

2005 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

CHAYANOV'S RULE AND SCHOOL REFORM

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Alexander V. Chayanov was a Russian economist and rural sociologist killed in Stalin's purges around 1938. He authored a theory of peasant economy that was quite influential in Western economic anthropology since translation of his major work in 1966.¹ Marshall Sahlins successfully used his theory in *Stone Age Economics* and introduced "Chayanov's rule": "In the community of domestic producing groups, the greater the relative working capacity of the household the less its members work."² Peasant societies have certain level of standard consumption determined by what a family with the lowest worker/consumer ratio can attain. In other words, a peasant family will work harder if they have many small children to feed, but when these children grow up and begin to participate in production, the economic activity of the household will taper off, even though the opportunity for creating and accumulating more wealth will be unused. There are intrinsic limits to economic growth that have to do with social and political pressures of an egalitarian society, but also with what Chayanov calls the equilibrium between drudgery and utility. The latter is best explained by Durrenberger and Tannenbaum as "the balance between what people would like to have versus the difficulty of the labor entailed in achieving these consumption goals."³ Because peasants exploit their own labor, cutting back on work is economically more advantageous than receiving benefits from working beyond the minimum required to sustain a traditional level of consumption. From the classical economic point of view, such a behavior looks irrational. Russian and later Soviet officials were frustrated by the peasants' inability to participate in intensification of agriculture, required by the country's rapid industrialization. Chayanov's theory was an attempt to look beyond the frustration. Not unique to Russia, the situation of resistant underdevelopment is common throughout the Third World countries. It prompted development of economic anthropology and economic sociology—disciplines that strive to understand the aberrations, the economic relationships outside of classical economic theory's framework. One of the major attractions of Chayanov's theory, as well as of the whole field of economic anthropology, is an ability to explain behaviors that look "irrational" from the point of view of standard economics. I use the spirit of this approach (but not its letter) to explain why students often do not demonstrate the expected level of effort. The explanation shows some of the limits of the contemporary school reforming.

The contemporary school reform is an attempt to intensify the learning labor of students. The learning labor is defined here as all learning activities directed by teachers in and out of the school proper, as all things students must do as students (listening to lectures, completing work sheets, solving problems,

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writing essays, doing homework, etc.). I have provided justifications for such an interpretation elsewhere;⁴ for now, let us consider the notion of learning labor to be a starting point for the following discussion.

Like any other labor, the learning labor can have various levels of productivity. The same expenditure of effort can bring various levels of

educational results. The traditionalism-progressivism debate is largely a disagreement on which forms of student labor are more efficient; the question of how to measure effectiveness is even more important. It becomes more and more clear that a variety of labor forms, both traditionalist and progressivist, must be used to ensure the most productive mix. The debate aside, one must note that no major educational discoveries have been introduced in the last century. The well-known forms of learning have been improved and augmented by computer-based technologies, but the productivity of learning labor cannot be raised significantly. In contrast with rapidly developed technologies of manufacturing, learning still involves large quantities of frustratingly ineffective drudgery. The reasons for that are not accidental, and they cannot be overcome by a theoretical breakthrough of some sort. The limits of learning labor's productivity are determined by its very nature. Simply put, if no effort is made, the learning labor is not productive. The drudgery itself (the effort, the expenditure of strength) is the major productive component of students' labor. Two main strategies account for lion's share of productivity gains outside of education: division of labor (or in general, effective organization) and mechanization of work processes. Neither of the two strategies can easily be used in learning, because they both contradict the purpose of learning. By necessity, we cannot ask half of the students to learn multiplication, and the other half – long divisions. We disallow simple copying and pasting materials from the Internet, because such an exercise does not add any learning value to students' schoolwork. Paradoxically, learning is a form of labor that will always remain ineffective. In this respect, learning is like exercising: no one can do it for you, and a car ride will not substitute jogging. The thrust of the school reform efforts of the past 25 years was directed at making student labor more intensive and more extensive, not more effective. It is no longer a matter of choosing between more experiential and more traditional forms of learning, for the methods matter less than most educational scholars are willing to admit. The federal government for example, rightly got out of the business of prescribing teaching methods and is content with controlling the outcomes. The idea is to increase length and intensity of schoolwork and homework. Therefore, the problem of schooling is that of motivation, not organization, and not of teaching. The task here is therefore to understand what motivates students to perform labor demanded of them, and how these factors can interfere with the task of overall intensification of such labor. Two assumptions will guide this discussion: (1) The standard economic theories (such as human capital theory) fail to account for numerous instances of student behavior, and

should therefore be replaced by economic anthropological frameworks, and (2) the intensity of learning labor is guided mainly by each individual school's cultural and economic properties rather than by large-scale class and race conflicts, as critical theorists would like us to believe. Both of these assumptions need systematic explication that will be undertaken outside of this paper. My only aim is to demonstrate how a certain form of theorizing is plausible, not that it is accurate.

From an economic point of view, learning labor is a form of taxation, not unlike those methods widely used in pre-industrial societies. Examples of labor taxation include mobilization of free labor for building roads, pyramids, the Great Wall of China, etc. The socialist economies have been using labor taxation extensively with more or less drastic enforcement measures, but in capitalist industrial societies, monetary taxation is the norm. One notable exception is the learning labor of students. The students are asked to perform much work,

ostensibly for their own benefit. Yet the methods of extraction (compulsory education) and the method of remuneration (social approval, credentials, etc.) clearly place the learning labor in the category of taxation. In fact, the contradiction between the stated goals and the forms of organization reveals the profound ambivalence of schooling. Conventions of economic analysis compel me to ignore the rhetoric, and concentrate on the objective characteristics of school labor. From an economic standpoint, learning is a tax collected as compulsory labor. Like any compulsory labor, it suffers from subtle sabotage of laborers.

Schools are the institution designed to extract the labor from students. Like any other form of taxation, the learning labor benefits the society at large. One important difference is this: other labor taxes deposit value in a concrete physical object such as a road or bridge or a temple. In the case of learning labor, the depository of value (skills and knowledge) is the student herself. Hardly anyone will dispute that the total sum of all skills and knowledge deposited in individual students and workers is a public good, yet it is a special public good, stashed away in millions of pieces controlled to a certain extent by individuals. It is important to remember that the individuals cannot make the value of their education beneficial to them without entering into the labor market. Education is a public good that is stored by individuals, yet it can only reveal its true value in the public sphere. The laborer sells his labor power to the employer, not the actual value of his labor. Part of the labor power is the skills and knowledge manufactured by the laborer during his years of unpaid labor as a student. Of course, teachers have contributed to creation of this value, but the student himself has contributed the most. The Human Capital Theory assumes that the laborer receives a fair compensation for his previous work as a student, but very simple calculations suggest this is not true. If education benefited only students as individuals, the institution of compulsory education would have never arisen.

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Learning labor also benefits individual students differentially; that is, more intensive labor must produce greater economic rewards in the future. Working as hard as one can would be the most obvious choice, and anything else will appear to be irrational. Faced with the obvious fact that many if not most students clearly do not work at maximum capacity, educational theorists speculate about immaturity or the pressure from poor learning conditions or social background of schooling. Yet all these explanations lack plausibility. Surely, the cognitive abilities of even first-graders allow to make the perfectly rational choices. Surely, even in poor schools students could apply much more effort, should they calculate the benefits of education. Surely, all students understand the self-defeating side of political resistance. My claim is that a powerful economic and social mechanism insures students' underperformance, a mechanism similar to that described by Chayanov and Sahlins. Many schools are enclaves of non-capitalist economies, in which students make rational choices. We need to understand the rules of their economies, which cannot be done in the space of one paper. The method used below is that of theoretical case-study. I am not claiming that the school and its players are typical; I only claim that they are plausible.

Let us now examine the West Side school as a theoretical case. It has developed the customary rate of labor (CRL), a common understanding of how much work a student owes to a teacher. The rate is not a matter of individual preference, but is rather an unspoken social contract. The rate includes not only the number of written assignments, or the amount of homework, but also, and more importantly, the ratio of on-task versus off-task time in classroom. The

more goofing around is going on, the less is actual on-task time, and the lower is the CRL.

The CRL is differentiated according to which subject we are looking at, and how well a student wants to do in class. For example, a passable grade in math may not imply the same amount of work as an A in art class. So we are dealing here with a number of interrelated rates. A sudden increase of the rate in what has been a traditional less labor-intensive class may have a ripple effect on the overall average rate. For example, if a music teacher is able to extract five hours of homework a week, plus 90% on-task time in classroom, this may trigger an unreasonably high expectations from the Math or English teachers, because their status demands having higher rates than in music.

The CRL is also differentiated by ability. Everyone is perfectly aware of differences in individual students' ability to perform work. The CRL is determined by how much work a less able but diligent student can perform to achieve a high grade in the class. The higher ability students will reduce their own labor expenditures to maintain the CRL, even if that means they are not operating at full capacity.

Any attempts to increase the CRL, for example, by a new teacher, will be met with active or passive resistance by both students and other teachers. The arsenal of methods is wide and flexible: from refusal to do homework to disciplinary disruptions, from signs of disrespect to administrative pressures. But students are also discouraging each other from upgrading their effort. The mechanism is quite simple here: each individual contribution of labor is a part of collective contribution to keep teachers relatively happy and grades relatively high. So it is commonly expected that everyone will contribute something. Everyone has a stake at maintaining the CRL. Below is a sample of school members and their basic strategies with respect to the customary labor rate.

1. Meet Joe, a popular and successful science teacher. Like a Melanesian Big Man, he has achieved a high social status by a skillful use of generosity in the context of reciprocity. He has bestowed a number of favors, gifts, and privileges on many students and some teachers. He visibly spends more time on preparing entertaining lessons than anyone else, thus reducing the drudgery factor for students. He helps with advice, lends an attentive ear, cares about students' personal lives, gets them out of trouble, and negotiates conflicts. Joe applies for grants, and brings additional resources to the science department. He has a number of student followers involved in the science club, whose successes were covered in a local paper. These and other activities have gradually created a sense of obligation, converted to generalized high regard. Students do not remember any more what specific favor each of them received from Joe; rather, they perceive his status in a holistic manner; Joe is someone to be respected. The student contribution of labor in his classes is the highest in the entire school; it is more than just a generic labor tax, but takes a meaning of personal tribute to Joe. Sahlins has demonstrated how Big Man figures can generate additional labor beyond what is expected by the Chayanov's rule. This is an example of economic power of purely political mobilization of resources.⁶ The higher rates of labor allow Joe look good in the school principal's eyes, because of the higher tests scores he is able to produce. Consequently, he has more influence on the

school administration, and can help many students, which in turn, upholds his status as an influential teacher. What has begun as reciprocity relation is transforming into the redistribution: students contribute to Joe's power, while he is obliged to redistribute generously the power he accumulates. Joe is not interested in upping the average CRL, because that would make his specially negotiated higher rate more difficult to maintain, and will therefore degrade his status among other teachers and among students.

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2. Sara is an unpopular Social Studies teacher in her third year at the school. Students contribute the amount of labor that is minimally necessary to avoid open conflict with the school principal. This is not because of lack of skills, but because the students have to reduce their labor expenditures somewhere. Her classes are very often disrupted, so that students are entertained rather than working, thus greatly reducing the drudgery component. Almost no one does homework. Sara cannot fail entire classes, because this will poorly reflect on her teaching reputation; nor can she seek help in classroom management, because it will further add to her reputation as a poor disciplinarian. The only way of peaceful coexistence is to collect labor at much reduced rates, while giving a grade distribution that looks normal. To justify the normal grade curve, she has to expect some work to be done for a grade, but it is ridiculously easy to make a grade in her class. She would like to raise the CLR for her own class, but has no stake in raising the average for the whole school. While teachers like Joe are overtly supportive of Sara, they are not about to risk their own status to rescue a fellow teacher; rather, they prefer to lament the lack of training and experience she exhibits. The other teachers understand that they are able to collect higher shares of student labor in part because Sara can collect very little.

3. Our next character is Steve, the troublemaker student. He performs an important task of diluting labor intensity on behalf of the entire student body. Steve creates an occasional classroom disruption thus testing the limits of labor reduction. He is the bargaining representative for other students as well as a part-time entertainer. Only because of his efforts, the flexible boundary of acceptable labor minimum made visible. Steve is like a blacksmith or a potter in rural societies who is freed from regular labor, because he performs a specialized sort of work. Steve's contribution involves personal risk, and high stress levels. However, his rationale is similar to that of Joe and other Big Men: contributing generously to the common good will pay off in form of higher social status. He is not competing for teachers' recognition, yet his status among students is relatively high and is boosted by the reputation of a fearless outlaw.

4. And finally, Sally the good student. She is a very disciplined, hard-working student— not among the class geniuses, but knows how to make an A in any class. Her performance is the gold standard for determining the CRL. She firmly believes that she must be able to make an A in every class with a reasonable effort. She is the

chief enforcer of the rate, for if an assignment appears to be too difficult, or amount of work too great to handle, she directly challenges the offending teacher. She is a fierce enforcer of the CRL. Sally is able to negotiate the political system of the school, in part because of her mother who is active in the building's PTA, and is otherwise connected. Sally also has a busy social life and is striving to maintain high status both among teachers and students. Any increase of the general CRL will put her in jeopardy, because she would then be forced to scale down her social life or suffer a drop in GPA.

The Westside School as a whole will unlikely be responsive to the demands of school reform. While a new principal may try to turn up the enthusiasm for learning, and introduce a few extra sessions of test preparation, she is unlikely to increase the CRL, simply because no constituency at or around school is interested in doing so. The school is one of many variations of school economies. Some of them are based on different principles, and may allow for free competition among students, and involve no customary rate of labor. In others, students have no sense of solidarity to support the CRL, because they pursue different economic aims. A failing school is probably a failing economy, which does not follow any particular pattern of labor. However, in most cases, learning labor as an essentially individual activity must be regulated by relationships among students and teachers. It is very difficult to imagine an ideal school where a student is free to exercise her abilities at maximum extent, and a teacher is allowed to challenge those abilities to the fullest. People who are in a daily contact naturally find a way of coordinating their efforts. The relational economies come to play where the capitalist, market-based economy cannot effectively penetrate.

The cast of characters above demonstrates that any school reform is not an easy task. In the present form, the reform is unsustainable, because it ignores the relational economies of schooling. No intensification of learning labor can occur without dealing with these relational economies. School reform must be viewed more in terms of economic development in the third world countries. Direct imposition of market principles is impossible on pre-capitalistic societies; similarly, the arbitrary increase of learning labor cannot happen because of the economic logic embedded in school communities. In trying to raise the CRL in the Westside School, one would be well advised to take the relational economy into consideration. For example, Joe must be persuaded to share his influence with Sara and other teachers, so they are treated like a cast rather than individual big men, competing for the same limited allocation of status. The job of part-time entertainer must be taken away from Steve; which means that teachers and administrators must provide both the portions of entertainment and breaking up the routine of the school day. Yet this means that Steve must be given another job, for example of a school newspaper's reporter, or a student government

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member. Sally must accept lower GPA, which means that other more able students should be able to enjoy higher social status. Each of these propositions seems formidable, and yet ignoring them would not be wise.

The most important shift must occur in the ideology of schooling. The school must develop a form of locally-acceptable ideology somehow legitimizing

the increase in learning labor input in terms of the communal good, not individual achievement. Continuing attempts to “sell” education as a service to students are outdated and do not reflect the nature of mass schooling. Schooling must be recast in terms of national service. Going to schools is something young people should do as an obligation, as a duty. The rhetoric of service has an established, well-developed vocabulary of service sacrifice and common good. Such a rhetoric may allow further mobilization of student effort through activation of relational mechanism within each schools. Students will work more for a society that is thankful and is taking care of their own social needs. School effectiveness should be therefore measured not only—and not as much by—learning outcomes, but also by the quality of the process of school life. Without providing too much detail, I can only point out that such indicators are possible. It is enough to point out to the instruments developed by the World Bank to measure levels of the social capital in a given society.⁷

The current school reform movement comes from very reasonable expectations of accountability; yet it is flawed in its understanding of both quality control procedures (from which it originally was drawn) and the nature of schooling. The accountability practices should not be abandoned, but must be changed so that schools are accountable for the conditions of student work. For example, hospitals report not only on the recovery rate of their patients, but also on patient satisfaction, safety, quality of food, community relations, etc. Generally, in most quality management systems such as ISO 9000, control over the process of production takes precedence over the immediate bottom line accountability. In education, we should adopt similar practices. Each school’s authorities must come up with a large list of services students would want, and make sure the teachers regulate access to those services. For example, a thicker network of after-school activities with voluntary participation will create some of these resources. School report cards will then include not only test results, but also the level of social capital built in schools.

Relational economies of schooling are not just social inertia opposing social change. Quite to the contrary, students and teachers in many schools need and want change. Yet such change cannot be brought through purely administrative, authoritarian methods advocated by both Democratic and Republican administrations. What needs to be done is a much more sophisticated socio-economic analysis of schooling beyond narratives of accountability and

class struggle. If we hope to change schools, we need to understand and change the relational, non-capitalist economies that govern those schools.

Notes

1. A.V.Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay and R.E.F. Smith. (Homewood, IL: R.D. Irwin, 1966).
2. Marshall D. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine, 1974) , 87.
3. E. Paul Durrenberger and Nicola Tannenbaum, “Chayanov and Theory in Economic Anthropology,” in *Theory in Economic Anthropology*, ed. Jean Ensminger (Walnut Creek: Altamira , 2002), 141.
4. Alexander Sidorkin, “Labor of Learning,” *Educational Theory*51, no. 1 (winter 2001): 91-108.
5. See Sidorkin, “Labor of Learning.”
6. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 135-139.
7. Christiaan Grootaert, Deepa Narayan, Veronica Nyhan Jones, Michael Woolcock, *Measuring Social Capital: An Integrated Questionnaire*, World Bank Working Paper No.18, http://povlibrary.worldbank.org/files/11998_WP18-

Web.pdf. [cited on 6/29/2005].