

A further comment on Paulson's gift to Harvard: Public education and American democracy

By Barry Grey
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The media's response to Harvard University's June 3 announcement that it was receiving a gift of \$400 million from hedge fund billionaire John Paulson was generally celebratory. There was virtually no expression of concern over the antidemocratic implications of the fact that schools at every level, from K-12 to college, are increasingly dependent on handouts from America's super-rich.

Paulson's donation, in return for which Harvard renamed its school of engineering the "Harvard John A. Paulson School," is only the latest in a series of nine-figure gifts to elite colleges from billionaire investors and CEOs. Over the past two years, Harvard has received handouts of \$150 million and \$350 million; Cornell and Johns Hopkins have each been given \$350 million; Yale has been the beneficiary of donations of \$250 million and \$150 million.

There is nothing progressive about this trend. It is part of the general subordination of all aspects of US society to the capitalist market and the vagaries of the new financial aristocracy that rules America. It will do nothing to resolve the desperate crisis of education that confronts working-class and many middle-class youth from elementary school to the college level.

On the contrary, it is of a piece with the general dismantling of public schools and restructuring of education along openly class lines. At the university level, this takes the form of soaring tuition and board costs that either exclude working-class youth from college or impose a crushing burden of student debt.

College presidents are increasingly receiving million-dollar-plus pay packages. Last year, the number of public university presidents getting over \$1 million rose to 9, more than double the previous year's

number. In 2013, 42 private college presidents made more than \$1 million.

Privately owned, for-profit charter schools are supplanting public schools at the K-12 level, and at all levels so-called "public-private partnerships" are strengthening the grip of corporations over the education system.

The privatization of education is profoundly antidemocratic and alien to the basic principles and conceptions that animated the American Revolution. Among the most far-sighted and principled of the Founding Fathers, the development of a system of universal public education was seen as a fundamental responsibility of the state and prerequisite for the survival of democracy. This view was rooted in the Enlightenment traditions of reason, science and popular sovereignty.

It was championed as an antidote to the aristocratic principle that prevailed in Europe and deemed essential to the egalitarian impulse spelled out in the Declaration of Independence's revolutionary assertion that "all men are created equal."

Among the foremost champions of public education was Thomas Jefferson. In a 1786 letter to fellow Virginian and signer of the Declaration of Independence George Wythe, Jefferson wrote that "the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people." In another letter to Wythe of the same year, he wrote: "Preach...a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [of monarchical government]."

In a letter the following year to James Madison,

Jefferson wrote: “Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.”

In his first inaugural address (1801), the newly elected president declared: “The diffusion of information and the arraignment of all abuses at the bar of public reason, I deem [one of] the essential principles of our government, and consequently [one of] those which ought to shape its administration.”

In 1817, Jefferson proposed a system of public schools in Virginia for the purpose of “diffus[ing] knowledge more generally through the mass of the people.” It took the destruction of the Southern slave system in the Civil War 48 years later to realize Jefferson’s project.

In 1819, Jefferson founded the University of Virginia as a state-funded institution. In line with his strict secularism, he made no provision for a chapel in his original design of the campus.

In 1818, in a letter to Joseph C. Cabell, Jefferson summed up his passionate commitment to public education, writing, “A system of general instruction, which shall reach every description of our citizens from the richest to the poorest, as it was the earliest, so will it be the latest of all the public concerns in which I shall permit myself to take an interest.”

There was a profound democratic and egalitarian impulse underlying the fight for universal, state-funded public education. Some of the most determined and principled opponents of slavery made the fight for public schools a personal crusade.

Thaddeus Stevens, the leader of antislavery Radical Republicans in the US House of Representatives prior to and during the Civil War, played the decisive role in obtaining passage in 1865 of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. But shortly before his death three years later, he told a friend, “I say my life has not been entirely in vain. When I remember that I gave free schools to Pennsylvania, my adopted state, I think my life may have been worth living.”

It took the American Revolution and the Second American Revolution, the Civil War of 1861-1865, to firmly establish public education in the US. Throughout much of the South, public schools emerged only with the defeat of the slave owners and the emancipation of the slaves. In many of the former

Confederate states, public schools were established by the legislatures that came to power under Reconstruction.

Public education was defended and expanded and access to college made broader under the pressure of the mass struggles of the American working class in the last decades of the 19th century and first eight decades of the 20th.

Over the past 35 years, along with the suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions, the decimation of much of US industry, and the financialization of the US economy, social inequality has reached levels that are incompatible with democratic norms.

This retrograde process is embodied in the ascendancy of a new financial aristocracy that derives its vast wealth not from the production of useful goods or expansion of society’s productive forces, but rather from entirely parasitic speculative activities that are of an essentially criminal character.

Alongside the negation of the democratic achievements of the American bourgeois revolutions, a social counterrevolution is being carried out to destroy all of the past social conquests of the working class.

The disintegration of American democracy finds noxious expression in the subordination of education to the capitalist market. The American bourgeoisie long ago repudiated the democratic views of its revolutionary forebears. It has no interest in informing and educating the many millions to whom it can offer no prospect for decent employment or a decent life.

Figures such as Paulson embody this reactionary degeneration. A parasite and social malefactor, he was deeply involved in the criminal financial machinations that triggered the financial crash of 2008 and the global slump that continues to this day.

Today, the democratic right to quality education for all can be secured only by means of the struggle of the working class for socialism.

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