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Capitalism Rejected is Education Perfected: The Imperfect Examples of Tarzan's New York Adventure and Captain Fantastic

Abstract

One of the more beguiling films of 2016 was Matt Ross' *Captain Fantastic*, a tale about a father raising a brood of children in the Pacific Northwest woods, and the challenges the family faces when it emerges into "civilization" to confront a family crisis. A much earlier film, 1942's *Tarzan's New York Adventure*, shares its narrative structure: Tarzan and Jane must leave their jungle paradise and confront a threat to their family in the canyons of New York. Both films explore the problems associated with parents' attempt at educating their children. And in both films the families' pedagogical agenda is configured by the economic structures of their respective cultures.

Keywords

Captain Fantastic, Tarzan, Film, Marx

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Cover Page Footnote

Professor Emeritus at Nova Southeastern University, Dr. Alford was a Fulbright Scholar at Albert Ludwigs Universität in Freiburg. His areas of research and teaching include early German and English Romanticism, Film Criticism and Theory, and American Literature, in particular the Contemporary American Novel and the work of Paul Auster. Dr. Alford has also been at the forefront of motorcycle studies for over a decade. He has served as an editor for *The International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* since 2005. His own publications in the field have focused on the intersection of motorcycles and culture and his most recent book, co-authored with Dr. Suzanne Ferriss is titled "An Alternative History of Bicycles and Motorcycles: Two-Wheeled Transportation and Material Culture" (2016).

Confiscatory student loans favoring the banks over America's young. State funding policies favoring wealthy white school districts over the urban poor. Aggressive university efforts to court foreign students to state schools, favoring out-of-state tuition revenues at the expense of seats for in-state students. Support for "charter schools" that divert public funds to educational initiatives inevitably driven by retrograde Christian groups seeking to turn the clock back to some imaginary past. These moves by American governing entities merely exemplify a worsening situation for ambitious, qualified high school and college students. These economic decisions erode fundamental cultural principles that should honor public education as a central value for our citizens and one, ironically for its opponents, that would increase our national economic standing over the long term.

In the face of a financial system at the mercy of bottom-line economics, what are parents to do? One solution for the ideologically committed is to opt out of the educational system altogether. Suburban home-schooling has been a choice for parents fearful of "contamination" by modern education, external threats supposedly coming from ideas of religious toleration, gender equity, and female bodily autonomy. Left-leaning parents have another option periodically chosen throughout American history, from Brook Farm to Arcosanti: seeking out like-minded people to live and work in a community simultaneously apart from "society" but participating, as need be, in the larger political unit. But there is an even more radical option to utopian communitarianism, exemplified (though not practiced) by Thoreau: walk away from your community into the woods and establish your family as a self-sustaining unit. Matt Ross' 2016 film, *Captain Fantastic*, is a beguiling, yet hard-headed look at just such a choice. While the film appears to dramatize a Sixties version of returning to the woods to live and prosper, it echoes another, much earlier literary and cinematic portrait of a family who decided to raise their son in a natural environment, one that appeared to be far from the contaminants of capitalist society: Tarzan and Jane.

In addition to the original Edgar Rice Burroughs' series of books originating in 1912, there have been over fifty cinematic "Tarzans," from Elmo Lincoln in 1918's *Tarzan of the Apes* to, at the time of this writing, Alexander Skarsgård in 2016's *The Legend of Tarzan*.¹ I hope readers share my view that Johnny Weissmuller, whose international success as Tarzan stretched from 1932's *Tarzan the Ape Man* to 1948's *Tarzan and the Mermaids*, was and is the best cinematic representative of this imaginary ideal. I will eschew arguing about the "real" Tarzan (e.g., Burroughs' original text) to focus on the Rousseauvean myth fostered in the Weissmuller films and its relevance to *Captain Fantastic*, a myth that, for all its valorization of the supposedly idyllic life in the jungle, repeatedly emphasizes that choosing "nature" over civilization does not exempt one from danger, but transmutes the danger of economic exploitation and its subsequent miseries (alienation, destruction of the family unit, ongoing physical exhaustion) to one of actual physical danger, from both animals and "natives."

Tarzan was an ongoing series with Weissmuller reprising his role, and the jungle narrative cannot be understood as neatly as a single film. Three of the first four films, *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934), and *Tarzan Finds a Son!* (1939) establish Tarzan's presence in the African jungle;² Jane Parker's (Maureen O'Sullivan) decision to remain

with Tarzan, despite the allure of civilization promised by her visiting friends, Harry Holt (who appears as Jane's friend in two of the films) and Marlin Arlington; and the acquisition of a child, Boy (Johnny Sheffield), the only survivor of a plane crash.

In the *Tarzan* films, the values of jungle living are repeatedly demonstrated by their contrast to the violent, deceitful, avaricious European and American visitors to Tarzan and Jane's home, as well as angry animals (lions, leopards, hippos, rhinos, etc., regardless of whether their natural habitat was the west African jungle) and swarms of spear-carrying "natives."³ The films generally tempt Tarzan's family with the allures of civilization (for example, make up, dresses and other consumerist baubles for Jane) before the evils of the same civilization are revealed (generally, exploitation of Africa's resources, such as ivory, by the greedy, manipulative visitors), and Tarzan's jungle values are reaffirmed.

For our purposes, no film embodies the interesting parallels and contrasts with *Captain Fantastic* better than *Tarzan's New York Adventure* (1942). In this film, evil men from a New York circus land near Tarzan's lair to capture animals and return them to America. Struck by an encounter with Boy, and his relationship with a baby elephant, the men kidnap Boy and take him to America, forcing Tarzan and Jane to follow, in hopes of rescuing him and returning to Africa. While in New York Tarzan experiences civilization first hand, with largely comic results (aided by Cheetah, the chimpanzee, who also somehow made the journey; perhaps quarantine regulations were more relaxed in the 1930s). However, in attempting to rescue Boy, Tarzan is forced to defend his guardianship of Boy in court.

One obvious parallel between the two films relates to their structure. *Captain Fantastic* falls neatly into three parts: the family's idyllic experiences in the woods, their "fall" into society to attend to the mother's death, and the surprising return of all but one of the children to a modified version of their woodland home following what seems, mistakenly, to have been a successful attempt to "civilize" the children by having authorities confiscate them from their biological father.

Tarzan's *New York Adventure* shares a tripartite structure with *Captain Fantastic*. We are shown the family in its natural setting, events require a swift exit into a confusing and potentially threatening "civilized" environment, and, following a series of threats to the integrity of the family, order is restored, as the family succeeds in returning to its original home. While *Captain Fantastic* has been lauded as a critique of capitalist relations and how they poison, among other things, family relations,⁴ I suggest that the film is more even-handed about the possibilities and perils of a "natural" education than it first appears, both endorsing, for example, Ben's striking honesty with his children, while also showing how raising children in such an environment stunts significant areas of their personal growth. As such, it is not so much a celebration of a "natural" family as an inquiry into what would constitute such a series of relations. *Tarzan's New York Adventure*, and, by extension, all of the early Weissmuller Tarzan films, offer a simpler contrast between the natural and the civilized, featuring the halcyon daily life in the jungle being threatened by the ingrained corruption of capitalist civilization as well as the natural denizens of the jungle. *Captain Fantastic* substitutes economic threats for natural ones (the former then affecting the children's intellectual growth and character), such that "civilization" harbors dangers that are indirect and often concealed, but no less dangerous to the family unit than a prowling leopard.

Education

Both *Captain Fantastic* and *Tarzan's New York Adventure* are nominally narratives in which a family takes a journey that reaffirms the values of their collective life choice, to live apart, as much as possible, from the noxious effects of civilized society. While the central concern is maintaining the integrity of the family unit, the rationale for maintaining that integrity is the education of the children. The adventures the two families undergo result from the passionate commitment of the parent(s) to what appears to be the *raison d'être* of the family unit: the proper education of offspring. While in Ben's case, his recognition of how a capitalist society can deform children's education motivates his choice of environment, Tarzan has obviously not been exposed to a society he wishes to withdraw from. However, he is seemingly constantly threatened by external agents who have, as their fundamental motivation, the exploitation of Africa's resources for selfish personal gain. As the financially strapped Martin Arlington explains his reason for extracting ivory from an elephant graveyard in *Tarzan and His Mate*, "I'd sit on top of the pile [of money he would make from the sale of the ivory] with a gun and watch it grow."⁵ Marx could not have described the bourgeois sensibility better. Ben withdraws to avoid the economic system, while the economic system (in the form of white hunters bent on exploitation) comes to Tarzan, who then is forced to expel the threat from the jungle (usually with the help of a loyal band of elephants who respond to his call).

Given that the Pacific Northwest forest and the African jungle are not so much garden-like places of refuge from physical threats, but places absent of a particular economic system, how would one best create an environment conducive to childhood education? Looking to Marx's view of education provides some helpful structure.

For Marx, the proper education of children does not so much involve "returning to nature" (generally conceived as an ahistorical condition and thus outside the Marxist historicist worldview), but rather employing a return to nature as a means of severing the connection between the bourgeois family and the economic system that configures how education is understood. As Marx notes in "The Communist Manifesto":

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.

The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.

Do you charge us with wanting to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime we plead guilty.

But, you say, we destroy the most hallowed of relations, when we replace home education by social.

And your education! Is not that also social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention direct or indirect, of society, by means of schools, &c.? The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention, and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class.

*The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parents and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.*⁶

For Marx, then, there are two “families,” those of the bourgeois and those of the proletariat. In the former case, the connection to capital perverts the appropriate course of childhood education. In the latter case, the enslavement of the proletariat to wages destroys family relations themselves.

The family of *Captain Fantastic* is surely a bourgeois family, and its presence in the Pacific Northwest woods is a consequence of Ben’s status as an educated bourgeois, and his decision to remove his children from the perceived damage that education within a bourgeois society will cause them. “Nature” in this sense functions as a place where the strategy of removal can work—nature is special not necessarily because of the romantic, positive effects of being in daily contact with it (as the British Romantic poets would have it), but as a place absent of capitalist exploitation and capital relations.⁷

Tarzan’s family differs from Ben’s in that the jungle is not a place of escape, but a place of natural growth and a source of humanizing education. The characters’ education (and here we may perhaps except Jane from the equation) results directly from being raised in Nature, a person who is both in nature and of nature. Boy, like Tarzan, has never consciously known any other kind of existence. In *Captain Fantastic* we begin (in Ben’s backstory with his wife) in a capitalistic society and escape from it (in Ben’s brief accounting, from Boulder, Colorado to Oregon to the “woods” of the Pacific Northwest); in the Tarzan films the two male characters have known only nature. For them, the threat of capitalism exists in the form of exploitative intruders. Tarzan apparently has dealt with them all his life, as he instinctively sees them as a threat and their weapons as evil, breaking rifles over his knee whenever possible.⁸

How does Marx’s view of the proper content of education comport with that of our two natural families? In an 1866 address on Juvenile and Child Labor, he noted that proper education consists of three parts:

Firstly: *Mental education.*

Secondly: *Bodily education*, such as is given in schools of gymnastics, and by military exercise.

Thirdly: *Technological training*, which imparts the general principles of all processes of production, and, simultaneously initiates the child and young person in the practical use and handling of the elementary instruments of all trades.⁹

While in this instance he was discussing the education of the children of the proletariat, it would seem that his description is aiming for the ideal format to educate children in general, with the understanding that the differences between the bourgeois and proletariat would dissolve following the various and inevitable revolutionary steps to the period following the withering away of the state and the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Clearly, both families benefit from an educational model (consciously in the case of *Captain Fantastic*; the unconscious result of living in the jungle in the case of Tarzan and Boy)

quite like what Marx is describing.¹⁰ Unlike education under capitalism, where families experience the intervention of an educational model designed to meet the needs of an exploitative economy, Ben's children and Boy are educated, according to the circumstances of their surroundings, in the mental skills necessary to flourish. Both families are exceptionally fit. And both sets of children are taught what we would call "survival skills" which, however, in the context of their surroundings, are simply the skills necessary as one goes about one's daily business (which includes killing, preparing, and cooking animals as well as harvesting various fruits and vegetables). Hence, it would seem that in both instances, the children acquire the three categories of competence Marx's emphasizes: the mental, the bodily, and the technological (in this case, mastery of weapons). The results of this approach are children who are resourceful, practically skillful and, perhaps most important, respectful both of others whom they meet as well as the environment they inhabit. While we may marvel at Boy's skill with elephants or Zaja's knowledge of the American Constitution, what is truly valuable is the character of these admirable children. Engendering practical and verbal skills is commendable; yet the ideal of any educational program, from Plato onward, has been the development of a strong and resourceful character in a developing young adult. And, in both films, the threat to this development is a particular economic system.

Yet, as noted, both films do not valorize the "natural" life as an unalloyed good and, in this sense, the films are all the more estimable in their dramatic assessment of proper childhood education. In *Captain Fantastic*, Bo, Ben's eldest son, has two poignant interactions with girls of his age. He first meets a trio of girls exiting from a convenience store. As a response to their appreciative glances, he looks wordlessly at the ground. Ben tries to encourage him:

BEN: Go talk to them. We got time.

BO: Ask her what she thinks of the working people creating an armed revolution against the exploiting classes and their state structures?

BEN: Well, Marxists can be just as genocidal as capitalists.

BO: Or whether or not she's a dialectical materialist and accords primacy to the class struggle?

BEN: Avoid Marxism. Or telling her you're a Trotskyite.

BO: Trotskyist. Only a Stalinist would call a Trotskyist a Trotskyite. And I'm not a Trotskyist anymore. I'm a Maoist.

BEN: Right. I forgot, sorry.

Bo's "natural" education has ill-prepared him for one of the most important (and awkward) passages of male adolescence: how to talk to a girl. Later in the film, Bo meets an attractive girl of his age who clearly takes a shine to him. We witness his pain and humiliation at not knowing how to socially interact with her, and his cluelessness of how to pursue a romantic conquest. (His passionate marriage proposal to a girl he has known for all of fifteen minutes is taken by both her and her mother as comedic shtick.)¹¹ His time in the woods may have taught him how to kill, dress and cook an animal for his family's dinner, but the process of eventually finding a romantic partner and creating his own family of children to educate would seem to be at minimum as important. While his education in nature has taught him some skills, he has been stunted in his emotional and social growth to the point that he doesn't know how to interact emotionally with a girl. How could one develop such skills in the absence of social interactions?

Boy, still a child, has not yet developed sexually or emotionally where the absence of a female relation would be a problem for him. However, he is exceedingly naïve, and his naiveté results in a threat to his life: the evil circus people kidnap him (albeit assuming that Tarzan has died in a fall and a fire). He is treated in New York as an exotic animal whose skills with elephants are put on display for the economic gain of the circus. His exploitation results from an inability to understand the concept of “deceit” in adults. We would not consider a young adult fully formed were he/she unable to recognize those who would exploit him/her, and this knowledge is usually the result of negative social experiences growing up, none of which are (fortunately or unfortunately) available to Boy. While Boy may be able to train an elephant, he is literally unable to defend himself against an adult with ulterior motives.

In Defense of a “Natural Education”

Both films provide an opportunity for the principal characters to offer their defense of their choice for their children’s education. As noted, Tarzan is compelled to defend his (and Jane’s) rearing of Boy, and how his choices benefit Boy better than a “civilized” education. In the following excerpts, the two attorneys, one hired by the circus and one defending Tarzan and Jane, interrogate them.

TARZAN’S ATTORNEY: You have educated your son, haven't you? I mean, well, what did you teach the boy?

TARZAN: Teach Boy where to find water when thirsty, where to find food when hungry. Tarzan teach Boy to be strong like lion and happy like bird.

TARZAN’S ATTORNEY: You find everything you need in the jungle, do you?

TARZAN: Wise men need little.

TARZAN’S ATTORNEY: Have you ever thought what would become of Boy if he grows up in the jungle?

TARZAN: Boy grow up to be brother of sun and friend of rain. Hurt nobody. Want nothing people have. Grow old like cedar tree. Boy will be good man, happy man.

TARZAN’S ATTORNEY: No one can want more than that. That's all, thank you.

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: Can you read, Tarzan?

TARZAN: Read?

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: Yes, read. Read a book. Ever hear of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?

TARZAN: Tarzan read trails in jungle. Read clouds in sky. Lawyer ever hear of kinsin-nupa?

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: Kinsin-what?

TARZAN: Kinsin-nupa. Cure snakebites. All babies in the jungle know that.

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: This is a court of law.

TARZAN: White man's law lots of words. Jungle law more easy. Man live own life.

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: So you prefer the jungle code to civilized law?

TARZAN: In jungle, men only kill bad animals. In civilization, men kill good men.

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: Will Mr. Norton concede that human life is in constant peril, in this wild unexplored region of the world from which this child was rescued?

TARZAN'S ATTORNEY: No, I will not concede any such thing. In the last year, 35,000 men, women and children were killed in automobile accidents alone in this country.

CIRCUS ATTORNEY: Your honor, I object. Counsel's remarks are immaterial.

JUDGE ABBOTSON: Objection denied. Proceed, Mr. Beaton.

TARZAN'S ATTORNEY: If the court please...

JUDGE ABBOTSON: Yes.

TARZAN'S ATTORNEY: I submit, Your Honor, the jungle is not an issue in this case. The only issue is guardianship. Are these two people morally fit to bring up an adolescent to proper manhood? It is my contention, your honor, that they are. By his conduct in this court, Tarzan has proved himself no savage but rather uniquely civilized.

During Jane's interrogation, she notes that while she has lived in civilization, given the choice of the jungle, she "wouldn't want to live anywhere else." Living there teaches a child "most of the things he needs to know: how to live simply, naturally, happily," and enables him to grow up "healthy and strong."

Tarzan's account of Boy's education (with his attorney's help) attempts not so much to defend the natural as redefine the civilized.¹² Several significant deviations from Marx's understanding of proper education are apparent. For Marx, "mental" education was important, while for Tarzan, literacy was irrelevant, as it did not provide the basis for character formation, but instead created the conditions for self-interested duplicity (i.e., "civilized" education was for Tarzan developing the selfish, Sophistic elements inherent in the command of language). True knowledge, for Tarzan, is practical knowledge (somewhat analogous to Marx's "technological" knowledge), something that civilized people, such as lawyers, have no inkling of. Children's safety (a precondition for education), Tarzan and his lawyer argue, is statistically more reliable in the jungle than in civilization. Hence, Boy will grow up to be a good man, one who is brother of the sun and friend of the rain.

As noted in the exchange above between Ben and Bo, Ben does not see a commitment to Marxist principles the solution to the problem of children's education ("Marxists can be just as genocidal as capitalists"). In lieu of Jesus or Marx, Ben promotes a celebration of Noam Chomsky, in which it seems he is only partly joking. (Celebrating Chomsky's birthday seems to be a way of providing the children with the benefits of a holiday—special foods, gifts, singing and dancing, etc.—so they would not feel left out in not celebrating the "magical fictitious elf," Santa Claus.) Nor would it seem that Ben promotes a Tarzan-like form of jungle living, as their house in the woods

features a sewing machine, Mason jars, knives, bows and arrows, a sink, etc. Instead, Ben wants to engender in his children a type of material and psychological self-sufficiency, combined with an anarchic sense of bricolage: taking from civilization what one needs (e.g., a sewing machine) while developing a powerful sense of independence from the system which produced these useful goods (using a purchased bow and arrow, but killing, gutting and killing animals for food).¹³ As Ben says to Harper after she challenges his parenting as “ridiculous”:

Is knowing how to set a broken bone or how to treat a severe burn ridiculous? Knowing how to navigate by the stars in total darkness, that's ridiculous? How to identify edible plants, how to make clothes from animal skins, how to survive in the forest with nothing but a knife? That's ridiculous to you?

Here we see echoes of Tarzan’s ridicule of the circus lawyer: “Kinsin-nupa. Cure snakebites. All babies in the jungle know that.”¹⁴

Unlike Tarzan, Ben is a fierce advocate of “civilized” knowledge, strongly enforcing family time for cultural and scientific education. Bo knows six languages; little Zaja can recite the U.S. Constitution; all of the children spend whatever time not devoted to foraging for food or physical training in reading books and mastering musical instruments.¹⁵ In this respect his attitude seems to echo Marx’s notion that there are types of knowledge independent of economic order or, to put it another way, that certain modes of consciousness are independent of the economic system under which they occur (raising the insoluble conflict within Marxist thought between the claim that economics determines consciousness and the role of the intellectual in revolutionary life). Ben appears to assume he can use the education acquired in his bourgeois youth as a tool against bourgeois order through the vehicle of his children’s education.

Ironically, while Ben has clearly had a fine education, he does not support Bo’s aspiration to go to college. Bo was accepted at Yale, Harvard, Brown, Princeton, MIT, Stanford and Dartmouth (only in Hollywood), despite having only been educated in what Ben calls “an unaccredited home school.” When Bo proudly but hesitantly shows Ben his acceptance letters, Ben harshly upbraids him. “You speak six languages. You have high math, theoretical physics! This is what I’m talking about! What the hell are these people going to teach you?” To Ben’s surprise, Bo reveals that Ben’s partner and Bo’s mother, Leslie (Trin Miller), helped Bo with the applications. As Bo says, “I know nothing! I know nothing! I am a freak because of you! You made us freaks! And mom knew that! She understood! Unless it comes out of a fucking book, I don’t know anything about anything!” Thus, unlike Jane, who supports Tarzan’s view of the proper education of Boy, Leslie understood that college would help educate Ben by socializing him.¹⁶ It would be difficult, as noted, to make a strict comparison between the asociality of Boy and Bo, given Boy’s sexual immaturity, but clearly Ben (at least according to Bo) has a view of education limited to what we might call book learnin’. In contrast, Tarzan eschews books in favor of what “nature” has to teach Boy. In this respect, both children suffer from a limited view of how education functions in the development of character and general maturation.

At the outset we noted the tripartite structure that both films share: a movement from the timeless, Edenic quotidian, to the fallen civilized, and a return to Eden. In the Tarzan film, the familial trio (and Cheetah) return to their jungle life seemingly unaffected by the “adventures,”

experienced in New York. Given the mythic quality of the Tarzan story, one doesn't expect verisimilitude: Boy apparently doesn't need counseling following the shock of a kidnapping, and Tarzan doesn't need to reconsider his life choices based on his evening at the 21 Club in New York. The heroic journey and rescue simply return the family to its assumed, unchanged and proper relation, both to their natural surroundings and each other. Ben and his family are another matter. Ben initially appears to capitulate to capitalist convention. After explaining to his children that he will be leaving them with their grandparents, Ben says of his attempt at helping heal his wife of her psychological problems that, "It's been a mistake. A beautiful mistake, but a mistake." He says to them that if they stay with him, "I'll ruin your lives," greatly upsetting them. Only after reuniting with them on the bus and performing the cremation ceremony with their mother's corpse does the family reunite in a common purpose. Bo leaves the family, not to go to college (which would have been funded by his wife's father), but to Africa (!), based on randomly putting his finger on a globe. Thus, his decision is hardly a conscious choice of "nature" over civilization/capitalism.

The remaining family's transformation over the course of the narrative is exemplified visually by two scenes of family togetherness, one at the beginning and another at the end of the film. At the opening the family is living in a modified tepee, existing half indoors and half outdoors, and their life seems more "savage" than natural, with Bo eating a raw deer heart as part of an initiation ceremony and the rest of the family attired in a random assortment of skins and clothes. By the end of the film the family has returned to the woods, but we find them now in a proper, modest house. Though huddled around a table reading as they had been circling the fire at the film's opening, the children are now studying textbooks appropriate to their age. Ben reminds them that the school bus will arrive in fifteen minutes, suggesting a general compromise between his radical ideas of engendering familial self-sufficiency and a more conventional rural upbringing. This middle path could be understood as the result of the education the entire family experiences owing to the series of adventures in "civilization."

If we could get Marx, Tarzan and Ben in one room (better still, perhaps, in a jungle treehouse, with Cheetah fanning them with a palm leaf) they clearly would disagree about the ideal structure of a child's education. What all three would agree with, however, is that the fundamental threat to both a child's education and his/her developing character is the economic system of capitalism. We might then ask, given our current environment, if we want to educate children properly, what is the appropriate response to the ubiquity of late capitalism? What should we do? We are given three strategies: revolution, living altogether apart from any economic system at all in the jungle, or a retreat—with periodic interaction with the system—whereby young people can master various type of knowledge with no thought to their economic utility. The understanding all three share is that civilization=capitalism is a false equivalence. The traditional term in contrast with civilization, nature, gives rise to the problematic differences among our three educators.

The binary nature/civilization, while emerging as an important contrast for Europeans following the voyages of discovery, is woefully underdetermined in meaning. The Return to Nature has been a recurrent theme in Western culture, yet, as Arthur Lovejoy and others have amply demonstrated, both these terms have come to mean pretty much whatever the writer in question wants them to mean.¹⁷ Yet, as such, we dismiss a proper definition at our peril. "Nature," for example, has variously been defined as wilderness (itself underdetermined), the jungle, an Edenic garden, etc. Civilization can be the result of thousands of years of progress or

a pox on humanity. Recognizing that both are problematic terms, those who do not blindly endorse one or the other as the proper state of humankind have sought a middle ground, such as the yeoman farmer of Thomas Jefferson's imagination, or the liminal space of the settlement standing between civilization and nature in the mythic structure of the Western hero (originating in the Leatherstocking tales of James Fennimore Cooper).¹⁸ The environmental movement, energized by the threat of global warming, has attempted to straddle this divide by understanding humans as stewards of nature (with such problematic suggestions as helping "nature" by driving an electric car) or, in Michael Pollan's view, treating "nature" as a garden, simultaneously respecting it for itself and what it can provide for human flourishing.¹⁹ What is generally missing, or unexamined in these opposing terms, is the question of economic systems. For example, is living in "nature" living under the rubric of a tribal economic system, one governed by barter? Given the explosion and "success" of capitalism across the globe, does positing "zones" independent of capitalism (in this case, the woods or the jungle) make any sense? Or do the films in question simply function as heuristic allegories, ones that, while helping us to clarify our thinking about education, do not provide any practical guidance in improving children's developing characters? There is no simple answer here, but these two films exemplify the ongoing concern for the role that nature (and civilization) play in one of humanity's most important projects, the education of its children.

Notes

¹ An excellent, recent resource for Tarzan films is Scott Tracy Griffin, *Tarzan on Film* (London: Titan Books, 2016).

² Unlike Burroughs' first book, *Tarzan the Ape Man*, the first Weissmuller film does not supply an origin story; Tarzan is simply present in the jungle for the arrival of Harry Holt, Jane Parker and her father, James Parker, and their safari. His identity as John Clayton, Earl of Greystoke, goes unmentioned. In *Tarzan Finds a Son*, Boy's origin is sketchily attributed to Tarzan's original literary genealogy as heir to the Greystoke family, although no mention is made of the Claytons.

³ The native tribes in the various films were not anthropologically correct, but named as inside jokes, e.g., the Zambeli tribe of *Tarzan Finds a Son*, named for producer Sam Zimbalist (Griffin, *Tarzan on Film*, 62).

⁴ See Bryant W. Sculos, "Parenting for Progress: Reflections on Matt Ross's *Captain Fantastic*," *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 4.2 (2016).

⁵ Significantly, this attitude toward money clearly affects his social relations. He notes, proudly, that "If you have money, women aren't hard to get."

⁶ Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm#100>

⁷ As Roderick Frazier Nash notes, “A society must become technological, urban, and crowded before a need for wild nature makes economic and intellectual sense. A Marxist formulation is tempting. There seems to be a social and economic class of nature lovers whose national affiliations are not as strong as their common interest in enjoying and saving wilderness wherever it exists. These people organize, confer, correspond, and raise money for nature preservation. A social profile of their ranks would reveal an inordinately high proportion of scientists, writers, artists—people of quality and the affluence to pay for it” (*Wilderness and the American Mind* [New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2014], 343). Ben certainly fits this description.

⁸ Ironically, in Tarzan’s battles with various jungle creatures, he dispatches them with one of the signal symbols of civilization: a steel knife, the result of countless years of “civilized” experimentation with mining, smelting and fashioning of metals for human use. As an undergraduate in the Sixties, during the height of the return-to-nature commune craze, I was instructed by one of my mentors, Professor John Silber, that the traditional image of a return to nature was a man walking into the woods bearing a gun and a Bible. That man, he noted, was carrying with him two thousand years of technological expertise and cultural history and, as such, was not so much returning to nature as playing out a mythic narrative.

⁹ The International Workingmen's Association, 1866, “Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions,”
<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1866/instructions.htm#04>

¹⁰ One explanation for the popularity of the Tarzan saga that combines the notion of the end of the American wilderness (around 1890) and the American need for an imaginative “wild space,” resulting in the “importation” of wilderness can be found in Nash, *Wilderness*, 352-353.

¹¹ When Claire’s mother catches Bo kissing her daughter, he declares, “But I know that your daughter has taught me many things just now. She has broadened my mind; she has helped me grow. When we just kissed for the first time just then, it... The endorphins that your daughter sent through my body were like dolphins swimming through my bloodstream. The way she has opened me up, she has penetrated deep inside of me, and I know that I have penetrated deep, deep inside of your daughter. And... but not—not like that. I would love to when... When it's necessary for... I, I want kids someday. Not right now, of course. But when you're ready, when I'm ready, because I think this should be a shared decision. This is a decision that we should make together. But when you are ready, I will be ready. I am ready for you, if you will have me... Claire... What's your last name?”

¹² This observation mirrors Marx’s view in the Manifesto, quoted above, when he contrasts “bourgeois clap-trap” with what he considers genuine education.

¹³ What might seem disturbing about his child rearing to some viewers is the serio-comic scene in which the family engineers a significant theft of food from a grocery store, in which Ben’s faked heart attack provides a diversion for the crime. More Abbie Hoffman than Chomsky, this scene seems to imply a sense of moral superiority to “the man,” and

not a respect for others. Later in the film, Ben defends the theft as a way of taking the children's mind off the death of their mother.

¹⁴ Ben is upbraided in the film about injuries to Rellian's hand and Vespyr's broken leg and concussion. The conflicting attitudes toward these injuries—either the accidental result of Ben's "training" and "missions" or child abuse—are voiced by characters in the film and left open to the viewer's judgment.

¹⁵ Among the books the children are reading during the film are *Lolita*; *The Brothers Karamazov*; *Guns, Germs and Steel*; and *Middlemarch*.

¹⁶ Late in the film Leslie's mother shares one of Leslie's early letters to her, in which Leslie lauds their educational experiment with their children as something never before accomplished—while comparing it (shakily) to the educational model in Plato's *Republic*. Clearly, her support of Bo's applications to college signaled a change of heart.

¹⁷ Arthur O. Lovejoy, "'Nature' as Aesthetic Norm," *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1948): 69-77. Originally published as Arthur O. Lovejoy, "'Nature' as Aesthetic Norm," *Modern Language Notes* 42.7 (1927): 444-50.

¹⁸ Note that there is an imperfect analogy between the mythic space of the cinematic Western and that of the African geography of the Weissmuller Tarzan films. As noted, Western film geography consists of the "civilized" East, the "savage" West, home to the Indians and outlaws, and the liminal space of the settlers, who the western hero, willingly or otherwise, defends against the encroachment of the Indians or outlaws. Tarzan's Africa consists of an area where the white Europeans/Americans land to begin their safari, the Mutia Escarpment, and, behind the Escarpment, Tarzan's realm. While both geographies consist of two areas divided by a physical space, the "settlement" and the Escarpment, the Escarpment does not function as a mediating space, but rather more like a line in the sand that, once crossed, becomes a realm of both idyll (Tarzan and Jane's lair) and danger (ferocious animals and "natives"). For an exploration of the cinematic Western myth, see John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1976) and *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Pr, 1984), as well as *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Madison, WI: The Popular Press, 1999). Another valuable resource is Robert Warshow's "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," found in his collection, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2002).

¹⁹ Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardner's Education* (New York: Grove Press, 2003): 176-201.

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