

Meritocracy and Social Inequality: How Economic Ideologies Threaten the Meaning of
Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Do you find yourself spending more time on Facebook than reading the news? Are you ever so overwhelmed by the problems in the world that you turn on reality television, just to think about smaller problems for a while? We live in a world in which the student population is confronted with more social issues than anyone could combat in a lifetime, but is the way we view these problems making them seem more hopeless? By examining the social function of the higher education system, perhaps we may find a new avenue for not just addressing global injustice, but for viewing inequality. In my paper I look at the which in which the changing job market after the industrial revolution has put pressure on the education system to provide students with jobs, not just an education. Our education system is increasingly filtered through an economic lens, encouraging the student body to focus on the work in front of them instead of the world around them. Higher education should be a means of preserving and perpetuating humanitarian values in our society. If we allow colleges and universities to become overwhelmed by the pull of the economy, the student body will no longer see their education as invitation into the global community, but rather as a bartering chip in the job market.

Technological advancement in American society has changed the job market from one of producing goods to one of providing services, and people have been forced to spend more of their time interacting with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Since the Industrial Revolution, people are no longer needed to work on farms or stand in assembly lines; they are working at cash registers, sitting at desks in busy offices, or serving you food. Many of us have jobs where we rarely spend more than a few moments being truly alone.

Arlie Hochschild explains how emotional strain has been added to our jobs after the Industrial Revolution in her book, *The Managed Heart* (1983). As mechanization and technology decreased the role of factory jobs, social labor increased, bringing more interaction between people of different classes, backgrounds, and educations (Hochschild, 1983). We were forced to come up with universal demeanors to be used at work to avoid upsetting people, even if we must hide our true emotions. We have no choice in who comes up to the register when we are working and we certainly cannot choose to treat them any way we like. The changes in our interactions have brought changes in the way we view ourselves and our position in the world, so much so that it seems our nation has adopted a new psychology. Individuals are now required to be readily able to interact with anyone, regardless of how different their lives may be, yet this change in our society has not had the meaningful effect of linking different cultures as it would seem.

In conjunction with these changes in labor came the expansion of higher education, bringing with it a rapidly expanding world of information. Universities

became a means of organizing behavior by offering a nationally standard definition of higher education across the country. As higher education expanded to allow more students, Frank and Meyer (2007) identify three major changes: 1) By breaking down discriminatory barriers that barred potential students based on class, race, citizenry, and gender a more diverse and broadened student base was formed, 2) the product of higher education was given more validity by the increase in student population and “expert” knowledge, 3) Strategic controls over knowledge distribution have been weakened, meaning a wider variety of the population is able to access information that was previously only available to the elite. Not only have the students and the ideas become more numerous and diverse, but the number of people in our society that can be considered “experts” on a given topic is increasing.

That is to say that the more “experts” there are in the world, the more opinions there are regarding the right education to offer, and in higher education the stakes are particularly high. Universities provide their students with a formal education, but they are imperative in social education as well, and the exact type of social education offered is defined by the institutionalized beliefs of the nation. A well-rounded education will also encompass “general values” in American society, and those who control the university can also control what is considered a general value. What the institution defines as generally understood is then handed down the students as if it is the way of the world, not one possible interpretation. In a world in which ideas are infinite and beliefs are clashing, determining what students learn in school also offers the power to determine the way young minds view the world.

This statement is not meant to suggest that universities are experts in mind control

and taking over the population, rather it is a reminder of the role education plays in the bigger picture of the socialization process, a process that developed long before universities ever existed. Our socialization process is the process by which human beings learn about their families, their communities, the rules of life, religion, etiquette, the future, the past, and eventually themselves, and it is a process that changes from culture to culture. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, that these explanations evolve into social institutions intended to solve the culturally specific problems we encounter in our daily lives. They discuss reality in order to understand the happenings of every day life that are coordinated as a population but do not have to be continually explained (other than to children, who are still new to the process). Ritualized responses become powerful when they are so widely understood that they are no longer questioned as optional, but are instead viewed as the way things are. This is the process by which our beliefs are internalized in the individual, when our definitions of the way things are is not just something we are interested in but is a knowledge on which our very being depends (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Our way of viewing the world is defined as universal within our respective cultures, but encountering others outside of our own world presents us with challenges. We must fiercely maintain our own definitions through culturally specific justifications, or risk conforming to this new identity of the other. We have complex means of maintaining our own definitions of life in the face of conflicting ideals through a mechanism Berger and Luckmann call “reality maintenance” (1966, p. 147). Maintaining reality refers to the mental or actual conversation one has of rationalizing the behavior of the other inside of their own context, identifying the conclusion of the other as failed

logic, and thereby dismissing their beliefs as irrational or “out of this world.”

In America specifically, our universe-maintaining beliefs constantly run against opposition and dissent. Since the birth of the nation people have been living in the same space but believing in different culturally-defined worlds. The growth of immigration and the increased socialization after the Industrial Revolution have made it harder for people to stay within their own spheres of understanding because the more we become a communicative world, the more we are forced to adapt around one another. In the past few decades, the internet, cell phones, emails, text messaging, fiber optics, documentaries, reality television, video communication and so forth have brought these conflicts into brutal collision at neck-breaking speed. Not only are our social institutions under a wider variety of attack than any time or place in history, but the attack is coming from every corner of the world through every portal in our homes.

This intersection of ideas is touted as the pride of our nation, but rather than forming a collective identity across cultures, Americans have turned to individualism to structure behavior. It is much easier to defend your views against countering perspectives if you believe in a world of subjective ethics, where one person’s beliefs do not particularly reflect on your own; they have their culture, you have yours. In making such a statement, one is able to use their culture to define the behaviors of another without truly understanding their differences. If the culture of another is defined inside of our own culture, we are attempting to shut out what it is about their life that makes our own seem less inevitable. We want to believe that our definition of the world is the right one, or else there would be no reason to pay any attention to the meaning.

This is not to say that we are all sitting around plugging our ears and shutting our

eyes to the outside world. Rather, it means that, for example, a group of coworkers who are all of a different religious faith may go out for lunch and enjoy themselves without each one of them losing their religion. Instead of abandoning what we learned throughout life, we understand different realms of belief that may exist inside of our culture. If we did not have these universe-maintaining boundaries, the meaning of life would change every time we encountered something new. We need this individualism in the United States because our world is filled with so many conflicting beliefs. The concern, however, is that individualism is a risky means of defining a culture. In fact, it seems somewhat contradictory.

Berger and Luckmann define individualism as unsuccessful socialization, because our understanding of the world is defined by the people around us and the people that came before us. We are born into a society that is already moving forward, and divorcing ourselves from that and foraging our own opinions about life is incompatible with the process. Berger and Luckmann explain that individuality encourages subjective definitions of one's role in the world, and "where subjective disidentification from one's 'proper place' in society becomes possible, and when at the same time the social structure does not permit the realization of the subjectively chosen identity...[it] becomes a fantasy identity, objectified within the individual's consciousness as his 'real self'" (1966, p.171). They go on to explain that this contradiction will introduce tension in society, as the individual still behaves in line with the social institutions of society yet somehow maintains a sphere of rebellion by believing in an incompatible role. This is possible because throughout socialization the individual is able to "internalize different realities without identifying with them...and instead of it being his reality, it is a reality to be used

by him for specific purposes” (1966, p. 162).

There is good reason to believe that commercialism is amplifying this divide inside the minds of Americans. Materialist goals are so deeply immersed in our culture that we often call objects by their brand name, not the name of the object itself. Our goals for the future are marked by monetary gain and the acquisition of luxuries. It is quite possible to argue that we are internalizing characters of wealth and success inside of ourselves, while outwardly recognizing the improbability due to the constraints of our socioeconomic system. In other words, I may dream of being a billionaire even if I do not have an education, a job, or any means of getting either one. The more commercialism makes fantasy seem attainable, the more likely we are to hope for these impossibilities and unconsciously shape our behavior around that hope. It is not the intention of this paper to focus on such possibilities, however. What is important is that we may act out a role even when it does not apply to us, a phenomena Berger and Luckmann suggest is only amplified by the change in social structures due to industrialization (1966).

In many ways, Americans have used this complex capability to their benefit, particularly through the social function of the American Dream as an organizer of behavior. The first step was to make the American Dream a pervasive, easily understood ideal to which people of a certain class may easily adhere. Successful socialization demands that we are not “taken in” by outside ideals, but rather that we find ways of containing them inside of our own. Therefore, Americans are capable of paying lip service to a great number of cultures, without actually understanding them. We instead define them without our cultural context, a culture that can be increasingly described as the world of the American Dream. Our individuality has become our way of explaining

why others are different from ourselves, and the American Dream is used to explain why others are inferior or doomed for failure.

The American Dream mentality teaches us that we are all on an equal playing field, and any hard-working individual has a shot at success. If any human being has an equal chance of being successful in America, than those who are not successful are viewed as somehow less than human (McNamee & Miller, 2004). In order to see how successfully the American Dream ideal has been imbedded in our culture, it is beneficial to look at those who are not successful and understand the way they are viewed. Our national rhetoric reflects an “in or out” mentality, and recent debate of illegal immigration has been particularly illuminating.

Julian Jefferies’s (2009) article “Do Undocumented Students Play by the Rules?: Meritocracy in the USA” discusses the manner in which meritocratic justifications are used against the children of illegal immigrants seeking higher education. The study was conducted by examining accounts from 113 articles published from September of 2002 until September of 2008 in major newspapers in Massachusetts regarding the admission of the children of illegal into higher education. These children are often born in America and know nothing other than American culture, but are still denied access to the benefits that make higher education affordable or even possible. After compiling the ideas that appeared most frequently in the news, he found that “access to work, education, and other important institutions” is believed by Americans to be strictly for “the most talented, hard-working and virtuous...and people’s lack of success is attributed to individual characteristics such as laziness, indolence, and lack of appropriate values” (Jefferies, 2009, p.28). We are able to justify refusing benefits to the children of illegal immigrants

because, by definition of the American dream, they have had just as many opportunities for success as the next person and do not deserve special treatment.

This mentality is not specific to illegal immigrants, however, and restriction to aid of those in need is consistently justified on the basis of law. Regardless of citizenry, individual rights are stripped from those who break the law. What is interesting in the discussion of the children of illegal immigrants is not the legal justifications, it is the way average Americans have fully internalized this moral system and regurgitate it as an inseparable part of their belief system and, therefore, of their sense of self. Without meeting any one of the people in question, the individuals in the study are able to make sweeping judgments about what strangers deserve. Attention is not paid to the varying experiences of individual people, because it makes institutions of the American Dream less than total.

Human beings must be very careful in choosing their words, because in any region of the world socially constructed institutions are produced and reproduced through language. The very nature of communication changes with technology, and in America particularly after the Industrial Revolution our language has become increasingly role-specific. The unparalleled rate at which communication technology is expanding has forced redefinitions of our national psychology. It is not enough to simply avoid people whose cultural ideas conflict with your own, a method Berger and Luckmann suggest was far more simple before industrialization, so we must now come up with more extreme boundaries around our own definitions of the world, and moreover, constantly defend them in everyday interaction. Berger and Luckmann describe interacting with immigrants as a “crisis” mode of reality maintenance, but go on to say the more these interactions

take place, “the defensive procedures may, of course, lose their characteristic of crisis and become routinized” (1966, p.154). Today, our responses to outsiders are necessarily routinized due to the frequency of these interactions, and we often respond to outside ideals without even realizing we have made a response.

Often our response to others comes through the lack of action. We no longer openly exclude people based on race or ethnicity, but when others need our aid we see this not as a request for help from one human to another, but as an assault on the American ideal. The idea is that each person is given an equal opportunity in America that can only be realized through hard work, and asking an American to ignore that process is illogical and unfair. We are thereby able to justify our inaction in the face of inequality. We see people around us working hard every day and still never being able to succeed, so we justify this by pointing to their own inability to fit into our definition of the right way to live.

Rather than seeming elitist or unrealistic, this mentality is given the right to flourish in the individualized setting of America. As the United States has come to be defined by economic policy, our socioeconomic standing forms the path on which we are supposed to follow throughout life. We are increasingly entrenched in our roles, and deviation from the roles threatens overturning our primary socialization, or the lessons taught to us from childhood (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In conversation we are then forced to take a double position, one that recognizes the melting pot of the United States but still maintains that the lessons we learned about life are the right ones. Those who have the most power in society are given the right to determine the way the world turns for the masses (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), as they have the most control over the

information that is widely spread.

The mechanism for perpetuating these definitions of reality can thus be defined as communicative. As Berger and Luckman describe, “the conversational apparatus maintains reality by ‘talking through’ various elements of experience and allocating a definite place in the world” (p.153). We do not view these conversations as theoretical, as the vast majority of conversation takes place after a general understanding of the world is already mutually understood between both parties (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This is supported by the socialization process, as lessons are handed down to children through communication until they are able to obtain the knowledge that is considered “common sense” in their society. Berger and Luckmann write that “in conversation, the objectifications of language become objects of individual consciousness” (1966, p. 153); they are internalized, and we believe that the idea originated within ourselves. When we say “I believe,” there is an unspoken “we” involved, because no social individual creates their own reality or definition of life without being influenced by other people.

The most pervasive influence in American culture comes from the Capitalist economy, and Americans take pride in the country’s economic power over the world. American students are taught to internalize this ideal as well, as the only careers worth pursuing are increasingly defined as those that will earn the most money. Students are being taught to stay inside of socially prescribed roles to avoid being overrun by the outside world, the one they are told is filled with other people just waiting to step into their place. These ideas begin in childhood and are only provided validity as we move on to higher education and consider career paths. Yet this fear only spreads because we continually tell younger generations that it is the only way to survive in America. We are

in a tailspin of logic that keeps us socially functional and economically productive, but emotionally detached.

The more we encounter outside influence the more we seem to retreat into our predefined roles taught to us since primary socialization. We depend on our roles even though they limit our possibilities in life. Learning someone's viewpoint outside of your own, while challenging to your original conception of ritualized life, is an enlightening and meaningful challenge. One cannot claim the strength of their moral systems until they are put to the test, but once they are and continue to hold true, they are even more meaningful. It is important to take the time to consider that everything we believe in is wrong, if for no other reason than to expand our conceptualization of life. If one is able to recognize that their beliefs are not "the way things are" but rather the way things were said to be by some, a re-imagining of the world is made possible. Life is not about preservation, after all.

While we are not individually responsible for the socialization process, the process is not in control of us either. We are fully capable of changing our minds, as the socialization process is never complete. American society has become highly individualistic, but instead of believing in our own control, we believe in complacency to avoid confrontation. By strictly talking about the current state of injustice, poverty, discrimination, and so forth, we are eliminating dialogue that includes opportunity or hope. Instead we discuss the reasonable paths to financial success inside the constraints of what we have already been told. Believing in anything else then seems impossible. For example, women are told they will experience sexual discrimination in life and minorities are told to expect racial discrimination, so when these injustices occur it simply fulfills

the prophecy. We have become complacent and do nothing to change the problem, because people are only acting as predicted. Complacency comes to be defined as cultural tolerance. We have formed isolated social castles where, as long as the level of injustice is within the predicted limits defined by our socioeconomic standing, we will ignore the blows as part of life. Certainly, complacency is a more comfortable resting place, but is it more meaningful? In order to find out, we must question the truth, question the lies, question the process, and question ourselves.

Communication is in itself social action. Each and every member of society is impacting one another just by sharing their thoughts. If this is so, why not try to use this power for meaningful change? Why not believe that we may manipulate this system of inequality and gaps in logic? We may define this as naive initially, but it is only because we have been told idealism is useless. As soon as we realize the meaning of learning about ourselves from other people, we may challenge the beliefs of one another without trying to overtake or insult them.

Education is the key to opening our dialectical possibilities, and higher education is under assault from economic pressures now more than ever. Rather than talking about the rules of our world as an inevitability to be learned and worked around, colleges and universities need to remind students that this is their universe to be defined and maintained. It is no longer logical to accept the constraints of this socially isolated reality that was made for a population that no longer exists. Now more than ever we are responsible for one another, and more importantly, responsible for protecting the world for future generations. Berger and Luckmann write, “we not only live in the same world, we participate in each other’s being” (1966, p.130). Once we realize this

interdependence, we may begin to change the world.

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