
Review of Malcolm Harris' *Kids These Days* by young people encountering education in Australia*Edited by Harris Malcolm
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In recent years, a great deal of angst has been generated in the public sphere about what is wrong with young people. Their phones have given them short attention spans, they do not turn up to lectures, and they eat avocado that has been cruelly smashed rather than austere spread on toast. All of this, some commentators have suggested, somehow explains why the generation marketing folk have labelled “millennials” have been unable to buy into Sydney’s property bubble.

In contemporary media, criticisms of “kids” by “adults” are myriad and sometimes weird. Malcolm Harris’ 2017 book *Kids These Days* gained traction in the US media by engaging with these discussions. *Kids These Days*, however, also asks us to turn our attention from the kids to the world into which they have become adults. Many of these observations are relevant to the history of education.

Kids These Days is about “human capital”. It describes a world where obtaining the skills and knowledge used at work has become the sole responsibility of the worker. The path to obtaining the skills requisite to employment has been marketised, putting a great deal of pressure – especially via young peoples’ time, effort and financial costs – on those who seek the “privilege” of one day having a job.

Getting a good job needs more and more education – something we have long observed in the history of education. This book offers us the opportunity to think through the effects of this long credentialising history as its pressure bears down on successive generations.

Harris begins by asking us to re-think schooling from the perspective of a labour theory of value. If school is the site of human capital formation and this is essential to capitalist enterprise, for children, school work is labour. Children are required to contribute their labour under the “pedagogical mask” that schools provide. As the workforce became more competitive – which Harris argues is a consequence of increased precarity and falling minimum wages relative to inflation, making the “college premium” increasingly essential – the amount of effort children “invest” in their own human capital is making the pressure on them unbearable. Smartphones worsen the problem by making the work literally inescapable. “Helicopter” parents, who monitor and encourage investment in human capital from infancy onwards, are, in fact, responding rationally to this competitive environment. The effect, however, only increases the pressure on kids.

Since the 1980s, higher education has experienced exponential growth. This growth, far from the achievement of a class of university-trained leaders, is a symptom of this same shift, according to Harris. The “privilege” students pay and labour for enables them to literally embody the expertise that capital demands. It is also a set of values that has pushed that generation of young people into significant debt. The college debt situation is much worse in the USA than Australia, but is noticeable nevertheless. The relentless escalation of the required investment to make one’s self competitive for a good job, Harris argues, has now resulted in a new form of exploitation. Young people’s free labour is increasingly offered directly to capital in the form of voluntary work, or internships, all in the relentless pursuit of sufficient human capital to be competitive. University students, worried about their future despite the “college premium” in the job market, are told they

still need more. After decades of work performed through their education, Harris argues that they now offer increased labour for free to even further prove their worthiness for the privilege of work.

Harris's conclusion offers very little to feel optimistic about. His metaphor is a game called "Bop It", where the player obeys the ever-accelerating commands of the toy to bop, twist or pull. For young people, he says voting, protesting and ethically shopping (what he calls "playing progressive Bop It") are about as useful as this game in confronting the structure of exploitation. He predicts a world where discrimination is built into the algorithms that govern our online behaviour, governments crack down on protest with violence and capitalism integrates the entire non-profit sector into its system of exploitation. In the end, Harris claims that young people can either "enact the bad future" or "cut the knot of trend lines": the only choice is to "become fascists or revolutionaries, one or the other [...] [but] I fear it will seem in retrospect like we never had a choice at all".

Hannah Forsyth, NSW Year 12, 1992

This book related some problems with education that were different to my schooling, now more than two decades ago. Getting into university was only just starting to become important for more than a small handful of students – so that even completing the Higher School Certificate was only recently increasingly universal. Teachers and parents encouraged us to pursue what interested us, with only the local careers advisor expressing much of a relationship between schooling and employment opportunities – and this was the era of high youth unemployment during the "recession we had to have". Those of us who pursued Arts degrees did so with the knowledge that we may never earn enough to pay off our HECS debts – but we retained some sort of middle-class consciousness that we would be OK anyway. Reading this book, however, is not only helpful for my current project, but it also helped explain some of the stresses I was observing among my own students, studying history at university.

I decided to ask some younger people about whether Harris' observations resonated for them. These four – Christina Burjan, Patrick Flood, Cooper Forsyth and Ruby Newman – completed Year 12 in NSW in the last few years and have co-authored this review with me.

Christina Burjan, University of Sydney Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Advanced Studies (Politics and International Relations) Year 2, 2019

Reading *Kids these Days*, I found that Harris articulated several experiences I encountered throughout my time at High School. Growing up as the eldest child, I sought to assert myself as the most quintessential eldest child imaginable, embodying every stereotypical eldest-child trait that comes to mind. As I progressed into high school, I discovered that my eldest-child compulsion to devoutly please authoritative figures, achieving "perfection" in my scholarly endeavours, was a sentiment shared by many, if not majority, of my fellow colleagues, regardless of their status of eldest, middle or youngest child. Immersed in a pool of hypercompetition, as Harris describes, my desire to please was progressively overtaken by a subconscious need to "think ahead towards my future" and "make investment now for later on". Upon reflection, it was clear to see the way in which Harris' concept of the "pedagogical mask" came to dictate the direction of my own work ethic.

This investment in what Harris refers to as my own "human capital" culminated in the preparation undertaken in my senior years of school as we progressed towards the delivery of the most quantitative translation of this capital available – my ATAR.

Adults in this world often provided contradictory advice. Throughout senior school, it was constantly reiterated to us that there were things "bigger things than the HSC". We

were repeatedly told it was important to “enjoy down time and relax”. And we were similarly provided with countless success stories of individuals who had failed to do well in their final exams, yet found ways to go on and acquire the university qualifications of their dreams, in fairy-tale-esque endings.

Despite these endlessly-reiterated claims, I was unable to shake the understanding that the preparation undertaken towards these exams would be the most significant investment we would be able to make towards the success of our own futures, at least for a long time to come. This was the understanding, after all, that had been ingrained into us over the years of high school.

After these experiences of schooling, I found Harris’ discussion of the mindset of the millennial, now integrated into their behaviour and attitudes at school and work, of particular interest. In my exam preparation, slacking off was inconceivable. It would be a self-sabotage of my own success, and would allow those around me to more readily advance further ahead than myself. Whether anyone ever actually verbalised this sentiment, I do not know, but it was certainly internalised. It was therefore easy to see how Harris had come to draw the connection between this ever-increasing hypercompetition between millennials at school, and their lack of ability to mobilise and sustain effective collective action in the workforce, namely, in the form of strikes and union movement.

In my experience, this investment in “human capital” also extended beyond academic study. In order to give ourselves the “best chance later on”, we were encouraged to develop ourselves as “holistic learners”, maximising extra-curricular activities and other available opportunities. We understood that in addition to the intrinsic benefits they offered, each opportunity provided extra “résumé points”, some extra edge over our fellow colleagues, as we all progressed towards the final judgement that would be our university applications.

Several times throughout the book, Harris highlights the irony inherent in the way in which millennials are on the whole portrayed as technology-obsessed slackers who are too acclimatised to their “trophy generation” pillow of comfort. This is in contrast to the statistical evidence which suggests that, in reality, millennials are working academically harder with greater levels of stress and anxiety than ever before. My own schooling experience shows me that this rift between stereotype and reality often translates into a lack of understanding. My parents and other adults could not properly understand why I would stress as significantly as I did, throughout my final years of high school. According to the logic of the stereotypes available, my strong work ethic and driving need to “give myself the best chance possible” meant that, to their knowledge, I was the exception to the “slacking-off” status quo and had little reason to stress as much as I did. Overall, the concepts Harris discusses in this book helped me to better understand and articulate how and why this rift of understanding developed.

Patrick Flood, University of Sydney, Bachelor of Communication (Social and Political Sciences)/Bachelor of Laws, University of Technology Sydney, Year 2, 2019

While reading Malcolm Harris’ *Kids These Days*, I found myself relating to his fears for the future. In particular, I have shared the experience that young people are incessant self-investors, even before entering the workforce. Indeed, Harris captures the fears and anxiety of many young people, including me. While I am uncertain whether Harris’ American investigation illustrates the current state of the job market in Australia, his contentions nonetheless reflect the structural challenges young people face.

Harris’ exploration of the way in which young people approach tertiary education is an experience I can relate to. As Harris contends, young people relentlessly “self-invest” in their personal capital. In my own experience, in my first year of university, I was feeling anxious about pursuing my passions for history, given that it would not necessarily constitute an

effective investment in my future job prospects. Similarly, throughout high school, I invested heavily in performing for my exams rather than consuming and learning from the content. I found that, while I would perform well in my High School Certificate, which I was told constituted a significant investment in my future, I did not enjoy or learn as heavily from the content or my teachers. In hindsight, my belief in the importance of receiving a high ATAR, was not in proportion to its value. I do not believe that the outcome of my schooling accurately reflects the lessons I have learnt, experiences I have had and, ultimately, the jobs I should pursue. Thus, Harris' book illuminates the shifts in the value of various forms of capital.

Further, I found Harris' exploration of a pedagogical ideology to be interesting. In my own experience, it is certainly true that parents place an emphasis on their children to take "safe" pathways towards certain careers, without realising the extent of change and instability in the future job market. Perhaps, at times, Harris lapses into an over-emphasis on the role of parents as "investors". My parents invested in my "human capital", certainly, but also insisted I balance this with a healthy lifestyle.

Harris' statistical and economic analysis usefully contradicts the anecdotal evidence that older generations seem to use to characterise younger people. Indeed, his point that technology has not stifled workloads, but has rather increased output, contravenes the claims older generations make about lazy young people attached to their technology. This use of data to contravene anecdotal contentions of many of the older generations, presents a divide between the old and the new. There is, indeed, a lack of understanding among older generations to grasp the increasing pressure put on young people to invest in one's own capital in a rapidly changing marketplace. While there may be a degree of truth to our technology obsessions, I do not believe this characterises my generation or the unique struggles we face. The technology, as Harris points out, means that our ability to self-invest is never far away. That is a pressure by itself.

At times, I found that the book lapses into experiences that are unique to America. However, the structural issues described are certainly reminiscent of my own experiences. While Australian students may not experience the same degree of college debt, the commercialisation of universities is certainly an issue I have faced. While I do believe there is an important distinction between Australian and American experiences, the structural issues described affect us all.

After reading Harris' book, the issues of career stability, debt and unemployment are now much more prominent in my mind. Further, I found he captured my fear and anxiety for the future.

Cooper Forsyth, Bachelor of Arts University of Sydney, Year 1, 2019

I agree with Malcolm Harris's view that young people are increasingly persuaded to invest in their own "human capital" due to a variety of external pressures. I found the "pedagogical mask" – which prevents us school kids from viewing school work as labour – to be an enlightening idea, as for the first time I felt I was able to question the assumption that working hard at school was simply "for my own good", an investment in myself invariably worth pursuing.

Harris argued that our anxiety to keep investing in ourselves is increasing, and his descriptions of the changes to pre-schooling in the USA resonated with the various things I had seen in the news. These describe parents' anxiety over the education of children under five. My aunt (a primary school teacher) has told me of many parents' insistence her school either push their child up a grade when they clearly were not ready, or to put them through a "gifted and talented" stream. This kind of acceleration seems to be increasing in popularity, which I think is a symptom of that anxiety. Most of all, however, *Kids these Days* made sense of what always seemed to me a bizarre frenzy that affects the kids doing the HSC, which I just finished myself.

Since I started High School, I have thought that the way we do schooling is more than a little bit inadequate; in younger years, things that were properly analytical seemed to be glossed over in place of something more formulaic, while in senior school, education suddenly became a thing to be gamed. Sure, there was good content. In fact, I always felt grateful for the things that I learned. However, there was never enough time to really grapple with content in a meaningful way, and certainly this was rarely our priority. Instead, the question “what does the marker want” was superior to all others, and school quickly became a race to find the best schemes, the best formulas and tricks; the best way to ensure consistently high marks with little to no risk. Reading Harris, I saw that having discarded any desire for the inherent value of learning, we could better safeguard the value of our “human capital”. At school, this was understood not as real knowledge, but as a number inked out clearly in red pen. Our learning was pointed, with factory-like precision, towards this one aim. Even the best and least cynical of my teachers, who of course cared deeply about the inherent value of their subject, were forced to acquiesce to this way of thinking. They admitted that we could avoid having to really come to terms with the subject, and suggested that our key aim was to make sure everyone could get the best marks possible. To me, this highlights the validity of Harris’s argument more than anything else; even those who most want our learning to be uncontrived think that students need a cynical approach because, otherwise, we might not succeed. Clearly, human capital is more valuable than ever, and everyone through the system is feeling it.

I thought Harris’s conclusion was seriously bleak, and while (ironically) I do not feel I have acquired enough human capital to contend with his argument, I sure as hell hope he is wrong. And while I am actually happy to play “progressive pop-it” to at least push back against systemic forces, I do not imagine that schooling will be one that will change anytime soon.

Ruby Newman, Bachelor of Music, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Year 1, 2019

For me, Malcolm Harris’s critiques of education stood out the most. His writing felt like a friend to reassure me during the final months of the HSC. He confirmed for me all the doubts I had about the “education” system and more particularly the NSW system of the “ATAR”.

School was always a place in which I thrived. I was an engaged, confident and critical student, thinking about my future in a workplace and how the assessments I was completing at school were successfully preparing me for this. Came Year 12 and I changed. After reading *Kids these Days*, I now realise that my need to strive and “succeed” at school was a product of capitalism – moulding us to be the hardest working, best-prepared human capital. Capitalism flourishes under the system that the HSC supports: it promotes competition, pitting us against each another. As Harris argues, “grades turn into money, or into choice, or into ‘better life outcomes’”.

And that makes me sad. It makes me sad that many students are blindly following the path of “success” outlined in HSC terms. But that is simply what we are taught. I am grateful to Harris for providing clear statistics and explanations for my discomfort regarding the rigidity and obsolete nature of education. Many adults in my life, albeit in my parent’s small liberal bubble, hold a similar belief to me. They hear me talking about the same texts and methods of learning that they were reading and undertaking when they were at school. I know NSW are staging a schooling review at the moment so, maybe there is some hope there? At least they understand that something big needs to change.

I think tertiary education in Australia, whilst the debts are not nearly as high as in America, is similarly in need of transformation. The corporations that run them and the fees that students must pay are products of the capitalist system that runs our society. It demands a large output of graduates at an increasingly higher cost to make up for the declining employment and wage rates for young people.

My generation is open-minded. Even with the growing threat of Fascism worldwide, I have hope. Hope is all I try to carry. I am, and have been for a while, thinking about how I (and we) can reform Australia's education system. To move from a system of "schooling" that is shaping us to be factory workers, to one of collaboration, autonomy and a complete dismantling of hierarchies between teachers and students. If this book has taught me anything, it is that young people like me are only devouring our avo toast as a means of escaping or ridding ourselves of our strict new identities as human capital. So who is to blame?

Discussion

Hannah Forsyth: how do we know to be frightened of the future? For most of you, the pressure of the HSC (which we should say has always been part of that process) was offset by parents and even teachers telling you not to work too hard. How did you "know" they were "wrong"?

Christina Burjan: I think it is really all about a collective mob sort of mentality that develops at the student level within the school environment. Because everybody is working with this understanding that is been ingrained into them that the better you do, the greater opportunities and options you will be rewarded with, the competitiveness and seriousness of it all just gains this momentum which just builds and builds and builds as you approach the final years of school. Therefore, I would say it is not so much, "knowing" that the advice of parents and teachers was "wrong" but rather sensing a lack of understanding on their behalf as to just how competitive it is and how high the stakes are (or at least how high it feels they are).

Cooper Forsyth: what Christina said about the mob mentality is 100 percent right; with the anxiety being reinforced by your peers. However, I do not think that parents and teachers are always as rebellious as you were [Hannah Forsyth]; and the mood is not really one of "just relax". The people who are told not to work so hard are already too caught up in valuing themselves through their hard work. Teachers then get stuck between hassling the slack kids to work harder, and reminding the studious kids to take breaks. However, they only do the latter because they have already helped to create a culture that encourages competitiveness and a "gamified" final year of schooling. Just like the promotion of mindful meditation and de-stress techniques (which I understand are also used in paid workplaces), these reassurances are the result of a culture of heightened productivity, rather than a contradiction to it.

Ruby Newman: I think that we "know" to be frightened of the future because the "timeline" or "chronology" that society expects of us places a lot of value on tertiary education, and for this to happen straight after high school. Furthermore, we are taught that tertiary education equals stability in a workplace and higher paid work. For me, it is having to acclimatise to this expectation that makes me worry or feel scared about the future.

Patrick Flood: I found my schooling to be important for my personal development. Although, I do believe I "over invested" in my performance in the HSC. I also find the idea of tweaking or revolutionising education to be appealing, however. Chrissy's suggestion of a greater emphasis on critical thinking seems to be the most valid to me. Personally, I found my History Extension examinations to be the most challenging, having to balance memorised knowledge with an unpredictable question. In terms of university, my history courses have prepared me the best.

Hannah Forsyth: does your investment in your own human capital affect your choice of post-school study? Cooper and Ruby will be making this choice now – Chrissy and Patrick made it, though I understand Patrick is seeking to change courses. What is at stake in your choice now, do you think?

Patrick Flood: certainly, like Chrissy, I wanted to balance pragmatism and my own passions. This is a path I have been searching for on an ongoing basis, choosing subjects

from Business Law to specialised Politics courses to find it! Honestly, my passions have overwhelmed my own sense of pragmatism. In the HSC, I was able to utilise the variety of subjects to “test” the various disciplines. I found university a further testing ground for this.

Ruby Newman: I tried to “un-invest” as best I could in my own human capital during year 12, so I chose a course that I knew would not demand a high ATAR – for the Conservatorium of Music, you need over 70, but your place is mostly based on an interview/audition/portfolio. I made this decision to apply to a course with these requirements because I know I want to study in an institution that values peoples’ individuality and creative work over their ability to think quickly and memorise in high pressure situations (which is my very cynical wrap-up of what the ATAR measures). I also want to be studying with other young people who do not fit the format or the matrix of mainstream schooling.

Christina Burjan: I would definitely say the concept of investing in my own human capital played a large part in my decision regarding post-school study. Although I knew, for example, that I personally was not interested in the content of subjects such as law or medicine, I would be lying if I said I did not take into consideration the fact that I wanted to choose a course which allowed me to make the most of my treasured ATAR that I had worked so hard to earn and invested so much capital towards. In this way, I think the choice of post-school study very easily gets caught up in this ongoing investment-cycle, if you will. In order to justify the investment made towards the ATAR, one ends up picking a course which ultimately ends up requiring more work, and more investment, and thus the cycle continues. I would like to think that, in my own case, I have managed to find a happy balance between something which does indeed actually allow me to explore my own interests, whilst, at the same time, satisfies my pragmatically concerned millennial side in that it also looks good on paper, and keeps itself open to potential job opportunities.

Hannah Forsyth: Ruby and Cooper have gestured to some things that would make schooling better – what do you think, Patrick and Chrissy? For all of you, would reforming education help, or is something else at the core of the problem?

Christina Burjan: I agree with the ideas put forward by Ruby and Cooper, and see the change within the education system as an important starting point towards grappling the systemic issues at hand. As Cooper mentioned, I think the structure of particularly HSC exams encourage this utilisation of effective and economical tricks and schemes that allow tried and true content to simply be memorised and regurgitated. Reform that tackles the nature of these exams themselves is important. Overall, greater emphasis needs to be placed upon students thinking for themselves and grappling with concepts and ideas on the spot, within the exam setting. Exams that could be tailored to personal learning styles might also help reduce hypercompetition.

Ruby Newman: we have to stop encouraging standardised testing. The alternative is a much bigger discussion. Some ideas might include peer-based assessments, teacher-based assessments that are formed from one-one discussions or by teacher observations of individual class participation. The curriculum needs to be more flexible and adaptable for teachers, to allow them more autonomy over their teaching. This would lead to greater passion and vibrancy in the classroom and therefore students would be more engaged. Reports are an outdated concept, and no other workplaces (because school is essentially a workplace) or systems use letters to categorise people or staff, based on one to two high pressure exams (Hannah Forsyth: actually, my workplace sort of does this, but I see your point). Maybe there could be a bigger push for the reporting students’ unique pathways – the ways they work with others, their inclusivity, their energy, their quick thinking, their slow but meaningful thinking, etc. Education is in dire need of a re-think. Here in Australia and in America, it is one of the least progressive spheres and that has to change.

Patrick Flood: change in the education system could certainly be an important starting point. The HSC exams encourage a degree of effective and economical tricks. However,

I think that the wide breadth of subjects available fits with the enormous variety of personalities. I found it amazing to be tested on my acting ability in Drama, and my critical thinking in History Extension. For this reason, Australian education is not exactly “standardised” in that we can choose our subjects to explore our options.

Cooper Forsyth: I do not think that the problem really lies in education at all. Most of my teachers were fantastic, and almost always put in extraordinary amounts of passionate work, long outside of school hours. As I said before, the problem is not what is being taught either. Rethinking exams to make the work less contrived, as Christina suggested, is certainly important, but I think that the core issue is not the education system, but the system that it appears to be for: capitalism. As long as market pressures continue to increase the anxiety to invest in one’s human capital, it becomes harder and harder to see education as being for anything else; and unrealistic to expect anything better. It is essentially a hyperproletarianisation of learning, so tweaking the school system is unlikely to solve the problem.

Conclusions for the history of education

This reading of Malcolm Harris’s *Kids These Days* helps point to some emergent pathways that historians of education might further explore. Striking themes include parallels between school and work, and the possibility of including schooling among our historical explorations of children’s labour in the history of capitalism. Our reading of the book also reveals relationships between pedagogical and economic structures that deserve a more detailed historical analysis. And finally, observations about the ways that young people are neither persuaded by every piece of advice, policy development nor examination system points to a need to continue to develop theories and methodologies that better acknowledge student agency in the history of education.

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The Good University: what Universities Actually do and why it’s Time for Radical Change

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