■ Robert M. Zecker

A PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY: COMMUNIST WORKERS' SCHOOLS IN AMERICA, 1930-1956

Nearly a century before the invention of rubrics and metrics, some critics of education argued public schools were designed to turn out nothing more than obedient cogs for corporate America. From the left of the classroom, workers in the orbit of the Communist Party argued that schools were agents of indoctrination, designed to instill quiescent, interchangeable workers. To counter the hegemonic message, a network of Workers' Schools for children and older comrades nurtured Americans interested in a more liberating education. Organizations such as the Slovak Workers Society had already in the 1920s established such Workers' Schools, and after its founding in 1930, the CP-backed fraternal insurance society, the International Workers Order, supported its own network of children's schools as well as urging members to further their education at the "People's Universities" such as New York's Jefferson School for Social Science or Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School. Radical workers created a counterhegemonic pedagogy disseminating knowledge of America's hidden history of activism, protest and dissent, the narrative educators largely ignored in public-school classrooms, while also valorizing the contributions of African Americans, Hispanics, Jews and other white ethnics often denigrated in the era. Dubbed "People's Universities" by proletarian educators such as the Jefferson School's directors, they helped "workers of hand and brain" "achieve that education which can enable them to change their world through ever better understanding of it." [1]

1 New York University, Tamiment-Wagner Labor Archives, Jefferson School of Social Science Papers, Box 3, Addenda, Course catalogue, "The Jefferson School, Winter 1950;" Box 1,

The deficiencies of public education were spelled out in 1925 by Max Bedacht, in a few years general secretary of the IWO. "What is Workers' Education?" he asked in *The Workers Monthly* before detailing the means by which "the educational machinery" created "the mentality and psychology of the masses which falls an easy victim to the guiles of the capitalist press and the preachers, which succumbs so easily to the germs of patriotic paroxysms without any attempt at resistance …" Capitalist schools, Bedacht argued, had to give "the prospective wage-slave the intellectual requirement to make him a useful wheel in the profit mills of present day society" but not a loose wheel: "(T)he exercise of the mental faculties of the pupil present a dangerous prospect for the ruling class. Therefore this ruling class endeavors to accompany this positive education with enough hypodermic injections of intellectual poison to sterilize the minds of the pupils as much as … possible."[2]

Arguing "The Future of the Working Class Belongs to the Children Not 'Our Educational System'," J.W. Schiffel similarly in 1928 told readers of the Slovak Workers Society newspaper *Rovnosť ľudu*, schools "must raise the child to be obedient, and a fit tool, that is an unresisting one, for exploitation." To counter this, the Slovak Workers established a network of Workers' Schools that offered classes to children by day, and evening sessions for adults avid for lessons in literature, history and practical courses such as union organizing, vocabulary building and public speaking. Larger cities such as New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia and Chicago featured several Slovak Workers' Schools, but even smaller places such as East Akron, Youngstown and Bellaire, Ohio, had schools. Instruction remained flexible to local needs, for as *Rovnosť ľudu* argued in 1920, "It's not necessary to put shackles on the school system. A teacher should not be bound by a strict curriculum. He should have the freedom to make changes according to his surroundings and the maturity of the pupils he is teaching, … thus real scholars, not bound to any inflexible plan may seek ways to invent innovative teaching methods." Standardized testing was not welcome at the Workers' Schools.[3]

Folder 5: Annual Report, 1947.

2 Library of Congress, CPUSA collection, Reel 317, Delo 4242, *The Workers Monthly*, April 1925, 262-263, "What is Workers' Education?" by Max Bedacht.

3 *Rovnosť ľudu*, November 12, 1928, 5, "The Future of the Working Class Belongs to the

Theater troupes and choruses were used as pedagogical tools to teach children the difference between capitalism and socialism through folk and working-class songs, with the workers' academy of Chicago praised as "a rare opportunity to learn and have a bit of fun, too." Film and painting classes were used, too, with "students taught to create living paintings." Evidently the schools resonated with attendees, for as a Chicago writer to *Rovnosť ľudu* enthused, "We don't even have to explain the meaning of our school, we're only organizing the workers, who are eager for education, who know how to appreciate this education and who put the most weight on education, and when I had to, I'd spend my last red cent as a sacrifice for your school, even more, because school is everything to us."[4] (My own grandfather, who had to quit school at sixteen but nevertheless read Chaucer for fun and often told me, "Whatever you learn, no one can take away from you," was the kind of pupil the Workers' Schools successfully attracted.)

With the Depression's onset, the International Workers Order took as central to its mission offering a pedagogy that enabled worker agency. The IWO incorporated the Slovak and other ethnic fraternal societies and their schools into its program of workers' militancy. From its founding in 1930 it created a network of Proletarian Children's Schools, bypassing the capitalist school to factory pipeline. The IWO's Declaration of Principles, published in September 1930 in *The Spark*, its Yiddish magazine, declared culture "a potent instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie to enslave the toiling masses, and that when the bourgeoisie, through its schools, … purports to 'carry the light to the masses,' in fact it purveys them with such information, … that they might become faithful servants of the capitalistic order." The IWO vowed to create schools to "educate the workers' children in the spirit of class warfare." Such schools were envisioned as counter-beacons to "clarify their minds, fortify their wills, strengthen their ranks, …elevate them to the dignity of builders of a new society."[5] The Depression was an apt moment for al-

Children Not 'Our Educational System'" by J.W. Schiffel; September 13, 1922, 2; November 2, 1921, 8; May 30, 1924, 4; September 23, 1929, 3; July 14, 1920, 6.

4 Ibid., September 22, 1920, 5; January 25, 1928, 3; December 22, 1928, 2; June 8, 1921, 5.

5 Cornell University, IWO supplemental collection, Box 3, "From Yiddish, "Declaration of Principles of the International Workers Order, *The Spark*, September 1930, 1.

ternative education, as mass unemployment delegitimized capitalism and the schools that buttressed the system. In 1934 the IWO's magazine, *The New Order*, commented on the Depression's "shattering of illusion after illusion," with "school books … thrown into the limbo of fairy books. Lies, falsehoods, designs of the most hideous sort lurked in the sugared words of the books."[6] By 1938, Bedacht hoped that "progressive ideas and aspirations are gradually conquering the great staff of the teachers of our children," courtesy of his Order's Worker's Schools, even as he worried about "the abundant flow of reactionary poison" provided by public education.[7]

That poison's antidote was offered by the Workers' Schools. In 1934, *Rovnosť ľudu* publicized the offerings of Cleveland, highlighting the course in Political Economics, timely to many workers trying to make sense of the Depression's devastation. "This course will allow working-class students to be educated on the … questions which will clarify for students the picture of the workers' movement," the paper said. The IWO training school promised, Bedacht said, to develop young workers' "body and head," with summer classes at Camp Kinderland in rural New York state and the Natures' Friend camp near Gary combining classes in "Organization, Political Economy, Cultural Work, the Negro Problem, and Trade Unions" with sports and swimming. For worker-students from industrial America, IWO schools offered some of the only recreational facilities available, as well as courses designed to demystify the rash of Hoovervilles. As war clouds threatened Europe, the Chicago Workers' School announced in 1937 it was "offering a special course for unionists and all others who want to familiarize themselves with readings about the biggest threat of war. Courses on the foundations of political education; the Popular Front movement in France and Spain; … the movement against war and fascism" and others were publicized. Chicago's school two months later explained the need for its classes: "The working class needs an instruction and education, for right now the march is on for higher wages, better working conditions and a better world."[8]

6 CPUSA, Reel 287, Delo 3709, *The New Order*, March 1934, 3.

7 Cornell, IWO collection, Box 1, Folder 5, minutes, plenary session, General Executive Board of the IWO, September 10 & 11, 1938, report to GEB by Bedacht.

8 *Rľ*, June 20, 1934, 2; July 6, 1934, 4. Ľudový denník, January 9, 1937, 6; March 29, 1937,

By World War II, the IWO schools were part of a network of left-wing Worker's Schools, which served as "a people's university," as the Polish newspaper *Głos Ludowy* labeled Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School. In 1942 more than 4,000 black, white and Hispanic men and women flocked to its classes, which included courses in "The People's War; Structure of Fascism; Propaganda Analysis; Spanish; Basic English; Russian; French; Economics; Philosophy; History; Psychology; Art; Music; Writing for Short Story; Newspaper and Radio; Public Speaking; Labor Problems; History and Culture of Racial and National Groups." Polish history and language courses were introduced during the war.[9] The schools' interracialism resonated with white ethnics who knew their own Italian, Slavic and Jewish heritages were denigrated by the same segregationist politicians who oppressed blacks. Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, for example, infamously insulted an Italian IWO member from Brooklyn in a letter that began "Dear Dago."[10] Such schools, combining practical skills with liberationist education in subjugated people's history and culture, were welcomed by students such as a Young Pioneer who wrote to the Slovak paper, "Away with bosses' propaganda!"[11]

Schools refashioned American history into a usable past valorizing radical battlers for racial and class justice. African American, Hispanic, and white ethnic members of the IWO were tutored in these schools on the achievements of abolitionists and other activists to present workers with a past largely effaced from public school curricula. The value of ethnic and racial cultures to America was preached in Workers' Schools, too, at a time when non-WASP cultures were denigrated. Counter-narratives of earlier liberation struggles were recast as the full flowering of America's radical tradition. Harlem Workers' Schools held celebrations of Toussaint L'ouverture, the liberator of Haiti, and resurrected the memory of radical abolitionist Frederick Douglass. "Honor your working class heroes!" attendees at a Harlem Toussaint L'ouverture Memorial were urged, and the same message resonated in Workers' Schools.[12]

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9 Ed, January 6, 1944, 3; *Głos Ludowy*, January 15, 1944, 1 of 2nd section.

10 *GL*, September 8, 1945, 1 of 2nd section.

11 *Rl*, February 1, 1930, 4.

12 CPUSA, Reel 139, Delo 1842, Toussaint L'Ouverture Memorial, Communist Youth

After 1944 the Jefferson School in New York became perhaps the flagship Workers' School, offering courses in African American, Latin American and U.S. labor history by scholars such as Herbert Aptheker, Elizabeth Lawson and the Foner brothers. Aptheker and Phil Foner's resurrection of the salience of slave revolts and black abolitionists such as Douglass to America's freedom story was a counterhegemonic pedagogy at a time when public schools persistently dismissed abolitionists as unstable, dangerously violent extremists and slavery as a benign institution. Into the 1950s New York public schools taught slavery had been beneficial to the "lesser-developed" African race.[13]

Such schools were the full flowering of the Communist Party's Popular Front period, in which Party leader Earl Browder argued "Communism is Americanism updated for the twentieth century."[14] The progressive strains of American history were valorized, rather than ceding patriotism to the far right. Still, the ironies of Herbert Aptheker teaching a course in "Negro Slave Revolts" at a school named after the slave owner Thomas Jefferson, should be apparent. The Jefferson School, as well as leftist newspapers such as *Głos Ludowy* publicized Frederick Douglass' 1850s diatribe, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," suggesting an ambivalent embrace of patriotism on the part of the comrades.[15]

Other schools such as the Michigan Social Science School offered valorizing courses in African American history from visiting scholars, such as in 1949, when *Głos Ludowy* publicized Aptheker's appearance as the featured speaker in the Detroit school's cultural program on "The Road to Negro Freedom."[16] The Jefferson and other schools issued pamphlets based on its courses in African American history and Latin American anti-imperialism that enabled worker-students at other schools such as Newark's Walt Whitman School to learn the story of the Amistad

League, May 20, 1929.

13 Clarence Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 42, 223.

14 CPUSA, Reel 303, Delo 3983, pamphlet, "Who are the Americans?" by Earl Browder (1936.)

15 *GL*, February 16, 1952, 3 of 2nd section; Jefferson School, Box 3, Folder 2, "Negro History: Its Lessons for Our Time" by Herbert Aptheker (New York: New Century Publishers, 1956.)

16 *GL*, June 4, 1949, 4.

revolt, John Brown and other slave rebellions, or the Latin American fight against Wall Street imperialism, decades before such stories entered "mainstream" schools.[17]

While promotion of ethno-racial heroes might be perceived as simply self-affirmation, this history was tied to ongoing pedagogy on black liberation in both the U.S. and colonized Africa. Buried histories of L'ouverture and Douglass were resurrected as praxis to inspire transformative activism. Such freedom songs also problematized a narrative of conflict-free American "progress." Harlem's Frederick Douglass School as late as 1952 promised to "show the connection between juicy war profits and Jim Crow misery, and … teach the people how to fight both."[18]

The schools quickly succeeded. Already in 1931 the secretary of the IWO's Jewish Section reported on the establishment of 80 children's schools "in which 6,000 children are given a working class revolutionary education." Members' contributions to a school tax allowed the IWO "to publish some readers used for the New Project Method of education and which strengthened the ideology of the schools."[19]

As in 1920s Slovak schools, amusements helped children learn class-conscious lessons. Children in IWO schools were offered "Games for Workers' Children," recreational pastimes to teach commitment to the class struggle. "Use this book, Comrade leader!" the booklet's preface urged Youth section directors. "Make it a powerful weapon in the fight for the workers' children of America." The games were offered as a counter to the bosses' recreational organizations, which taught "patriotism, militarism and hatred of the working class." Proletarian games such as

17 Jefferson School, Box 2, Folder 9, "History of the American Negro People, Study Outline, 1619-1918" (1939.) New York Workers' School, by Elizabeth Lawson; Box 2, Folder 11, Jefferson School course outline, "History of the American Negro (1526-1900.)"

18 Hunter College, Institute for Puerto Rican Studies, Jesús Colón Papers, Box 14, Folder 2, Flyer, "A Call to a Conference on a Proposed New People's School in Harlem." January 12, 1952.

19 Wayne State University, Reuther Library, Don Binkowski Papers, Box 5, Folder 5-29, Rubin Saltzman, "The First Convention of the IWO," *Daily Worker*, May 30, 1931, 3. The necessity of developing the schools as "centers … for developing the class consciousness of the workers and draw(ing) them into the daily struggles" was stressed. CPUSA, Reel 247, Delo 3170, July 22, 1933, "To All the Language Bureaus," "What Are the Tasks among the Foreign Born Workers" by F. Brown; Reel 247, Delo 3178, "The building of the International Workers Order …," report on work of the Jewish Bureau of the C.C. of the CUSA, October 15, 1933.

"Fight the NRA" and "Keep Out the Sheriff" organized playful combat against the sellouts of the New Deal or deputies looking to evict poor workers. Other games such as "Hitler's Donkey Solo," "Death to the Lynchers" and "Negro Sharecroppers are Fighters" foregrounded the IWO's anti-fascist and racial-justice campaigns. Another game, "Lenin Says," was familiar to many kids, although here Vladimir, not Simon, gave orders.[20]

In other cases schools were geared to adults and seen as the means to rectify Old World deficiencies. Slovaks in the IWO noted they attempted to make up for "our terrible lack of cadres by establishing schools." Public speaking and organizing skills were taught to advanced students, but "on account of the imperialistic policy of the pre-war Hungarian government, only about one of a thousand Slovaks knows the Slovak grammar." This echoed the lament of earlier Slovak Workers teachers who sniffed at the abysmal Slovak of students whose parents came from the sticks of eastern Slovakia. Consequently, the IWO in Chicago arranged courses in a Slovak grammar school for immigrants. More advanced Marxism would come later.[21]

As the Slovak case indicates, while the IWO preached interracialism, sometimes linguistic challenges meant particular schools were monoethnic or monoracial. Other times schools made concerted efforts to cross ethnic and racial lines. Courses in "Negro problems" were offered at Workers' Schools in Pittsburgh and other cities, and white as well as black workers were urged to take these courses, although it was admitted in one case courses were advertised as "for Negro workers," so few whites enrolled. In other cases, however, as with the Toussaint L'ouverture Memorial, publicity said "It is the duty of every Negro and militant white worker to join in commemoration of the heroic deeds of the Haitian revolution," a message certainly not offered in public schools.[22]

20 Colón Papers, Box 28, Folder 1, "Games for Workers' Children" (issued jointly by the National Pioneer Council and Junior Section of the International Workers Order) (no date, 1933-35?) The Boy Scouts were frequently criticized as a reactionary organization preaching militarism and boss-centered patriotism. *RI*, November 12, 1928, 5; June 28, 1929, 4; August 24, 1929, 4; March 4, 1930, 5.

21 CPUSA, Reel 248, Delo 3188, letter, October 30, 1933, John Mackovich of the Czecho-Slovak Fraction to the C.C. of the CPUSA.

22 ibid., Reel 155, Delo 2024, Negro Department CPUSA, Report to Polcom, February 4,

Schools offered a mix of ethnic culture, training in public speaking, union organizing and worker history. The Harlem Workers' School in 1934 noted theater was increasingly turning its attention to the "Negro problem," and "Drama from the workers' point of view." Consequently, they offered classes on "Proletarian Drama," "The Negro and the Working-Class Theater," as well as a class on "John Henry … Bad Negro," an example of the left's embrace of ethno-racial folk culture. The school also offered a course on "the history of the Negro in America from the beginnings of slavery up to the Civil War," and "What has Capitalism Done for the Negro?"[23]

This mixing of progressive culture with Marxist analysis continued into the 1950s. The Jefferson School was not coy about where its ideological focus lay: The school's capstone was the Institute of Marxist Studies,[24] and history classes offered a counterhegemonic analysis of workers' militancy. But Jefferson and other schools also brought literature and art to "workers of hand and brain." Jefferson offered a panoply of non-credit classes in art, literature, music and sculpture to workers interested in education and culture for their own sake. By 1950 it was possible for a garment worker to take classes in "Mystery Story Writing" with Dashiell Hammett of *Maltese Falcon* fame, or painting instruction with Philip Evergood or Anton Refregier. The course catalogue labeled its varied classes, "Know-how for progressive," and argued, "Students come to the Jefferson School solely because they believe the school will help them understand the world we live in."[25] Students pursuing non-credit, non-career-driven courses were the antithesis of Bedacht's pupils as "useful wheels." Jefferson catered to workers interested in education for education's sake.

Ethnic schools such as those run by the Cervantes Fraternal Society, the IWO affiliate for Puerto Rican and other Spanish-speaking members, likewise provided practical training for unionists and economics classes,

1930.

23 ibid., Reel 283, Delo 3650, *Harlem Student Worker*, spring 1934.

24 Jefferson School, Box 2, Folder 2: "Institute of Marxist Studies," Pamphlet on "Program of Studies," September 1949 to June 1950.

25 ibid., Box 3, Addenda, Course catalogue, "The Jefferson School, Winter 1950"

but also classes on "Spanish" literature, dance and music.[26] In 1947, in line with the IWO's earlier call to make Workers' Schools into full-fledged social centers for organic, working-class intellectuals, Cervantes opened a Casa de Puerto Rico in East Harlem, with "a gym, a library of Spanish and English books, classes in English and Spanish, discussion groups, lectures, handicraft classes, glee clubs, a nursey and similar activities of interest and aid to the Puerto Rican people." The Casa also endeavored to educate Anglos on the cultural worth and history of Puerto Ricans. Honorary chairman José Ferrer envisioned the Casa "as a Center where Americans of other origins and backgrounds may learn about Puerto Rico and her people." Indeed, white ethnic IWO members from East Harlem such as Congressman Vito Marcantonio and Vito Magli attended events at the Casa, emblematic of the IWO's commitment to interracialism.[27]

Elsewhere in the nation Jewish, Italian, and Slavic IWO members attested lodge schools offered courses and events celebrating Negro History Week, as when Chicago's Frederick Douglass Lodge held an educational celebration of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and other black figures.[28] The Jefferson School organized an interracial "Freedom Frolic" during Negro History Week, featuring African drumming, calypso, theater and the singing of civil-rights songs to supplement lectures on African American history.[29]

At a time when *de facto* segregation reigned in many public schools, the Workers' Schools taught and celebrated interracial Americanism. The aim of history classes and performances in integrated settings was, as Youth Director Ernest Rymer put it, to learn "to appreciate the cultural contributions made to America by the various nationalities;" attendees received "the best and truest education in Americanism and character building."[30]

26 Colón Papers, Box 18, Folder 7, "report" (in English) on Educational Work of the Spanish Section, IWO (1940.)

27 ibid., Box 15, Folder 6, "Casa de Puerto Rico" (in English) sponsored by the Cervantes Fraternal Society, IWO; Plan and Tentative Budget for Casa de Puerto Rico (1947) (in English.) The Casa was typical of the IWO's schools and educational centers in the scope of its offerings.

28 *GL*, April 18, 1942, 5.

29 ibid., March 22, 1952, 4 of 2nd section.

30 Colón Papers, Box 42, Folder 20, program/souvenir book, "I.W.O. Tenth Anniversary Celebration, N.Y., IWO. International Fiesta and Dance" (1940.)

Schools claimed prominent historical figures as progressive icons; they were urged in 1936 to stress "the revolutionary historic role of Lincoln" and to "link up their present struggle with its revolutionary traditions and past" lest "fascist falsifiers" claim "all that is valuable in the historical past of the nation," so "that the fascists may bamboozle the masses …" Workers' Schools embraced Lincoln, as well as "that great liberationist son of the Negro people, Frederick Douglass," as part of a progressive American genealogy.[31]

This defiant counterhegemonic pedagogy continued well into the McCarthy Era. In 1952, Harlem's Frederick Douglass Educational Center of black and Hispanic IWO lodges was "dedicated to teaching the people of Harlem – Negroes, West Indians, Puerto Ricans, and others – how to break down the ghetto walls." The Center offered courses in the rich cultural contributions of African and Hispanic Americans, including "the Negro Woman" (taught by Claudia Jones), "the History of the Negro People for Teen-Agers," "Culture of the Negro People," "African Liberation Movements," and "West Indian Liberation Movements."[32]

By this time progressive schools were in the cross hairs of government red-hunters. Schools were stigmatized for preaching scientific Marxism but also racial equality. The IWO's Jewish Children's School of Chelsea, Massachusetts, was condemned as "the little red schoolhouse" where lessons favoring black civil rights were derided as part of "a deliberate Communist conspiracy to inflame racial and religious minorities here against the United States." A teacher countered in a letter to a local newspaper defending the teaching of interracial democracy at the school, but local red-baiters were unmoved.[33] Many school boards, including New York

31 CPUSA, Reel 303, Delo 3983, letter, Agitprop Commission, to All Party Press, January 9, 1936.

32 Colón Papers, Box 14, Folder 2, Flyer, Frederick Douglass Educational Center, Spring 1952.

33 IWO collection, Box 38, Folder 8, letter, July 20, 1949, I. Goldberg to Lew Marks; clippings from the *Chelsea* (Massachusetts) *Record*, July 14, July 15, and August 27, 1949; Box 38, Folder 9, letter to editor, *Chelsea Record*, July 20, 1949, from Jack W. Weinman, teacher, Chelsea Jewish Children's School; letter, August 24, 1949, from I. Goldberg to Dr. H.B. Steller; clipping from *Chelsea Record*, August 13, 1949, letter to editor from Harry Pasternak, Public Relations Committee, American Jewish League Against Communism, Inc.; letter to editor from Rubin Saltzman, no date (August 1949?)

City's, barred IWO use of public schools. "We will carry our fight for freedom of education to the people of New York until we get a reversal of this un-American procedure and resolution," the IWO vowed. "Labor and the progressive people of New York initiated the fight for free public schools and they will not allow the schools to become the private property of a few reactionary individuals who are transgressing their civic responsibilities."[34]

The IWO, though, soon faced even graver threats to its existence. By 1954 the IWO was dismantled, deemed a "moral and political hazard" by the New York State Insurance Department due to its designation by the attorney general as "subversive." Thus vanished the IWO schools. The Jefferson School, facing insurmountable legal bills in fighting "subversive" designation, pleaded with the public, "Don't Let McCarthyism Darken the Halls of Learning," but closed by 1956's end. Jefferson's board was "confident that the understanding and inspiration provided by the School will live on in the minds of its many thousands of students, and will continue to be reflected in their daily lives."[35]

Many alumni continued working for civil rights, peace and other causes, and alternative schools rose again during Mississippi Freedom Summer and other liberationist moments. Still, the momentum for radical education was forestalled by eradication of these Workers' Schools. The curriculum of dissent had to be reconnected after government suppression. Workers' Schools offer a liberating, pedagogical genealogy to counter contemporary privatized, marketized education mania. In a neo-Dickensian era where monetization has replaced much of the liberal arts, we must look to an earlier era's "people's university" for instruction.

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