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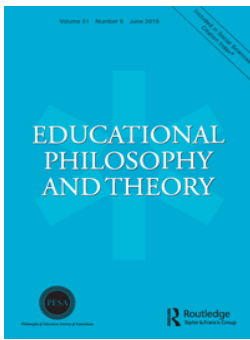
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# Conjuring optimism in dark times: Education, affect and human capital

Sam Sellar<sup>a</sup> and Lew Zipin<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Childhood, Youth and Education Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how the discursive construction, valuation and subjective experience of human capital is evolving in parallel with crises of capital as a world-system. Ideology critique provides tools for analysing policy ‘fictions’ that aim to sustain investment in human capital through education. Foucauldian analytical tools enable analysis of how human capital has become a project of self-appreciation and cultivation of positive psychological traits. We argue that the work of Lauren Berlant provides an important complement to these approaches and enables us to analyse how crises of capital are being lived as the crueling of optimism about social mobility through investment in oneself as human capital. The paper points to an educational politics and pedagogy for living through infrastructural breakdown in darkly uncertain historical times.

## KEYWORDS

Affect; education policy; human capital; ideology critique; Foucault; optimism

## Introduction

This paper undertakes a conceptual investigation of recent shifts in the constitution of ‘human capital’ that are emergent in precarious historical conditions. We argue that the prefixing of ‘human’ to ‘capital’ performs discursively in ways that reflect significant material-historical tensions in justifications for capitalism as a world-system that can enable both powerful accumulation of wealth and fair distribution of wellbeing (Wallerstein, 1983). We argue further that rising designations of human dispositions, affects and emotions as objects for capitalisation indicate crisis in deep historical logics of capitalist sustainability. In what follows, we hyphenate ‘human’ and ‘capital’—i.e. human capital—when we mean to highlight new and mutating dynamisms in the conjunction of these two terms.

We note that mutations and performative effects of human capital discourse are an educational problematic because production of human capital for global knowledge economies has become a dominant rationale for education policy and practice. Indeed, it is difficult to find an example of national or global education policy anywhere that does not frame education as a crucial investment in human capital. With the global spread of this policy discourse, what gets defined as traits of the human that can be capitalised upon expands increasingly into noncognitive territories that have become a focus of economic research and large-scale educational assessments (Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Jencks, 1979; Levin, 2013). The turn to noncognitive skills has had various implications for curricula and pedagogies in schools, including through programmes designed to promote calculable and economically

**CONTACT** Sam Sellar  [s.sellar@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:s.sellar@mmu.ac.uk)

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productive character traits such as motivation, persistence or aspiration (e.g. Duckworth, 2016), linked to discourses of social and emotional well-being.

In this paper, we first consider how established critical tools—ideology critique and Foucauldian discourse analysis—offer explanatory power for understanding expansions of human capital into new psycho-emotive territories. We argue further, however, that these tools, while of continuing value, do not sufficiently register emergent qualities of social-cultural experience—especially affective qualities—calling for more timely conceptual-analytical tools to which we turn.

Compatible with ideology-critique, we draw on Wallerstein (1983, 1998, 2013) and Harvey (2011) to argue that we are living in dark historical times when capacities for capital continually to expand are diminishing to a ‘crisis’ point. Continual growth is an imperative for sustaining capitalism and diminished potential for expansion thus propels it towards a limit-point of instability. Crises of capital in various spheres now place its defining logic of sustainable accumulation into question. As Wallerstein (1983) argues:

Historical capitalism ... [is] that concrete time-bounded, space-bounded integrated locus of productive activities within which the endless accumulation of capital has been the economic objective or ‘law’ that has governed or prevailed in fundamental economic activity. (p. 18)

Further, as Wark (2015) argues, the expansion of capital has run on carbon, and is thus thoroughly imbricated in ecological crises that threaten to reach a point of no return (Scranton, 2015). As crises across economic and environmental spheres produce contradictions and breakdowns that render life more difficult for most, much ideological work arises to create a pervasive sense that there is no alternative to capitalism—a condition that Fisher (2009) dubs ‘capitalist realism’. As Jameson (2003, p. 76) has suggested, ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’. However, this paper argues the possibility that efforts to translate more of ‘the human’ into capital may register how promises of the good life based on perpetual self-investment in capital accumulation are reaching a limit-point. In response, we argue, crisis perhaps becomes a ground for imagination and experimentation—in emotive, aesthetic and ethical registers—with new forms of expression that undermine, elude and exceed the particular ‘optimisms’ that are now promoted as valuable dispositions of human capital.

Through a Foucauldian lens, we see human capital discourse as mutating substantively, in terms of what it signifies, in association with the rise of neoliberalism. Human capital has become a pervasive mode of subjectivity tied to the injunction to ‘self-appreciate’ one’s economic value (Feher, 2009). Subjectivity has become a new intensive terrain in the impulse of capital extension, as geographical and then financial fronts of expansion reach limits. At the same time—returning to insights from ideology-critique—we see human capital discourse, in invoking new possibilities for self-appreciative accumulations, as addressing people’s worries about ‘staying afloat’ amidst conditions that warrant fears about downward mobility. In this sense, human capital discourse seeks to tame emotional stresses, invoking ‘positive’ emotions as the very basis of new capitalisation, thus salvaging meritocratic promises of upward mobility if accumulative behaviours proper to neo-liberal self-investment are pursued (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). Educational incitements to optimism about better life prospects through intensified self-investment are thus bound up in, and help to animate, the human capital project. Incitements to optimistic investment in one’s individual human capital, against indicators that broadly structural processes of capital accumulation are reaching historic limit-points, is an acute contradiction to wrestle with both existentially and theoretically in current times.

This paper explores acute tensions that emerge as efforts to conjure optimism about the prospects of hitching one’s star to human capital accumulation meet what Lauren Berlant (2011) observes as widespread experiences of an endemic ‘cruelling’ of optimism within currently shifting conditions of material-historical structure and infrastructure. In what follows, we first provide a brief historical survey of developments in economics and education relating to the conceptualisation, creation and calculation of human-capital value. We then consider analytical tools that help us to analyse these developments: (1) ideology-critique of how current crises of capital accumulation are masked via human capital discourse and (2) Foucauldian diagnosis of how subjectivities are re-normalised and newly incited via

human capital discourse. Arguing that these approaches are useful but insufficient for grasping human capital's present unfoldings, we then turn to the work of Berlant (2011, 2016) to consider how shifting historical conditions, which register in human capital's extensions into noncognitive territories, call for new analytic tools that give us better purchase on affective experiences within the (infra)structural crises of 'cruel' times.

## A brief history of human capital

The concept of human capital has a long history, extending back to the writings of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Karl Marx. However, the term gained new prominence in neoclassical economic theory during the 1960s and 1970s through the work of Chicago School economists such as Mincer (1974), Schultz (1971) and, most influentially, Becker (1975). In its most basic sense, human capital is used to explain the input of human actors into the production of value. From this theoretical position, the value of labour cannot simply be determined as a homogeneous commodity, because people produce different levels of output in the same period of time and the value of what they produce in this time can vary. Human capital theory thus explains differential productivity and earnings in terms of differences in productive capacities between individuals, which are attributed to different levels of experience, knowledge and skills acquired through education and training.

Debates during the 1960s and 1970s acknowledged resistance to the concept due to its perceived reduction of human worth to economic value. For example, Thurow (1970) argued that:

A sharp distinction must be drawn between the 'value' of a [person] and the value of a [person's] earnings. A [person's] human capital indicates the present value of [their] future productive capacities. It does not indicate [their] worth as a human being. (p. 16)

At the time, wherever people stood in the debate, the concept of human capital did not signify beyond skills and competences that could be seen as directly relevant to economic productivity. Schultz (1971) also acknowledged that the concept was 'offensive to some' and that 'to treat human beings as wealth that can be augmented by investment runs counter to deeply held values' (p. 26). However, he argued that such resistance was misplaced and that '[b]y investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to them. It is one way free [people] can enhance their welfare' (p. 26).

Over time, this way of thinking prevailed and conceptions of human worth and productive capacity converged such that, as Feher (2009, p. 26) argues, we have now come to a point where 'my human capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect'. The 'human' in front of capital has thus shifted from indicating 'economic' worth in distinction from 'human' worth, towards a conflation of the two senses of worth. Discourses of human capital now signify that human actors, whatever their relation to means of production, should cease to think of themselves as workers with only labour power as a productive commodity to sell, and instead think of themselves as embodying a unique set of saleable skills and attributes (Lemke, 2001). This is a key pivot point around which the expansion of 'human' attributes that are now understood as 'capital' have entered a new affective or immaterial phase (Hardt, 1999; Marazzi, 2011; Negri & Hardt, 1999).

As human capital discourse evolves, economic value is increasingly imputed to everyday life dispositions that would previously have been considered to belong to the moral domain of 'human worth', in distinction from 'economic value' (Stark, 2009). For example, companies profit from intangible assets such as brands that, as Arvidsson (2011) argues, depend on 'the ability to attract affective investments such as reputation, goodwill or employee motivation' (p. 44). Bowles, Gintis, and Osbourne (2001) argue that individual characteristics and behavioural traits—which they term 'incentive enhancing preferences'—are rewarded by labour markets and help to explain differences in earnings between individuals. Incentive enhancing preferences include a broad, 'irreducibly heterogeneous' (Bowles et al., 2001, p. 158) and context-dependent set of drives, attitudes and dispositions. An example of an incentive enhancing preference is a low rate of time preference; that is, an inclination to defer utility in the present in order to gain greater benefits in the future. Factored into models of time preference

are subjective and bodily attributes including senses of anticipation, visceral states, and dispositions such as impulsivity, compulsivity and inhibition (Frederick, Lowenstein, & O'Donoghue, 2002, p. 392). Luthans, Avolio, Avey and Norman (2007) report on a study that found 'initial evidence that positive constructs such as hope, resilience, efficacy, and optimism may have a common core that we have labelled for convenience as psychological capital that can be measured and related to performance and satisfaction' (p. 568). The inclusion of these dispositions in models of human capital extends the purview of human capital theory to states of bodily intensity.

In educational discourse and practice there have been two main fronts for the human capital push into curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The first continues a longstanding trend to promote educational development of skills, competencies and dispositions for the job market and has become a dominant framing for education policy globally (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). While the emphasis on work-readiness was always present, it has previously been balanced with other civic and social purposes for education, which at times have outweighed economic rationales. However, investment in human capital has become the overwhelming discourse since the 1990s, and with the new intensifications comes a widening of the concept of human capital to subsume civic and social purposes for education, which now translate into 'individual' traits with economic value.

For example, if we turn to the education work of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is a leading global source of education policy ideas, we see expansion of human capital into intangible dispositions reflected in policy analysis (Sellar & Lingard, 2014). The OECD argues that 'basic human capital', defined as 'productive capacities and characteristics' or 'skills' (OECD, 2002, p. 123), must now be understood in connection to 'wider human capital', defined as '[c]haracteristics that allow a person to build, manage and deploy basic human capital' (p. 124). The OECD asserts that 'motivational characteristics are likely to be central' to the value of wider human capital, particularly 'the willingness to trade current for future benefits—"future directedness"' (p. 124). Here we can see educational policy emphasis on developing the kinds of dispositions that are increasingly modelled as valuable elements of human capital.

With the widening of human capital comes a second front of expansion into qualities that can advance people's human capital 'portfolios' and which are articulated in psychological terms as contributing to 'success' and 'wellbeing', but are coded with economic implications for schooling. The field of positive psychology emerged around the investigation of such traits during the 1990s. Positive psychologists sought to move away from an emphasis on treating abnormal states to promoting healthy normalities (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000). This discourse, as it has been brought into education, might be interpreted as balancing economic rationales for accumulating wealth with more 'humanistic' concerns for wellbeing. There is of course a longer history, extending back to writings of Dale Carnegie (1937) and Napoleon Hill (1960), in which positive mental attitude is linked explicitly to economic success. However, more recent individualisation of civic and social purposes for education, and the growing tendency to quantify positive psychological traits using psychometrics, brings these traits into commensurability with human capital metrics (Sellar, 2015) and explicitly strengthens the convergence with the economic that was more implicitly present at the beginnings of this field of psychology.

A number of loci of such developments are significant. For example, Martin Seligman, perhaps the key figure in positive psychology, directs The Imagination Institute, a non-profit organisation with a mission to render imagination measurable. Angela Duckworth, recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship Award, has been pursuing research into the measurement of grit, a noncognitive trait defined in terms of low time preference and motivation to achieve goals (Duckworth, 2016). While both of these developments have indirect implications for economic agendas to drive innovation and productivity, a more direct sense of the economic relevance of noncognitive factors was signalled in the 2009 report by Nobel prize winning economists Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, with Jean-Paul Fitoussi (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009), on the measurement of social progress and economic growth using indicators beyond GDP. This project gave rise to the OECD's Better Life Initiative, has pursued new measures of wellbeing (OECD, 2013a). The OECD's influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) also generates one large volume of analysis that focuses specifically on student engagement with schooling, highlighting traits

such as drive, perseverance and motivation (OECD, 2013b). Rose (1999) has analysed how initiatives of this kind, at the same time as they signify extra-economic domains of individual psychology and wellbeing, also parallel and integrate with economic discourse. Indeed, we see in contemporary modes of governance a conversion of what sociologists would understand as social-relational dimensions of ethical and emotional life (Illouz, 2007) into supposedly individual traits and responsibilities that are then made commensurable with the imperatives of market capitalism and its metrics (Sellar, 2015; Shamir, 2008).

## The current historical crisis for capital accumulation

Developments in human capital are not happening in a vacuum, and we need to analyse them in historical contexts, especially in relation to significant crises in the structural trajectory of economic capital accumulation. Since the dynamics of a human capital conjunction is our focal problematic, we situate our analysis of (inter)subjective constructions within *human* capital discourse in relation to macro-scale analyses of what is happening to material-historical processes of *capital* accumulation presently. Most prominently, we draw on the work of Immanuel Wallerstein and David Harvey.

Both Wallerstein and Harvey identify the latter-half of the twentieth century as a critical turning point in capitalist capacity to maintain continual profit accumulation at sufficient rates of growth, without running aground on inherent contradictions that are becoming acute. Wallerstein (1983) notes that 'if we wish to understand how a system approaches its end, we must look at its contradictions, since all historical systems (indeed all systems) have inbuilt contradictions, which is why they all have limited lives' (p. 141). As a historian of capitalism as a world system, Wallerstein sees this system as having had a long life—approximately five hundred years. He has been arguing for some time that capitalism is now increasingly fraught by exacerbations of internal contradictions that have 'been with us from the beginning of the system' (p. 141), but which are

approaching the threshold of the point where ... contradiction can no longer be contained, that is, the point at which the necessary adjustments to maintain the normal functioning of the system will have so high a cost that they cannot bring the system into temporary equilibrium. (p. 141)

These contradictions involve acute tensions across theatres of economic accumulation, political legitimation and cultural belief systems. They also entail grave associated crises of environmental unsustainability; division and balkanisation of diverse population groups within nations; unsettling of international accords and power balances; declining welfare supports for national citizens undergoing hard times; rising flows of immigrants and refugees from 'peripheral' to 'metropole' regions; and more.

Wallerstein (1998) gives important attention to neoliberalism, which has linked the economic to many qualities of social life that classical liberalism kept distinct. He critiques 'the programme of neoliberalism, which has appeared to be so successful', but which he argues suffers from 'inherent limitations' (p. 46), in particular the anti-statism of neoliberal globalisation.

Far from representing the triumph of liberalism, and even less of renewed conservatism, this pervasive anti-statism, by delegitimising the state structures, has undermined an essential pillar of the modern world-system, the states system, a pillar without which the endless accumulation of capital is not possible. ... We have entered into the crisis of this system. The loss of hope and the accompanying fear are both part of the cause and the major symptom of this crisis. (p. 32)

The 'neo' revision of liberalism, argues Wallerstein, both reflects and further generates 'a serious loss of capacity' (p. 47) to provide legitimacy to state structures as competition among capital accumulators becomes intensified, at the same time that increasing population numbers and groups demand that capitalism and the state meet their needs and aspirations as promised. Wallerstein suggests that '[w]hat global liberalism had promised was reform, amelioration, and growing narrowing of the social and economic polarisation of the capitalist world-system. It has lost its magic' (p. 47) in its 'neo' developments. As Wallerstein (1983) and Picketty (2014) have shown, we are seeing globally increasing polarisation, not just in regions 'peripheral' to capital concentration, but within wealthy centres of capital, that is



palpable and distressing in the social lives of many. Optimism as a subjective disposition is consequently under threat and must now be conjured through new incitements.

Like Wallerstein, Harvey (2011) emphasises that, over its history, maintaining a steady and sufficient rate of capital accumulation—concentrated in wealthy nations, and incorporating exploitation of resources and cheap labour from wider zones of a ‘world economy’—has required that capital seek geographical expansion of resource and market investments and the geopolitical demarcation of powerful metropolises from resource-exploitable ‘developing’ peripheries. Equilibrium has been maintained through reasonable provision for needs and aspirations in the metropolises—including the integration of migrant groups—while containing unrest in the peripheries. However, in arguing that a geospatial limit-point has been reached, Harvey (2011) asks, ‘What spaces are left in the global economy for new spatial fixes for capital surplus absorption?’ He answers that ‘Africa is not yet fully integrated, but there is nowhere else with the capacity to absorb all this surplus capital’. He then asks, ‘What new lines of production can be opened up to absorb new growth?’ And he answers: ‘There may be no effective long term capitalist solutions (apart from reversion to fictitious capital manipulations) to this crisis of capitalism’ (p. 217). Harvey elaborates further on the dangers of relying on fictitiously manipulated lines of new production.

Compound growth for ever is not possible and the troubles that have beset the world these last thirty years signal that a limit is looming to continuous capital accumulation that cannot be transcended except by creating fictions that cannot last. Add to this the facts that so many people in the world live in conditions of abject poverty, that environmental degradations are spiralling out of control, that human dignities are everywhere being offended even as the rich are piling up more and more wealth under their command, and that the levers of political, institutional, judicial, military and media power are under such tight but dogmatic political control as to be incapable of doing much more than perpetuating the status quo. (p. 227, 228)

Harvey’s reference to ‘fictions’ is significant. In its most direct sense, his statement echoes much recent discourse among economists who observe a shift from investment in the ‘real economy’ to highly speculative and dangerous investments, detached from ‘market fundamentals’. Harvey, like Wallerstein, sees this kind of conjuring as heralding a limit-point for capital accumulation.

At some point quantitative changes lead to qualitative shifts and we need to take seriously the idea that we may be at exactly such an inflexion point in the history of capitalism. Questioning the future of capitalism itself as an adequate social system ought, therefore, to be in the forefront of current debate. (p. 217)

Harvey argues that we are now seeing a shift from productive economic expansion of capital accumulation across geographic space to fictitious ‘productivity’ through expansion into speculative dimensions. His diagnoses of the perils of fictitious investment do not speak explicitly to discursive shifts of the sort that we chronicle regarding what human capital comes to signify. However, we argue that there are ideological dimensions within the leaps, among capital-accumulating bodies, towards investment in conjured ‘new markets’, into which human capital discourse partakes and contributes. The prefixing of ‘human’ to ‘capital’ signals a significant qualitative shift in claims for capitalism’s continued accumulative possibility—indeed an attempt to quantify, and so give appearance of empirically substantive ballast to, qualitative fictions of self-investment potential. Here we see a turn towards embodied intensities—emotions, dispositions, aspirations and more—as territories of supposed human capital accumulation, as geo-spatial extensity reaches a historic inflexion-point.

## Human capital and ideology critique

To understand how shifts in *human* capital play into the fictive labours of Harvey’s inflexion-point in the crisis of economic capital, we need to pay attention to discrepancies between (a) the logic of economic capital accumulation and (b) the logic of human capital accumulation. With Wallerstein and Harvey, we underscore how a structural necessity of material-historical capitalism is widely unequal accumulation of scarce and highly valued properties. By significant contrast, human capital speaks to a promise of boundless capitalising potential of widely diverse characteristics from which we can generate value through imagination, innovation and optimism. The contrast between these two logics of accumulation



requires some elaboration. We begin with a discussion of the ideology of 'meritocracy' in relation to human capital discourse.

Meritocracy is central to ideological fictions of both capitalism-writ-large and human capital as the invitation to self-investment. Wallerstein (1983) notes that certain class fractions, such as 'administrators, technicians, scientists, educators', have 'been part of the bourgeoisie whose claim to participation in the sharing-out of the surplus has been given precise ideological form in the twentieth-century concept of human capital', which has '[I]ent itself to the concept known today as "meritocracy"' (p. 84). Like all persuasive ideological fictions, meritocracy speaks to partial realities of experience: most significantly, there is mobility within the class structure of capitalism. Meritocracy, argues Wallerstein, gave capitalism 'a framework within which individual mobility was possible without threatening hierarchical work-force allocation' (p. 85). Wallerstein observes that 'the percentage of the world's population for whom such ascent was possible has gone up' (p. 132), especially in prosperous times. However, at all times, 'meritocratic ascent remains very much the attribute of a minority. For meritocracy is a false universalism. It proclaims a universal opportunity that, by definition, is only meaningful if it is not universal. Meritocracy is intrinsically elitist' (p. 132).

At the current critical limit-point of capitalism, elitist selection is of a whole new order through which the falsity of universalist meritocratic promise is registering. People in the metropolises, and even in preferred class positions within metropolises, now legitimately feel anxious that downward mobility is a real possibility for them: indeed many experience it materially, and sense that it may be a prolonged and perhaps irreversible trend. As wider groups of people increasingly face downward mobility, the fiction of meritocracy itself is thus challenged, creating new crisis conditions at an ideological level. We suggest that human capital discourse functions, in significant part, as a fictive project of rejuvenating faith in promises of continued potential for expanding capital accumulation that can include groups who currently have precarious prospects for mobility.

A prominent and compelling development of such ideology critique is the unpacking of what Brown et al. (2011) call the 'opportunity bargain': the promise that more learning will result in more earning. Brown et al. argue that now

[t]he stark reality is that what the few can achieve the majority cannot regardless of how educated they are. ... Rather than enter an 'age of human capital', where the economic successes of individuals and whole economies depend on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves, human capital is subject to the laws of diminishing returns. (p. 12)

Instead of an 'opportunity bargain', many find themselves caught in an 'opportunity trap', argue Brown et al., where rules of 'normal' selective and elitist meritocracy are broken, and selection for success intensifies, such that even more elite groups do not enjoy reasonable security against *downward* mobility in exchange for their learning efforts.

People may therefore be doing everything that is expected of them in terms of acquiring marketable skills, investing in further learning ... but it may not deliver the expected returns ... The problem that many confront today is that doing one's best may not be good enough. (pp. 140-141)

It is here that the expansions of human capital into widening dispositional territories—what are often called noncognitive skills, or wider human capital—become ideologically significant. Brown et al. write:

Today, the selection criteria have been extended to include a range of behavioural competencies, including personal drive, self-reliance, and interpersonal skills. ... Success in the labor market has come to depend on 'personal capital': the (re)packaging of the self to capitalize upon personal qualities valued by employers. This includes ... soft currencies, including social confidence, good communication skills, and social fit with colleagues and customers. (p. 140)

Such multiplication of 'selection criteria' confounds long-standing suasions of meritocratic promise. The ideological hold of meritocracy's partial 'truth value'—that there is room for upward mobility of reasonable numbers of individuals within capital's structuring of classed inequalities—becomes fraught with new losses of faith, as appearances of 'commitment to meritocracy ha[ve] been defeated by new forms of [selective] privilege' (p. 133). This line of ideology critique unpacks the concept of human capital as a promise of employability in exchange for meritocratic effort that, increasingly, cannot be delivered. Noting that the ideological legitimacy of meritocracy hinges on 'a belief that there are no limits to the

number of idea-generating jobs that could be created to compensate for those lost to Asia, even if there are limits to the expansion of manufacturing employment', Brown et al. query: 'But where are these new jobs? They depend on an article of faith rather than hard evidence' (p. 123).

We agree with this critique, which extends Wallerstein's unpacking of meritocracy discourse to twenty-first century fictions about new domains of human capitalisation. However, we see human capital discourse as reaching further than that kind of promise, in inciting people to believe they can and must be self-entrepreneurial creators of their own profit-ability through marketing new aspects of themselves that they had not previously imagined could constitute 'capital'. We suggest that the expansion of the human capital discourse into psychological territories of affect makes 'positive' appeals, at an emotive level, towards attenuating or at least forestalling people's anxious senses of new precarity about future possibilities (Berlant, 2011; Standing, 2011). This diagnosis is explanatory of the expanding conceptualisation, and translation into measurement, of 'positive psychology' constructs.

Such ideology critique, we argue, is called for to challenge sleights-of-hand that human capital discourse performs. To evoke psycho-affective abundance and infinite expandability—conjuring not just potentials for newly abundant knowledge-economy jobs that Brown et al. (2011) question, but unlimited potentials for self-entrepreneurial creation of newly profitable life-chances—contradicts the current crisis of capital accumulation. Indeed, it contradicts capitalism's core material-historical logic of *scarcity*. We see it as no accident that, in times when fewer can accumulate even securely liveable—let alone investable—wealth, the scarcity of substantive wealth distribution that characterises the historical structuring of grossly unequal *economic* capital accumulation potential is 'compensated' (and contradicted) by an *ideo*-logic of *unbounded proliferation* of potential to accumulate new amounts and, especially, kinds of *human* capital.

If current crises of material-historical capitalism express a limit-point, where it is no longer possible to maintain the normative logic of meritocratic mobility as compensation for necessary capitalist inequality in the growth and distribution of wealth and wellbeing, then we might expect ideological fictions to multiply wherever the impulse is strong to sustain belief in capital's promise. It is thus proper to recognise that human capital discourse effectively offers fictive hope as balm for troubled emotional states of people in dark material conditions. A further rub is that hope offered through human capital promises is typically embedded in a discourse of 'responsibilisation' as analysed by Foucauldian thinkers such as Rose (1999). This discourse suggests that individuals, in becoming self-responsible for making good on the infinite possibilities for self-capitalisation, are also blameable for their failures to do so. In a time of growing material scarcity and economic precarity, such Foucauldian analysis does partly echo ideology-critiques according to which false promises mask actual traps. However, a Foucauldian orientation asks us to consider different performative work—moving us outside of ideology critique—of discourse that prefixes 'human' to 'capital'.

## Human capital and Foucauldian analysis

The prefixing of 'human' to 'capital' is, for Foucault (2008), part of a historical shift in processes of subjectivation and the governance of populations that he analysed in his lectures on neoliberalism and biopolitics. Drawing on Foucault, Feher (2009, p. 25) claims that human capital has become the form of neoliberal subjectivity: 'the concept of human capital is less a symptom of the gradual 'commodification' of the liberal subject than it is the expression of an emergent neoliberal condition, the novelty of which has been so far underestimated'. This highlighting of *novelty* implies need for new analytical tools. For Foucauldians such as Feher (2009) or Rose (1999), the analytical shift is from emphasis on ideological masking of structurally-positioned interests and power-plays, to historic emergence of shifting conditions for subjective formations that carry new potentials for self-understanding and acting. In the emphasis on human capital that marks neoliberalism, according to the Foucauldian analytic, the locus of self-as-capital-accumulator shifts from productive enterprises to subjective productions across every walk of life.

Unlike critics who analyse ideological confoundings of the 'real conditions' or 'core logic' of capital, including capital's crises, Foucauldians such as Gordon (1991) and Lemke (2001) note that, for Foucault, there is no such 'real'. Rather, as Lemke summarises Foucault's argument, '[w]hat is called capitalism is not the product of a pure economic process and historical capitalism cannot be derived from a "logic of capital"' (p. 194). That is, 'there is no [essential] logic to capital; as any past, present or future mode of capitalism is 'historically singular (*one* form of capitalism among possible other forms)', consisting of contingent assemblages of any 'number of economic and institutional variables' that operate 'in a field of possibilities' (p. 194). (See Zipin and Brennan (2009) for critical discussion of this stance).

From this difference in conceptual perspective about what defines 'capital', Foucauldians see discourses of human capital as constituting the neoliberal subject not as a wage earner but a self-developer and accumulator of talents and potentialities; not as a possessor of labour power to be sold as a commodity but as an 'entrepreneur of himself' (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). Key to this self-enterprising subject is a historical shift in the logic of human capital investment. As Feher (2009, p. 26) quotes Theodore Schultz, 'not all investment in human capital is for future earnings alone, some of it is for future well-being in forms that are not captured in the earnings stream of the individual in whom the investment is made'. Mirroring global developments in the financialisation of capital, the imperative for human capital is growth in an expansive sense of what this term can signify, not merely maximising income. Feher continues: '[I]nsofar as our condition is that of human capital in a neoliberal environment, our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves' (p. 27).

Of course, the terms 'value' and 'appreciate' carry double-entendres of economic and moral meaning. However, the more classical liberal conception of the subject would see these as different discourse systems, with one applying to the necessity of selling one's labour and capacities as gainful commodities, and the other applying to the worth of humanness that lies beyond the economic realm. The neoliberal project of self-appreciation collapses these two registers and thus effects a slippage between economic and moral value, such that the subject becomes a site of accumulation of capital understood in terms of both economic *and* more-than-economic worth. Capital thus takes on new forms and logics as the neoliberal subject embodies new 'special type[s] of capital ... not like other forms, for the ability, skill and knowledge cannot be separated from the person who possesses them' (Lemke, 2001, p. 199). Self-appreciation is also marked by a shift from the quantitative abstractness of accumulating exchange value to the qualitative specificities of appreciating dispositional traits of the human. Indeed, Feher observes that 'it is arguably the psychological discourse of "self-esteem" that is the most accurate correlate of practices and policies that aim at maximising the (self-)appreciation of human capital' (pp. 28, 29).

The collapsing of economic and moral worth in the locus of the subject creates new processes through which people become self-governing. Feher argues that

it is therefore possible to govern subjects seeking to increase the value of their human capital, or, more precisely, to act on the way they govern themselves, by inciting them to adopt conducts deemed valorising and to follow models for self-valuation that modify their priorities and inflect their strategic choices. (p. 28)

In the Foucauldian project, this inciting force of governing 'mentalities', or *governmentality*, is not concentrated in a particular structural location or state apparatus, but distributes across populations in cultural-material assemblages of epistemes and practices that condition the 'conduct of conduct': the production of desires that *both* align with discursively internalised norms *and* generate new possibilities for self-actualisation.

The prevailing language of human capital discourse is economic and this invites analysis along ideology-critique lines about economic rationalisation. However, Foucauldian insights about the working together of moral and economic registers suggest that the economic terminology functions normatively in registers that exceed the 'economic', extending Foucault's Nietzschean project of the genealogy of morals into a history of the present. Such analysis ironically inverts, as well as providing an alternative perspective to, the kind of Marxian ideology critique that, in 'classical liberal' times, unpacked supposedly

non-economic discourses of human worth in terms of coded economic functions such as interpellating subjects into an 'imaginary relationship ... to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971, p. 162).

We take the Foucauldian lens for analysing the constitution of dispositional and affective dimensions of wider human capital as adding explanatory power in its shift in emphasis from misrecognition of interests to normative 'incitements'. Human capital discourse is, from a Foucauldian perspective, powerfully constitutive and, at the same time, part of the fabric of conditions for 'new possibility'. Seen as rhetoric, human capital discourse is analysable through persuasive ideology critiques of how it functions to co-opt growing pessimism among populations unsettled by new kinds and degrees of downward mobility and a looming sense that political-economic institutions of capital accumulation and government may not be working in their interests. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in promises that education can provide 'well-being', 'resilience', 'persistence', 'motivation', 'aspiration' and other 'positive-psychological' human capital (Staunæs, 2011). However, we agree with Feher's (2009) suggestion that such human capital constructs are *also* part of the productive incitements of a neo-liberal condition, the historical 'novelty of which has been so far underestimated' (p. 25). For Foucault, this entails new normalisations of subjectivity, but also incitement of potentials towards new self, social and even (infra-)structural re-formations.

We thus argue for *both* ideology-critique *and* Foucauldian analytics, in search of explanatory power in relation to historical mutations in human capital discourse and effects. But we also want to argue that these two analytical approaches, independently or together, are not sufficient for grasping capital's crises and how they condition subjective and social lives. Ideology-critique works primarily at a macro level, emphasising the structural logic of *capital*, and thus does not finely attend to textured emergences of new subjective dynamics through which populations are incited to self-appreciate as embodiments of *human* capital. However, ideology-critique does take seriously the acute crisis conditions of economic capital. Foucauldian lenses, while contributing greater focus on re-formations of the subject as a self-governing locus of appreciative accumulations, do not attend to structural depth and the critical limit-point of capital's accumulation logic. Moreover, Foucauldian analysis tends towards *cool* genealogy of morals, without sufficient registry of the *heat* of ethico-emotive response within lived conditions. We see this *flat affect* in Foucauldian analysis as inadequate to register actually embodied and emotive living-through of very difficult conditions in the present. We suggest that work associated with the affective turn in social theory, particularly the work of Lauren Berlant, offers stronger prospects for diagnosing ethico-emotive dimensions of a material-meets-discursive history of the lived present and verging futures.

## Human capital, affect and cruel optimism

In this section, we seek to think beyond insufficiencies for elucidating human capital through lenses of ideology critique and Foucauldian analysis. Our project has hinged on attention to how human capital's discursive mutations have extended from material-economic to noncognitive terrains, and increasingly into affective registers. Understanding this shifting human capital phenomenology calls for attention, at once, to levels of both macro-structure and embodied subjectivity. While ideology-critique and Foucauldian analysis respectively give focus and insight into the one and the other of these levels of the social, the extension of human capital discourse into *affective* territories signifies dimensions of social life in current times that, we argue, exceed the grasp of those two analytics. We find fitting tools for analysing present structural-meets-lifeworld crises of capital in Lauren Berlant's (2011, 2016) recent work.

Central to Berlant's argument is her diagnosis that current life-world social spaces are characterised by pervasive experiences of 'cruel optimism'. Berlant (2011) defines cruel optimism as affective 'attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (p. 24).

What's cruel about these attachments ... is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (p. 24)

Berlant argues that many people's trajectories of strategically sensible investment in hoped-for futures are now chronically thwarted, due to new ways and degrees of constraint across various life circumstances, endemic to material-historical conditions of current times. Hence, the crueling of optimism for 'living on' in ways that enable people to look forward to being in the world manifests as wide-spread sensory apprehension. Berlant's attention to dynamics of desire—through which particular *contents* of attachment (e.g. human capital's promises) feed a more generalised subjective sense of self-formative need for hopeful possibility 'to look forward'—extends analysis to pre-subjective terrains of affect. Yet in the current historical juncture, suggests Berlant, these affect-energised attachments—felt as crucial to 'living on'—also, in an acute double-bind, threaten the wellbeing of subjects:

[O]ptimism is cruel when it takes shape as an affectively stunning double bind: a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent. (p. 51)

We suggest that ideology-critique emphasises *content* (e.g. the opportunity bargain) while Foucauldian analysis emphasises *form* (e.g. the constitution of self-appreciating subjects). Human capital, as we have analysed it, invokes creation of value through binding pre-subjective (affective) energies into 'personalised' nameable and measurable dispositions and emotions (e.g. optimism). However, the crisis conditions of capital undermine optimism and thus also undermine subjectivities that emerge as affectively attached to promises of human capital. As Berlant (2011) writes, 'where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalising or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place' (pp. 24, 25). The conjunction of 'human' and 'capital' tends to thwart the 'keeping on' of the very subjectivities it incites, giving rise to a schismatic affective registry of structural crisis. The 'affectively stunning double bind' of cruel optimism—cruelling the object of desire, and *the possibility of optimism itself*—actualises the crisis of capital at the level of the human capital subject for whom, in seeking to accumulate self-appreciations of various sorts, optimism becomes an intensive vanishing horizon to be ever-more-extensively pursued.

While Berlant attends closely to emerging subjectivities and how these bind with pre-subjective energies of affect, her argument embeds subjective-emotive formations in social conditions of current capitalist and other structural crises. Berlant (2016) offers analytically potent redefinitions of 'structure' and, relatedly, 'infrastructure': 'I am redefining "structure" here as *that which organises transformation* and "infrastructure" as that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself' (p. 394; original emphasis). Berlant further explains infrastructure as 'the lifeworld of structure' (p. 393): as social-interactional sites of proximate living among others, at once structurally reproductive *and* transformative. As capital encounters its limit-crises at the level of structure, such crisis registers as *glitches* in living social textures of infrastructure; that is, what binds us to structures-in-breakdown also falters. Writes Berlant: '[A]t some crisis times ... politics is defined by a collectively held sense that a glitch has appeared in the reproduction of life' (p. 393). Berlant does not see the political project for times of cruel optimism as pursuing repair of these glitches in reproduction, but rather as pursuing new genres for living on. Her analytical project is to recognise and articulate new genres emerging in-and-from living the infrastructural glitches.

We suggest that current and ongoing mutations in human capital discourse express attempts by policy-makers, positive psychologists and others to simulate repairs of glitches in the infrastructures for 'keeping on' in lifeworlds of capitalist crisis. For example, the project of defining and measuring human capital, to be acquired in schools, in noncognitive terms—including dispositional-emotive constructs such as 'grit' (Duckworth, 2016), 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2006), and, indeed, 'optimism' (Seligman, 1998)—constitutes a move to bind affect to restorations of optimism. Yet such 'repair-jobs' contribute poignantly to the double-bind of cruel optimism.

In taking up the analytical significance, in the current historical juncture of what Berlant (2016, p. 396) calls 'glitchinfrastructures'—which we understand as crucial incentivising conditions for moves to recuperate 'optimism' as human capital—we argue that the phenomenology of human capital discourse

exceeds both ideology-critique and Foucauldian analytical tools. Ideology-critique apprehends the structural depth of crisis, but overlooks important textures of glitchinfrastructure and (inter)subjective life. We agree that meritocratic promises of an opportunity bargain (Brown et al., 2011) cruelly mask lived realities of opportunity traps. However, the dynamics involved are not limited to simple ideological masking. The progenitors of human capital discourse themselves wrestle with ways through crises that resist their 'solutions', limited by the constraints of their frameworks and political imperatives. In enacting the impulse to recuperate limit-point crises of capitalist structure, registered by people as glitches in life-world infrastructures, human capital discourse mutates into affective territories. As such, human capital discourse arouses attention to where crisis is emotively lived and embodied, and points us to the analytical need to situate this emotive living of crisis—and human capital discourse that moves to recuperate it—in the structural crises of late-modern capitalism.

Foucauldian approaches recognise the historical novelty of conditions of possibility for emergent subjective transformations, but not the affectively textured anguishes of 'glitchinfrastructure' living on, let alone how these textures connect to crises at the level of structure. We suggest that, in some ways, the Foucauldian concept of 'incitement' feeds into the syndrome of cruel optimism in association with the argument that, because capital has no necessary logic (Lemke, 2001), human capital discourse can incentivise constructive possibilities for self and social reinventions. For example, Feher (2009) concludes:

[I]t may be that for the Left, challenging neoliberal modes of self-appreciation, rather than rejecting the framework of the neoliberal condition, is not only a sound tactical move. More decisively, it may also be a way of warding off its current melancholy by means of reentering the domain of the enviable and desirable—of raising, from its own perspective, the question of what constitutes an appreciable life. (p. 41)

This gesture to a Left project of pursuing more desirable subjective modes of self-appreciative reinvention *within* the neoliberal framework relies too much, we suggest, on a theory of possible positive incitements. It does not register the depth of emotive conditions in glitchinfrastructure times and spaces of cruel optimism; nor does it sufficiently connect infrastructure experience to structural levels of political-economic crisis.

By contrast, Berlant's conception of infrastructure works to elucidate fuller textures and ethico-emotive significances of structural crisis as made social—as lived and (inter)subjectively embodied. It also furthers conception of possibilities for counter-movements that are grounded in the infrastructure living of crisis.

This way of thinking infrastructure-making as the convergence scene of various value abstractions, material protocols for metabolising resources, and socially distributed experience taps into David Harvey's view that the disturbance capital makes in creating dominant class interest infrastructures can also foster countermovements in new infrastructures for life and sociality, despite and in response to the neglect and destructiveness of the state and capital toward the very contexts of life and lives that they're exploiting. (Berlant, 2016, p. 403)

By 'countermovements' Berlant does not signify large collectivities such as broad-based 'class' movements engaged in struggle, but rather situated localities in which people in proximity live their way into alternative genres—experimentally, aesthetically and ethically reworking the sensoria, emotional habitus and social relations of life-world fabrics. Berlant suggests that living the crises of political-economic structure, in counter-moving emergent modes of local glitchinfrastructure, involves existential entry into questions of how to live that cannot be 'answered' ideologically or through replacement figures of optimistic attachment (such as human capital).

[I]n the situation tragedy of the present, we live on the precipice of infrastructure collapse economically, politically, and in the built and natural worlds. ... In a fundamentally unstable economy, planning can be seen as a neurotic reminder of the previous era's optimism that everyone, or anyone, could be significantly necessary to capital: now, what used to be called alienation, a structure that felt alienated, is experienced at once as sensual saturation and physical exhaustion ... What ought the reproduction of life involve if life in the near future cannot move beyond superintending its own destruction in a contentious encounter of debt with discipline? What will it take to reorganize constituent power beyond the claim that society should be a club for constant growth, with ... wealth ... more justly distributed? What good could happen to personal life, to kinship, to the world of unsaids that house the reproduction of intimate life in the material and fantasmatic ordinary? (p. 409)



Human capital discourse, in moving to reclaim optimism for the ‘club for constant growth’, is not adequate even to its own task, let alone to guiding lived addresses to these questions. Yet it is—in ways un-reflexive to its progenitors and circulators—a site of leaky registry of the need to address an infrastructural locus fraught with lifeworld tensions, wherein people *necessarily* live these questions. Human capital, as a project of repair, avoids naming and cannot begin addressing infrastructural glitches. In Berlant’s gesture to how countermovement might proceed, a concept of *affect*—which ‘registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energise attachments’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 16)—is central. And for Berlant this is a matter of *pedagogy* for living. If human capital discourse incites a pedagogy that develops positive psychological characteristics to fuel the optimistic promises of the ‘knowledge economy’, then infrastructure-making, as conceived by Berlant (2016), entails a very different conception of pedagogy.

### Conclusion: A pedagogy of unlearning

The aim of this paper has been to analyse, using a combination of theoretical tools, the conjunction human capital as a discursive-social phenomenology. We have arrived at the argument that human capital discourse currently reaches into new affective terrains and moves to co-opt embodied energies towards a cruel-optimistic project of self-appreciation. At the same time, in ways obscured to its progenitors and channellers, this discourse indexes impulses to simulate repairs of crises that register affectively as infrastructural glitches. The materialised historical logic of capital is one of scarcity, not plethora, and thus we see no prospects for a universal self-entrepreneurialism that would enable all to make good on the opportunity bargain. The contradictions of human capital convert the opportunity bargain into an opportunity trap (Brown et al., 2011), yet the ‘optimism’ of the promise still lures many to go on in the glitch-ridden conditions of the trap.

As human capital seeks new frontiers of expansion into (non)cognitive-emotive registers, its psycho-social dynamics run ahead of established theoretical tools for analysing the historical conditions it expresses. There is growing literature examining shifts to cognitive and affective labour that are relevant to our argument (e.g. Moulner-Boutang, 2011; Negri & Hardt, 1999); and others have analysed changing relations, driven by technological change, between new modes of production and changing demands for labour (e.g. Brynjolfson & McAfee, 2014). Developing our argument in connection with these analyses is called for, but would go beyond the scope of this article. Equally, it has not been possible for us to develop detailed analyses of texts displaying human capital discourse, or of how the discourse operates in educational institutions. We invite further analyses, deploying multifaceted sets of conceptual tools, that cut across diverse contexts in which the human capital phenomenon plays out.

While recognising the explanatory powers of ideology critique and Foucauldian analysis, our project has led us to Berlant’s complex framing of current times. In this work, we find powerful new theoretical tools for analysing how the human capital phenomenon exceeds more tried-and-true tools. While ideology-critique and Foucauldian approaches draw analytical attention to ways in which human capital moves to recuperate optimistic investments in the promises of capital, Berlant points to analyses of how human capital promises are beset by infrastructural glitches that register in embodied scenes of living. From this perspective we can see human capital discourse as a cruelly ‘reparative’ and vainly reproductive project. The countermovements towards which Berlant gestures involve letting go of reproductive optimisms in favour of textured analysis and experimental reworking of the sensorium of the present. Berlant (2011, p. 263) argues that

what it means to take the measure of the impasse of the present ... [is] to see what is halting, stuttering, and aching about being in the middle of detaching from a waning fantasy of the good life; and to produce some better ways of mediating the sense of a historical moment that is affectively felt but undefined.

This, to Berlant is an *educational project* of living in the glitchinfrastructure, undertaken as ‘a form of study that uses critique to intensify one’s attachment to the world felt but yet unestablished’, and which finds in new experimental forms of sociality the ‘power to retrain affective practical being, and in particular



... to dishabituate through unlearning the overskilled sensorium' (2016, p. 399). Living in the glitch-structure is a matter of finding ways to live on differently.

Berlant's conceptual tools provide more textured grasp on the affective dynamics of crisis and offer ways to imagine an affective politics and pedagogy in 'glitchinfrastructures for teaching unlearning' (p. 396). Berlant, in her work, looks for emergent genres of counter-moving life in cultural texts and varied public spheres. Our work focuses on education institutions, particularly schools, where our research finds that young people see through opportunity bargains and incitements to self-appreciation (e.g. Zipin & Dumenden, 2014; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015). Berlant's gestures towards pedagogy provoke us to think about how school educators might work pedagogically with young people in ways that do not reinforce promises of human capital or (cruelled) optimism about acquiring positive psychological traits. Instead, we seek possibilities for experimenting with curricula and pedagogies of infrastructure-making. As Berlant writes: 'What remains for our pedagogy of unlearning is to build affective infrastructures that admit the work of desire as the work of an aspirational ambivalence', while still holding 'out the prospect of a world worth attaching to that's something other than an old hope's bitter echo' (p. 414).

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## Notes on contributors

**Sam Sellar** is Reader in Education Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. His current research focuses on large-scale assessments, data infrastructures, commercialisation and new accountabilities in schooling. Sam's recent co-authored books include *The global education race: Taking the measure of PISA and international testing* (2017, Brush) and *Globalising educational accountabilities* (2016, Routledge).

**Lew Zipin** is Adjunct Senior Research Fellow in the School of Education at the University of South Australia. He is also Extraordinary Professor in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

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