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**Reviewed by Stephen J. Handel  
University of California, Office of the President  
USA**

***On Baristas, Taxi Drivers and College Degrees***

I go to Starbucks each morning with nothing on my mind until that first shot of caffeine hits my bloodstream. Lately, however, I've taken to imagining what kind of college degree the barista earned before setting off on his or her "career." Anthropology? Philosophy? Art History with a minor in Portuguese? I'm too embarrassed to ask, understanding that honest work in a coffee shop after thousands of dollars spent on a college degree must be seen as both a moral failure and a bad investment.

Alas, that is what I have been led to believe. The shrill debate of recent years about the decreasing "value" of a college education and the need for schools to emphasize "workforce credentials" and "marketable skills" have led us to pity the poor Starbucks employee as this century's embodiment of the 1970's taxi driver with a Ph.D. Then, as now, the anecdote, though pervasive, rings hollow.

That is the valuable corrective in David Baker's powerful book, *The Schooled Society*. In a vigorous rebuttal, he flips the "education-as-myth" concept on its head by showing the remarkable growth of a global culture steeped



in the language, credentials, and knowledge of a schooled society. Baker, a sociologist at Pennsylvania State University, has written a book whose force of argument (and scads of empirical evidence) disentangle the myriad strands of argument and counter-argument about the value of education, offering a perspective that emphasizes its positive impact on global society and our individual lives. In doing so, he demonstrates that the current debate about the need for a new vocationalism (“Kids need jobs, not degrees!”) is not just the wrong issue; it is wholly beside the point.

Baker begins his book by insisting that the schooled society—rather than a secondary outcome fueled by the profit motive or a cynical government ploy to sedate its citizens—is the *primary* actor in worldwide economic growth and the most important influence on the way in which individuals see and compare one another. Baker’s book is divided into two main observations. He first shows how schooling has moved from an opportunity reserved for privileged segments of society to one in which everyone can participate for economic or personal satisfaction. Baker notes that compulsory education has become the norm in Western democracies and that in the span of about 150 years, the world has changed from a population largely of illiterates to one in which about 80 percent of all adults have been educated to the point in which they can read and write a short statement about their life.

Baker’s second observation is that our “education culture” infuses all facets of life, informing the way that we raise our children, prepare for work, and become effective citizens. Moreover, this influence continues to grow as schooling is now seen as an important element throughout one’s life-span, from pre-K programs such as Head Start, to life-long learning initiatives for senior citizens. So powerful is the reach of this perspective, says Baker, that education is now seen as a universal human right—chartered, no less, in

the United Nations. It is the *sine quo non* of the modern and actualized individual. Baker concludes that “widespread education and the values, ideas, and norms that it fosters make it a robust primary institution that now uniquely shapes society far more than reacts to it” (p. xiii).

Despite the powerful effects of the schooled society, however, Baker contends that policymakers and scholars have overlooked its salutary effects. They portray K-12 schools and higher education as marketers of a false prophecy and, instead, advance corporate hegemony and technological transformations as the drivers of a supercharged capitalism. Baker stresses that our ambivalence about education—its costs, outcomes, and alleged conspiratorial ideologies—are simply an outgrowth of an institution that we can’t do without. Baker is most incisive when he highlights newspaper headlines and cable TV chats that stress an “overeducated” America, one that is producing a generation of college graduates who will be unprepared for the available jobs. For critics, “educational upgrading” is a sham, a kind of “diploma disease,” where credentials have no substantive link to skills in the workplace. But Baker shows that while this theme has a long history in America, there is no evidence to support its core concern. Job mismatch does occur in society—those baristas and taxi drivers with Ph.D.’s—but evidence shows that it is more likely to impact individuals who possess relevant skills and experience, but do not possess a college degree.

Baker’s theoretical framework is broad, embracing the provocative notion that education has altered the nature of work itself. Education does not merely provide people with the skills to operate in 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations, he argues; *it has helped create those organizations*. He uses the popularity of the MBA degree to demonstrate how a schooled society has changed the way that businesses recruit talent. Baker observes that “a hierarchy

of academic degrees has become thoroughly blended with the internal hierarchy of the modern organization” (p. 136). Were the MBA a sham degree—advanced by cynical universities uninterested in the career prospects of their students—it would have never gained acceptability in the business world. Unless corporate America is complicit in a conspiracy to promote useless credentials, he argues, the MBA degree has become popular precisely because it has increased the productivity of the organizations for which it was designed.

Of course, it is hardly radical to argue that education is important. Across America, families uproot to better neighborhoods to ensure that their children have access to good schools and spend small fortunes to hire SAT tutors. Baker’s book, however, is not an elaborate straw man. He argues that education is something far more vital than preparation for work; it defines one’s individual standing in society. Baker’s contention rings true when we attempt to explain the near hysteria of many middle- and upper-class families desperate to enroll their sons and daughters in America’s most prestigious higher education institutions (despite the fact that college access is virtually guaranteed in America). Securing access to elite colleges has always been a sought-after goal, but families today believe that reproducing their social standing—indeed, maintaining it—may well rely on the type of university that their offspring find themselves attending. As Baker notes, over 100 years ago, social mobility was engendered by inherited wealth and, to a lesser extent, professional standing. Today, such standing is primarily achieved through higher education degrees and credentials. While it remains powerfully true that privileged populations have greater access to better schools and colleges, social position has become increasingly determined by level of education: “... over just several American generations, education has thoroughly saturated intergenerational mobility; given the

increasingly homogenization of schooling’s influence, the educational dominance of social mobility is or soon will be global” (p. 54).

Baker also shows how education is valued at the other end of the academic spectrum by highlighting how the term “drop out” has ascended in our eyes as a marker of *personal* failure rather than academic incompetence. Before compulsory schooling, failure to graduate from high school was a socially understood—even acceptable—outcome for both institution and student. Today, however, schools and colleges are condemned for low completion rates. Students who fail to finish are seen as mismanaging their careers and undermining their citizenship. Even their patriotism is questioned, as suggested by President Obama in his 2009 State of the Union address: “Every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country.”

Finally, *The Schooled Society* is a rigorous statement about school as an institution—perhaps the pivotal institution—that fuels the betterment of societies and individuals. In his accessible, sometimes eloquent prose, Baker is able to bring coherence to what was heretofore a jumble of observations, seeming inconsistencies, and yawning gaps between liberal and conservative perspectives that relegate education to a secondary and far less powerful role in culture. For Baker, education empowers people; it does not subjugate them to a world order whose goal is to undermine their individuality, as argued by Marxists. And contrary to the right, which views the massification of education as a sorry excuse for the majesty of a bygone era in which the classics took center stage, Baker shows that the rise of Java at the expense of Latin has made both subjects accessible to more people worldwide.

The joy of reading *The Schooled Society* is in renewing one’s appreciation for the benefits of education. Baker’s book provides


us with a reasoned perspective in judging the value of a schooled society on culture and our individual lives. At a time when the cacophony around the effectiveness of schools seems to offer little way forward, it is a relief to read a book that manages to lower

the rhetorical flame, demonstrating that at the heart of 21<sup>st</sup> century America lives an egalitarian and progressive institution whose ineffable value can be leveraged by kings and vagabonds, baristas and taxi drivers.

### **About the Reviewer**

**Stephen J. Handel, Ph.D.** serves as the chief undergraduate admissions officer for the University of California system. He previously served as the Executive Director of the National Office of Community College Initiatives at the College Board. He is the author of *College Admission: Now and Then Again* (2015) and other publications.



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