

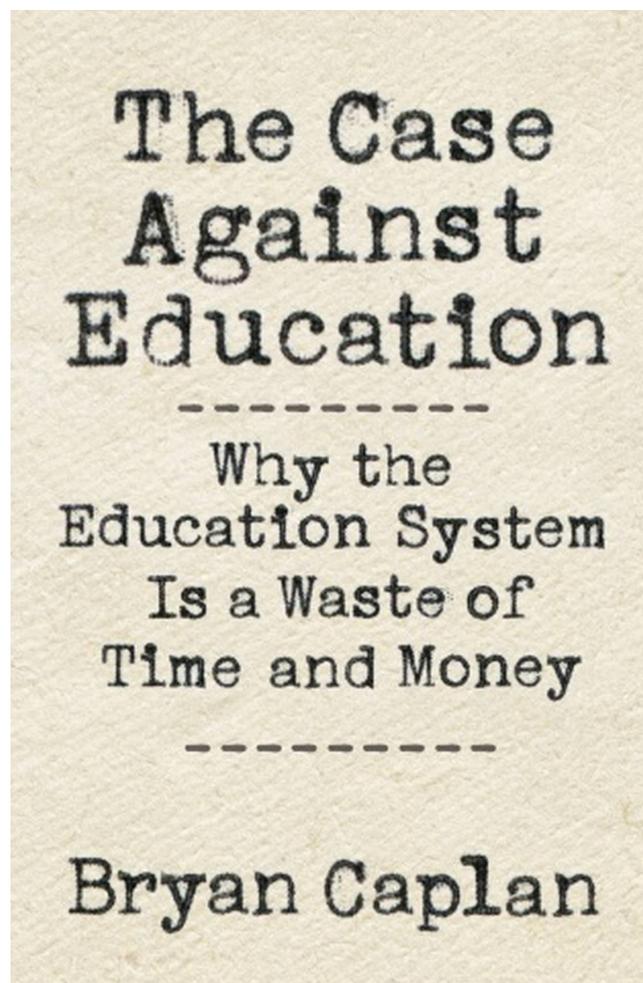
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

The Case Against Education by Bryan Caplan

Reviewed by James Davis



THE CASE AGAINST EDUCATION (PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018)

***The Case Against Education: Why The Education System Is A Waste Of Time And Money* by Bryan Caplan (Princeton University Press, 2018)**

This book's supposedly scandalous claim is that education serves primarily to "signal" certain qualities to employers, not to prepare people for life and work. The qualities that education signals, according to Bryan Caplan, professor of economics at George Mason University, are intelligence, diligence, and conformity. The more years of schooling, the stronger the signal, the more likely someone is to land a well-paying job and have a fulfilling career. Signaling is not the only function of education, Caplan concedes, but it has been drastically understated. "Human capital" proponents have instead advanced the idea that education prepares people for the world of work, that it not only helps them to *get* a job but also to *do* a job. A data whiz, Caplan's contention is that education is eighty percent signaling and only twenty percent human capital development. Pursued over the first several chapters, buttressed by statistics from the General Social Survey, College Board, and Bureau of Labor Statistics, his argument is that students don't learn as much as we'd like to think; what they do learn is irrelevant to their jobs; and colleges and universities – and even high schools – are primarily useful for certifying students' pre-existing qualities, not cultivating them further.

However, the book's genuinely scandalous claim is not that education is primarily about signaling. After all, a similar critique of American education has been formulated by the radical Left, who have long argued that schooling is largely a matter of sorting young people into the laboring or professional-managerial class, their learning an incidental artifact of the sorting procedure. Radical educators already believe, as Caplan ruefully asserts, that schooling is as much about "warehousing" kids so their parents can work, as it is about "enlightenment," so there's no audible gasp for his demonstration. What is breathtaking, rather, is the ease with which *The Case Against Education* equates education with job training, which is also to say, it reduces human beings to workers. We are apparently nothing more and nothing less. It is not enough for Caplan to show how little of what we are taught stays with us or is transferable to other situations, he contends that it doesn't matter anyway because the only truly valuable skills are basic literacy and numeracy. Everything else – from the arguably useful fields of history, science, foreign language, and mathematics to the self-evidently useless fields of fine arts, literature, and social sciences – fails to equip anyone to perform a "real job." That is, unless one seeks to teach these subjects, the likelihood of which is vanishingly small in relation to their prominence in the curriculum.

Sure, a few students enjoy learning a broad, multi-disciplinary academic curriculum, says Caplan, and some will even go on to "use" the skills it imparts, but they are the rare exceptions. And given the vast majority who make no "use" of academic training, indeed given the large number

who resist it and report loathing the experience, why continue to spend so much money – public taxpayer funds and private individual tuition – propping up this credentialing machine? It may improve the incomes of those who get through college; there's no disputing the data on the higher salaries of graduates, the "selfish return" to education. But the "social return" to education, the overall impact of increasing numbers of students enduring an increased number of years in school, is not a net gain in Caplan's view. Amid rampant credential inflation, the response of those who would distinguish themselves – and those demanding distinctions – is simply to move the goalposts further.

It's one thing to diagnose credential inflation and another to cure it. If you believe that there's a social benefit to more people staying in school longer, acquiring more degrees along the way, then credential inflation probably seems like a mild problem – an unfortunate, unintended consequence of the democratization of education. You may not have needed a bachelor's degree in actuarial mathematics to get an entry-level insurance job a generation ago, but well, now you do, and aren't you – and your company – the better for it? However, if you believe, as Caplan does, that there's little benefit and great cost to all this degree accumulation, then credential inflation is a dire, urgent problem. The second half of *The Case Against Education* advises students and parents to be circumspect about investing in a degree and makes the case for cutting government spending on education. Not just cutting, gutting. And not just public higher education, K-12 too. Since education is mostly useless, unless one is a strong student and unless one majors in a "real" subject like engineering or pre-med, Caplan argues, government funding should be slashed at the federal, state, and local level and low-interest student loans replaced by standard market-rate loans. Fewer people will go to college, but that's good policy because it's the only way to put the brakes on credential inflation. So goes the argument, which Caplan calls the doctrine of "separation of school and state."

Two aspects of this odious book may be overlooked even by outraged liberals but will concern radical educators. The argument is intended to provoke, as its title suggests, and Caplan anticipates outrage, but he is also sincere in his policy recommendations, calling himself a "whistle-blower." He feels he's telling an unpopular truth, the only one the data support, even if the American public resists it, afflicted as we are by "Social Desirability Bias." So, it's not enough to dismiss his analyses reflexively as the intellectual underpinnings of the far Right: music to the ears of Grover Norquist, Paul Ryan, and other deregulators. Certainly it is all that, as indicated by Caplan's George Mason University appointment, his affiliation with the Mercatus Project, and his reliance on anti-government arguments from Kenneth Arrow to F.A. Hayek. If you know *Democracy in Chains*, Nancy MacLean's recent history of the free-market fundamentalist economist James Buchanan's crusade to save Americans from their own democratic impulses, you will recognize that economics departments and institutes – and George Mason and the Mercatus Project in particular –

have been intellectual incubators for the policy vision that the Koch brothers fund and their flunkies, like Scott Walker, draft into legislation. Caplan can be derided as a mean libertarian – libertarian he owns, mean he is at pains to disavow – or a shill for the policy wonks pushing the national deregulation agenda. But what radical educators will find more disturbing still are the myopic, even dangerous, assumptions on which Caplan’s argument rests. It’s especially urgent to name these assumptions because the author is an adept rhetorician, dodging and parrying, challenging himself to avoid strawman arguments and go boldly where the data take him.

Aspect one: There is nothing except the market in Caplan’s vision. Not only can every policy decision be made with a cost-benefit analysis, not only can every action and desire be quantified and assigned a dollar value – all hallmarks of utilitarian economic thought – but also, the job market (and only the job market) should dictate our education system. It’s not just that vocational training should be revived and rehabilitated, every kind of education – even the academics we cast as the alternative to vocational training – is cast as vocational training. This agnosticism toward education’s content is troubling because it doesn’t make the case for or against a particular curriculum, it says only that the curriculum should be subordinated in every instance to occupational prospects. If growth sectors are in internet pornography, geriatric nursing, and offshore oil drilling (my examples, not Caplan’s), our obligation is to train people for those fields. We can moralize about their relative virtue, we can quibble that people typically change jobs many times, but what right do we have to subject future job-seekers to (at least) four years of English, three years of History, and two years of a foreign language, to say nothing of other frippery, like art and trigonometry? Who retains any of it? And of what is retained, how much is “used” at work? Precious little, Caplan concludes. So, he urges us to discard the comforting fictions that school teaches useful, transferable skills and that education is socially useful or ennobling to our humanity.

The problem that this narrow construction fails to confront – and it’s an obdurate problem – is that there is more to life than work. But even if life *were* only work, our working selves are more than our productivity and salary, Caplan’s sole measures of value. Can you imagine anyone in any occupation in another country who would content themselves with abysmal ignorance of even the rudimentary history of that country (to say nothing of others), possess little to no familiarity with its system of government (to say nothing of others), speak no language other than that spoken at home? In most countries, these are ordinary expectations, widely realized. In the U.S., however, knowledge is what helps one get a job or keep a job; everything else is expensive window-dressing.

Aspect two: Caplan surveys our country’s “useless” curriculum, lousy teaching, and indifferent students and finds a system that has been far too protected from market considerations. His remedy is to withhold education from a much wider segment of the population and tailor everyone else’s education to the market. These adjustments will make students more interested in learning, he contends, and non-students happier and better compensated, once credential inflation declines. However, one can accept Caplan’s data and reach a different conclusion. It’s not that the education system is insufficiently market-aligned but rather that market fundamentalism is already *so pervasive* that many Americans feel that education is just going through the motions. If students feel that school is basically “useless,” this may not indicate that the curriculum should be more “useful” but that we have accepted the free market doctrine that the only “useful” skills and experiences are those directly convertible into income. So thoroughly have we accepted this doctrine that our students can’t help but internalize it, notwithstanding the fine words we utter about well-rounded citizens, full human beings, or discipline-specific ways of framing the world. In other words, the indifference Caplan identifies may be a symptom not of the failure of free market fundamentalism to influence American education but of its baleful success.

Credential inflation is real. It leads students to resent their time in school and threatens to turn institutions into diploma mills. But a way must be found to address it other than the prescriptions Caplan recommends. If education primarily serves a “signaling” function, as Caplan and the radical Left agree it does, we should recognize the pervasive fear that drives the signalers, especially in the post-industrial era. As occupations are transformed or eliminated, as regular paychecks, healthcare, and retirement benefits are increasingly a luxury, young people signal out of desperation as much as aspiration. We cannot accede to a vision that calls, as Caplan does, for twelve-year-olds to declare their intention either to pursue an academic curriculum, a vocational curriculum, or drop out of school immediately to begin earning income. *The Case Against Education* presents itself as a sober reckoning with inconvenient truths about U.S. education, employing systematic methods to reach unflinching policy proposals. But these methods only make sense if one accepts a set of deeply troubling assumptions that remain unstated and unchallenged in Caplan’s propulsive narrative.



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