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**Lifting the Veil:  
A realist critique of Sistema's upwardly mobile path**

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## Lifting the Veil: A realist critique of Sistema's upwardly mobile path

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*El Sistema sits somewhere between a social project and a classical music initiative. However, its promise of delivering upward mobility has not been sufficiently examined as a structural phenomenon which dovetails with critical policy issues in taxation, educational provision, human rights, and welfare. This article argues that Sistema-style projects ought to be analyzed in relation to the withdrawal of the state's left-hand (e.g. education, health, and welfare). The downgrading of this side of state action is widely characterized as neoliberalism, which is opposed by recent Venezuelan governments. Yet the number of children and youths that can be brought under a conductor's baton seems to blind policy makers and media pundits to the dramatic failures of El Sistema to deliver on its claims. Therefore, it ought to be asked: what does El Sistema actually promote at home, and increasingly, abroad, through its international offshoots? The answer, it is argued, is an unreasonable belief in meritocracy and upward mobility.*

*Keywords: class, meritocracy, good faith, neoliberalism, Sistema, spirit, state failure, veil*

We have to realize that the moment a child receives an instrument he stops being a poor child. A child with an instrument is no longer poor. A child with an instrument and a teacher is no longer excluded. (José Antonio Abreu, founder of El Sistema, speaking at "Reaching for the Stars," a forum on music education held at the University of California, Berkeley, 28 November 2012.)

**T**he Sistema model of social action is a success above all at the level of propaganda. If the above statement from El Sistema's founder sounds like a sweeping one, perhaps even to his admirers, this should not be regarded as a side issue. It ought to be asked, much more often, what kind of educational and social policies are assisted by El Sistema's ideas? Abreu has been showered with awards internationally, but this should not stop us asking critical questions about why Sistema-style programs are politically popular. In what follows I argue that the Sistema model of musical training represents a multi-layered intervention in the

policy discourse of education as a whole, in which orchestras are used to convey dangerously misleading ideas about culture.

It must be said, here at the outset, that I define culture as *communication and process*. When we talk about culture, we are always in some way talking about processes of communication. It is through those processes that economic and moral values are created — values which are always hinted at when we refer to culture. Any definition of that notoriously subjective term “art,” or any reasoned discussion of aesthetic tastes, must at least coincide with the above definition. The Sistema model is a creative and social process then. Perhaps it will be admitted that teaching a child to play in an orchestra does not abolish poverty in quite the way Abreu insists, but what values are perpetuated when orchestral music-making is used to patch up education systems and lift young people’s economic and cultural horizons?

Successful innovation in the arts stems from people organizing themselves according to their creative interests. Therefore, it would be very appropriate if — as a standard component of school curricula — pupils could have tuition in an instrument of their choice and singing lessons if they wished. One can imagine a greater variety of instruments being in demand than the recorders, violins, cellos, and so on required by El Sistema, not to mention the languages and singing styles that might also be developed. In place of these basic issues concerning resources and facilities in education, El Sistema’s discourse focuses on improving the morale and the minds of young people. Indeed, it must be asked: are Sistema-style projects helping to impoverish expectations of musical education whilst they supposedly rescue children from poverty by lifting their cultural horizons? So far El Sistema’s public relations operations have succeeded in sweeping fundamental issues concerning education and culture under the carpet. This vanishing act is nurtured through orchestrated visits, micro-managed discussions, extraordinarily favourable public evaluations, and media reports which include anti-realist documentary films.<sup>1</sup> By anti-realism I mean the sort of discourse which not only ignores the structural relationship between poverty and capitalist prosperity, but especially underplays the way that many states reproduce exploitation and inequality in their education systems. Instead of analyzing these problems in relation to music, El Sistema helps invoke a profoundly

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conservative political landscape where people subscribe to a highly orthodox view of educational and cultural value.

### **The Veil of Culture**

El Sistema has cast a veil over the very things which realists make visible and audible. In its portrayal, the impoverished or marginalized are never dominated at the level of politics, or by a general institutional structuring which favours the ruling classes. All that would lead to some form of realist critique. Instead, Sistema propaganda actually celebrates the possibilities of cultural domination, via the rigid aesthetic mores and obvious hierarchical organization of classical music, which are all shown in a much more positive light as steps away from under-achievement and deviancy, and as steps up the social ladder. It may be argued that this discourse amounts to little more than the tactics of divide and rule.<sup>2</sup> But rather more significantly, I believe, El Sistema has revived a conservative sense of statecraft wherein the arts are part of a cultural veil which compensates for the shortcomings of the state — hence the title of this article. No writer has articulated this idea of culture as a politically “well-wrought veil” more clearly than the influential Anglo-Irish political philosopher, Edmund Burke (1729–1797) (Burke [1790] 1997, 86). Fearful of enlightenment reason (which he thought too abstract), and of the iconoclastic republicanism of the French Revolution (which he disavowed as an opportunistic intrigue to dispossess the Catholic Church), Burke argued in his 1790 essay, “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” that the virtue of England’s revolution of 1688 was its underlying conformity with the past, which meant that that “whole fabric” of monarchy was not overly damaged (87). Expanding on the subject of limited reform, Burke favors a general reverence towards the institutions of the past; he writes that a man “should approach ... the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude” (110). For Burke, the state is consecrated by a spirit of partnership existing between different social groups, a partnership in “all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection” (110).

However, given the real foundations of fundamental grievances, it is extremely hard for Burke to demonstrate the harmonious spirit produced by virtuous activity in

the arts and sciences — and he is not discussing the social contract in the Rousseauian sense.<sup>3</sup> Not to be accused of abstraction, he explains that “the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, [so] it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born” (110). Burke’s thought influenced the early nationalists in the Americas, including Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), to limit the aims of revolution in the matter of universal suffrage and to refashion the King’s peace through a top-heavy institutionalization of a republican civil peace. Burke had a precocious enthusiasm for aesthetics,<sup>4</sup> but in his mature writing artistic activity becomes just one aspect of a theory of statecraft advocating limited reform but extensive spiritual and secular alliances. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the republican liberal state, ideally a neutral state with a monopoly on violence, gradually expanded into so many areas of society (the economy, education, health, culture, and so on) that the very distinction between state and society became increasingly difficult to make. The terminology of “self-organizing society” or “the total state” was used to describe these developments, (Schmitt [1931] 1997, 272).<sup>5</sup>

Many of the declarations from El Sistema’s founder, a petroleum economist and conductor, reverberate with Burkean conservatism, for instance when Abreu describes his realization that “one of the most efficient ways to fight poverty was to introduce excluded children and young people to musical education ... and turn their families and communities into our allies.”<sup>6</sup> Given El Sistema’s predilection for the symphony orchestra, it is worth recalling that when Burke refers to the “fabric” of society he means time-honoured cultural prejudices, which encourage people to accommodate a questionable hierarchy and devote themselves mainly to its amelioration and their individual betterment within it. Following in the footsteps of Burkean statecraft, El Sistema encourages prejudices about much more than music. In what follows I argue that the organization turns music into a cultural veil to be draped over failures of the state and the inconvenient facts of everyday life. Perhaps, it is only when this veil is abandoned that we may recover our nerve and speak candidly about the social fractures which states that reproduce inequality inflict on their citizenry. However, El Sistema is not commonly regarded as part of this problem; indeed, as an alleged model for social cohesion, it is now very widely taken

up as a solution. The analysis here focuses on Venezuela and also on Scotland, where the arguments used by lenders to boost El Sistema in Venezuela have been taken up selectively and uncritically by government-backed researchers.

If the following critique appears polemical, it should be recalled that the hopes placed in social science, from the Enlightenment on, have been inextricably bound to the discourse of equality (Gay 1996, 123 ff.). Equality demands the critical analysis of class, and properly pursued, this approach is just as demanding for those on the political left as it is for those on the right. The requirements that equality make on moral and scholarly reflexivity provide all the most important compass points in what follows, and they allow us to examine El Sistema's discourse guided by a realist sense of political economy. When Sistema-style propaganda presents steps away from under-achievement and deviancy, each one constitutes a potential step that individuals can take on an upwardly mobile path. For this path to work at all, as many people as possible must lend it support by following the spirit, if not the letter, of Burke's arguments; therefore, they do not promote certain other steps, and the potential of collectivism and radical reform is veiled. In the next section I take ten statements as examples of this agenda. Other writers in this special issue examine Sistema-inspired musical practices in detail; what I try to show is how the reproduction of inequality works through them at a macro-structural level. This analysis begins at the level of amelioration when children are selected for musical training, and it ends in the financial opportunities provided by the same form of amelioration. The intervening steps are not distinctly structured in actuality — some describe institutional phenomena, while others are essentially ideological dilemmas; it is the interaction between them all that counts if the veil of culture is to be kept in place.

### **Lifting the Veil**

1. *There is no difference between classes here, nor white or black, [or] if you have money or not. Simply, if you are talented, if you have the vocation and the will to be here, you'll get in, and you'll share with us and make music.* (Young Venezuelan violinist)<sup>7</sup>

The conductor and Sistema commentator Jonathan Govias admits that El Sistema and its offshoots may not be providing the best model of musical education for the children and young people in these programmes.<sup>8</sup> There are concerns among some music educators about an over-commitment to the classical orchestra, and worries about the way other musical forms are dealt with in a tokenistic manner or shoehorned into the strictures of European classical music, though such problems are rarely spoken about in public.<sup>9</sup> However, it is debatable to what extent El Sistema is interested in promoting high-quality music education; after all, it now describes itself as “a social program of the Venezuelan state.” El Sistema’s prejudice for orchestral music is in fact the first step on a path of opportunity. What Sistema propagates most of all, implicitly and explicitly, is not so much an education in music as the notion of meritocracy (i.e. intelligence + effort = merit). Govias (2011) is among those that have recognised the importance of this discourse to El Sistema’s ethos. The statement above from a violinist is used in a documentary to put across the idea that the orchestra is a haven of meritocratic advancement. The same work ethic has been amplified by Richard Holloway, Chair of Sistema Scotland.<sup>10</sup>

It was the British sociologist, Michael Young (1915–2002), who invented the term meritocracy in 1958. Proponents of meritocratic values today often overlook the fact that what concerned Young (who, in his earlier role as politician, helped draft the Labour Party’s 1945 manifesto) was the corruption of social democracy and the egalitarian beliefs underpinning it. For Young (1994), meritocracy is a perverse ideology which helped justify the vagaries of Britain’s opportunity state — a state increasingly devoted to the technocratic renewal of the ruling class by providing opportunities for self-advancement according to merit. Long before Young, some conservative thinkers had also realized that there can be no accurate measures of merit without having equality in society in the first place (Möser [c1770] 1997).<sup>11</sup> But conservative philosophy is not of course interested in establishing mutual respect between conflicting classes, since the conflict is itself what must be repelled. The conservative school of thought centers instead on respectability and sympathy, and the latter is properly expressed through charity (Davies 1995).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, conservative thinkers have long been fixated on making the masses more respectable and ensuring that the poor deserve pity. As a charitable program looking for state

and non-state funds in various countries, Sistema displays the same ideology. In Abreu's words: "If a thousand must be sacrificed so that four make it, the sacrifice is well worth it" (quoted in Baker 2014, 203). In an inimitable sociological satire of the proliferation of meritocratic ideas, Young expands on the absurdities of a class system that comes to believe in itself. To help us see beyond this self-flattery, it is worth remembering that the militant labor movements in Scandinavia pursued the social-democratic state and models of education and welfare which rejected the imperious notion of the deserving poor.<sup>13</sup>

*2. The ... elegance of the theaters ... the immaculate wardrobe they must wear ... all stimulate the development of an acute appreciation of beauty in the boys and girls...* (Chefi Borzacchini)<sup>14</sup>

In the course of history, every imperially-minded takeover has been justified as both rational and good.<sup>15</sup> It would be a challenge to find an exception to this rule, and propagating conservative ideology through musical education is no diversion from it. However, the uncertainty about what Sistema really stands for leads inevitably to the second step on this upwardly mobile path. Here we encounter El Sistema as beauty contest. In the field of culture, Venezuela excels at two things: the supply of a spectacle in classical music, and the supply of beauty queens. Venezuelan women have won more beauty pageants than the women of any other country. The craze for aesthetic improvement is so widespread that in 2010, Gustavo Rojas, one of Hugo Chávez's (1954-2013) political opponents, felt no shame in offering the chance of breast implants in return for contributions to his campaign. Thanks to El Sistema, synthetic aesthetics, which are the norm in the world of beauty pageants, are also applied to the poor. Sistema's founder, Abreu, and the Miss Venezuela impresario, Osmel Sousa, have been described as the two most important Venezuelan cultural managers of recent times,<sup>16</sup> and the parallels between them are striking: one man at the top of a system based on subjective value judgments about aesthetic virtue, dictating how everything goes, and those at the bottom doing their best to fit the mandate for perfection. The impact of this approach to what culture is all about is that public decision-making becomes more opaque and the opportunities for corruption greater. This trend can be seen first of all at the level of research.

According to funding assessments and key research reports concerning Sistema-inspired programs, expressive culture (in other words, orchestral music) is an area in which children can be made more ambitious and goal-orientated; this will assist them in future labor markets. We will meet the same rationalization again as we go further along this path; in government-backed reports it comes under the guise of rational actor or rational choice theory and associated logic modeling (e.g. GEN 2011; GCPH 2105). However, the logic applied in such studies looks very similar to that of a talent show; it mixes up education, which is generally supposed to strengthen the mind, with mere training. Moreover, if what is really sought after are the much vaunted “transferable skills,” then it seems doubtful that a musical training which belittles improvisation and experimentation can be of great assistance. Of course, like the world of beauty pageants, El Sistema’s aesthetic regime may enhance the capacities of certain individuals; it can help some people, some of the time. But the rationalist approach fails to reflect all those aspects of culture in which people do things that are not in their immediate or obvious self-interest. If they did not, culture would be about as interesting as beauty contests.<sup>17</sup>

**3.** *For us to be part of the orchestra is a way to rebirth, the chance to have a new life, a new family, a new way to see the world around us.* (Alejandro Carreño, concertmaster of the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra)<sup>18</sup>

Following initiation into a hierarchical aesthetic regime, it should be no surprise to also encounter the risk of sexual abuse on this path.<sup>19</sup> It would be unfair to single out El Sistema here when the issue is associated with high-pressure training more generally (whether in the arts, sport, or other areas). However, it is important to register the fact that when El Sistema’s founder insists that training children in classical music is a noble pursuit, he is glossing over the exploitative aspects of this tradition.<sup>20</sup> The exact number of boys who died as result of botched castrations in eighteenth-century Italy is unknown, but it is estimated in the thousands (Barber 1996). What is certain about those boys, who were intended to become *castrati* singers, is that they were the children of people whose poverty overcame their parental love. The story of classical music and Nazi genocide during World War Two is just as grotesquely compromised. The important point here is that there is a

linkage between consecrated culture and status-seeking that not only provides a recipe for abusive relationships, but may also create blindness to human damage dignified by art.

**4. *Music has to be a human right, like health, or food.* (Gustavo Dudamel)<sup>21</sup>**

The next step on this path helps to veil some of the most intimate paradoxes we have just passed. It is the notion that El Sistema supports human rights. The welfare-economics philosopher, Amartya Sen (1999), reminds us that human rights do not only have an instrumental significance; they have a constitutive importance too. People have the right to participate in culture for its own sake. In itself, this has instrumental significance, because human rights at the level of culture entail the right to change culture, rather than to merely reproduce its consecrated forms. This means that any sense of well-being that might be associated with culture is nothing without the freedom to pursue it. Looked at from this perspective, when El Sistema's founder says that "anything good, noble, and praiseworthy must be reproducible ... so what's good for one underprivileged child has to be good for all underprivileged children," he is reducing children to the status of performing monkeys.<sup>22</sup> Of course, it may be argued that children can, and will, overcome this form of indoctrination, grow up, and make up their own minds about music. But El Sistema's focus on cultural reproduction nevertheless constitutes a debasement of human rights discourse among the socially disadvantaged.

**5. *[A] child who is given a violin will not pick up a gun because music produces an irreversible transformation ... he may become a doctor, study law, or teach literature, but what music gives him remains indelibly part of who he is forever.* (José Antonio Abreu)<sup>23</sup>**

The next step is a fatally misleading one which deserves special attention. It is the attempt to maximize support for Sistema-style programs with the claim that they counter crime. Over the years of El Sistema's growth, crime, and especially violent crime, has become much worse in Venezuela. Yet, quite amazingly, this has not prevented the organization's proponents from insisting that youth orchestras are an effective means of combating crime and instilling civic virtues. Exploiting the same

gullibility sought by tabloid press astrologers, El Sistema even claims to be catching babies in the womb by playing music to expectant mothers and enticing the unborn child away from a life of violence.<sup>24</sup> If one takes such claims seriously, the reason children ought to be herded into orchestras is that every poor child in Venezuela is either a potential criminal or victim. While the second point is true, the first is little more than a slur based on class racism. Even in extreme situations, it is only a small minority which takes to crime and an even smaller one to violent crime (Logan 2015, 236). Moreover, most of the serious crime that plagues Venezuelans is organized, or at least facilitated, from above. Indeed, in this respect crime is a problem connected to an international financial/criminal nexus (Naylor 2004). Throwing orchestras at the poor does not just miss the target, it actually makes matters worse by misrepresenting the problems. Protecting children from danger requires attention to issues such as proper after-school care. A classical youth orchestra is not a substitute for such care; it may alienate as many children and parents as it attracts, and make the remainder appear even more deficient than before. That remainder, it should be noted, is the vast majority: on the basis of 2012 figures, no more (and possibly considerably less) than 4% of Venezuelan children were enrolled in El Sistema.<sup>25</sup>

From a realist criminological point of view, crime is also associated with the very spirit of individual upward mobility (rather than social equality) which El Sistema projects encourage at the bottom of society.<sup>26</sup> In the Venezuelan case, where there is long-standing corruption in the criminal justice system, the problem of rampant individualism is also linked to criminal impunity among the elites. However, putting criminology aside, it is easy to tell who is really fighting crime in Venezuela, because they risk being killed for their efforts. On the outskirts of Caracas, reporters for the community media organization Petare TV have been attacked and murdered. They are exposed to intimidation because their organization strives to build up “community intelligence” about power in society. Petare TV is a good example of courageous grassroots social action, and everything that is *not* done by El Sistema. Yet, while giving the false impression that youth orchestras are a solution to criminality, El Sistema also fuels dangerous stereotypes about areas like Petare, portraying them as zones where deviancy and violence are cultural norms that require cultural solutions. This only lends credence to the caricatures of ghetto life

that, according to journalists at Petare TV, provide a smokescreen for criminal elites (Logan 2015, 238–53).

El Sistema's evident failure as a solution to the problem of crime in Venezuela, alongside its political success in the same country, is a great paradox. This is underpinned by Sistema-friendly funding evaluations carried out by multi-lateral lenders such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) (see Baker 2014, 267–9; Logan 2015, 232–6). The same dynamic is being repeated in the United Kingdom. In 2015, the initial findings of a high-powered study of Sistema Scotland projects was published by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health in collaboration with Education Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University. Explicitly following in the footsteps of an IDB evaluation of El Sistema, this Scottish study throws variables together in a cost-benefit analysis of mythical proportions. Logic models are used to envisage massive long-term savings. Essentially, the argument is this: playing in an orchestra boosts “engagement with learning and education,” and doing better at school “may lead to improved employability” (GCPH 2015a, 8).<sup>27</sup> This “potentially” adds up to a whole experience that will make the individual feel better and be healthier in life, increase community well-being, and discourage one from becoming a criminal — all pathways to saving taxpayers' money. The GCPH study is illustrative of the hopes that research can elicit by keeping in line with international financial institutions and therefore narrowing the scope of analysis and discussion. However, when it comes to the delivery of general well-being via Sistema Scotland, GCPH's full report is littered with contradictory information (GCPH 2015b).<sup>28</sup> There is, for example, a brief account of the sort of ill-being that can be produced by playing in an orchestra after a full day at school: “children described feeling tired during sessions and wanting to go home” (32). Such feelings, and the varied reasons for dropping out of Sistema Scotland's projects, do nothing to dissuade the researchers from reaffirming their “success” and “inclusiveness” time and time again.<sup>29</sup> Yet the authors make clear that Sistema Scotland's “Big Noise” program is not yet underpinned by quantitative evidence, and a “high level of investment ... is being made on the basis of ‘good faith’” (GCPH 2015b, 38). More research may well gather positive quantitative evidence in the midst of worsening general conditions, but given the stark realities of inequality in

Venezuela, the basis of this good faith ought to be examined more critically than it is at present.

Careful readers of this Scottish report may notice that its central logic is rather too similar to the plotline of a second-rate Hollywood movie. Criminals are low-lives; they are idle and dim-witted and deserve to meet a bad end. In contrast, honesty and effort (encouraged and facilitated by Sistema Scotland) are ultimately rewarded by a happy life for warm-hearted heroes and heroines. Rather embarrassingly for the universities responsible for a virtually identical research hypothesis, some Hollywood movies get much closer to the truth. Crime, especially violent or serious crime, is organized by people who are not lazy, unintelligent under-achievers, but rather people who are unrestrained in their capacities and ambitions. The petty criminal might be fodder to the criminal elite, but that does not mean the poor are all potential petty criminals. Indeed, criminals may be about as thinly spread in society as professional musicians. In other words, there are two different subcultures and the first will not magically disappear by boosting the numbers of the second, any more than increasing the number of youth orchestras will diminish the popularity of gangsta rap.

*6. There are many other worthy musical pursuits but we don't believe they bring the same level of social benefit that our orchestras are set up to achieve. It will be wonderful if the children grow up to get enjoyment from playing and listening to whatever kind of music.... For us though, it is the symphony orchestra that has the capacity to provide the social transformation we hope to achieve. (Sistema Scotland) <sup>30</sup>*

El Sistema is not a force pitted against criminality, then. So who, or what, do Sistema-style programs really challenge? It is not very difficult to imagine the uproar in Britain if Qawwali music from India and Pakistan became an officially sanctioned path to upward mobility and the answer to a complex mix of educational and social problems, or in France if Andalusian orchestras of North Africa were supposed to compensate for the problems of structural inequality.<sup>31</sup> The fact that El Sistema's aesthetic prejudices go relatively unquestioned in these multi-cultural societies does not mean they are unproblematic. Sistema's symphonic model of social action is not

all-inclusive, especially in poor, ethnically diverse urban areas. Indeed, at this level, Sistema-style programs may well be stoking up civilizational conflict.

The idea of a clash of civilizations will be familiar to many because of the influential writings of the right-wing US political scientist Samuel Huntington (1927–2008). Huntington was unreserved in his allegiance to the Anglo-Protestant culture which, he argues, African, Jewish, and other North Americans had embraced (Huntington 2005). A less well known civilizational partisan is Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, author of the 2010 book *What if Latin America Ruled the World?* Where Huntington holds Hispanization responsible for the breakdown of an important work ethic and civic values in the US, Guardiola-Rivera envisages Hispanization quite differently: in his hands, it becomes the expansion of a progressive anti-imperial and egalitarian historical consciousness.<sup>32</sup> What Huntington and Guardiola-Rivera offer are two views of capitalist development heavily coloured by their ethnic and cosmological loyalties. The sort of differences that explain Asian and Scandinavian economic success stories are largely ignored by both.<sup>33</sup>

What is particularly notable about these visions is that they both overlook classical social-democratic aims in education, particularly the need to abolish education as a social enterprise for the rich. It is hardly surprising that Huntington should ignore egalitarian options designed to encourage mutual respect between competing social groups, since that would impinge on his archly right-wing arguments. More remarkable is that the progressive character of contemporary Latin American politics, celebrated by Guardiola-Rivera, goes unquestioned despite its poor performance in terms of establishing egalitarian education systems. Even Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution continues to reproduce great educational inequality: between 15% and 26% of pupils go to private schools, compared to around 7% in Britain and none in Finland — a country with one the most highly-esteemed education systems in the world which has also maintained one of the most strictly egalitarian ones.<sup>34</sup> These issues of educational policy are not tangential to Sistema which — entering from stage right — is a spectacular support act for the structured inequality of schooling. In countries which eschew radical reform, this is surely what makes the Sistema approach politically popular. In Scotland and the UK generally, rather than arguing for an egalitarian and culturally unpartisan education for

everyone, Sistema may be wielded as a double-edged sword against families from non-Western backgrounds. The message is clear: either greater cultural assimilation or greater cultural segregation. This plays into the hands of far-right discourses. In a turbulent world economy which is on the move, the scapegoats are invariably migrants accused of non-assimilation.

7. *The most miserable and tragic thing about poverty is not the lack of bread or roof, but the feeling of being no-one, the feeling of not being anyone.... That's why the child's development in the orchestra and the choir provides him with a noble identity.* (José Antonio Abreu)<sup>35</sup>

El Sistema's founder often refers to nobility and we may wonder why. In continuity with the justifications of *noblesse oblige*, what lies behind his rhetoric is the professional usurpation of political representation. At this point on the upwardly mobile path, radically different perceptions of the Sistema model have become clearer. On the one hand, Abreu's model may be regarded as one which ameliorates some effects of poverty for some people, whilst, diplomatically, adhering to no agenda for radical reform that would make the organisation unattractive to the ruling classes and the financial institutions they control. On the other hand, if we also remember Burke's arguments for reformist moderation, and his view of culture as a politically well-wrought veil, El Sistema's success looks like a function of contemporary state failure. Among media pundits there is much chatter about the weakened nation-state, but the machinery of war and repression is no weaker; in most cases it is only "the left-hand of the state" (education, health, and welfare) which is withering away.<sup>36</sup>

In the context of this deliberate impoverishment, it is not what El Sistema does wrong so much as what it does right that ought to attract more critical attention. There is much at stake when the withdrawal of the state's left-hand is manifested as outsourcing and turned into a set of professional opportunities which entice the middle classes and gives some employment to struggling artists of all kinds. So what comes next is one of most decisive steps taken on this path. Although real scepticism about Sistema appears justified by now, opinion also divides at this point between those who would argue that the state is still the most important structure for the

redistribution of wealth and educational provision, and those who would envisage an associational democracy with all the potential double standards and inequality such a system can encourage. Yet the latter group — a more *laissez faire* school of thought — includes some on the hard left of the political spectrum who idealistically anticipate the withering away of the entire state. This belief is not confined to the further reaches of anarchist theory. On the terrain of anti-capitalist doctrine it stands out as extreme example of wishful thinking. After all, if equality is the political desire, how else can it be pursued and maintained except by an interventionist state? Here we would do well do recall Bertolt Brecht's extremely ironic impersonation of the voice of the Soviet state under Stalin's control: "I know I ought to wither away."<sup>37</sup> But states do not wither away; they are overturned or they are politically transformed in ways that make them more or less accountable to their citizens.

So it is significant that El Sistema is that very ambiguous thing called a GONGO — a Government Organized Non-Governmental Organization. However, it would be too narrow to say that it belongs only to Venezuela when it is part of the world historical phenomenon of NGOism. In the eyes of its critics, "NGOism" is associated with various social and political ills (Yudice 2003; Opoku-Mensah, Lewis, and Tvedt 2007; Folorunso, Hall, and Logan 2012; Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Hilton, McKay, Crowson, and Mouhot 2013). Among the criticisms are the largely middle-class ideas of development most NGOs advocate; the frequency of anti-trade-unionism in NGOs; their highly opportunistic competition for resources; the plutocracy they engender; their trade in cultural stereotypes; superficial research and use of data; the accompaniment they provide for the breakdown of the welfare state; and last, but certainly not least, the support they provide for a jet-setting cadre which pontificates about the poor whilst having very little political muscle other than that which is required to secure a comfortable, if not luxurious, life for themselves — "the lords of poverty," as they have been called (Hancock 1989). This sense of usurpation may be more focused than it first appears; it still reflects a Cold War agenda to diminish or substitute the power and influence of labor movements.

**8.** *The child or adolescent learns to believe in excellence as their sole aim. They not only admire great musicians but also anyone else whose main goal is excellence.*

(Chefi Borzacchini)<sup>38</sup>

If El Sistema's proponents are to stay on message and attract funding, they must cast a Burkean veil over classical social-democratic reforms in education and political understandings of culture which would complicate their symphonic social mission. But getting to the top of the social ladder requires more than falling in line with the technocratic cadre responsible for "noble" pronouncements about poverty. It also requires espousing deeply held convictions concerning self-advancement. Individual artistic achievement is socially unpredictable, and because there is not a simple correlation between class background and artistic success, the arts have long been regarded by conservatives as an arena of genuine meritocratic achievement based on natural inequality (Mallock [1898] 1997, 216). Here one may rub shoulders with the spiritual aristocracy, the disparate meritocratic elite first identified in the nineteenth century by men like Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) and Émile Boutmy (1835–1906), the founder of Sciences Po in Paris. They were among those who recognized that the democratic threat to the *ancien régime* had necessitated the creation of a "new rampart," in the form of a proxy aristocracy, which, in Boutmy's words, was "built on eminently useful talents; superiority which commands prestige, and abilities of which society cannot sanely deprive itself" (in Piketty 2014, 487).<sup>39</sup> Echoing Burke's idea of the veil of culture, there is recognition here that manipulating artistic and scientific activities offers the ruling class a means of protection. Moreover, the same activities are an important arena for the perpetuation of the spiritual aristocracy's self-belief — an unquestioning faith evident in pronouncements like the one above. Hugh Jenkins (1908–2004), a Labour Minister of the Arts under Harold Wilson (1916–1995), was perhaps — and only briefly — the only such minister in Britain who, consistent with basic socialist principles, tried to take control of funding away from what he called "the Lord's Anointed People" (Jenkins 1979, 215). He was removed from office and his desire to involve the general public in the creation of cultural policy was never realized.

9. *The orchestra is a community ... that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself. Therefore the person who plays in an orchestra begins to live the experience of agreement.* (José Antonio Abreu)<sup>40</sup>

We are now almost at the end of this path to success. As Jenkins and so many others have pointed out, elites do not abolish themselves. The immediate interest of the spiritual aristocracy is to maintain the prestige of their activities, and to a considerable degree, this depends on what the ruling classes will support using a variety of state and market interventions. The notion of twenty-first-century charity (used by Sistema Scotland) is an addition to the lexicon of “fig leaf terms” which gloss over an otherwise opaque mixed economy which often looks to the cultural glories of the past (see Williams 1996, 124–6). If ever fully enacted, the sort of democratic proposals put forward by Jenkins would impinge on complex arrangements which maintain the cultural status quo. When spiritual aristocrats speak about creativity, or opportunities for social improvement, what concerns them most is morale and the perfectibility of the individual mind. Under normal circumstances, they hope, and expect, that people will become better adjusted to the order of things which provides for the spiritual aristocracy itself — hence the emphasis on “agreement.” However, from the time of Friedrich Schiller’s (1759–1805) *The Aesthetic Education of Man*, first published in 1794, even when the existing order must be overturned, the interest in the perfection of the mind, via aesthetics, appears as the precondition of the good revolution. Here the interests of the spiritual aristocracy, brought into being in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, can be seen merging with those of social psychologists and systems theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first.<sup>41</sup> The issue which preoccupies this nexus is psychologically matching individuals to systems and vice versa: creating human systems and systemic humans. And in this context, the orchestra may indeed take on the appearance of a techno-corporatist work of art — in Abreu’s vision, a model for harmonious labor and a harmonious society. Of course, it may be rightly objected that this is the stuff of ideology; in reality orchestras are not unified corporate bodies, they are stratified, precarious, and subject to all kinds of grievances on the part of musicians and ancillary staff. Nevertheless, what Abreu and other members of the spiritual aristocracy advocate is more than ideology: it is really the *spirit* of all

political systems which separate the mind from the body. In the eyes of the spiritual aristocracy, trade union demands which can be backed by the power to withdraw or modify (embodied) labor are looked down upon as politically unsophisticated, if not vulgarly materialistic. Supposedly trade unions are trapped by the dynamics of markets, whereas the mores of the spiritual aristocracy transcend, and sometimes even invert, the laws of supply and demand. These notions run deep. They mean that many performers, artists, writers, and academics may well prefer the forms of plutocracy and clientelism concealed by the “veil of culture,” rather than building strong unions, and face the unpredictable tides of politics and the anonymity of “market forces.”<sup>42</sup>

**10.** *From the very start it was quite obvious to Abreu that for a nation seeking future progress, art has to transcend aesthetic values: art has to be the driving force behind training, rescue, inclusion and development of its citizens. (Chefi Borzacchini)*<sup>43</sup>

It may well be asked how Abreu’s conservative project not only maintained but actually gained support in the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez (1954–2013). I have tried to answer this question more fully elsewhere, by examining the counter-revolution within the Bolivarian revolution.<sup>44</sup> The short answer I offer here takes us to the end of a social, political, and economic path which articulates neoliberal policy discourses in different countries. From this vantage point, the institutions and arguments of international finance are not veiled. However, capitalist economism here is also dignified by the practices of what Bourdieu (1977, 172) called the “good faith economy.” In essence, good faith economics impel us to turn a blind eye to exploitation and calculated greed, and to forgo high taxation. A Finnish-style education system would of course require considerable levels of public finance, and so would the facilities for the sort of non-partisan musical education mentioned in the introduction. Any attempt to achieve these public goods leads inevitably to the issue of progressive taxation; but the contemporary proponents of the good faith economy claim that capitalist competition is necessary for increased profit levels, and that high taxes should be avoided, as they will impinge on market dynamism. In arguing that we are all partners in capitalist accumulation, business leaders and

politicians such as David Young, Baron Young of Graffam (Margaret Thatcher's trade and industry minister from 1987 to 1989), assure us that we can expect growth to bubble over into voluntary benevolence (See Young, in Heelas and Morris 1992, 29–35). Therefore, instead of talking about exploitation (which is surely crucial to the moral economy of progressive taxation), we are encouraged to speak of “inclusion” and put our faith in capitalist benevolence and patronage.

Thanks to oil revenues, the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela has not pursued the issue of taxation nearly as vigorously as it should, at least by socialist standards. The IDB and CAF are among the important lenders which profit from perceiving gaps and filling them. El Sistema is among the beneficiaries. All too aware of the political difficulties of levying taxes in countries rich in natural resources, and the ensuing problems of reduced public accountability, social capital theory is used by lenders to justify highly speculative loans. The good news, in the view of a strategic analysis published by CAF, is that “returns on human capital investments” are an equalizing factor in society; the bad news is that this is also a result of a “decline in the relative wages of skilled labor” (Sanguinetti et al./CAF 2012, 37). Overall, extreme inequality persists, and, as they note, taxes play little or no part in struggles for equality in Latin America, so state social policies are weak.

Predictably, such a report has nothing to say about organized labor and is peppered with positive references to NGOs; nothing in it suggests a willingness to rock the boat. Yet mechanisms for budgetary transparency and a gradual expansion of the tax base among greater numbers of citizens are envisaged, both leading to “reciprocity between the state and society” (36).<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, state and society are entities which are very difficult to separate so neatly, and class, gender, and race fracture both. CAF disguises this reality with the notion of state-society reciprocity. The result is a simplification of the turbulent history of state formation and taxation, neither of which accord with the stated development paths that will make such a report sound reasonable to many readers. By smoothing over history, borrowing becomes a pragmatic alternative to taxation, at least in the medium term.

Although clearly one-sided, the self-justifications coming from CAF and other development banks do have a certain saliency. As the public in many countries began to view large-scale infrastructure projects with more suspicion, reductive forms of

social capital theory and the notion of “investing in people” came to the assistance of international financial institutions (see Fine 2010). This is one of the keys to understanding El Sistema’s power, because as a model of social action it provides a means to increase the influence of the ruling classes by drawing private finance and lending into public education and social policy. Cultural paternalism is in no way opposed to capitalist economism; rather, as Bourdieu suggests, they are two sides of the same coin, minted by the good faith economy. At this level the Sistema model looks like an advance guard bringing “structural adjustment” North after wreaking havoc in the global South. If unopposed it would help break down what a former Conservative education minister in Britain, Michael Gove, called “the Berlin Wall” in education.<sup>46</sup> Gove’s Cold War rhetoric is an attempt to gloss over the conservative desire to make both paternalism *and* the profit motive more widely applicable in the education system. Neoliberal politics cannot succeed in rolling back the state’s left-hand and reestablishing nineteenth-century levels of inequality unless the public is made to believe in nineteenth-century solutions to poverty. The discourse of education and culture propagated by El Sistema offers these illusions in abundance.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps the greatest illusion conjured up by El Sistema is that it offers a “revolutionary” agenda (see Baker 2014; Logan 2015). Notwithstanding this very deceptive rhetoric, I have suggested that the real issue is not revolution or reform, but between types of reform: neoliberal or social democratic. However, our relevant question in this respect is whether an attempt to implement classical social democratic policies today would have revolutionary implications. Before answering that question, some consideration of El Sistema’s political influence is needed.

In the face of criticism, which includes some of the above arguments, advocates of Sistema-inspired projects have pointed to the diversity of their work in countries such as Sweden and Italy.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in order to succeed politically, Sistema-inspired projects must adapt to different social and political conditions. Sistema-style projects are rarely if ever identical to El Sistema in Venezuela. I argue that however varied the contexts and practices, Sistema-style social action promotes essentially the same tortuous dogma, using culture to veil the failure of the state as its left-hand is

cut back and outsourced. There is a longer history of tinkering at the edges of public education systems as a diversion from egalitarian educational policy, a history that deserves more attention in its own right (Smyth and Wrigley 2013, 175–94; Ross 1998). Newer technocratic improvement schemes also tend to distract attention from the demands which teachers make to improve their working conditions, and indeed they often have the effect of disempowering teachers. The reduction of class sizes is an almost universal request on their part.<sup>48</sup> This is important to help develop mutual respect between teachers and pupils and create a positive sense of discipline that goes beyond the prevailing sense of crowd control in many schools. The idea propagated by El Sistema — that an orchestra will assist in making pupils more disciplined — is no more convincing than the suggestion that one teacher’s exemplary classroom might assist in solving the problems experienced in all the other classes. Moreover, in contrast to the oft-stated desire to give children more individual attention, Sistema projects offer up iconic images of vast swathes of disciplined children all following the precise guidance of a single baton.

A comparable diversion, which is useful to reflect upon now that it is over, is Bill Gates’s “small schools initiative,” a politically successful but educationally disastrous campaign to reduce the size of US schools, as if the problems of public education were all to do with the size of schools, rather than facilities and teacher-pupil ratios.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, as I have pointed out, when it comes to educational achievement and deviancy, Sistema has grotesquely simplified policy discourse in countries as different as Venezuela and the United Kingdom. The idealized model of the symphony orchestra is used to belittle the issue of respect for cultural and ethnic differences, a vital issue to take seriously if egalitarian education systems are to have a future. In recent years the slogan to “think globally and act locally” has become a political orthodoxy. It is a debilitating slogan when progressive social change requires us to act collectively on reforming national and international institutions, the very structures which Burkean conservatives want to be shielded from radical scrutiny and reform. In this respect, good-faith economics give Sistema-style action added political and financial saliency because the transactions promise to ameliorate the damage done by capitalism, in return for keeping our collective sights set low. In this and so many other instances, that means promoting ameliorative pathways with

promises of meritocratic upward mobility. Nevertheless, the structural problems persist, largely because the whole public does not have a real interest in everyone's education. There is no surer way to achieve that sense of the common good than the abolition of private education, as occurred in the Nordic social democracies.

Moreover, the general record of state education systems, internationally, compares very favorably with the checkered history of private and faith-based efforts, which have concealed very serious abuses. I suggest that educational reform along radical egalitarian lines is still doable if it is recognized that Sistema-style social action does more harm than good. States still possess considerable autonomy in education, so revolution is not a pre-requisite of egalitarian reform, but pursuing such reforms in this area would be a revolutionizing process.

By itself, egalitarian education cannot resolve all the problems rooted in a competitive socio-economic system which generates great disrespect for the losers and much suspicion of new competitors. The increased access to education won by women in the twentieth century did not bring about the complete downfall of patriarchy. However, the desire for mutual respect and genuine engagement with children as individuals cannot begin as long as the failings of the state are instead attributed to their flawed identities, ways of life, or deficient culture. Targeting children like this might enhance the capacities of some, but it is harmful as a general approach. Yet this failed model — not more successful Nordic educational policies, rooted in classical social democracy — are being enthusiastically imported into dozens of countries. Clearly, then, Sistema diverts attention from contemporary state failure. This seems to be made more palatable by the reproduction of music written by the dead, as if educational failure stemmed from contemporary aesthetics and popular music. There are more than a few traces of fascist belief to be detected here. But perhaps most of all, El Sistema articulates the cultural pact between the living and dead imagined by Edmund Burke. The cheapening of life over the years of El Sistema's growth in Venezuela, and the amount of blood that has been spilt there, suggests that this is anything but a harmless diversion from tackling serious problems in education, welfare, and the criminal justice system. Calculating the human costs of El Sistema's failures would always be a highly controversial exercise; but calculating the benefits of the conservative veil of culture is just as impossible, as

it was for Burke in 1790. Today, the human costs of the failure of the left-hand of the state are so extensive that technocratic researchers must follow in Burke's footsteps and defer the supposed benefits of El Sistema to the future.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For examples of the anti-realist approach which I refer to, see *El Sistema*, a film by Paul Smaczny and Maria Stodtmeier, produced by EuroArts Music (2008-2011); and the edition of *CBS 60 Minutes*, presented by Bob Simon, broadcast on 13 April 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4011959n> (last accessed July 2013). By contrast, some interesting examples of contemporary realism (also in English but concerning other subjects), notable for the penetrating examination of political phenomena and socio-economic discourses, are the BBC2 documentary series, *The Century of the Self*, by Adam Curtis (2002), and the film *Why We Fight*, by Eugene Jarecki (2005, Axiom Films).

<sup>2</sup> For more on what is regarded as a divide and rule strategy, see interviewees' remarks in Baker 2014, 184–6.

<sup>3</sup> In relation to social contract theory, Burke's social pact belongs to the English discourse on political power influenced by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704). By effectively translating the doctrine of original sin into a socio-political theory, power is entrusted to a sovereign authority responsible for protecting private property and saving citizens from the *original* state of nature; the latter is characterized by moral disorder and chaos. The question of private property is at the root of many of the contradictions which can be found in the English discourse, such as Locke's notion of "tacit consent." See MacIntyre 2002, 152 ff.

Logan, Owen. 2016. Lifting the veil: A realist critique of Sistema's upwardly mobile path. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15 (1): 58–88. [act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15\\_1.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15_1.pdf)

Only with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) does social contract discourse become truly social and necessarily collectivist, and, in the view of supporters and critics of Rousseau, ultimately socialistic.

<sup>4</sup> See “On Taste,” the introduction to Burke [1756] 2001.

<sup>5</sup> In 1931 the reality of modern state expansion was used by the German political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) to argue that parliamentary power was little more than a convenient fiction which disguised complicated, and institutionalized, processes of political and cultural contestation going on in German society. See Schmitt in Muller 1997, 267–74. Two years later Schmitt was appointed president of the Union of National-Socialist Jurists and was responsible for the creation of a legal framework which dissolved institutional autonomy under the state and gave ultimate authority to Adolph Hitler.

<sup>6</sup> From an interview by Alan Yentob in “How music saved Venezuela’s children,” BBC *Imagine* series, program produced by Alan Yentob and Janet Lee. Transmitted 18 November, 2008. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=43tqQhOTCgQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43tqQhOTCgQ) (last accessed July 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Musician in the film *Jose Antonio Abreu: The El Sistema music revolution*, made for the Ted Prize, [www.ted.com/talks/jose\\_abreu\\_on\\_kids\\_transformed\\_by\\_music.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jose_abreu_on_kids_transformed_by_music.html) (last accessed July 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Govias made these observations in his presentation, “Reformation or Revolution?,” at *El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective*.

<sup>9</sup> Emilio Mendoza’s presentation, “The Emperor Abreu’s new clothes: Show over substance in El Sistema’s (failed?) ODILA co-project,” provided considerable insider detail on this process. Delivered at *El Sistema and the Alternatives: Social Action through Music in Critical Perspective*.

<sup>10</sup> In Holloway’s words: “[...] if they [young people] say, ‘I want to be like him – I want to have his passion, and joy and being’ – you can be like him; but you’ll have to practice eight hours a day, six, seven days a week, and you’ll have to get up in the morning and think about doing this day in and day out and then you will be, as it were, your own [Gustavo] Dudamel. So it’s a wonderful, wonderful model to give to the world because it’s based on passion, it’s based on effort, it’s based on goodness, it’s one of the most productive icons the world has produced recently, I thank God for Venezuela that it’s produced not only El Sistema but it’s now producing individuals that the world is reckoning on and learning from.” (From a voice-over by Richard Holloway, chair of Sistema Scotland and former bishop of the Scottish Episcopal Church, speaking about El Sistema’s celebrated “graduate,” the conductor Gustavo Dudamel. Shown at the “Big Concert,” Stirling, Scotland, 21 June 2012).

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Justuce Möser [c1770], in Muller 1997, 75-77. Möser writes on the consolations of living in a society that does not allow advancement by merit. He Logan, Owen. 2016. Lifting the veil: A realist critique of Sistema’s upwardly mobile path. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15 (1): 58–88. [act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15\\_1.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15_1.pdf)

argues this arrangement is preferable to the prospects of an egalitarian society where one would advance on the basis what one actually deserves; Möser thinks failure would be less excusable in such a society and therefore more frowned upon.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Davies 1995, 89-100.

<sup>13</sup> An important account of the development of the modern Scandinavian labor movement is Childs 1938.

<sup>14</sup> Borzacchini 2005, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Even the explicitly racist beliefs underpinning the concept of *Lebensraum* (used by the Nazis to argue for Germany's expansionist policy in the 1930s and 40s) were justified as promoting a greater good in war time propaganda; the argument was continually made that Germany was bringing peace to Europe by vanquishing the Judeo/Bolshevik threat.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Geoff Baker for pointing out to me the comparison made in the Venezuelan media between Abreu and Sousa.

<sup>17</sup> It may be added that the government-backed research mentioned above takes informants' statements at face value, even though they are elicited from complex situations that require ethnographic approaches. As other researchers have noticed, museum visitors, for example, are overly attracted to providing answers which are flattering to them, and flatter the institutions they are in. See Bourdieu, Darbel with Schnapper 1991, 108. Such information therefore needs to be treated rather like the innocuous statements made by contestants in beauty pageants.

<sup>18</sup> Quotation from blog by Marshall Marcus, <https://marshallmarcus.wordpress.com/2012/07/18/> (last accessed November 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps more than any other issue, this was the one journalists latched onto in Baker's (2014) publication. However, the abuse issue has been largely ignored or dismissed by the Sistema sphere, in keeping with a history of turning a blind eye to abuse within classical music's educational institutions. For more on this topic see Ian Pace's website at <https://ianpace.wordpress.com>.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of some of the linkages to regimes of discipline and money-making that ought to be taken into account here, see the blog post by Geoff Baker at <http://blog.oup.com/2014/11/el-sistema-music-education/> (Last accessed June 2015).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/48hrs/article/1675020/how-conductor-gustavo-dudamel-communicates-his-love-music-audiences> (last accessed October 2015).

<sup>22</sup> See the film *El Sistema* by Smaczny and Stodtmeier.

<sup>23</sup> From an interview on the CBS *60 Minutes* program, 13 April 2008, [www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4011959n](http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4011959n) (last accessed, 20 July 2013).

<sup>24</sup> See “Venezuela Expanding Music Program for Expecting Mothers,” by Telesur English, Venezuela Analysis, <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/10965> (last accessed 11 June 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Calculation based on a population of under-18s of 10,289,000 ([http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/venezuela\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/venezuela_statistics.html)) and official Sistema figures in the region of 400,000 in that year. These Sistema figures may be on the high side (Baker 2014, 92-93) and include many over-18s, making the true percentage probably below 4%.

<sup>26</sup> For an influential study in the regard, see Wilson 1987. Wilson starts off by examining the paradoxical deterioration of Afro-American communities in US cities after the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. He finds that opportunities for upward mobility had the effect of dividing and weakening communities increasingly identified in terms color not class.

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5059/Sistema\\_summary\\_updated.pdf](http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5059/Sistema_summary_updated.pdf) (last accessed, 12 November 2015).

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5424/Sistema\\_findings\\_report.pdf](http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/5424/Sistema_findings_report.pdf) (last accessed 12 November 2015).

<sup>29</sup> A similar situation pertains in Venezuela, according to Baker (2014), where El Sistema is very coy about a dropout rate which appears — anecdotally, at least — to be high.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://makeabignoise.org.uk/sistema-scotland/frequent-questions/>.

<sup>31</sup> Such a controversy generated by an excessively ethnocentric musical education would of course be even greater if it were argued by the advocates of the musical genres mentioned that other forms of music could be adequately incorporated by them. Yet this is what advocates of Sistema’s classical orchestras do argue; implying of course that the European classical tradition is a universal gateway.

<sup>32</sup> See Guardiola-Rivera 2010. This historical polemic appears to take for granted the decline of extreme right-wing political violence in Latin America. For more on this question see Logan and McNeish, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> For more on these other development paths see Chang 2011.

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/studentlife/debate/2008/42\\_state\\_vs\\_private\\_school.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/studentlife/debate/2008/42_state_vs_private_school.shtml) (last accessed July 2013). In Venezuela the 15% of pupils found in private schools rises to 26% at high school level. At the other end of the spectrum are the estimated 195,000 Venezuelan children who are still not receiving primary school education. See Tamara Pearson *UNESCO: Education in Venezuela Has Greatly* Logan, Owen. 2016. Lifting the veil: A realist critique of Sistema’s upwardly mobile path. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15 (1): 58–88. [act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15\\_1.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15_1.pdf)

*Improved*, Venezuelanalysis.com (Published online 27 January 2010; last accessed July 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Jose Antonio Abreu: *The El Sistema music revolution*, [www.ted.com/talks/jose\\_abreu\\_on\\_kids\\_transformed\\_by\\_music.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jose_abreu_on_kids_transformed_by_music.html) (last accessed July 2013).

<sup>36</sup> See interview with Bourdieu, “The Left Hand and the Right Hand of the State,” in *Variant* magazine, Issue 32, Summer 2008. <http://www.variant.org.uk/32texts/bourdieu32.html> (last accessed June 2015).

<sup>37</sup> See Benjamin [1934] 1977, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Borzacchini 2005, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Boutmy’s thoughts in 1871 strongly echo Charles Baudelaire’s 1863 discussion of “The Dandy” (Baudelaire [1863] 1995, 26-29).

<sup>40</sup> See the film *Tocar y Luchar* (Arvelo).

<sup>41</sup> The US psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) is an important influence on technocratic thought about creativity as a release of “authentic” individual agency, and as a form of reconciliation with the social structures of capitalist society. A central concept for Maslow in this regard is what he describes as “peak experience.” For many, Maslow’s concept of peak experience captures the important socio-economic qualities of creativity. In his introduction to a volume of Maslow’s writings, Colin Wilson takes up the theme of peak experience and argues that humanity’s most urgent evolutionary necessity is to draw on our understanding of the unconscious and learn the “trick of plunging into these ‘inner’ states at will (...) [until then] we will remain creatures enslaved to the external world.” See Hoffman 1996, xiv. In his lifetime, Maslow was confident that American management recognized the productive potential of his ideas about an authentic, non-chemical path to happiness.

<sup>42</sup> See also Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 for in-depth argument about the gradual detachment of the aesthetic/cultural critique of capitalism from the social/labor critique coming from labor unions and parties of the left in France after 1968.

<sup>43</sup> Borzacchini 2005, 86.

<sup>44</sup> See Logan 2015, 216–53.

<sup>45</sup> Among the arguments which counter the consensual optimism of the CAF analysis is the political development of progressive taxation in the United States. There are three distinct phases in the twentieth century: the first led from above by major capitalists requiring infrastructure development; the second led from below during the later part of the New Deal of the 1930s, when there were labor-movement militancy and popular campaigns for progressive taxation (see Rauch 1944). The third, in the 1980s, reversed the two earlier phases in several respects, just when the Logan, Owen. 2016. Lifting the veil: A realist critique of Sistema’s upwardly mobile path. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15 (1): 58–88. [act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15\\_1.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Logan15_1.pdf)

human capital of the United States was at a high point of development and regulations for promoting transparency had evolved. The lesson to be drawn is that that the *realpolitik* of taxation has less to do with notions of the common good than distribution of class power in society. In the words of one critical commentator looking back on these developments: “Inequality has increased, mobility has declined, and the American Dream is dying.” See Khan 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Gove’s rationale in 2014 was that he wanted state and independent schools to be indistinguishable in terms of quality of provision. The argument of course begs the question: why would private schooling continue in such an egalitarian environment, if not to secure advantages, prestige, and religious sectarianism in one form or another? See <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/feb/03/michael-gove-berlin-wall-state-private-schools> (last accessed June 2015).

<sup>47</sup> I refer here to open floor discussion at the conference from which this special issue is drawn.

<sup>48</sup> For more on the politics of research around this issue, the Australian case, brought to light by David Zyngier, is indicative of the efforts to play down the issue of class size. See <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/new-study-smaller-class-sizes-a-benefit-dr-david-zyngier-concludes-20140424-zqyx4.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Gates’s initiative ran between 2000 and 2009.

### About the Author

Owen Logan is a photo-essayist and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen where he worked closely with the “Lives in the Oil Industry” oral history project and has researched the socio-economics of energy in various resource rich countries. Between 2007 and 2014 he was also a contributing editor to Variant magazine devoted to “cross-currents in culture.” He is also co-editor of *Flammable Societies: Studies on the Socio-Economics of Oil and Gas* (Pluto Press, 2012) and *Contested Powers: The Politics of Energy and Development in Latin America* (Zed Books, 2015). His photography has been widely published and exhibited. Books include *Bloodlines: Vite allo Specchio* (Cornerhouse, 1994) and *Masquerade: Michael Jackson Alive in Nigeria* (Altered Images/Stills 2015). His work is in several public collections, including the Scottish Parliament.