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## TRUST IN NUMBERS, DISTRUST OF EXPERTS: EDUCATION, NEW TECHNOLOGY, AND THE PARANOID POLITICS OF DISINTERESTED OBJECTIVITY

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Expertise is increasingly seen as suspect, particularly on the political right, because experts are presumed to have interests and agendas. The majority of registered Republican voters believe that higher education is “bad for America”;<sup>1</sup> only 27 percent of Republicans trust scientists, and only 31 percent trust medical science.<sup>2</sup> As of this writing, most Republican voters believe that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent and stolen, despite evidence provided by policy experts; academic experts; and thorough investigations, recounts, and audits by Republican officials at the state and local levels. In May 2021, the Republican party purged its congressional leadership for refusing to accept the stolen election lie. As of late March 2021, a quarter of Republican voters believed in the fantastical QAnon conspiracy (which includes evidence-free allegations of baby-eating Democrats running vast pedophilia rings), and this major US political party has become beholden to Trumpism with or without Trump. The 2019 book *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening by WWG1WGA* (Where We Go One We Go All) was a top 75 bestselling book on Amazon.com and included these allegations: “that prominent Democrats murder and eat children’ and that the US government ‘created AIDS, polio, Lyme disease, some natural disasters, two Indiana Jones movies and the Pixar movie *Monsters Inc.*”<sup>3</sup> The majority of Republican congresspeople (52 percent

in the House and 60 percent in the Senate as of the 117th Congress)<sup>4</sup> reject the scientific consensus on global warming. Established scientific advice from public health officials to wear masks and keep a distance during the COVID-19 pandemic was rejected by rightist politicians as an infringement on individual and commercial liberty. And the scientists and public health officials are accused of political partisanship and of being commercially interested.

This chapter argues that contemporary crises of hegemony, material and symbolic precarity, and agency have fostered rising distrust of experts and specialists. An expanding distrust of experts and specialists opens questions about the relationship between knowledge and interests and calls into question the longstanding political uses of the guise of disinterested objectivity in public life. I argue that people can be educated into very different interpretations of surfacing doubts about expert knowledge and the interests behind it: a reactionary politics of paranoia, a liberal doubling down on the guise of disinterested objectivity, or critical consciousness and political agency. The first section of this chapter addresses the crises that are calling into question the guise of disinterested objectivity. The second section contends that the politics of paranoia can only take hold if it has been taught and learned. I identify three dominant tropes through which doubts about disinterested objectivity are translated into paranoia, and I detail three ways that paranoid modes of interpretation depoliticize politics, rendering collective democratic action difficult or even impossible to conceive or enact. The third section runs these issues through the recent expansion of some contemporary educational technology producers discussed in prior chapters that rely on the guise of disinterested objectivity to further commercial ends and yet build the elements of paranoid politics and pedagogy into their products. I return to the example discussed in chapters 3 and 4 of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) discursive

production of an allegedly disinterested and objective science of social and emotional learning and a problematically depoliticized criticism of it. The chapter's conclusion calls for critical pedagogical projects that can translate doubt about disinterested objectivity into critical consciousness and radically democratic politics while avoiding the alluring promise of total security with its authoritarian guarantees.

In his 1995 book, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, science historian Theodore Porter attempts to account for the prestige and power of numbers. Porter argues that forms of quantification are “strategies of communication” that are “intimately bound up with forms of community.”<sup>5</sup> The reliance by public officials on numbers produced by experts, for Porter, reduces the need for “intimate knowledge and personal trust.” The authority of scientific or quasi-scientific pronouncements in public life depends on claims to objectivity and the exclusion of subjectivity and judgment.<sup>6</sup> The appeal of numbers in policy and politics derives from faith in objectivity as being more democratic, because it is allegedly impartial, fair, and impersonal.<sup>7</sup> Such a view presumes that bureaucracy appeals to citizens as democratic for its guise of disinterested objectivity. As Porter points out, when public officials make decisions by referring to numbers, this not only provides an aura of disinterestedness but it also conceals the decision being made. Invoking Foucault, Porter argues that the public use of numbers conceals the politics at play and the power being wielded.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the allure of numbers for Porter is that they are rule-bound or officially sanctioned.<sup>9</sup> In public affairs, alleges Porter, “expertise has more and more become inseparable from objectivity.”<sup>10</sup>

This assumption that expertise is inseparable from objectivity no longer holds.

Vaccine conspiracism has flourished in the present-day climate of paranoid politics. Public health experts, billionaire philanthrocapitalists, government health bureaucrats, and

surpranational organizations and corporations are alleged to be conspiring to build, through the Great Reset Conspiracy, a vast biocontrol surveillance system to integrate corporate state control over the body involving the implantation of nanobot devices and bio passports sometimes said to be coordinated with 5G cell phone signals (which themselves sometimes are alleged to have caused COVID-19) under the pretext of pandemic vaccination to collect biodata and remotely control bodies. Such paranoid fantasies of conspiracy are largely produced on the political right.<sup>11</sup> However, even in liberal discourse, conspiracy plays a pronounced and growing role. For example, Alex Gibney's informationally rich investigative documentary *Crime of the Century* (2021) explains the opioid epidemic with its half a million deaths primarily as an *exceptional* criminal conspiracy by pharmaceutical companies abetted by corrupt politicians and doctors, rather than as a symptom of the extent to which capitalism *routinely* undermines democracy and the public interest. They do so in a systematic way by prioritizing profit for human institutions, rolling back regulatory protections, fostering the culture of predation that the film illustrates, and producing the physical and psychological damage, pain, and alienation to which narcotics addiction responds. The film frames the opioid crisis as one in a series of exceptional destructive episodes in the history of the drug business rather than as one example of capitalist pillage.<sup>12</sup> In this framing, medical and legal specialists are corrupted by aberrant greed from their normally disinterested and objective roles as purveyors of health and justice rather than occupying professional positions that are contested institutional terrain shot through with power relations and politics.

The politics of paranoia begins with healthy epistemic doubt and skepticism about the objectivity, disinterestedness, and neutrality of claims to truth. The trust in specialists and numbers under the guise of disinterested objectivity described by Porter in the 1990s failed to account for the nexus of corporate

state interests, the role of capitalist profit seeking, and capitalist ideology in shaping and defining knowledge-making institutions. Various factors have driven such healthy skepticism about the guise of disinterested objectivity of specialists and experts, including economic precarity and hegemonic crises: the increasingly dubious legitimacy of the economic, political, and cultural social order.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the means of addressing these crises (that is, the tools for agency, such as education, policy influence, and journalism) have largely failed to provide citizens with the knowledge and dispositions to theorize, investigate, interpret, and judge claims to truth.<sup>14</sup>

For example, the means of citizens effecting change through influencing policy and legislation have been radically diminished, because nearly all legislation is enacted through purchased lobbying by the rich.<sup>15</sup> Education remains under the sway of positivist standardized testing and the guise of disinterested objectivity in curriculum that delinks learning from its social import and capacities for agency.<sup>16</sup> Schooling largely lacks critical literacies that would encourage students to interpret claims to truth in terms of the social locations of the claimant and broader structures of cultural, political, and economic power informing the context for learning. Instead, neoliberal restructuring in education has framed knowledge as something to be transmitted and consumed, rendering it into a quantifiable commodity or currency for academic and possibly later economic exchange.

Neoliberalism has displaced dialogic forms of knowledge cocreation with monologic modes of knowledge deposition. That is, it has framed knowledge as not only a commodity but also as true, legitimate, worthwhile, and beyond question, despite being written and sold by unseen authorities (such as corporate curriculum designers, and test, textbook, and tech corporations). The ascendance of standardized testing, teaching to the test, and the reduction of teaching and learning to instrumentalized skills since 2000 has transformed approaches

to knowledge in public schools. The neoliberal standards and accountability movement that went hand in hand with privatization schemes positioned dialogue, debate, dissent, interpretation, judgment, and other intellectual and democratic dispositions as a liability and threat to the delivery, consumption, and enforcement of the “right” knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The positivist guise of disinterested objectivity and the sanctification of knowledge through quantification belies the equating of truth with social authority. Truth appears to derive from those with power. While the assault on thinking cannot be reduced to schooling alone, the equating of truth with authority has been part of the broader educational conditions for a major portion of the US population to disregard and distrust scientists about COVID-19 masking and vaccines and to instead trust Donald Trump, even as he uttered ludicrous statements (such as suggesting injecting bleach to kill the virus). Journalism also clings to the guise of disinterested objectivity and has been recently overrun with public relations content and corporate mergers that have gutted investigative journalism.<sup>18</sup> Such views of science and public health expertise as being partisan and interested represents, as well, the triumph of neoliberalism’s evacuation of the very concept of the public good from public discourse. In this view, all facts are considered to be merely the positions of competitive interested parties.

These economic, political, cultural, educational, journalistic, and agentic crises are part of a crisis of system legitimacy.<sup>19</sup> Paranoid politics and paranoid culture express material crises and symbolic crises—particularly a crisis of hegemonic legitimacy and the erosion of the institutional and cultural means for agency. For those facing precarious conditions and the widespread perception of the evaporating means to act on and shape life conditions and respond to these crises, enemies appear everywhere and anywhere. Precarity and system legitimacy in crisis raise questions and suspicions about the legitimacy of truth

claims from the traditional knowledge-making institutions and experts. Such suspicions about the interests behind experts' claims call into question the guise of disinterested objectivity, the concealment of political decision, and the subjective exclusions that are wrapped up with power relations. There are different directions such doubt can take. One direction would be toward educating for critical consciousness. This would entail expanding questions about the relationships between claims to truth and forms of social authority of the claimant. Healthy doubt also involves contextualizing claims to truth in relation to the broader social, political, economic, and cultural forces, systems, and structures informing truth claims. Educating for critical consciousness fosters comprehension of the social and pedagogical formation of the self, and learning theory as "a resource that enables us to both define and respond to problems as they emerge in particular contexts."<sup>20</sup> As with science, we get closer to objectivity by accounting for the interests at play in the formation of truth. The politics of paranoia educates people in decidedly different directions than toward critical consciousness. It translates peoples' doubts and suspicions into fear and hatred of essentialized groups, particularly races and genders but also political parties and movements. For example, this translation appears in the right-wing media attacks on critical race theory in schools, particularly in the summer of 2021. Streaming banner headlines and vapid punditry invoke critical race theory less as a theory, argument, or lens for social analysis of structural inequality that demands remedy. Instead, right-wing news represents it more as a perjorative, a threat of black invasion of white space, and as a threat to "good schooling" that is supposed to be disinterested, apolitical, devoid of engagement with race and racism, and affirmative of existing social realities. The political spectacle of critical race theory wrapped reactionary and white supremacist cultural politics in a guise of disinterested objectivity. A central dimension of this news content was an effort to conflate a structural analysis deemed

radical or Marxist with liberal multicultural efforts for diversity. According to critical race theorist Kendall Thomas, right wing activists “want people to associate critical race theory with a whole range of things that have nothing to do with critical race theory. It’s a cynical effort to weaponize the illiteracy and the lack of knowledge in this country generally about race, racism and the law.”<sup>21</sup> The sheer number of allusions to critical race theory on Fox News approached a thousand in June and nearly a thousand in July; on the right wing Newsmax station, critical race theory was mentioned 930 times. Incessant invocation of the term and paranoid, racist fearmongering stood in for arguments, discussion, dialogue, and genuine debate.

### **THE PEDAGOGY OF PARANOID POLITICS**

A healthy skepticism toward blind faith in objectivist expert knowledge should stave off both dogmatic claims derived from radical subjectivism (in which subjective assertion delinked from argument, evidence, and theory is alleged to ground truth) and from dogmatic reference to sacred texts. Such skepticism wards off varieties of objectivism, such as positivism (claims to truth that conceal the subjective role in making it—assuming a world of facts that comes from beyond the social). As the Frankfurt School advocated, there is good reason for a distrust of excessive specialization, because such an understanding of specialization delinks knowledge from the social totality and excessively narrows understanding and the capacity for social intervention. Excessive disciplinary specialization in the humanities and social sciences has a conservatizing tendency to obscure the social and political implications of interpretation. In science and engineering, such overspecialization can result in technocratic rationality in which the social good is eclipsed by technical problem-solving or mathematical manipulation.



And yet, rejection of specialization and expertise often in the name of commercial, instrumental, practicalist ends (as Hofstadter pointed out)<sup>22</sup> can yield idiocy or worse. Who really wants to undergo spine surgery by a nonexpert or wants the educational system to be redesigned by businesspeople who know nothing about education or any other discipline of study? However, suspicion about expert knowledge and the interests tied to it is not widely becoming the basis for critical modes of interpretation grounded in research, theoretical investigation, and reflection about these relationships. Instead, suspicion about expertise and disinterested objectivity has largely gone in a few different directions that are at odds with critical dispositions. These paranoid politics must be taught and learned. Paranoid politics deters genuinely democratic dispositions, social relationships, and identifications in the following three ways.

(1) *The relativizing of truth claims* (particularly on the right). If everybody's claims are interested and motivated, then all claims are dubious, and there is no greater veracity to the claims of scientists, researchers, and experts than to the assertions of anyone else. Such relativizing of truth claims appears, for example, in the claims of anti-vaxxers, COVID conspiracists, QAnon adherents, and the Republican party's widespread embrace of 2020 election fraud lies. In the 2000s, Karl Rove derided the "reality-based community" for failing to see that truth is what the powerful say it is. The oil industry invoked postmodern relativism to claim that because there is minor dissent from the overwhelming consensus of the scientific community about global warming, the question remains open and hence reducing the use of fossil fuels would be unsubstantiated. These examples illustrate how relativizing truth results in authority imposing truth. Since then, information on the internet and particularly the advent of social media have resulted in a web of assertions, even as the means of editorially

controlling and vetting assertions has not expanded. (Nor has the social and educational techniques for discernment of the quality of assertion.) Such venues lack editorial processes for evaluation of evidence, argument, and theoretical underpinnings. Driven by advertising and click-through profits, content is commercially incentivized to be transgressive and incendiary, relying on emotionally potent simplification. This is fertile ground for racist, misogynist, jingoistic, and xenophobic content. As Jason Stanley has argued in *How Fascism Works*, Trump's delegitimation of the means of obtaining knowledge leaves truth in the realm of the aspiring autocrat.<sup>23</sup> The relativizing of truth claims disregards the difference between any random utterance and the valuable dialogic institutional processes that distinguish expert knowledge (such as editorial review, scholarly peer review, research study, or vibrant debate).

(2) *The grounding of truth claims in bodies and essentialized identities*, often in ways that presume inflated agency and conspiracy. With the rejection of expertise as partisan and interested, evidence, argument, and theory are rejected in favor of truths grounded in the alleged essence of groups of people. Racial, ethnic, and gender identity is grounded in the body, not in culture and history. This is widely practiced on the right. Examples include racist scapegoating by replacement conspiracy directed against Jews, Hispanics, Blacks, and others, and Incel scapegoating of women. The Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue mass shooting and the Charlottesville white supremacist marches put such thinking out in the open. In the former, Jews were alleged to be conspiring to replace white Christians with undocumented immigrants.

The flip side of assigning conspiratorial inflated agency to maligned and scapegoated groups is assigning inflated and mystical agency to elevated superman figures, such as Trump and other Strongmen figures. In both cases, the assignment of inflated agency has explanatory power in the absence of

decent social theory, evidence, or argument. Influencing left as well as right rhetorics, an outgrowth of this logic is also that essentialized groups—white men as much as others—are blamed for inequalities rather than white supremacist ideology that must be learned and can be challenged and unlearned. Such a move of conflating identity with ideology leaves white men no recourse other than guilt or defensiveness and paints antiracist forms of white identity as impossible.

(3) *Faith in data, quantification, and an uncritical perspective on science.* Paranoid politics in this form doubles down on uncritical faith in science and on the guise of disinterested objectivity and positivist ideology—truth as “just the facts” or truth deriving from disinterested expertise. In reaction to Trumpism and antiscience conspiracy mongering, many liberals and even some leftists have emphasized the valuation of science in ways that deny, as Porter points out, that objectivity in science comes from consensus in a field.<sup>24</sup> Science, as faith and dogma, effaces the many other critical traditions of thought, such as pragmatism and critical theory, which presume that truth is nonfoundational, provisional, fallible, and revisable. Also ignored when science becomes dogma is what Daston refers to as “mechanical objectivity” that is never fully attainable.<sup>25</sup> Such automated means of generating knowledge conceal the subjective dimensions of objectivity. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) education systems have built into the design of the teaching machine implicit and seldom exposed assumptions, values, ideologies, and curriculum selections that inform without examination both the meanings produced by the use of the technology and the interpretation of the data generated by student use. Purveyors misrepresent these technologies as providing neutral, objective, disinterested, and quantifiable knowledge.

These three problematic responses to the dubiousness of disinterested objectivity and expertise need to be comprehended as both political and pedagogical. Paranoid modes

of interpretation depoliticize politics by recasting the relationships between knowledge and interests. Paranoid politics diverts suspicion about the relationships between objectivity and interests away from critical theoretical dispositions and instead channels it into forms of social interpretation that evacuate politics. The politics of paranoia depoliticizes by making agonism into antagonism, depoliticizing agency, and it drives liberal reaction that doubles down on the guise of disinterested objectivity, replacing politics with a liberal consensus concern with “polarization” and “extremes.”

(1) *Making agonism into antagonism.* Social and political theories of hegemony, such as radical democracy theory, presume that society is constituted by difference and contestation among competing classes and cultural groups that aspire to social ascendancy. For Chantal Mouffe, radically democratic societies can make difference and contestation central to politics.<sup>26</sup> She calls for an agonistic rather than antagonistic politics. Agonism overcomes the problem of liberalism’s effacement of difference and power relations under the rubric of consensus. It also addresses the possibility that contestation and difference can become “antagonistic”—that is, that the political adversary is transformed into an enemy to be annihilated. Paranoid politics translates rightful suspicion about the interests tied to specialized knowledge into an antagonistic form of politics. In this form of politics, blame for economic inequality and political misrepresentation is displaced onto the victims of structures and systems and particularly on their alleged essential identities grounded in their bodies. Suspicion about the interests and ideological perspectives linked to truth claims can result in the good work of interpretation, contestation, and debate about meanings and representations—that is, engagement in cultural politics. Engagement with contested claims leads to dialogic exchange and the arrival at truth through debate, dissent, curiosity. It can also lead to the grounding of truth claims through argumentation, evidence,

the explication of the theoretical assumptions behind claims to truth, and consideration for how the social position of the participants (or location of the researcher) relates to the views being espoused (standpoint). Such a view of knowledge-making as cultural politics does not only present a more accurate picture of how culture works (as Stuart Hall shows) and how science works; it also accords with radically democratic dispositions, values, identifications, and practices.

Radical democracy as a political theory rejects the consensus-oriented politics of the liberal philosophical tradition that conceals the power interests of hegemonic groups. It also rejects the post-politics/post-ideology of neoliberalism that makes politics into a matter of managerialism and falsely presumes the end of ideological contestation. In addition, radical democracy rejects rightist authoritarian populism that seeks to make politics the will of the strongman or oligarchy. There is an affinity between the contested and dialogic forms of knowledge-making and radical democratic political theory that aims for democratic social relations. Radical democracy makes the valuation of difference and agonism central by building on Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony. This idea of hegemony recognizes that the social order is never once and forever fixed but rather is subject to contestation and struggle, and it depends on winning blocs by educating others into consent. However, the politics of paranoia teaches people to turn against the recognition of hegemonic agonism and turn toward what Mouffe calls "antagonistic" forms of politics, in which the adversary is seen as an enemy to be annihilated.<sup>27</sup> In paranoid politics, difference is positioned as threat rather than as a necessary part of the act of knowing and as constitutive of political community. Radical democracy theory sees identity formation through the process of identification accomplished by the pedagogical production of representations and subject positions. This nonessential conception of identity aims for the linkages of different identities through a common identification with the

emancipatory aspirations of radical democracy—what Mouffe calls “the chain of equivalency.”<sup>28</sup> Radical democracy’s non-essential conception of identity recognizes that identity and ideological convictions do not necessarily align. The politics of paranoia frames identity as essential; draws lines around the identity-based political community; corporealizes politics; and refuses to recognize the pedagogical, deliberative, and interpretive processes of culture and politics.

(2) *Replacing political agency with depoliticized forms of agency: conspiracy, bad interpretive frameworks, mechanical objectivity in machines.* Failing to comprehend politics as the consequence of meaning-making and educative work, the politics of paranoia sees social change as the consequence of the secretive and inexplicable dealings of those with mystically inflated agency. In the politics of paranoia, conspiring agents and minoritarian groups have an inexplicable capacity to achieve social ends. The powerful have inflated agency and are worshipped for their exceptionality. Might makes right. Knowledge and learning are not seen as tools for social and political agency. Yet in the logic of paranoid politics, everything can be a potential clue to unveil conspiracy—the secret plan that determines social reality enacted by secret players with secret motives. As the first QAnon post puts it, “everything has meaning.” The point not to be missed is that QAnon and other conspiracies fan the flames of conspiracy without providing a social theory or explanatory framework than can account for social change or subjective motivation. They cannot explain acts of interpretation in terms of how material and symbolic interests relate to social systems, social structures, and social patterns. Sometimes these conspiracies hang on ludicrous and flimsy motivations, such as QAnon’s assertion of a vast ring of politicians and rich liberals preying sexually or cannibalistically on children.<sup>29</sup> But these fantastical conspiracies respond to a very real experience of contemporary electoral politics as failing to represent the values and interests of many people. Other

conspiracies claim that the 5G cell signals cause COVID-19 or that Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the pharmaceutical industry are scheming to control bodies by implanting nanobots via vaccines. These conspiracies touch on the unaccountable workings of corporate power and the rightful fears of the unchecked growth of surveillance and citizen/consumer profiling and the automation of labor in data capitalism. These conspiracies mistake the structural workings of capitalism as a system and its imperatives for growth and profit at any cost with the nefarious intent of particular actors or organizations with untold power. These “bad social theories” fail to provide an account for how subjects are socially, politically, economically, and ideologically formed or how agents can learn to think and act in ways that depart from the social positions they may originate from and the ideological positions that are presumed to be aligned with those social positions. Conspiracism does not account for the development through learning of consciousness, critical or otherwise, mediation that is sometimes contradictory, negates the existing order or the imagining of better futures. It paints a picture of a world of social Darwinian opportunism, a world of sharks, in which motivation corresponds to identity and identity corresponds to interests.

(3) *Worries about “political polarization.”* Democracy depends on public debate, deliberation, and dissent. Yet it is common to read interpretations of political polarization as a problem. In this view, social media “echo chambers” reinforce individual political ideological propensities, thereby pitting people against one another and driving them further apart politically. In this framing, truth and politics are recast through an unsettling deficit of consensus. What disappears when “extreme” disagreement becomes the problem are the political, economic, and ideological interests of competing social groups and classes. Coming to terms with the political means being honest about how interests and ideological perspectives

undergird claims to truth and people's positions, including those of experts. Increasingly the political right has been using a demand for K–12 and higher education to be “inclusive” of all sides of an issue (what's the other side of slavery or the holocaust?), passing legislation in Florida (HB 233) and Texas (HB 3979) among other states with Republican-dominated legislatures that is designed to allow vigilante lawsuits or sanctions against schools or universities in which professors or teachers fail to support right-wing positions. In this context, the guise of disinterested objectivity is being used to wage war on public educational institutions while promoting the inclusion of hard right ideologies and the exclusion of any examination of systemic inequality, particularly with regard to race.

### **THE PARANOID POLITICS OF NEW EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY**

I have been arguing that crises of hegemony inform suspicions about the disinterestedness and objectivity of specialization and expertise in public life. Furthermore, suspicion about the guise of disinterested objectivity can go in the direction of criticality and democratic possibility, or it can take the direction of the politics of paranoia. This section provides several examples of how the elements of the politics of paranoia described earlier in this chapter are being spread through newly established for-profit educational technology products. The crucial task ahead is to create the educational conditions for questioning the relationships between knowledge and social authority as the basis for critical dispositions and for those critical dispositions to be the basis for collective struggle for redistributive justice, equality, and emancipation. As William I. Robinson notes in *The Global Police State*: “it must be reiterated time and again that it is capital's implacable drive to accumulate that leads it to plunder the environment, to expropriate land and resources, to waste and pillage communities everywhere, and



to impose a global police state to contain the explosive contradictions of an out-of-control system . . . this all comes to the outcome of social and class struggle.”<sup>30</sup>

This system depends on language, culture, and common sense to give it intelligibility. Education is a crucial site of and a stake in the struggle for the future. In its formal and informal settings, education produces knowledge and common sense, and it affirms or challenges broader discourses while also creating points of identification and subject positions for people to occupy. The guise of disinterested objectivity in education and the denial of the politics of education is profoundly reactionary, as it affirms the existing social order.

I want to examine an important but problematic intervention in the contemporary construction of allegedly disinterested objective educational science by experts. What is particularly problematic in the first example below is the lack of a broader normative political framing that would comprehend the production of the guise of disinterested objectivity in terms of broader material and symbolic contests and the politics of education.

### **Quantification of Social and Emotional Learning**

As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, noted scholars of education and new technology Ben Williamson and Nelli Piattoeva have observed how the OECD has produced a discourse of scientific objectivity for a relatively new educational trope, social and emotional learning, in order to legitimate it and build it into international quantified comparisons among nations through standardized testing. Social and emotional learning is an educational discourse that, according to the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and

maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”<sup>31</sup>

This project aims to teach the comprehension and self-regulation of affect and emotion; to teach empathy and “healthy” relationships. Social and emotional learning was developed in part in reaction to the standards and accountability movement in education that, under the guise of disinterested objectivity, has reduced teaching to that which is testable, quantifiable, and measurable. Though social and emotional learning purports to remedy the decontextualization of knowledge, teaching, and learning, it has developed principally through psychological tropes that are depoliticized and individualistic. For example, social and emotional learning does not teach ways of comprehending experience in relation to the broader social forces that produce those experiences, nor does it teach students ways of understanding emotions and affect to be able to act on and shape the social contexts they inhabit. Williamson and Piattoeva do not address the cultural politics and implicit pedagogy of social and emotional learning but instead focus on how behavior, affect, and subjective experience are being translated into a new quantified/datafied quasi-science. This quantification of social and emotional learning is being done in conjunction with a human capital and econometrics discourse that will be used for commercial and surveillance purposes through big data psychoinformatics that can track and predict student behavior.

The Williamson and Piattoeva analysis provides valuable insights about how discursive practices construct the alleged objectivity of a field through quantification of behavior and affect. They write: “Our main claim is that SELS, as a contested science in the making, embodies attempts by policy influencers to stabilize the field through the production of objectivity, while broadening and consolidating the uses of education technology.” They elaborate on how affect and behavior are standardized, how the standardized measures are made into

measurement technologies, and how data production is then used to promote policy and a “marketplace for technology providers.”<sup>32</sup>

Williamson and Piattoeva draw on Alain Desrosières and Porter to argue that quantification became “allied with objectivity not because it mirrored reality more accurately, but because numbers were easily transportable. Numbers may be shared across disciplinary divides and cultural borderlines, enabling effective communication between parties whose goals, interests and beliefs may be otherwise different” (Williamson & Piattoeva, 69). Moreover, they discuss “procedural objectivity” that “highlights the role of impersonal, standardized methods of investigation.”<sup>33</sup> Procedural objectivity removes the “problematic” human from the pursuit of truth by measuring and standardizing data across sites, making an “independent, standardized experimental apparatus” to achieve the same results in different places.<sup>34</sup> The authors point out a tautological dimension to the objectivity production of science. “Standardized analytical categories are the precondition for building standardized measurement tools that help to render uniform results, thus proving the theory that underlies the endeavor in the first place.”<sup>35</sup> So, in keeping with their example, the standardized measures of social and emotional learning that are invented evacuate the cultural specificity and contexts of their origins and makers. The standardization, measurement, and numerical quantification then provides an aura of scientific authenticity and the guise of objectivity. As Robin Truth Goodman points out, the imperative for standardization, measurement, and quantification of experience, behavior, and affect belies a paranoia about that which is uncontrollable in the human, that which cannot be turned into data and profit.<sup>36</sup>

Significantly, Williamson and Piattoeva criticize the ways that the field of knowledge effaces contested categories and the subjective aspects of truth formation. However, their analysis of the discursive production of objectivity does not

directly address class and cultural power and the material and symbolic interests in “stabilizing the field” by producing objectivity. While they do represent discursive production in a way that specifies beneficiaries of the project of making a standardized and quantified social and emotional learning—the technology industry, supranational organizations, governments, policy actors—they *do not* specify the victims of this project or the broader structuring social antagonisms that animate these kinds of projects. That is, their analysis would benefit from being situated in a broader class and ideological analysis that sees a project such as this one as a part of hegemonic struggle. Hegemonic blocs naturalize and universalize their particular material and symbolic interests. The project of making a quasi-science out of social and emotional learning is a political economic project that involves the redistribution of governance and decision making from public schools, public school teachers, and staff to private technology corporations. This redistribution is a part of the broader privatization of public goods and services and part of the even broader neoliberal restructuring of society that has been waged by a transnational capitalist class on people of both the working and professional classes since the late 1970s.

How does this case of the OECD’s project of translating social and emotional learning into quantifiable data that can form the basis for commercial extraction of children and social control relate to the politics of paranoia? This example is part of a broader pattern in which new educational technology projects fabricate a positivist quasi-science of behavior, affect, and subjectivity first under the *guise of attention to subjectivity* in order to deploy this quasi-science as objective. This social and emotional learning project, along with many others—including adaptive learning technology, biometric pedagogy projects, and the play-based learning movement—all claim to be attentive to student subjectivity, local contexts and cultures in order to promote pedagogies that utterly disregard student

subjectivity, local contexts and cultures, and differences. But all these projects then set the stage to expand the guise of disinterested objectivity in quantifying and datafying affect and behavior.<sup>37</sup> They all aim to induce children to produce data for financial gain by use of standardized, decontextualized pedagogical technologies.<sup>38</sup> In fact, promoters of these various commercial educational projects appropriate progressive language and concepts such as agency and culturally relevant pedagogy. The crucial point is that this new technology trend in education enacts paranoid politics as it deters genuinely democratic dispositions, social relationships, and identifications by grounding truth in social authority; by grounding truth claims in bodies and essentialized identities; and by promoting a faith in data, quantification, and an uncritical perspective on science.

Earlier in the chapter I discussed how the neoliberal standards and accountability movement contributed to the conditions for political authoritarianism by undermining dialogic, intellectual, and critical approaches to education but also by promoting positivist approaches to knowledge, in which knowledge is legitimated by the social authority of the claimant. These new educational technologies continue, deepen, and expand these tendencies while gaining greater social legitimacy by automating and technologizing quantification. What should not be missed as well is that paranoid interpretations of the uses of these technologies misunderstand the broader structural and systemic tendencies at play, explaining these technologies as conspiracies by super-agents rather than as the development of capital through data science, AI technology, militarized accumulation, and positivist ideology.

### **Adaptive Learning Technology**

Adaptive learning technologies (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3) have been called “the netflixing of education,” because they use AI to change curriculum or change the speed of curriculum

delivery in response to the student's use while building a long-term case about the student's achievement and making predictions about the user's interests or capacities.<sup>39</sup> Although adaptive learning companies such as the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative's (CZI) Summit promote the technology product as culturally relevant and attentive to individual students and the context, it is not. Instead, the technology largely speeds up or slows down the delivery of standardized and homogenized curriculum content. The data that students are induced to produce through their mandated use of the technology is then taken by CZI, which is a limited liability company that also owns and acquires for-profit education companies. The limited liability company's use of third-party data raises serious concerns about student privacy.<sup>40</sup> The data produced is a valuable commercial asset. The case being made about individual students stands to deepen a kind of "techno tracking," exacerbating the ways that social and cultural reproduction plays out through schooling. The pedagogical approach suggests that teachers are facilitators, and the real teacher is the technology. Adaptive learning technology displaces dialogic forms of teaching and learning in favor of a transmissional model of pedagogy. It undermines the capacity of teaching to address the relationship between claims to truth, the subjectivities of students, and the meaning of truth claims in a particular social context.

### **Avatars for Literacy and Social and Emotional Learning**

New educational technology investors, such as the New Schools Venture Fund created by venture capitalist and long-time educational privatizer John Doerr, invest in for-profit start-ups, such as online curriculum companies involved in student surveillance and data tracking (Class Dojo), avatars that teach literacy through scripted lessons and phonics (Amira Learning), and gamified online curriculum products (Centervention). The data produced by students is a valuable

commercial asset. The programs track, predict, and direct future behavior. The truth of the student is located in the body under surveillance. Centervention's Zoo U teaches students social and emotional learning by having them sit in front of a computer screen (instead of interacting with human beings), watch animated cartoons, and play video games about social interactions, even as the technology is incapable of engaging with the unique specificities of student subjectivity or cultural context. Amira Learning's avatar teaches students reading by having students sound out words, but it offers nothing in the way of engaging with the meaning of language or the social meaning of texts. Learning in these examples is about nothing more than the learning of discrete and decontextualized knowledge, and technical skills rather than understanding that could form the basis for social comprehension and action.

### **Biometric Pedagogy**

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a neoliberal venture philanthropy in education, spent millions to study biometric wrist sensors to measure teachers' efficacy by their effects on the bodies of students. Similarly, Affdex developed webcam biometric facial scanners to measure teacher efficacy by the physical changes to students' faces. A Montessori school named Wildflower puts biometric tracking slippers on toddlers to accumulate and crunch movement data.<sup>41</sup> These products presume that learning can be read from the bodies of children. There is no place in this model of pedagogy for dialogue, thinking, mediation, or the relating of knowledge to experience and the broader social world. Truth claims are grounded in the body of students to be read off by the technology.

### **Play-Based Learning**

LEGO Foundation and the OECD have been pushing for the quantification of play-based learning and the making of play-based learning into a quantifiable global learning standard.

LEGO, the largest toy maker in the world, is moving to the interface of traditional physical toys with online apps, data commerce, and for-profit education initiatives. The OECD is pursuing the same aims as with the social and emotional learning quantification project: facilitating social control and corporate profit. Again, truth is found in the body and is to be quantified and measured through the use of apps.

It would be all too easy to explain as conspiracies this trend of quantifying and standardizing affect and behavior into data for commerce by billionaires (such as Zuckerberg and Gates), supranational organizations (such as the OECD), corporations (such as LEGO) and these tech companies. Instead, they collectively represent the project of what William Robinson calls “militarized” capital accumulation through extraction of the lifeworld. That is, such new forms of privatization that displace teacher labor with technology and manufacture children’s data respond to the crisis of surplus capital, capital’s need for ever new places to invest, and the crisis of legitimacy for capitalism. These projects create new markets, in part by pillaging public education, public labor, and the lived experience of childhood. These projects also function ideologically and pedagogically to produce forms of teaching and learning that deny the politics of knowledge and the relationships between truth claims and authority; to treat learning as an effect on bodies; and to undermine forms of dialogue that can facilitate interpretation and judgment of the interplay between knowledge, self, and society.

In all these examples, paranoid politics and pedagogy is evident in terms of the antidemocratic pedagogical approaches promoted by these technologies; the approach to learning, social relations, and society taught by these technologies; and the assumptions, values, and ideologies undergirding these products. All these technologies aim for profit through ever greater control over youth. In addition, these technologies promote faith in data and truth as quantification of decontextualized



fact rather than fostering modes of interpretation in which students learn to analyze the values, assumptions, ideologies, and material and symbolic contests behind the formation of data, which makes that data meaningful in a particular context. These technologies reveal a profound paranoia about the uniqueness, spontaneity, and varieties of human experience and cultures, not to mention thought and imagination that cannot be standardized, measured, and controlled.

Rising distrust of specialists and expertise driven by these crises opens questions about the politics of knowledge and interests. The political right channels doubt and distrust of expertise towards hatred, scapegoating, and authoritarianism. Alternatively, the right kinds of educational projects can foster critical pedagogies, the development of critical consciousness and democratic dispositions that comprehend the politics and power relations involved in claims to truth by experts. Contemporary crises of hegemony and agency foster scepticism about the relationship between specialization and truth. This scepticism has enabled new authoritarian modes that relativize truth and equate it with power while falsely grounding identitarian truth in essentialized bodies and reified data. However, this scepticism also challenges the guise of disinterested objectivity that denies the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and objectivity: the ways that subjects are formed pedagogically and ideologically in part through the instantiation of social antagonisms and the ways that subjects are implicated in the investigation, interpretation, and formation of contested knowledge.

The critical, political, and pedagogical task ahead is to translate the proliferating doubt about the guise of disinterested objectivity into critical modes of interpretation that can form the basis for public action. On one hand, this suggests eschewing both the total distrust of expertise now prevalent on the right and the guise of disinterested objectivity in its

individualized professional forms, embracing instead the valuation of expertise as universally interested. That is, forms of specialization and expertise need to be situated in terms of human and planetary benefit rather than in terms of disinterested technical efficiency and the logic of accumulation, exchange, mastery of nature, and domination. Getting there is a political and educational project. The effort would entail fostering critical literacies and modes of investigation of the relationships between claims to truth and forms of social authority of the claimant; contextualizing claims to truth in relation to the broader social, political, economic, and cultural forces, systems, and structures informing truth claims. It also demands educating people to comprehend, criticize, and reject the politics of paranoia that translates doubts and suspicions into fear and hatred of essentialized groups, particularly races and genders but also political parties and movements. The critical pedagogical response to the politics of paranoia in its various guises has to involve grounding interpretation in broader egalitarian and emancipatory normative political and ethical referents. Critical pedagogical practices in all places where culture is produced and meanings are made can be sites for cultural criticism and cultural production. Such practices can respond to the politics of paranoia and its scapegoating, essentialism, depoliticization, and antidemocratic representations and identifications. Critical pedagogical practices can respond by producing radically democratic identifications and subject positions; educating about the systemic causes that structure selves and societies; and teaching the tools for educated interpretation, informed judgment, and democratic dialogue and exchange. A crucial task is to reject the ideologies of technology utopianism and the mistaken framing of AI and other new technologies as autonomous expressions of “mechanical objectivity”—that is, as somehow beyond interpretation, cultural politics, and cultural pedagogy.<sup>42</sup>

The politics of paranoia spreads a culture of distrust and framing of all as the enemy to be potentially annihilated.

Critical pedagogy can spread a culture of trust in people to use knowledge collectively for shared benefit and associated living, even as associating with others must involve recognizing their differences. Trusting others; expanding social relations of solidarity; and embracing an inherently agonistic society, self, and culture is bound up with a certain embrace of the inherent risk of living—a risk that parallels the very risk of using language and being misunderstood, because language is characterized by an ineradicable slippage in meaning at the core of signification. As social psychologist and Frankfurt School social philosopher Erich Fromm wrote in response to the specter of nuclear annihilation through Mutually Assured Destruction during the Cold War,

Closely related to the problem of the mode of paranoid thinking is the wish for absolute security. . . . This craving is irrational (1) because there is no absolute security in life, (2) because once it is established as the dominant goal there is no limit to the means sought for the reach this goal, (3) because in the search for this goal the person cripples himself and loses all pleasure in living. In fact, the chase after security is a boomerang: It creates more insecurity than it avoids.<sup>43</sup>

Fromm's insight reminds us that the politics of paranoia depends on a destructive fantasy of total security that involves the impossible dream of shutting down social agonism, politics, and difference as well as the fantasy of abdicating the self to the bigger body and its promise of total incorporation—the fascist promise. Radical inequality and the precarity, hegemonic crises, and agentic and democratic crises produce disorientation and demands for security. The response to this must be to struggle for human and planetary security but within what Stuart Hall called a "politics without guarantees"<sup>44</sup>—a promise of vibrant and contested democratic culture with difference and agonism at the core.

This is a portion of the eBook [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14387.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14387.001.0001)  
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# The Alienation of Fact

## Digital Educational Privatization, AI, and the False Promise of Bodies and Numbers

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### Citation:

*The Alienation of Fact: Digital Educational Privatization, AI, and the False Promise of Bodies and Numbers*

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DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/14387.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14387.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262371735

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Names: Saltman, Kenneth J., 1969– author.

Title: The alienation of fact : digital educational privatization, AI, and the false promise of bodies and numbers / Kenneth J. Saltman.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022005023 (print) | LCCN 2022005024 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262544368 (Paperback) | ISBN 9780262371735 (PDF) | ISBN 9780262371742 (ePub)

Subjects: LCSH: Artificial intelligence—Educational applications. | Privatization in education. | Verification (Empiricism)

Classification: LCC LB1028.43 .S26 2022 (print) | LCC LB1028.43 (ebook) | DDC 370.285—dc23/eng/20220608

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022005023>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022005024>