Review – The Cult of Smart

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KYLE L. CHONG, MAY 25 2021

The cult of smart: How our broken education system perpetuates social injustice
By Fredrik deBoer
All Points Books, 2020

I am a university instructor and teacher educator and believe my job is fundamentally a political act of humanizing my teaching and supporting my students' learning, grades be damned. I make no claim to speak for my field, political progressives, or American education writ-large. However, my background in political science and my work in education caused me to experience some cognitive dissonance while reading Frederik deBoer's *The cult of smart: How our broken education system perpetuates social injustice*. Reading this text as something of a manifesto, or political text, I think many will be persuaded by the necessity of a radical rethinking of the American social contract and safety net. DeBoer's defense of policies like Medicare for All, universal pre-K, universal basic income, and more, will be compelling to even skeptical readers. I think the book's greatest strength lies in its urging of the Left to seek a consistent vision of a political revolution and rethinking of the American social contract in multiple settings. His critique of the c*ult of smart*, which he defines as an American educational culture in which intelligence is "equated with overall human value" (p.5), forms the crux of the book's argument.

Reading this book as a treatise, or indictment of, American education elicits a different reaction. Readers may share my discomfort(s) with this text *despite* my agreement with its progressive political stances. Progressive readers may feel cauterized by deBoer's labelling of other progressive thought as insufficiently pure, or loyal to a movement that is as fractious and diverse as any other. As a critical teacher educator for whom teaching *is* political, I share Au's (2018) fear in *A Marxist education: Learning to change the world* that "the Left's history and practice of cannibalizing itself, posturing about who is the most radical, and rupturing" (p.6) is unsustainable, especially in a moment where being 'critical' has become a norm (Leonardo, 2013).

DeBoer organizes his book into nine chapters that fall into three strands of argument: 1) critiques of political and economic liberalism (One, Four, Six, and Seven), 2) critiques of educational institutions and culture (Two, Three, and Five), and 3) 'realistic' reforms (Eight and Nine). I organize my review accordingly, with concluding remarks.

Critiques of political and economic liberalism

I am both persuaded and dissuaded by deBoer's arguments that education is deeply intertwined with political and economic liberalism and that to 'fix' education is to trouble liberal capitalistic logic implicit in it. DeBoer's (2020) argument is persuasive because he acknowledges how much educational terminology that sounds egalitarian can, in practice, exacerbate inequity, such as meritocracy (p.60). The book's crux, the *cult of smart*, is most persuasively defended in its critique of 'traditional' intelligence assessments as inefficacious and overpromising to students. Just because a student succeeds in a high-stakes standardized text does not demonstrate their intelligence, but rather their ability to take a test.

However, I am less persuaded by deBoer's claim that the cult of smart is entirely novel or helpful in understanding the landscape and multiple scales of educational inequity. DeBoer writes that "too many liberals… assume that inequality of ability must necessarily mean inequality of human value, dignity, rights, or worth", which causes them to be

inadvertent "defenders of privileges of birth" (p.159). I, for one, cannot think of a single educator or education scholar who believes that every child is genetically or intellectually equal. Nor can I think of an educator who would call intellectual inequality a deficit of human worth.

Unless deBoer's cult of smart is a proxy for credentialism or tracking (see Schneider, 2011), I read the term as somewhat exaggerated because it, perhaps unintentionally, marginalizes the role of the teacher and the curriculum in favor of the more abstract scale of 'education.' Reframing deBoer's claim about intellectual ability as a determiner of human value in an asset-affirming lens would be to argue that students all have different kinds of intelligence. Rather, deBoer, calls students with different kinds of intelligence "untalented, those unfortunate enough to lack a natural aptitude for school" (p.62). DeBoer is clearly addressing an audience concerned with the politics of smartness, but I would still caution readers that deficit-conceptualizations of students yield deficit and damage-centered classroom practices and educational policies (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). DeBoer's critiques of liberalism are well known and shared in education research, but to wrap these critiques up in a 'cult' of smart seems condescending both to the students who already feel subordinated by white-centered and harmful teaching practices and curriculum; and to communities who already feel disenfranchised by the onslaught of the curricular, psychic, and physical violence that students of Color endure in schools (Love, 2016, 2019).

Critiques of educational institutions and culture

Further, deBoer's argument is undercut by its misappropriation of American education to suit the critiques of liberal capitalist inequality; and the book's blurring of the different 'scales' of educational research, such as teaching, schooling, and education is problematic. To not differentiate, as would be expected in education research, between teaching (teachers and pedagogy), from schooling (curriculum), and education (learning, students, and policy), obscures the precise location(s) at which schooling becomes dehumanizing or violent. For example, in critiquing disparities of student achievement, deBoer relies on genetics, rather than engaging how schools themselves operate.

DeBoer's emphatic distaste for neoliberal logic's creep into education is evident in his critiques of credentialism, deficit-language (i.e., gaps), and charter schools. However, the logical inconsistency in his seeming desire to make college free and disassociated with the social elite, he simultaneously, and repeatedly, argues that some people simply do not have the "aptitude and desire" (p.190) to attend university. The ironic presence of deficit-language throughout the book is an example of the cognitive dissonance I experienced as a reader. From a purely political perspective, certainly government should not wastefully spend on public universities that do not confer similar competitive advantage to students or faculty of their private peer-institutions, especially if it means diminishing the social capital of university enterprises led by the nation's leading political donors. Yet, politics does not function in a vacuum of dollars and cents, and my willingness to engage with deBoer's desired political outcomes was met with skepticism for how he argues for them.

Most problematic was deBoer's seeming disinterest with the human-caused exacerbation of socioeconomic inequity that paints a dismissive picture of teachers who, too often, absorb the responsibility to reduce harm enacted on students in schools. Instead, deBoer's argument seemed to rest on a 'genius-is-genetic' argument that stumbled into circumnavigating accusations of [pseudo]scientific racism. Beyond his unqualified discussion of race realism (which, in Critical Race Theory, refers to the ordinary, everyday, and endemic nature of racism in American life), deBoer writes that "the difference between *individual* students is largely genetic while the difference between racial *groups* is not… Given that genetics play an undeniably large role in human outcomes, this is a failure of political strategy as well as an intellectual mistake" (p.111). While deBoer clearly opposes [pseudo]scientific racism, other concerns emerge.

DeBoer fairly clearly rejects racist sorting of groups by intelligence. Yet, his seeming unwillingness to acknowledge the role social constructs like race and urban policy have in imprinting intergenerational physiological, in *addition* to psychological, trauma on communities of Color is troubling (e.g., Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Love, 2016, 2019). While deBoer does not attend to racism in great detail, instead choosing the language of "social injustice" (p.163), he embraces the edginess of critical 'social justice' work. However, he risks unintentionally reinforcing racially-biased tropes of student achievement through ambiguous explanations of educational inequity grounded in broad assumptions about student achievement, such as the book's claim that genetics and racism do not mutually influence

each other.

Instead deBoer repeatedly refers one's less 'desirable' genetics an "accident of birth" (p.153), a problematic claim for two reasons. Consider, for example, the criminally disproportionate affects COVID-19 had on Black and Indigenous communities, or how concentrating Black residents in West Oakland, CA, are significantly likelier to suffer from asthma, stroke, and heart failure due to their prolonged exposure to emissions caused by their proximity to the Port of Oakland, and a major Postal Service facility (EDF, 2021). I doubt that these disparities are entirely caused in a vacuum where racism is absent.

An accident of birth further implies that deficits are a failure of the student, without acknowledging the physiological imprint of racist urban policies like redlining and segregation. As a result, 'accidents,' both good and bad, can be banished to 'alternative' forms of schooling or 'underperforming' urban schools, rather than a societal failure to reckon with the endemic normalcy of white supremacist ideology in American life (Bell, 1991). While deBoer is critical of standardized testing and intelligence as an "existential" (p.203) measurement, he seems to not extend this critique to the narrow definition of intelligence itself. I prefer to see focus on students' assets and the school system's educational and civic debts, rather than belittle them with deficit and damage-centered language that has plagued the American education system (see Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lo, 2019, Moll et al., 1992).

'Realistic' reforms

The concluding chapters of deBoer's book are the most persuasive to me, partly because I was no longer reading this book as a text aimed at education or a prescription for an ailing American educational system, but rather as a manifesto articulating a political vision. I agree with the political vision deBoer advocates for: Medicare for All, universal basic income, a federal jobs guarantee, and cancelling student debt. All are smart fiscal policy that expand the social safety net shown to be lacking during COVID-19. As an education researcher, I am also persuaded by arguments in favor of universal pre-K and tuition-free college; and arguments against state curricular standards' restrictiveness, and charter schools. These are all policies that have been long advocated for by educators and education researchers. Yet, in the previous eight chapters, deBoer seems to argue that only the 'naturally talented' should go to college in the first place but, inconsistently, that space should be made for all to go to college for free – suggesting that education was perhaps always a pretense.

Yet, I am not willing to let education, long dreamt of as a public good, to be used as a cudgel or a strawman; let alone a cause, or panacea, of American society's inequities and injustices. Readers may share my concern that this instrumentalization of education unnecessarily disparages teachers and sympathetic readers, who may share deBoer's Leftist politics, through his use of rhetoric that calls political disagreement logical "mistakes," "errors," and "wrong" thinking.

Conclusion

This is a curious book. On the one hand it is useful, especially to budding progressives, and those looking to expand the breadth of possibilities in what education can look like. It is a text that, when seen as a manifesto, articulates a grand vision of a progressive American politics freed from the constraints of credentialism, tracking, and capitalist competitive advantage. However, deBoer's book presents relatively few novel arguments about education reform, and flirts with reducing and instrumentalizing education to a passive industry, whilst embracing an uncritical view of genetic inequality, deficit-frameworks, and polemical rhetoric that appears to gatekeep 'pure Leftism.' Despite my agreement with his larger political vision and my reading of this book as a political manifesto, my commitments as an education researcher won out in my reading of this text. Education is flawed, yes, but the visceral feelings of being cannibalized as a friendly reader of this book may leave others unsettled and alienated.

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