

Review of

What's Left of the World: Education, Identity and the Post-Work Political Imagination

By David J. Blacker, Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2019

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David Blacker's *What's Left of the World* arrives at once too early and too late. He is hardly unaware of this predicament, as it is the space within which he must operate—as a critic and educational philosopher—to proceed with the analysis this book relies on and the task it sets out. Blacker's diagnosis of contemporary educational thought and practice, already elaborated in detail in his excellent *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame* (2013), makes clear that educational critique and philosophy are welded to a social practice that is running out of steam. The purposes and means of (broadly speaking) public education are wearing thin and our present historical moment therefore obviates educational thought which might redeem, improve, or even critique mass educational practice. The hole in the underside of this sinking ship, though, has yet to be noticed or acknowledged by many of those who sail in it, which means that Blacker is in the unenviable position of making himself walk the plank. How society might change to adapt to educational collapse, and what models of education might be developed within such a society are, for Blacker, in (or perhaps even beyond) the realms of the imagination. We are too late to bother with developing educational thought for our current dominant practices, too early to propose or work with proposals of not-yet-viable alternatives.

The critical slant that Blacker takes on contemporary educational thought, practice, and politics—which was the subject of his previous book—is at once compelling and convincing, even if it might be seen in many ways as pessimistic. The task of his new book, *What's Left of the World*, is to build on this earlier critique and lean towards more hopeful proposals for where educational and political thought can be productively developed. To be able to situate this more optimistic thought, Blacker deploys the wrecking ball he used so successfully on the education system in *The Falling Rate of Learning* to a broader socio-political context. Such a move makes sense because the context within which new social and educational practices might arise will not likely be (at least for Blacker) grounded in models inherited from contemporary education and will, therefore, be substantially reliant on other social phenomena. The “post-work political imagination,” as Blacker identifies, is clearly a context within which educational thought might be productively employed, not least because the reality of a post-work society seems to be edging closer, and the effects this has on the “purposes” of contemporary education are stark, especially where the latter justifies itself through its contribution to an individual's employability.

Blacker's engagement with the problem and opportunity of a post-work society, though, takes a back seat to a more timely critique of “identity politics.” Writing in an accessible, almost journalistic style, he

imbues his critique with theoretical and philosophical insights from Zygmunt Bauman, Mark Fisher, G.W.F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Antonio Gramsci, and a liberal (by his own admission) reading and application of Friedrich Nietzsche. While highly readable and often thought-provoking, this object of critique ultimately comes across, at best, as something of a red herring. It is true that concerns relating to what could broadly be called “identity politics” occupy a significant amount of time and effort from those on the left: time and effort that could possibly be directed towards other valuable ends, which might annoy and fuel reactionaries less. Leaving aside the obvious tangible gains made by these forms of activism for oppressed and/or minority groups, given the rise of nationalism and the electoral apathy of many citizens (the vast majority of the populations of the USA or UK, for example, are not engaged in any activism, and over 30% of eligible voters did not even vote in the last two major elections of those countries), these activists of various stripes might rather be seen by Blacker as some of the best allies for a desirable political future rather than its enemies. While many activists are, of course, engaged with specific defects and injustices in the contemporary situation, this does not mean that they do not, like Blacker, also have a constructive vision of a better future.

The decidedly literate and often in-and-of-itself impressive application of philosophical understanding to the problem of individualisation that Blacker offers is undermined by its abstraction from actual arguments made by, for example, antifascists, antiracists, and trans activists. Relying heavily on the sociological lens that Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity” provides, Blacker is too quick to treat his objects of critique as social phenomena, rather than as social actors with arguments worthy of thoughtful consideration. As well as being a red herring, then, “identity politics” also perhaps ends up being something of a straw man, used to justify the broader social analysis of the move towards “identitarianism” that Blacker provides. At worst, Blacker’s reference to “[r]efugee hordes from Syraquistan” (34), his lumping together of the “alt-right/alt light vs. antifa/identitarians” as “of course mutually contemptible” (108), and his generalising dismissal of what he calls “leftist denunciations and shaming” (114), could be understood as strikingly reactionary. To offset this perception, Blacker could have given some time to considering why these various descriptions, positions, or critiques are understood as problematic from the perspectives he dismisses. Effectively, what this near book-long critique of “identity politics” boils down to is that the left is falling prey to an ideology of identitarianism, itself a symptom of our broader cultural moment, which takes up the thinking and acting space that would be required for a more holistic (for Blacker, ecological) vision of the future. Unfortunately, as Blacker does not engage or take seriously any of the numerous highly articulate proponents of the positions he critiques (Haider 2018; Stryker 2017; Bray 2017), this argument—unlike his more direct educational critique—is neither compelling nor convincing.

Even if supposedly “identitarian” activists are symptomatic of a broader cultural problem—and, of course, not the problems they themselves describe and direct their energies towards—it seems unfairly dismissive and logically problematic to suggest that “they” (in all their plurality) are not themselves concerned with “world-building,” even if theirs relies on different emphases than the one Blacker assumes we should be moving towards. For Blacker, though, the individualism and group identification exhibited by cultural and political “identitarianism” is itself an obstruction to the specific political future that he hopefully imagines, the political future that he “identifies” with (184–185). The ethos to be associated with this future is expounded in the final—and by far the shortest—chapter of *What’s Left of the World*. At the core of this ethos is what Blacker calls “the Nietzschean extrapolation” (really much more Blackerian than Nietzschean; see 140), based around “the idea that not only people *like me* (tribe, soul,

humanity) count and are worthy of moral consideration, but also nonhuman sentient beings and, ultimately certain inorganic entities” (189). The first component of this clearly plays a large part in the majority of supposedly “identitarian” activism, not least that of Antifa, whom Blacker finds as contemptible as the alt-right. While Blacker goes on to emphasise the latter, more broadly ecological, component of this “extrapolation,” primarily via James Lovelock’s “Gaia hypothesis,” the irony that work of the condemned “identitarians” (notably those of an antifascist tendency) goes a long way towards developing the former is not considered.

Blacker spends much of *What’s Left of the World* doing a lot of philosophical work to dismiss (usually left-wing) “identitarianism” so that he can clear the ground for a presentation of an ecologically grounded ethos that could take its place, both culturally and politically. But the complexity of identity, and the complexity of its politics, cannot be superseded by ecologically oriented concerns in this way without the risk of ecofascism. This risk is allayed by doing the exact opposite of what Blacker has done in this book: by understanding that “identity politics” should not be held up in opposition to ecological politics. As Blacker’s “Nietzschean extrapolation” itself suggests, and despite the efforts he expends in attacking and dismissing “leftist” identitarian concerns, the two are by no means mutually exclusive. It is hardly news to suggest that globalised state capitalism is the dominant and persistent threat to both equality and the environment. In these terms, *What’s Left of the World* is a misfire and possibly even a backfire because it sees enemies where it might find allies.

While Blacker is unlikely to avoid alienating a significant portion of his potential readership—and it is even less likely that he will care—this book will appeal to those who share Blacker’s critique of the left, as well as those who might be able to look past those engagements towards the more ecologically focused aspect of his argument. Covering so many issues relevant to contemporary politics, as well as the future of the planet, *What’s Left of the World* could even find itself becoming a touchstone text for future theoretical educational research, even if its usefulness could in some instances be as a critical foil for its readers.

References

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About the Author

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