

Dorling, D. (2019) Review of Bryan Caplan's 'The Case Against Education: Why the education system is a waste of time and money', HEPI blog, 6th September, <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/09/06/review-by-danny-dorling-of-the-case-against-education-why-the-education-system-is-a-waste-of-time-and-money-by-professor-bryan-caplan-of-george-mason-university/>

Review by Danny Dorling of '*The Case Against Education: Why the education system is a waste of time and money*' was published by Princeton University Press in 2018 and written by Bryan Caplan, who is a professor of economics at George Mason university, Virginia, USA.

From the very start, and repeatedly in the first few pages, the author claims that the book is a strong polemic, but one which is rooted in much evidence. Having read the book I would suggest you read it if you are interested in the origins of a particular set of arguments; and why a small group of people make them, and may carry on making such arguments for some time into the future. This is a book which appears to be rooted in Caplan's childhood experiences and the attitudes he says he held from being a very young child. Caplan looks at data in a particular way. It is not how I read the data, but his views are clearly heartfelt and honest.

The argument this book makes, relying almost entirely on data from the USA, is that formal school and university education are both largely a waste of time, both being mainly signalling some apparent value, rather than being valuable in and of themselves. This is akin to arguing that medical treatment is largely a waste of time, holding onto a childhood theory that the pills don't work, and then asserting that claim using data from the USA. For instance, you could claim that most medical intervention is cosmetic and does not improve health. Peoples' teeth tend to be whiter in the USA than in Europe, but they do not live as long, or as healthily as most people in Europe do. This is despite spending so much more on health care than Europeans do. The implication that is then drawn is that health care spending is about signalling health, in this case whiter teeth, rather than really being about good health. And withdrawing all state funding for health care is the solution. However, just because education and health might often be poorly delivered in the USA, and just because signalling is so important in the USA, that would not demonstrate that such services cannot be well delivered.

So how did Bryan Caplan come to his conclusions? What he has helpfully done in the latter pages of this book is explain how he formed a set of beliefs from a very early age. These are from his own experiences of his own schooling. This is a sample of one, measured only through his recollection. It would be interesting to know what his family and teachers thought of him. He has found what he concludes to be evidence to confirm the beliefs his younger self held. To save space, from now on I will simply quote a few things he says in the book and then end with a single example of the kind of evidence he could have employed, had he been looking more widely and had a more open mind.

‘Autobiographically, my doubts about the social value of education long predated my discovery of political philosophy. What undermined my faith? Firsthand experience. Soon after starting kindergarten, I started to realize, in a childish way, that I’d never use most of the material my teachers taught. Yet I also knew a bright future was waiting for me as long as I went through the motions. Once I was old enough to grasp that employers are greedy but not stupid, my rendezvous with the signalling model was almost unavoidable.’ (pp. 217-218).

His response to his teachers’ attempts to broaden his horizons:

‘I voiced my malcontent to teachers and parents alike. Their standard response: even the “stupidest” assignments serve the higher purpose of broadening horizons.’ (p. 255).

At school Caplan particularly disliked poetry, history and languages:

‘Take me. After three years of Spanish homework, Spanish exams, and Spanish presentations. I remember nearly nada. Yet if I had failed high school Spanish, I couldn’t have gone to a good college, wouldn’t have gotten into Princeton’s Ph.D. program and probably would not have been a professor.’ (p. 27-28).

Based on his dislike of schooling he argues for reintroducing child labour into the USA:

‘What’s Wrong With Child Labor? ... Before using taxpayer dollars to jumpstart apprenticeships, government should get out of the way and take stock of all the opportunities the labor market provides.’ pp.230-233.

On what schools teach and finding mathematical proofs hard to follow (he did find elementary statistics and some of his economics lessons useful) he says:
‘Why do English classes focus on literature and poetry instead of business and technical writing? Why do advanced math classes bother with proofs almost no student can follow?’ (p. 10)

On his teaching and his views on his colleagues’ teaching practise:
‘We’re easy on our students, even at elite schools like Berkeley and Princeton. Frankly, most econ professors practice a variant of the old Soviet adage, “We pretend to teach, they pretend to learn.” During your years of study, our better students acquire only two marketable skills: elementary statistics, and ability to calculate a present discounted value.’ (pp. 82-83).

On people he sees as being of very little economic value:
‘Even the birth of a clear-cut “drain on society” can be a net social benefit it, like most of us, the “drain” is glad to be alive.’ (p. 182).

On his own politics and not respecting democratically taken decisions:
*‘Philosophically, I am staunchly libertarian. While not absolutely opposed to taxpayer support for education, I have a strong moral presumption against taxpayer support for **anything**. ... Even if a tax has full democratic support, the burden of proof properly rests with the majority that wants to tax, not the minority that demurs.’* (pp. 215-216, emphasis as in the original).

On his impression of what those listening to him think of him and how they defer to him:
‘When I argue education is largely wasteful signalling, most listeners yield. Popular resistance doesn’t kick in until I add, “Let’s waste less by cutting government spending on education.”’ (p. 204).

On the reader of his book and trying to communicate to like-minded souls:
*‘When I judge our education hollow, it isn’t just my opinion; it’s very likely your opinion, too. Honestly, how many educators do **you** find fascinating?’* (p. 24, emphasis as in the original).

On how he got his job:

‘Once I resolved to become an economics professor, I strove to meet other economic professors. One, Tyler Cowen, got me my job.’ (p. 67).

On his advice to the poor and very young women (or girls) thinking of a university education:

‘Are you a woman who firmly plans to marry? Then despite your spotty academic record, college may be for you. Otherwise, skip college and get a job. Poor Students, finally, should not go to college, period. ... My council rubs many the wrong way. Some dismiss it as “elitist,” “Philistine,” or “sexist.” The correct label is candid.’ (p.161).

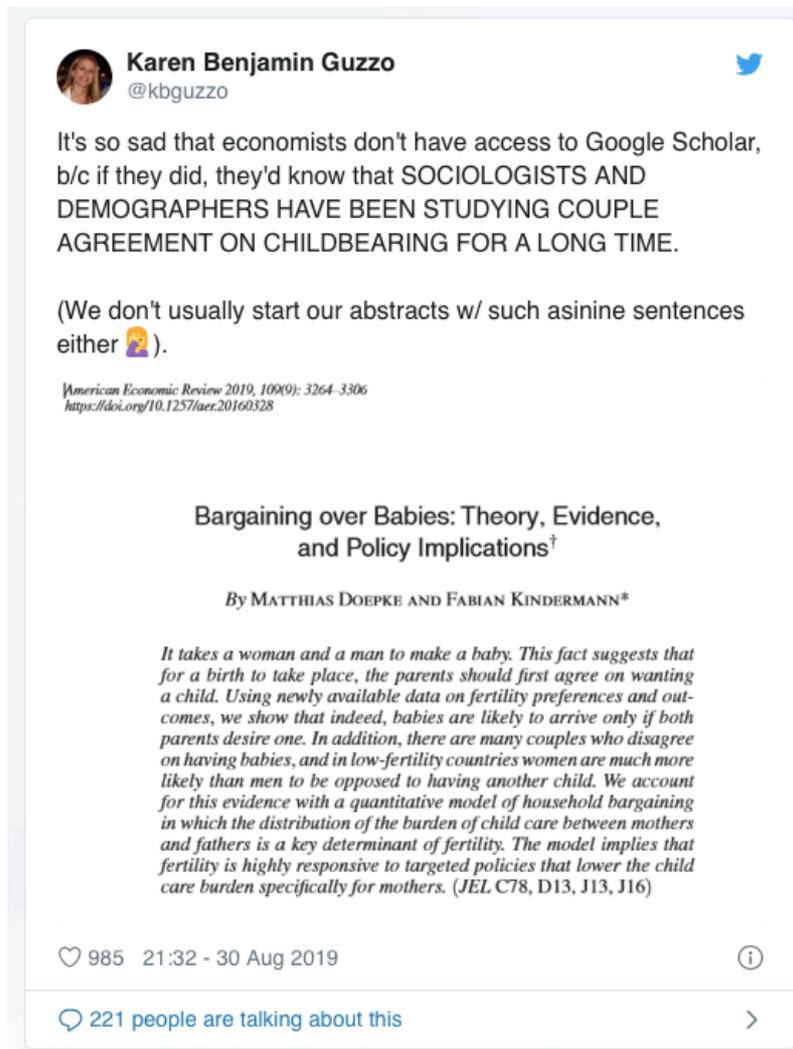
On being weird and why almost everyone else is wrong but him and his favourites:

‘When you have a weird experience, you doubt yourself. What’s really weird: the World, or you? The answer for education as we’ve seen, is the World. ... My favorite students live and breathe economics, but my favorite students are weird.’ (p. 96, through to p. 153)

On his views on himself (note the use of the ‘royal we’):

‘Why should we prefer my numbers to anyone else’s? First, to the best of my knowledge, I am the only researcher to account for ability bias, sheepskin effects, and completion probability at the same time ... Second, to the best of my knowledge, my numbers are the most comprehensive.’ (p. 162)

The best of Caplan’s knowledge may not be good enough. He has a tendency not to absorb or properly consider work which confronts the views he formed as a young child. On pages 137 and 138 of his book Caplan discusses evidence for the wider effects of education, including on health. He gives some of his opinions and mentions a few papers he has read, dismissing the findings of those he does not agree with. In doing this, as an economist writing about education, he is not unusual. Economists are more prone to dismiss work that does not conform to their worldview than other academics are, they think they are very good at insights; but in this Caplan is an extreme outlier among economists.



Complaints about a sub-group of economists with views like Caplan's are so frequent that one popped up on my twitter feed as I was reading this book. On 30 August 2019 a demographer, Karen Benjamin Guzzo, referring to economists publishing their ideas about why people have babies. She sent this sarcastic tweet out into world:

*'It's so sad that economists don't have access to Google Scholar, b/c if they did, they'd know that **SOCIOLOGISTS AND DEMOGRAPHERS HAVE BEEN STUDYING COUPLE AGREEMENT ON CHILDBEARING FOR A LONG TIME.** (We don't usually start our abstracts w/ such asinine sentences either).'*

Source:

<https://twitter.com/kbguzzo/status/1167550753386434565?s=20>

Guzzo also referred in turn to the longstanding argument from academics who study society about the failure of our attempts to help economics love us back: to Philip N. Cohen's 'Sociology: "I love you." Economics: "I know."' Family Inequality, 16 November 2015

<https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2015/11/16/sociology-i-love-you-economics-i-know/>

So, to end with here is a single example of the kind of work Caplan either does not know of, or which he does but he decides to ignore. A few months before Guzzo expressed her exasperation with Caplan type arguments, a group of epidemiologists published a working paper titled: 'The Causal Effects of Education on Adult Health, Mortality & Income: Evidence from Mendelian Randomization & the Raising of the School Leaving Age'

(<https://hceconomics.uchicago.edu/research/working-paper/causal-effects-education-adult-health-mortality-and-income-evidence-mendelian>)

The authors of that working paper comment on economists who study things like education, and recognise that those economists might be unfamiliar with some advanced statistical methods and data sources: "*Economists rarely use Mendelian randomisation and as such it is important to highlight the conditions under which Mendelian randomization can be used in an instrumental variables strategy seeking to identify the causal effect of the treatment (in our case education) on the outcomes of interest.*"

The authors of this working paper go on to find, in contrast to Caplan, and using far more advanced statistical techniques and data than he employs, that: "*An additional year of education is associated with lower risk of having had a diagnosis of hypertension, diabetes, having a stroke, having a heart attack, being a current or ever smoker or dying during the follow up of the sample. There is no impact on cancer risk but education is observationally associated with increased risk of a diagnosis of depression. Additional education is also associated with greater grip strength (indicating greater health), lower arterial stiffness, lower BMI, lower blood pressure, and greater fluid intelligence. Education is associated with a higher probability of having a higher income, though with a smaller absolute impact on the probability in the higher parts of the income distribution (over £52,000 p.a. and over £100,000 p.a.). There was little association with happiness but the lifestyle relationships show an*

interesting pattern: more educated participants consumed more alcohol and did less moderate exercise, watched fewer hours television and did more vigorous exercise.'

The authors of that working paper found this using two different methods, both highly statistical, the method Caplan says he prefers, but their findings were not what he prefers. They also look in their working paper at a far wider range of previous work than Caplan considers. As a reviewer of this book I was left wondering, what is everyone behaves as Caplan says he has behaved in his life and as he advises others to do? If everyone were to take Caplan's advice and all become lawyers, professor of economics, or some other occupation that was high paid but not especially productive, or aim to go to university which the intension of marrying such a person for economic gain – who would these two group exploit to fund their lifestyles? Would it be also those children now forced to be labourers?

In the USA, and to a lesser extent in the UK, there will exist a group of people with beliefs like Caplan's. What this books suggests is that is likely that they did not enjoy school other than for its utilitarian value in teaching them what they needed to get on in life (as they see themselves as having 'got on'). They were statistically able, not statistically brilliant, and not especially emphatic although, like Caplan, they might believe that they are widely read. Caplan is a very good example of this group and he does not hide his views if you are willing to read past the first few dozen pages of his book, in which his investigation is initially presented as being more disinterested and neutral than it turns out to be.

The most accurate word I can find to describe this book is Philistine. At some times and in particular places, for a time at least, Philistine ideals can rise to the fore. Caplan suggests that the learning of languages is only of value to someone who might have to be employed as a translator (presumably into English). He sees the study of history as only being of use to a future teacher of history (p. 7). In the same sentence he announces that both gym (sports) and French poetry are 'chaff' (p. 79). But a serious publisher has decided to publish his book, and he holds a serious position in a serious university. The book will mostly be read not by people like me, but by people who will see it as supporting their libertarian views including a wish to lower taxes again and again and to

privatize as much as is possible. We live in serious times, where in the USA, the economically declining former centre of the global economy, amongst the high priests of economics, are a few now openly professing the most wild of claims in favour of what used to be called the night-watchman state.

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