today, most of which, through an apparent process of mimetic isomorphism, are becoming increasingly like business corporations. Their structures of governance are divorced from academics, and administration has become a separate career path that, once embarked upon, is unlikely to see a return to the professoriate. With an increasing pay gap between administrators and academics, and little likelihood of senior managers going back into teaching and research posts, university administrators have become divorced from their fellow academics and will rarely face the prospect of having to labour under the regimes they instigated. This has, Aronowitz suggests, led to a bifurcation of interests between management and academics that undermines both the traditional functioning of the university and its autonomous self-governance by a community of scholars. This change in management, coupled with an increased use of 'adjunct' teaching staff on part-time or temporary contracts and with little or no paid research time or job security, means that the university is increasingly modelled on the capitalist business organization, a structure in which traditional academic values find little space. Indeed, Aronowitz is quite explicit in claiming that these structures undermine academic values of freedom and autonomy. Academic freedom is challenged by the increased pressure upon academics to account for their research through funding from external agencies, thereby subordinating disinterested research to the interests of corporations (especially in the sciences), the military or the economy. Administrative autonomy is eroded by the increasing layers of professional administrators employed by universities, at a time when faculty recruitment is often frozen (2008: 120).

Aronowitz is careful to avoid the trap of nostalgic reaction when responding to these changes and does not advocate a simple return to some traditional 'community of scholars'. He maintains an awareness of the inequities of the 'old' system of education, whereby the disciplinary authority of the academic was supposedly unchallengeable and students were relatively passive recipients of their 'education', rather than active

subjects of it. In this he separates his position from those “educational radicals [who] once condemned the disciplinary basis of school knowledge as an outmoded, repressive regime [but] now resist any hint of educational reform, since such proposals rarely signify the enlargement of resources but are used by administration to facilitate consolidation” (2008: 126). Rather, Aronowitz wants to embrace the necessity for reform and to push it much further than either the paradoxical reactionary radicals, or the neo-liberal reformers, would like.

## Widening Participation and Democratizing Access

One example of this is his response to the question of widening participation. Aronowitz is clear that broader access to a university education is a good thing, but questions what exactly it is that is being accessed. An example of this is found in one of Aronowitz’s relatively rare mentions of the development of distance learning and the virtual classroom, widely discussed by the likes of David Noble (2001) and others (e.g. the collection edited by Robins and Webster, 2002). Here he notes that:

After more than a decade of fumbling, it appears that distance learning is regaining its legs. Given the systematic disinvestment currently globally rampant in higher education, one would expect new cost-cutting proposals to be put forward, often dressed in the garb of democratization. If this trend gains momentum, we may witness in our lifetimes an educational regime in which only a tiny minority of students and professors enjoy the luxury of classroom learning while the immense majority earn credentials without seeing a single live professor or conversing in person with fellow students. (Aronowitz, 2008: 80)

So long as the idea of ‘widening participation’ in HE leaves the rest of society untouched it is likely to pander to ‘the market’ and students’ expectations that a university degree will improve their prospects in the labour market. Inevitably this leads to a focus on the product of an education (access to the credential, whether BSc, BA, MSc, MA or PhD) rather than the process. In this, alas, he may not be wrong. My own place of work has recently signed a deal with Kaplan to offer a University of Essex validated and branded BSc in the area of business and management. The projected enrolments, if realised, will mean that in just a couple of years there will be more ‘Essex’ business graduates taking this route to their degree than study on campus. Needless to say, the content of the degrees are incomparable. Whilst all of the necessary QAA benchmark boxes are ticked, the new scheme is entirely of the technical type that Aronowitz is worried about. In contrast, the full-time BSc in Business and Management taught at the University of Essex has a more critically oriented curriculum where students are introduced not only to mainstream management theory but also to wider debates in social theory, ethics, philosophy and international political economy, and are expected to engage with popular cultural representations of work and management in film and in literature, as well as in management theory texts, so as to locate the production of ‘business’ and ‘management’ within a wider cultural, social, economic and political context. Not only is the content of the two degrees incomparable, but so is the form of delivery. Kaplan uses a relatively small number of course tutors coupled with a large number of casually employed assistants who administer the small groups into which students are placed during their studies. Few of these have PhDs and none, to my knowledge, are research active, so students are not getting any of the benefits of a

degree at a research institution other than the human capital conferred by the brand. Almost humorously, this form of intellectual asset stripping was dressed up in the garb of democratisation and broadening participation in HE to those in full-time employment who could not otherwise attend a full time course of study. Of course, as Aronowitz suggests, the course of study they gain access to is not at all the same thing, other than in terms of the impoverished credential they will receive at the end of their studies.

Such developments are not entirely the result of corporate profiteering, however. Aronowitz offers the interesting suggestion that the student protests of the 60s and 70s may have paradoxically driven the neo-liberalisation of HE. As the traditional liberal arts education was rejected, by students and radical faculty alike, as elitist it was replaced by a kind of populism that had little substance in terms of an alternative programme for education. Instead the concerns of working and middle class students, and their parents, over financial security and employability came, in part, to drive the growth of technical areas like business education. The problem here is that whilst more people are going to university, what they get there is not what it used to be, nor what it could be:

...if higher education is to become a public good in the double meaning of the term – as a decommodified resource for the people and an ethically legitimate institution that does not submit to the business imperative – then beyond access we would have to promote a national debate about what is to be taught and what is to be learned if citizenship and critical thought are to remain, even at the level of intention, the heart of higher learning. (Aronowitz, 2008: 76)

In the absence of a clear alternative, radical programme for education, neo-liberalism filled the vacuum and traditional academic values were driven out in favour of employability. As I have suggested, however, Aronowitz resists the temptation to retrench nostalgically around lost values and instead seeks to push through on the agenda of 'widening participation' to open up a debate over what social function schooling should perform and how that function is best realised.

## **Resistance First!**

Here there is an interesting twist, I think, to Aronowitz's argument. The idea that it was student protest that pushed change in the universities is reminiscent of autonomist Marxist arguments concerning the primacy of resistance in capitalist restructuring (Cleaver, 1992; Dyer-Witheford, 1999) as well as Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) idea that the discursive reconstitution of a 'new spirit of capitalism' was driven by anti-capitalist sentiment and student revolt. Unfortunately I didn't feel that the full implications of this idea were worked through in this book. If we accept arguments, like Boltanski and Chiapello's, that capitalism has restructured significantly in recent years, at least in heartlands like Western Europe and North America, then the question of what kind of employment schooling is preparing us for should be addressed head on. As I have suggested above, the model of schooling that Aronowitz portrays, through his focus on standardisation and testing, is reminiscent of the disciplinary regimes of the factory and the prison, where docility and obedience are the ruling principles and foundations for productive organization. If Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), Hardt and Negri (2000) and others (e.g. Deleuze, 1992) are correct, however, and capitalism has

restructured around the model of the network, immaterial labour, communication and biopolitics, then perhaps there is a tension in the place of contemporary higher education in capitalist social reproduction that Aronowitz misses?

In his desire to construct a critical functionalist position where schooling has been subsumed into employability there is a danger that his analysis misses these kinds of changes and neglects the very real possibility that schooling, or specifically higher education, is itself out of step with developments in capitalism. Such an argument might consider the paradoxical situation that universities find themselves in today of simultaneously guaranteeing stable social reproduction, by preparing students for the world of work, and also being quasi capitalist organizations in themselves. It is entirely possible that this tension is itself creating some of the paradoxes of contemporary university education where, as standardisation and large class sizes, as well as a technical curriculum predominate, students are increasingly disengaged and uninspired, at least partly because of standardization, large class sizes and a predominantly technical curriculum. Under such conditions there can be little hope of them developing the critical and creative faculties that critical theorists and management pundits alike suggest are necessary for commercial success in today's global economy.

Of course, it is entirely possible that Aronowitz is correct and that the majority of graduates today will not end up in the creative sectors or working as 'symbolic analysts' and knowledge managers, but labouring in silicon sweatshops – call centres and routinised coding factories – or retail outlets, bars and restaurants (cf. Thompson, 2005; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Under such circumstances perhaps the degraded idea of schooling that Aronowitz outlines in this book *is* functional and does fit the capitalist zeitgeist, but in this case extending his arguments out to examine the labour market that schooling supposedly serves would give his argument considerably greater critical leverage, particularly given his concerns with a whole-social critique, rather than pedagogic methodologies.

## **CMS in the Business School**

A final, but connected, comment relates to the question of 'resistance'. It is notable that Aronowitz bases many of his arguments on a fairly limited empirical base. His own experiences, predominantly at CUNY, and a handful of other prominent cases from North America are the only empirical material presented in the book. Very little serious analysis is given of areas of 'technical' education and the content of the curriculum pursued in those areas, despite the rise of such being a key concern for Aronowitz. A perfect example of this, of course, would be the business school, where, in the UK and Europe at least, the project of Critical Management Studies (CMS) has been increasingly prominent. Indeed, by some accounts the rise of CMS has been so extensive that the CMS conference is as large, if not larger, than the more mainstream British Academy of Management. This, coupled with the fact that two of the most prestigious departments of management and business in the UK, at least in terms of the RAE, have a significant presence of CMS affiliated scholars (Warwick and Lancaster) suggests that traditions of critique and a more liberal education are not quite dead even

in those places that prejudice would assume are most tightly coupled to an agenda of employability and corporate servitude.

Aronowitz does partly recognise this dynamic and I suspect that he might respond to this criticism by simply saying that such critical positions, at least in terms of teaching content, are reserved for a small handful of elite institutions (cf. Aronowitz, 2008: 30) but it does seem to me that this point needs addressing. If capitalism is dependent on the development of critique to provide content for its basic, but ultimately empty, drive toward accumulation for its own sake (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), then the resources of critique and their role within higher education may be more complicated than Aronowitz suggests. This kind of internal tension in HE both complicates the critical functionalist analysis that Aronowitz pursues in this book and opens avenues through which such contradictions might usefully be developed as areas for further academic research and as productive sites for intervention, resistance and struggle.

This last point also raises important questions over the kind of alternative models of education that Aronowitz identifies, but does not analyse in detail, outside of formal schooling. Most significant, to my mind, in his account is the idea of an autonomous sphere of education in the social movements (Aronowitz, 2008: 50, 56-58). His comment that, “[i]n the last instance, the best chance for education resides in the communities, in social movements, and in the kids themselves” (p. 50) is (aside from the slightly patronizing and 1980s evocation of ‘the kids’) unfortunately left almost entirely undeveloped in this book. Indeed, although he implies that institutionalised schooling should play a decreasing role in a more human education, Aronowitz offers little interrogation of the various forms of alternative education that have developed within the new (and even newer) social movements. The strength of the Home Education movements in the UK and USA, whilst often quite conservative (Apple, 2000), offers some interesting examples of quite consciously autonomous models of ‘education otherwise’<sup>1</sup> that are neglected here by Aronowitz. Similarly he ignores developments like the Tent State University model in the USA<sup>2</sup>, popular education collectives like Trapese<sup>3</sup> or experiments around a ‘knowledge commons’, however precarious such initiatives are, such as Wikipedia and even journals like *ephemera*.

Given Aronowitz’s focus on social movement and community education, some kind of critical analysis of these forms of education, which are coterminous with other forms of social action rather than located in discrete ‘alternative’ educational institutions, is needed, as Paul Willis (1977) did in the 1970s, for example. Instead, Aronowitz’s substantive discussion of ‘alternatives’ is restricted to a fairly cursory examination of two theorists of education – Gramsci and Freire – who provide the substantive focus for the last two chapters of the book. Whilst these are interesting and valuable, particularly the chapter on Freire which touches upon the possibility of an emancipatory, humanist education after the post-modern turn in social theory, this lack of empirical examination, and a clear grounding in the political-economy of contemporary capitalism leaves the full potential of a book like this unrealised. Nevertheless, this is an

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1 <http://www.education-otherwise.org/>

2 <http://www.tentstate.com/>

3 <http://trapese.clearerchannel.org/>

interesting and thought provoking read and, alongside the work of writers like Noble (2001), Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), Harvie (2006) and Martin (1998), contributes to the growing leftist critique of corporatized Higher Education in advanced capitalist countries.

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#### the author

Chris Land is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.  
E-mail: cland@essex.ac.uk