


Higher Education for All occasionally mentions this historiography, although it disregards several important works, such as Joy Williamson-Lott's *Black Power on Campus* (2003) and Chris Loss's *Between Citizens and the State* (2011), that are relevant to subjects explored by the book. It's possible that Higgins's focus on California's institutions of higher education limited his interest in this national context. An overriding focus on California is understandable in light of the state's outsized influence as a model system of public higher education and its status as a bellwether for national stances toward taxation and affirmative action. There is also value in aspiring to employ a broader historiographical frame of reference than the one sometimes employed by historians of higher education, myself included. Rather than attempting to open a dialogue with our subfield, Higgins seeks to engage with "the historiography of Cold War liberalism, postwar conservatism, and ... the New Left" (7).

Ultimately, *Higher Education for All* speaks to activists as much as to historians. Higgins starts and ends with an account of student protests against tuition increases at California public colleges and universities in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008. He notes that current debates about access often invoke an oversimplified version of the Master Plan that refer to it as an artifact of a postwar heyday of generous state funding. As is the case with most "golden age" narratives, the historical record is more complex. *Higher Education for All* illustrates how the Master Plan strengthened California's commitment to college access, while reifying institutional stratification and the underrepresentation of students of color and working-class white students on the more prestigious and better-funded campuses of the UC system. For those inspired by the example of the students who campaigned against these inequitable consequences, the Master Plan should serve as "an example and a warning" (7).

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.45

Jon Shelton. *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. 270 pp.

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Why did American economic inequality increase so much after 1980? Why has European-style social democracy, with its more generous welfare state, struggled to gain broader support from policymakers in the United States? Jon Shelton answers these questions by arguing that policymakers of both parties—though principally Democrats—bought into what he calls the "education myth," the idea that "building human capital through education represented the best, and increasingly, the only way for Americans to access economic opportunity" (p. 3). Faith in this myth blotted out

paths to a broad social democracy, such as policies for strong labor unions, producerist trade agreements, and full employment through job guarantees.

The education myth sounds similar to other framings from historians of education: the “education gospel,” the “education trap,” the proclivity to “educationalize” policy problems. Yet unlike scholars who see a long-standing rhythm in American policymakers’ obsession with education as economic or social salve, Shelton—whose first book on urban teacher strikes in the 1960s and 1970s also neatly combined labor, education, and political history—argues that the education myth is a relatively recent invention. He quickly reviews the role of schools in society since the American Revolution, and while some seeds of the education myth were planted in the early twentieth century, they did not really sprout until the 1960s. Looming large in his account is the emergence of human capital theories from University of Chicago economists Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, which percolated into Great Society legislation, particularly the War on Poverty and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Shelton thinks lawmakers should have instead passed A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin’s 1966 Freedom Budget—he does not dwell on its overdetermined failure to become law—but he also sees a lost opportunity for social democracy during the Carter era fight over the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act. When that got watered down, the education myth crowded out any real social democratic alternatives during the 1980s through 2016.

According to Shelton, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 marked the pinnacle of the education myth. Though that was signed by a Republican president, the Democrats bear most of Shelton’s admonition for believing that human capital accumulation alone would uplift the poor, even income distribution, and dispense shared prosperity. Shelton blasts the New Democrats tied to the Democratic Leadership Council, and especially DLC golden boy Bill Clinton—along with advisers such as David Osborne and Robert Reich—for ignoring the plight of non-college educated workers and myopically focusing on education and training. With Clinton in charge, “any possibility of broad social democratic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism shriveled into nothing more than desiccated remains” (p. 162). Shelton paints the Obama administration in similar stripes. Beginning in 2016, Shelton sees an inevitable populist revolt against the education myth taking shape—manifest by the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, as well as activism from the Chicago Teachers Union—and he is faintly optimistic that the myth has now run its course.

A book on the education myth might explore how this idea reshaped the education system itself. Shelton discusses some aspects of the testing and accountability policies that flowed from a focus on human capital accrual. But this is not really a book about schools. Mostly it is about how people have talked about education, surfing from commission report to political speech—a tried-and-true approach among historians of education. In order to explore how the education myth drowned out alternative approaches to political economy, he details elite-level debates around labor policy and trade policy in addition to discussions about education.

The closest to the ground Shelton gets is in Wisconsin, which serves as his case study for connecting the national story to the state—and sometimes local—debates over education and its purpose. Given how central the state and local levels are in education policy—from funding to rulemaking—this is an important device for underscoring his

argument. Wisconsin is a good choice, given the significance of the “Wisconsin Idea” of universities to progressivism, industrial labor’s prominence, and the dramatic recent political turn under Republican governor Scott Walker to villainize public employees, including teachers and professors. But sometimes these sections seem tagged on, parallel with but not fully integrated into the federal-level story.

How did the human capital framework move from the papers of economists to the lips and laws of policymakers? Shelton points to some connections, through figures such as Walter Heller, chair of the Council of Economic Advisers under John F. Kennedy and then Lyndon B. Johnson. But more work remains for scholars to show how this intellectual framework was translated into policy and how that policy actually affected students and schools. Shelton sometimes writes as if the Clinton or Obama administrations had more autonomy than they did in policy-making. They were constrained by a Right that often feared public schools, which served a growing share of Black and Brown students. While Shelton hammers 1990s Democrats for promoting human capital development, he acknowledges that teachers, too, put it to strategic use: leadership of both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association leveraged human capital language to gain business support and ward off conservative efforts to defund schools and dismantle the public system through vouchers. Though Shelton notes there was both a liberal and a conservative version of the education myth, he struggles to position conservatives like William Bennett, Reagan’s second secretary of education. Bennett saw schools as necessary for citizenship rather than just human capital accrual, but he wanted to create a particular kind of American citizen, one who was steeped in the traditional Western canon.

Shelton is deeply skeptical of human capital economics, and his argument is in line with other recent books from Cristina Groeger and Daniel Moak, part of a burgeoning cluster of scholars who question the place of schools in ameliorating inequalities (and an echo of 1970s historiographical debates about schools and social mobility). But *The Education Myth* is not cynical about public schools. Shelton points out that education serves as “one of the few common experiences that truly binds Americans together” (p. 204), and throughout the book, he defends the place of public schools in promoting democratic values. While he largely aligns with David Labaree’s contention that economic competition through increasing educational attainment leads to a zero-sum rat race rather than equality of outcome, Shelton never espouses the view that education is a wasteful expenditure in labor-market signaling, as libertarian economist Bryan Caplan argues in *The Case against Education* (2018). Rather, Shelton wants to take the pressure to deliver economic equality off the backs of teachers and restore a citizen-building focus to schools of all stripes, including colleges and universities. The right to an education, he thinks, should be one of many that also includes rights to employment, healthcare, and housing.

As he highlights the democratic values that teacher unions and progressive intellectuals sought to instill in schools, Shelton tries to avoid romanticizing the role that schools once played in citizen building. He qualifies claims about education’s earlier place in promoting economic independence and economic security by noting that working-class Americans had a “complicated” relationship with schools as the system institutionalized (p.21), and that Black Americans and other groups considered non-white were often intentionally excluded across the country. Drawing on Groeger’s *The Education Trap* (2021), Shelton notes that public schools had little to


do with decreasing economic inequality in the early twentieth century. Still, the overall impression that policymakers in the antebellum or Jim Crow eras had a better grasp on the role that schools play in society presents a more harmonious picture of the past than Shelton intends.

Overall, this is a helpfully slim volume with a strong through line that could be useful in many history of education classes, especially to offer an overview of the role of schools in broader American policy since the country's founding, while providing a more detailed account of the interplay between education and political economy since the 1960s. It shows students we could value education for more than its economic returns, and it reminds them that equal opportunity might well emerge from policies relating to trade, labor, and countercyclical government spending rather than education policy alone.

doi:10.1017/heq.2023.46

Tamson Pietsch. *The Floating University: Experience, Empire, and the Politics of Knowledge*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923. 320 pp.

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In her captivating study, *The Floating University: Experience, Empire, and the Politics of Knowledge*, Tamson Pietsch sets sail into a long-overlooked historical adventure—the Floating University of 1926. This audacious experiment, conceived by Professor James E. Lough of New York University, took five hundred students on an eight-month global voyage. With the ambition to cultivate students' ability to think in “world terms” (p. 1), the journey began in New York City and wound its way through Cuba and the Panama Canal, then toward Los Angeles and Hawaii before crossing the wide expanse of the Pacific, en route to Asia, then westward to Europe, culminating in that continent's renowned capital cities. Pietsch's meticulous attention to detail guides her readers through multifaceted cultural landscapes, painting a vivid picture of students' travel experiences and the ultimate collapse of the Floating University. In the end, her narration goes well beyond a mere chronicle of a forgotten experiment. She explores the deeper politics of knowledge and the intricate interplay between American higher education and expanding U.S. imperial power.

Pietsch situates the Floating University within the transformative context of the American higher education system during the 1920s—a period that witnessed significant evolution and adaptation in response to the advent of mass education. A pioneering initiative in an era of widespread educational experimentation, Lough's Floating University offered a dynamic blend of academic study and experiential learning. Grounded in the educational philosophy of John Dewey and