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John Marsh. Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way out of Inequality

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Book Reviews

John Marsh. *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way out of Inequality*. New York: NYU Press, 2011. 255 p. ISBN 978-1583672433. \$19.95

There is an old aphorism—commonly attributed to Mark Twain, though there is little evidence he ever wrote or said such a thing—that what is dangerous to us is not what we do not know, but that which we think we know that just is not so. We might also say, from a societal perspective, that our deepest problems are not the great political disputes that periodically erupt in our media, but precisely those issues that do not produce debate. Beneath that placid exterior can lurk deep problems. It is just that sort of unspoken issue that John Marsh considers in *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality*. Despite broad political consensus that education is the key to solving our labor woes, Marsh argues, we in fact cannot expect more or better education to fix our economy.

Marsh, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, makes a comprehensive and persuasive case that, despite political orthodoxy to the contrary, education is not a reliable weapon against economic woes like income inequality or poverty. Early in the text, he lays his thesis out succinctly: “I conclude that education bears far too much of the burden of our hopes for economic justice, and, moreover, that we ask education to accomplish things it simply cannot accomplish” (p. 18). Over the course of his text, Marsh marshals two kinds of evidence to support this view: an empirical case made with quantitative economic and educational data, and a historical case made with archival and historical evidence. In the former, he endeavors to demonstrate that there is no simple causal relationship between rising levels of education and a decline in poverty or inequality. In the latter, he asks where the pervasive notion of education as economic savior comes from. Both are conducted rigorously and convincingly.

Marsh’s careful aggregation and explanation of the relevant data could serve as a model of responsible empirical work concerning large-scale economic questions. Using a series of charts and graphs, Marsh utilizes data from a wide variety of reputable sources to demonstrate that there is no consistent relationship between a more educated populace and a more economically equal country. In the last several decades, America has nearly tripled its total education level in terms of number of undergraduate and graduate degrees. At the same time, our poverty rate has not significantly declined, while the Gini coefficient, the gold standard of metrics of income inequality, has exploded. As Marsh writes, “investments in education have not always had the dynamic effect on economic growth that many economists and certainly most newspaper columnists would like to believe.... [E]ven if investments in education had an obvious and positive effect on economic growth, in the last few decades most Americans have not shared in that growth” (p. 177). If this case is as clear

as Marsh makes it, why have politicians and writers been so insistent about the use of education as an economic savior? Here, Marsh' s historical case is instructive. He argues that the decline of redistributive liberalism, in post-Reagan America, has led to the overestimation of education as a means to achieve economic justice out of necessity. With social programs like those of the New Deal and the Great Society out of favor, many advocate for education as an economic salve due to a lack of better options.

College educators might be disturbed by the consequences of Marsh' s argument. In post-recession America, public universities the country over still struggle to secure funding from their state governments, even with the economy on the upswing. An argument about the irrelevance of education to fighting inequality might be seen as simply reducing our ability to argue for the value of college in a time of great vulnerability for the academy. But one of the more counterintuitive points Marsh makes, and one of the most important, is that attending college still makes strong economic sense—for individuals. As Marsh writes, “it remains the case in the United States today that if someone wants to make a living wage, if she wants her family to not live in or on the edge of poverty, she had better go to college” (p. 209). Marsh' s evidence makes a clear case that those who graduate from college have better economic outcomes than those who do not. So what is the problem? The problem is that, in a country where only about a third of adults have a college degree, this relative advantage actually exacerbates inequality rather than shrinks it. College can take individuals and move them into a better income stratum, but in so doing it simply leaves more people behind.

Rather than advocating for the roundabout methods of increased access for college as a means to fight poverty and inequality, Marsh calls for the more direct method of the establishment of a universal living wage. After all, since educational outcomes are so strongly correlated with income, we might as well try a brute force approach—and end up with greater financial security for the poor besides. Marsh' s proposal for this living wage is, I should mention, frustratingly vague; there are many various proposals for guaranteed minimum incomes and minimum basic incomes and negative income taxes, etc., and the differences are vitally important. This is a particularly glaring failing given that Marsh' s economic base is so careful, thorough, and evidence-based. What is more, as radical as Marsh' s preferred policies may seem to some, in a sense they are not radical enough, given the problems he outlines. Marsh' s argument is comprehensively critical of the wisdom and justice of the American economic system. His proposed solutions seem insufficient to the task of fixing it.

But Marsh' s purpose in *Class Dismissed* is not to propose an entire economics platform. Rather, he endeavors to expose the empirical failings of a ubiquitous assumption about the relationship between education and the health of our economy. In that, he makes a

comprehensive and convincing case—one that should be heeded both within the academy and without.

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