

〈Essay〉

An Essay on Education and Politics

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Since public education is established and sustained by the state, it is inevitably shaped by political forces. In particular, compulsory education can hardly possess any purpose other than the formation of “citizens.” This immediately raises a prior question: What, in the first place, is the state, and what is meant by politics?

In any case, when one surveys the history of Western education from ancient Greece onward, it is evident that education, politics, and the state have always been closely interlinked. Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* exemplify this intimate connection.

Just as politics is grounded in *power*—the capacity to govern, direct, and transform people by various forms of authority—education likewise cannot be conceived apart from the power to move and reshape the “child.” Politics and education, or education and politics, share the same root.

Although this power appears to have become considerably “softer” in recent years—as suggested by the national curriculum—many people today, particularly in Japan under neoliberal and global conditions, are in fact obediently domesticated. It is no exaggeration to say that they have been tamed—like livestock or pets that willingly enter their own cages. The modern school is a soft cage, a soft prison.

Education can be examined from a microscopic perspective—this child, this lesson—as in lesson studies or subject-matter pedagogy; and it can also be examined from a macroscopic perspective, as in educational sociology, history, or philosophy, which consider education and society within the broader context of nation-states, global economies, and the conditions under which human beings must “live.” However, education as a discipline is no exception to the trend of fragmentation. Few educators or scholars possess an integrated understanding that connects the micro and the macro. Each is immersed in a specialized domain, working under the ungrounded assumption that the individual efforts of specialists will somehow harmoniously converge into “better education.” Yet the results are plain to see: educational problems never decrease, but only multiply, deepening the general confusion.

As I will touch on later, to be precise, “bullshit problems” are continually and deliberately manufactured, only to be absorbed and enlarged by capitalism as mechanisms for profit-making. This is a defining characteristic of contemporary society.

In what follows, I will examine the relationship between education and politics, clarify the nature of the current national curriculum, and consider what kind of mindset and posture students preparing for the teaching profession should adopt as they engage in the “labor” of teaching.

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Before proceeding further, it is useful to briefly review the educational theories of Plato and Aristotle. Although their conception of the “state” differs greatly from that of the modern world, both thinkers approached education and the structure of society as inseparable issues.

In Plato’s case, the well-known tripartite theory of the soul divides the human being into three hierarchical faculties: reason, spiritedness, and desire. According to Plato, the highest faculty—reason, embodied by the philosopher—ought to rule over the warriors, who correspond to spiritedness, and over the common people and slaves, who embody desire. The soul (*anima or psychē*) functions as the life-principle within each individual, and these three

elements constitute our internal powers. Most people are driven primarily by their desires; they do not listen to reason, and even their spiritedness or will is easily swayed by appetite. The ideal human being is one in whom head, heart, and body are harmoniously integrated under the guidance of reason, practicing moderation and self-control. Plato proposes an educational curriculum aimed precisely at cultivating such persons in the *Republic*.

Aristotle's view is similar, though distinct. While Plato places heavy emphasis on reason and holds that *theōria*—contemplation of the realm of Forms—is the highest vocation of the free person and philosopher, Aristotle, while sympathetic to this, pays far closer attention to the diversity of actual human beings and the question of what forms of education might be preferable in concrete circumstances. In the *Politics*, he develops a sustained argument grounded in empirical observation: people differ in lifestyle, social class, habits of thought, and expectations regarding education—some expect a great deal from it, others very little.

It was Aristotle who argued that human beings are shaped by three factors: natural disposition (*physis*), habit or acquired character (*hexis*), and reason (*logos*). To claim simply that human beings can be changed into anything through education is, however, a distortion of what Aristotle meant and is in fact unrealistic. One's inborn nature cannot be transformed. Education should assist the natural unfolding of whatever good dispositions an individual already possesses. Educational techniques and external interventions must support the natural development of one's better capacities; to attempt to cultivate what a person does not originally possess, or to impose abilities foreign to his or her nature, ultimately results only in suffering for the individual.

In contrast, the prevailing stance in modern education assumes that all people are equal and that their abilities and capacities can be developed into almost anything through schooling. Guided by this illusion—or at least this normative fiction—public education and the national curriculum have been constructed. But what, in reality, is happening?

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Pierre Bourdieu famously argued that a person's life trajectory is determined not only by innate talent but also by three major forms of capital:

- (1) **economic capital**—whether one is born into wealth or poverty;
- (2) **cultural capital**—the extent to which one's home contains books and other objectified cultural goods; and
- (3) **social capital**—the networks, connections, and relationships one can draw upon.

These factors, he argued, largely predetermine a person's prospects long before individual effort comes into play. In contemporary society, these forms of capital have become increasingly consolidated into rigid class structures. The fact that economic inequality correlates strongly with disparities in motivation, educational opportunity, and academic achievement has already been well documented.

Within compulsory schooling—especially in public schools operating under the national curriculum—the emptiness of proclaiming that “all children are equal” and that education can “develop any ability to any extent” is evident to almost everyone, even if it cannot be publicly acknowledged. Setting aside the rhetoric of so-called “leftist” groups who invoke egalitarian slogans, a sober look at present-day Japan reveals a society steadily taking on the characteristics of a class system.

Under the new “competency-based” educational discourse, which champions abstract and idealistic slogans such as “learning to learn” and cultivating the “zest for life,” neoliberalism quietly asserts its logic: one rises or falls by individual responsibility. Even the “failure to learn” must be recognized as a form of agency. As a result, Japan has found itself declining within global competition and increasingly dependent on large numbers of foreign workers—a development that crept in almost unnoticed.

Within such circumstances, only children from “advantaged” families—those with strong academic foundations built through parental involvement, tutoring, and enrichment—are in a position to speak meaningfully about the shift “from teaching to learning.” The so-called “relaxed education” (*yutori kyōiku*) is feasible only for children from households that themselves possess *yutori*—economic, cultural, and temporal surplus. The rest inevitably become children and adolescents who develop little capacity for sustained thought, responding only to sensory stimulation, immersed from early childhood in smartphones and video games, exercising a form of “agency” that consists in learning nothing at all. These, in turn, grow into adults formed by the same pattern.

Yet this may in fact be precisely what certain elites desire: the emergence of a new global class society in which a small wealthy minority dominates an increasingly uneducated and manipulable majority. The true irony lies in the possibility that the national curriculum—with its dreamlike rhetoric of self-directed learning—may itself be contributing to, and accelerating, the construction of this new class order on a planetary scale.

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Even so, as noted at the outset, those who are deeply devoted to education often lack a macro-level perspective and therefore take pride—operating solely from a microscopic vantage point—in believing that they are earnestly concerned about children’s future and contributing to the creation of a “wonderful” national curriculum. This may be a common tendency among teachers: a kind of faith that they themselves always act for the sake of children and that education, by its very nature, is good. Yet such educational faith deserves to be reconsidered.

In a world where idealistic slogans circulate with ease and where, behind the scenes, educators and institutions quietly seek to outmaneuver others, school education increasingly appears—at least from the perspective of the general public—to function as a training ground for cunning adults. And this, perhaps, cannot be helped. Public education is, after all, an instrument of the state. The school is a site of citizen formation governed by a state that prioritizes economic imperatives above all else. The children who attend such schools and the teachers who work in them alike are people who must live within the state; this condition binds both. If one dislikes this reality, the only option is to relocate to a place better suited to one’s own convictions.

Education and politics: how do they collaborate, to what ends, and what do we gain—or lose—from their entanglement? Ultimately, what kind of life and what kind of society do we wish to pursue? Those aiming to enter the teaching profession would do well to reflect on these questions now. Whether one becomes a slave of the profession, or instead assumes the guise of a “slave” while remaining the author of one’s own life, depends on this very self-awareness.