

Challenging the skills fetish

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Research Article

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Argument: skills fetish

Alienates skills from people who embody them & social context in which they are exercised

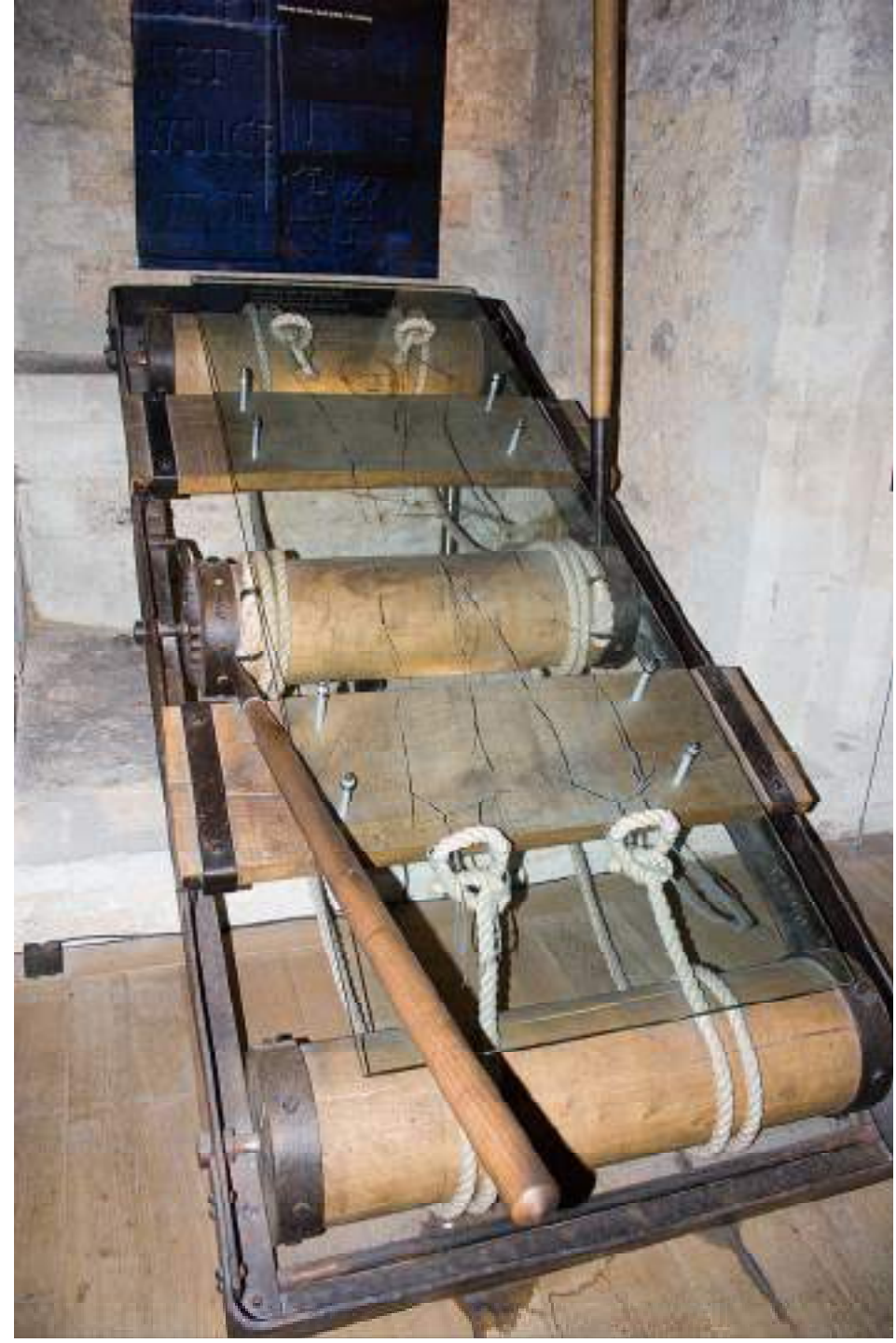
Reifies a social relation, so that skills are individualised, additive, & assessed independently

Is premised on an impoverished human actor – economic ‘man’

Deeply embedded in human capital theory & logical conclusion

Degrades education, work & social life

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Torture_Rack.jpg



Overview

Evolution of the Skills discourse

Market performance & individualisation of risk

Genericism & trainability

Skills fetish – Anglophone origins

Nominalism & methodological individualism

Reification of a social relation

Skills fetish, commodity fetishism & markets

The individual of human capital theory

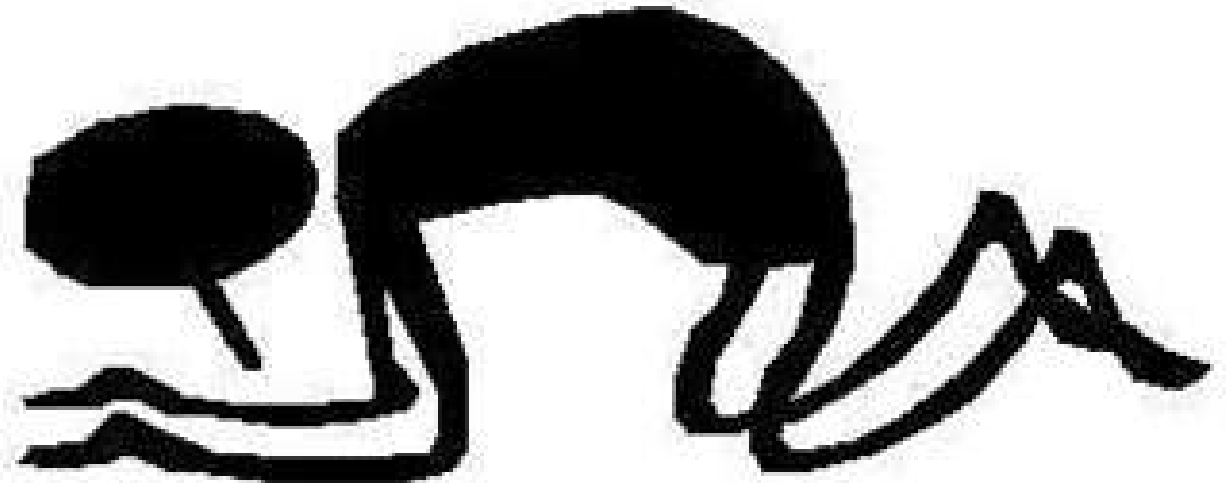


https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/af/WMCH_Drone.jpg

Skills will save us: policy discourse

1. Skills & education are key determinants of economic productivity & growth.
2. Individuals with strong foundational skills more likely to finish school & PSE & have good careers
3. Individuals with advanced skills & education do better in labour market
4. Highly educated Canadians more active in their communities & politics
5. Advanced skills & HE associated with better physical & mental health

Munro, Daniel. (2014). *Skills and Higher Education in Canada: Towards Excellence and Equity*. Canada 2020. Retrieved from Ottawa: < http://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/2014_Canada2020_Paper-Series_Education_FINAL.pdf > viewed 5 June 2014



Tightly ties education to work

Micro-credentials – skills fetish
moved up a notch

Widespread legitimation –
competency discourse colonising HE

Employer disinvestment in training

Individualisation of risk in labour
market

Most deleterious consequences for
disadvantaged students

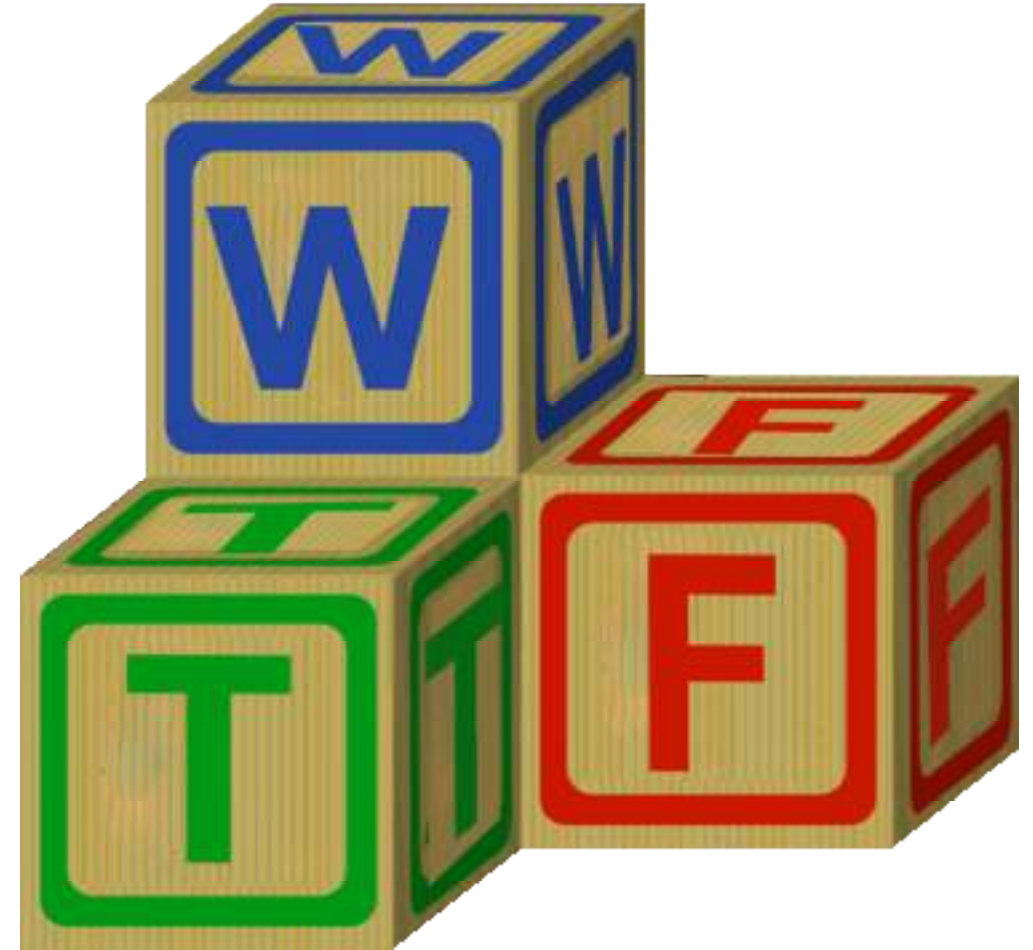


Ontario, Ford government – performance-based funding

Will account **for 60% of funding** to public PSE institutions by 2024-2025

6 will be based on ‘skills & job outlooks’ & 4 to ‘economic & community impact’

One of these indicators is skills & competencies



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/66/WTF-Blocks.png>

Australia

Student fees higher for a BA student than in medicine

Government funded micro-credentials in universities – ‘never let a good crisis go to waste’



TINA & the individualisation of risk

“There is no alternative” Thatcher

A market society

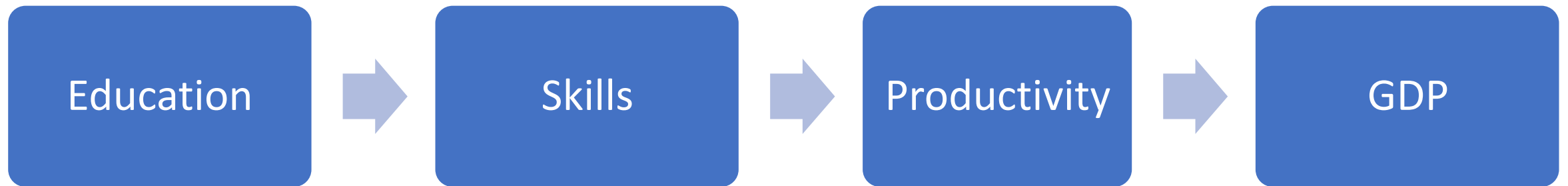
Interventionist state

Entrepreneurial citizens who invest
(wisely) in their human capital

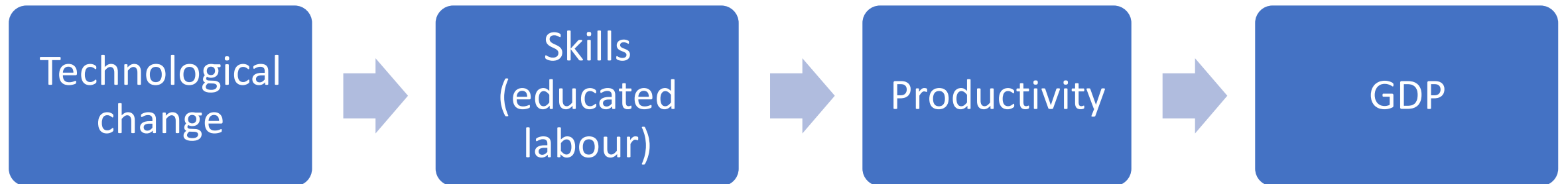
Individualisation of risk



Current orthodoxy in education: Human capital theory



Skills biased technological change



When in doubt, double down!

- Theory doesn't describe society or education, change society & education to fit the theory!



1960s & 1970s

Human capital theory
descriptive – *explains*
why individuals, firms &
nations invest in higher
levels of education



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mus%C3%A9e_d%27histoire_de_Nantes_-_451_-_Jumelles_du_capitaine_%C3%89mile_Louis_Ropart.jpg

1980s & 1990s

Human capital theory becomes normative – education *should* be about work

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Uncle_Sam_\(pointing_finger\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Uncle_Sam_(pointing_finger).png)



2000s to now

Human capital theory becomes prescriptive – education *must* be about work

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nineteenth-century_U.S._Navy_cat_o%27_nine_tails.jpg



Evolution of the skills discourse

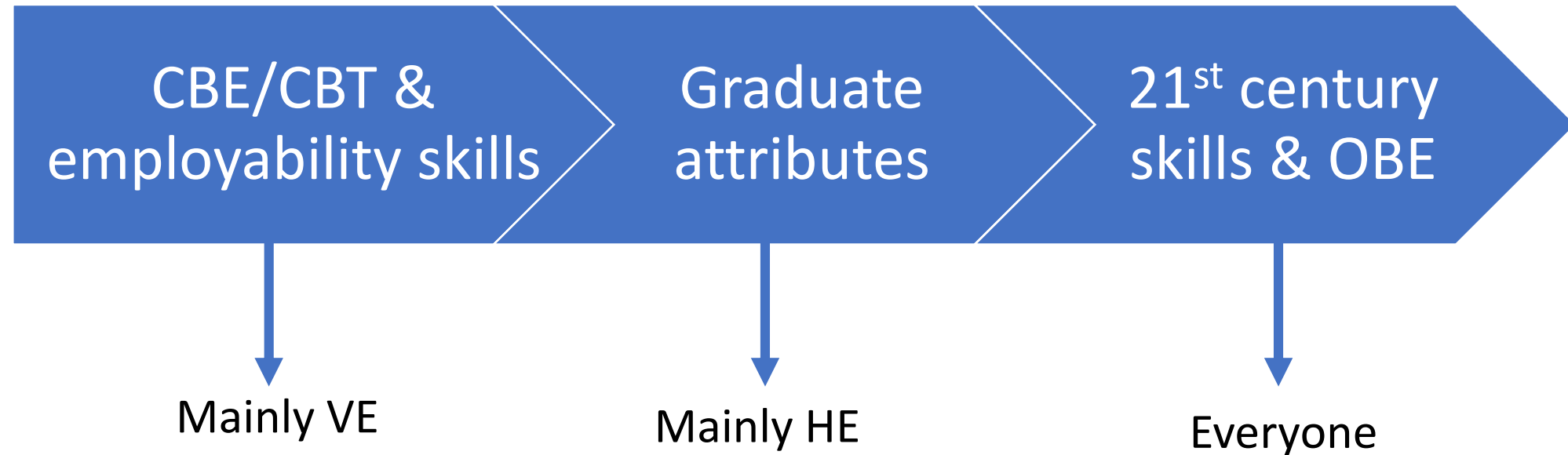
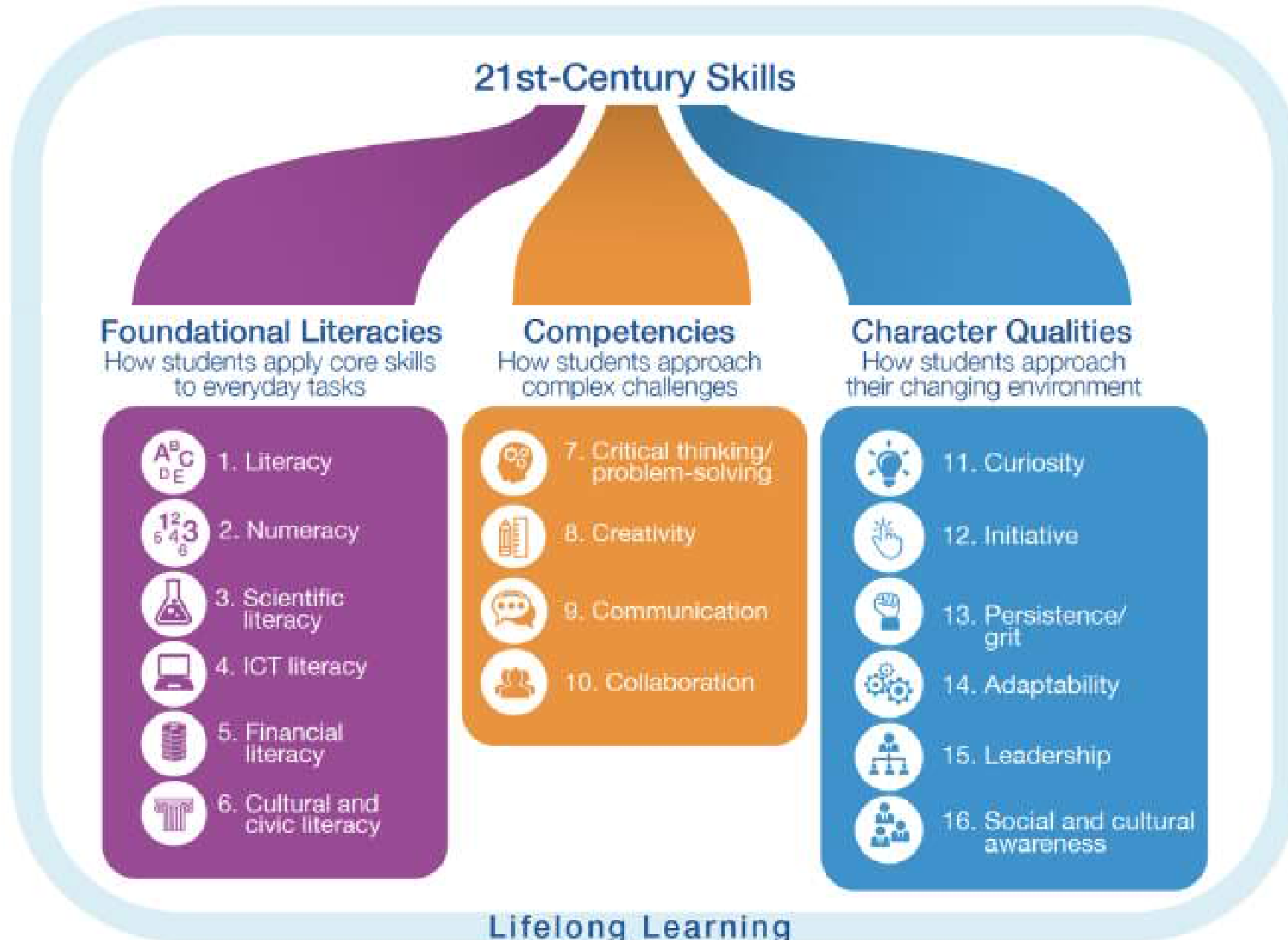


Exhibit 2: Students require 16 skills for the 21st century



Need the *right* skills

World Economic Forum, & Boston Consulting Group. (2015). *New vision for education – Unlocking the potential of technology.*

Retrieved from Geneva: < http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFUSA_NewVisionforEducation_Report2015.pdf > viewed 15 May 2019

All defined in outcomes that are

- Demonstrable
- Observable
- Assessable (though more trouble here)

Source: <http://www.toddjannausch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Hammer-and-Nails.jpg>



Market Performance

Individuals need to be ‘market ready’ and enable to enact a ‘market performance’ in a move that further shifts the responsibility from the employer to the individual to invest in their skills.

Employers want individuals who can “hit the ground running...requiring job seekers to demonstrate both specific and generic, hard and soft skills”

Brown, Philip, & Souto-Otero, Manuel. (2020)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ready_to_Perform_at_Bon_Echos_Little_Theatre_-_c1926_\(32846576532\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ready_to_Perform_at_Bon_Echos_Little_Theatre_-_c1926_(32846576532).jpg)



Genericism & trainability

- Individuals equipped for perpetually changing future
- Lifelong learning important when nothing stable
- A way of ordering curriculum
- How all education is vocationalised – discourse of work relevance



Weak links between education & jobs

Graduates compete with those from many fields

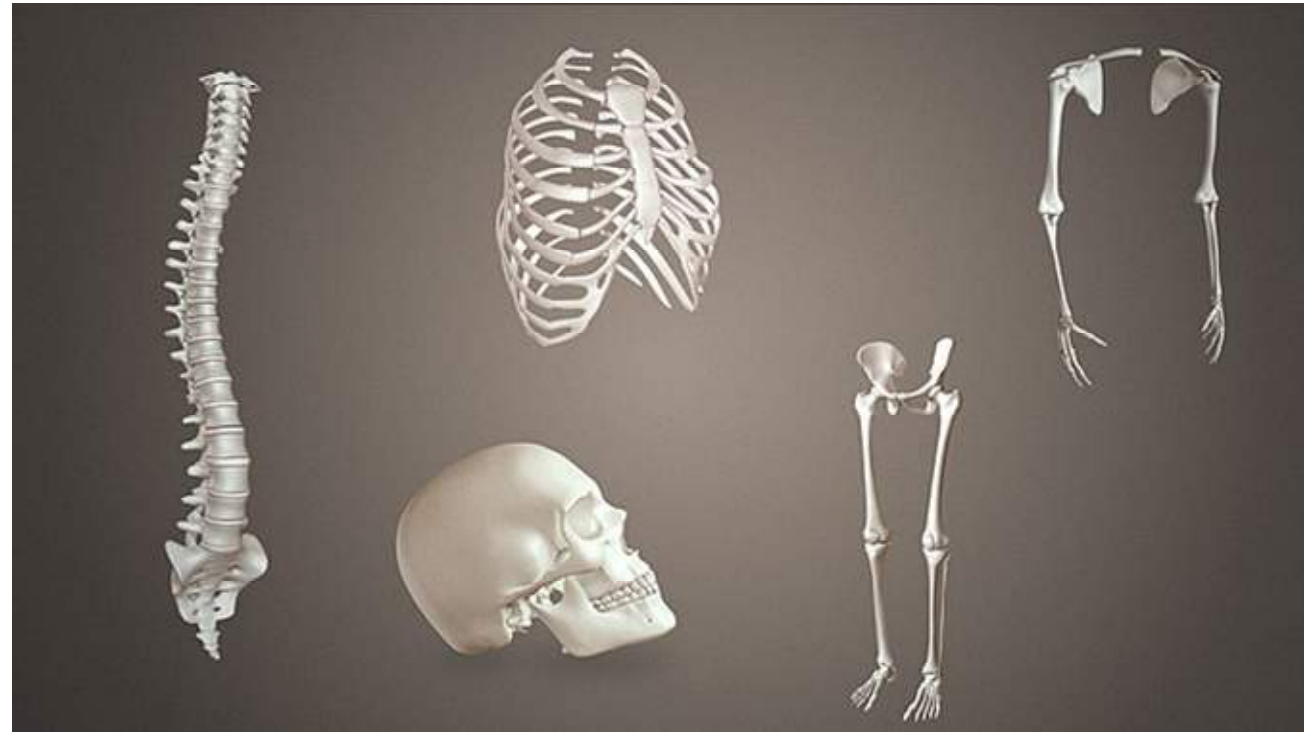
Educational institutions emphasise 'brand value'

Employability disconnected from occupations

Skills – individual properties & attributes, task focused & 'no particular association with a knowledge base' (Clarke & Winch 2006, p.261)

Skills discrete, additive, cumulative

Skills fetish – particularly *Anglophone* notion



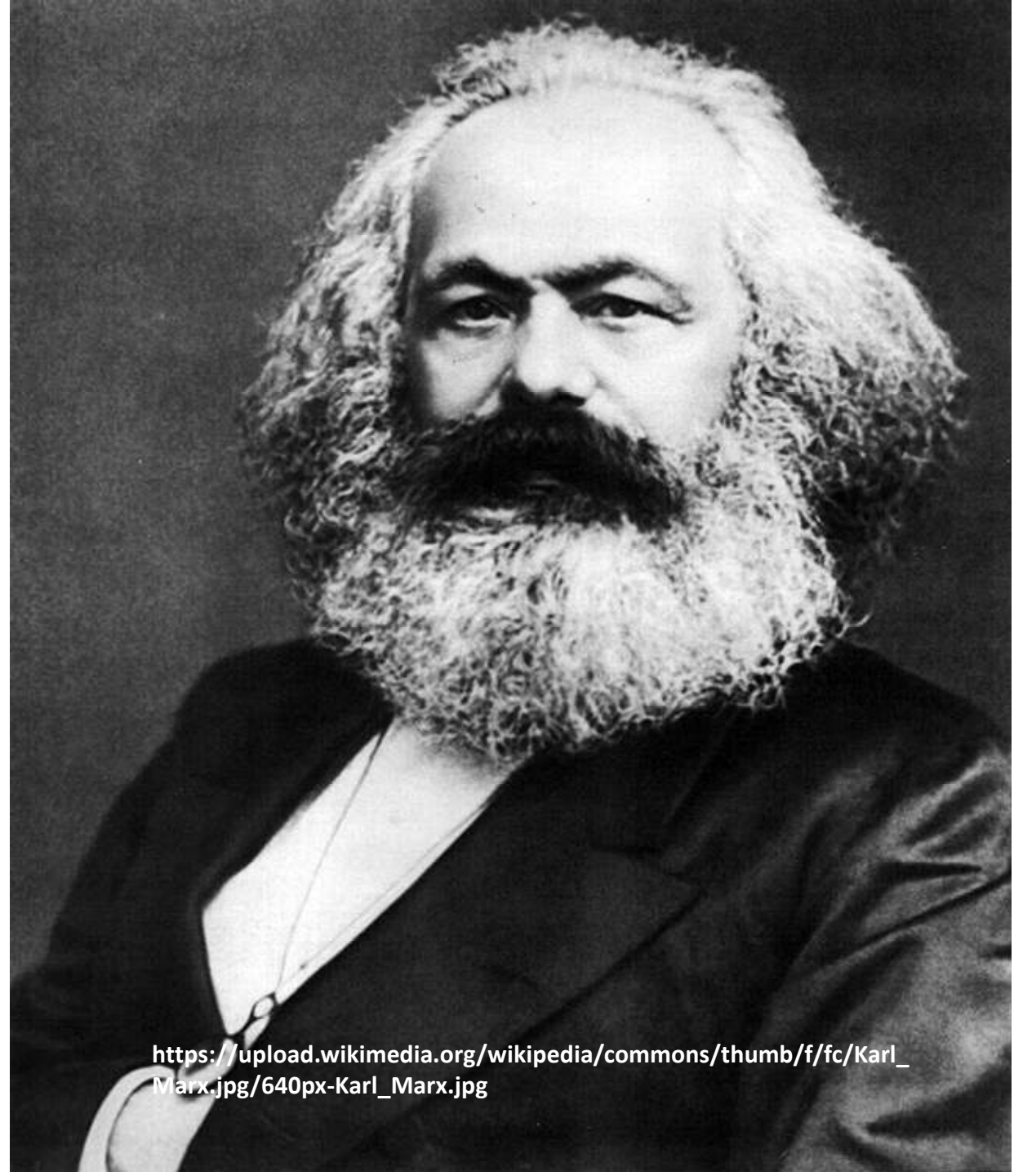
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4c/Bones_of_skeletal_system.jpg/640px-Bones_of_skeletal_system.jpg

Nominalism & methodological individualism

- 18th Century philosophy of David Hume
- Knowledge is gained through observation & measurement
- Society the sum of individuals
- Total is sum of parts
- Individuals – splendid isolation – can only know & pursue own aims
- Begets behaviourism – observable outcomes
- Skills additive – all skills can be distinguished, named & assessed independently

Reification of a social relation

- Draw on Marx in two ways
 1. Commodity fetishism
 2. Skills as marketable commodities

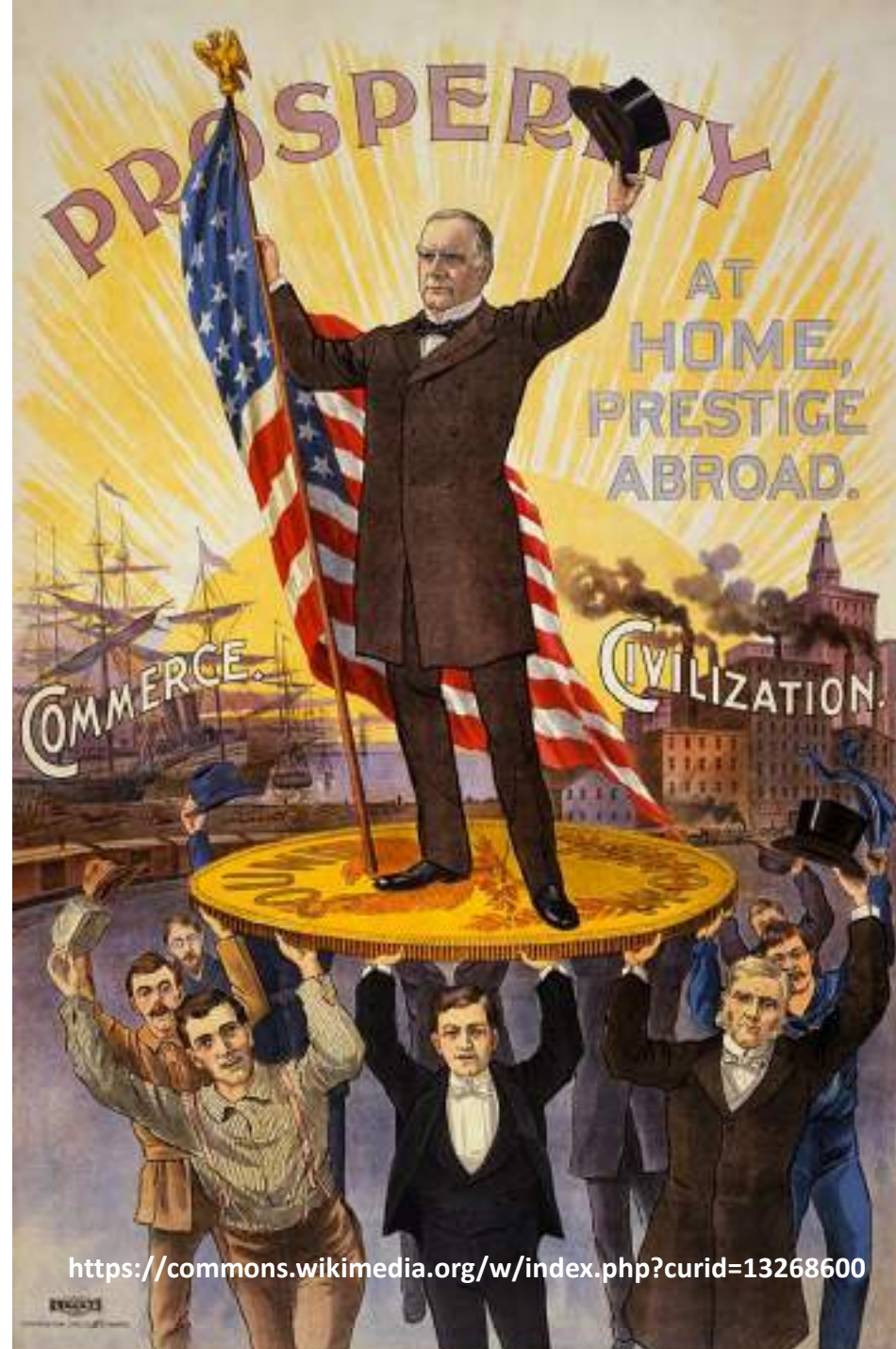


https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fc/Karl_Marx.jpg/640px-Karl_Marx.jpg

Commodity fetishism

“As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.”

Karl Marx (1990). *Capital*. London: Penguin Classics. p. 165.



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13268600>

Skills fetish

Just as commodity fetishism reifies a social relation of capitalist production as a relationship between commodities, the skills discourse reifies skills as external 'things' that exist independently of the bodies of people who exercise skills, and independently of the social relationships and social contexts that require domain specific knowledge and skills for their realisation.

Driven by human capital theory

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/Kellar_levitation_poster.jpg



Skills bought and sold in markets

- Individuals invest in their skills development
- Educational institutions sell skills
- Employers purchase them
- Privileges market value, skills reduced to commodities



The individual of human capital theory

“The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself.” Individuals are *proprietors* of their persons, and “Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors” (Macpherson 1962: 3)

Macpherson, C.B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

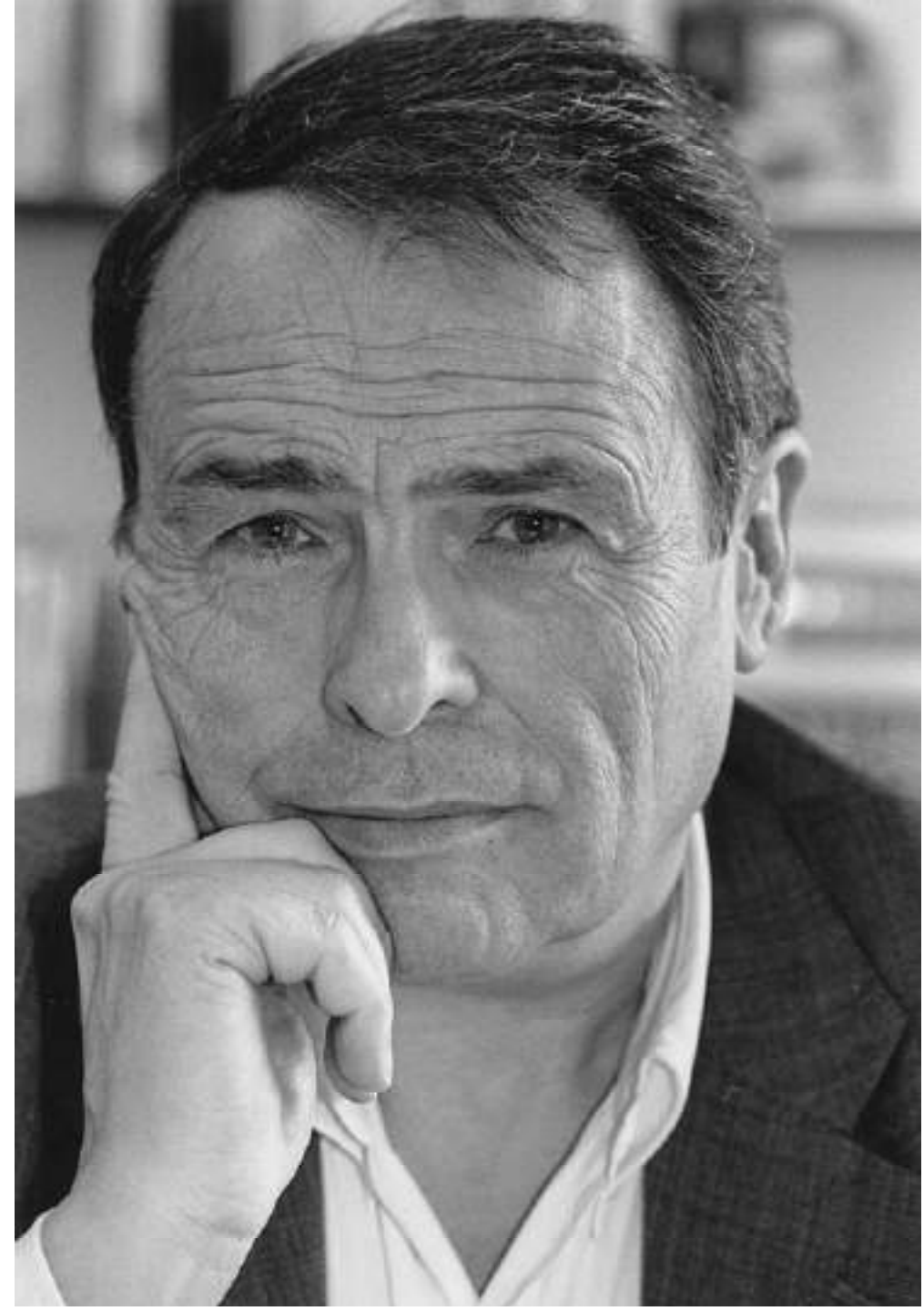
Source: <https://www.scuba-monkey.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/piggy-bank.jpg>



Bourdieu – ethnocentric universalisation of historically specific concept of human motivation

“All the capacities and dispositions it liberally grants to its abstract ‘actor’- the art of estimating and taking chances, the ability to anticipate through a kind of practical induction, the capacity to bet on the possible against the probable for a measured risk, the propensity to invest, access to economic information, etc. – can only be acquired under definite social and economic conditions.” Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 124

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/c0/Pierre_Bourdieu_%281%29.jpg/640px-Pierre_Bourdieu_%281%29.jpg



Conclusion

Skills doxa – taken for granted truth

Debate is ‘right kind of skills’

21st century skills the latest contender

Underpinned by human capital theory

Moved from descriptive, to normative
to prescriptive

Based on impoverished conception of
human beings, motivation & agency

Need more expansive notions of
human beings & hence of purposes of
education

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/Train_wreck_at_Montparnasse_1895.jpg



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Thank you!

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