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American education, meritocratic ideology, and the legitimation of inequality: the community college and the problem of American exceptionalism*

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Abstract. This article examines American education in comparative perspective, suggesting that the distinctive structure of the school system is both an embodiment and a source of the felt fluidity of class boundaries in the United States. Several characteristic features of the American educational system are identified: the avoidance of early selection, the lack of sharp segmentation between different types of institutions, relative freedom of movement both among and within institutions, openness to new fields of study, high levels of enrollment, and the provision of opportunities for educational mobility well into adulthood. The two-year public community college, it argues, is an essential expression of these patterns which, through its very accessibility, reinforces the American ideology that it is never too late for individual talent to reveal itself – and to be rewarded. The article concludes with a discussion of the effects of the nation's distinctive school system on American culture and politics, suggesting that the perceived "classlessness" of American society may in part be a product of its seemingly open and democratic structure of education.

Introduction

The unique system of education that has developed in the United States – a system of which the community college is an integral component – has had a powerful impact on the texture of American social and political life. This impact does not, to be sure, lend itself to precise measurement. Nonetheless, a case can be made that some core aspects of what observers, both foreign and domestic, have referred to as American "exceptionalism"[1] – the egalitarian tenor of daily life, the relative weakness of class consciousness, the felt fluidity of class boundaries, and the persistent national preoccupation with equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of condition – are both embodied in the peculiar structure of American education – *and* constantly reinforced by this same structure. To understand why this might be so requires a grasp of just how distinctive the American educational system has been in comparative and historical perspective.

Compared to the educational systems of other advanced industrial countries, American education has been characterized by striking levels of openness and fluidity. The first nation to offer access to secondary education to the entire population, the United States was also the inventor of the "comprehensive" high school, where academic and vocational curricula were

taught under the same roof. In Europe, in contrast, secondary education was typically divided into separate institutions offering distinct programs of academic, technical, and vocational training. The academic sectors in these systems – in France the *lycée*, in Germany the *gymnasium*, in England the grammar and "public" schools – were attended by only a small proportion of the population and had a decidedly elite character. As recently as 1950, for example, only about five percent of French and German young people – most of them from privileged backgrounds – received academic secondary school diplomas. In the United States during the same period, about 60 percent of young people completed what was admittedly a less rigorous secondary education, and roughly 11 percent of the population graduated from college (Ringer, 1979: 252).

The differences in sheer numbers do not, however, convey a full sense of the depth of the dissimilarities in structure and cultural atmosphere between American and European schools. For it was not simply a matter of more Americans being enrolled in secondary education; what was of greater social and political import was that students of diverse backgrounds were enrolled in the same school. In Europe, the typical pattern was markedly different; secondary students from the same community attended separate schools of sharply divergent statuses, where they studied distinct curricula with students from broadly similar social backgrounds. Moreover, in the elite sectors of the European systems, as Max Weber (1978) noted, a cultural ideal of the classically educated "cultivated man" generally held sway; such an ideal, with its implicit emphasis on the cultural superiority of the elite over the masses, tended to magnify the social distance between classes that the American comprehensive high school, with its emphasis on the democratic mixing of students in lunchrooms, school assemblies, and extracurricular activities, was expressly designed to reduce.

If the characteristic American pattern of educational organization was a unitary one, then the typical European pattern was one of *segmented* schooling – a pattern which Fritz Ringer (1979: 29) has defined as "one in which parallel courses of study, are separated by institutional or curricular barriers, as well as by differences in the social origins of their students." American education has not, of course, been free of segmentation; indeed, as George Counts (1922) had already documented in the years after World War I, there has long been curricular tracking by social class *within* American high schools. Nevertheless, the barriers that did exist between the various segments of American education were neither as sharp nor as visible as those in Europe.

One of the most distinctive features of the American education system – and one that is fundamental to its openness – is that it gives students with undistinguished academic records multiple chances to succeed. Whereas in England and many other European countries, allocation to a non-academic

track took place as early as age 11 and thenceforth had a virtually irreversible character, the "late-bloomer" in the United States could reveal his or her talents in the high-school years or even later (Turner, 1966). Indeed, in the years after World War II, equality of opportunity in the United States increasingly came to mean that everyone – even those with poor academic records – had a right to enter higher education. As a consequence, as Burton Clark (1985: 315) has noted, students emerging from secondary school in the United States "have second, third, and fourth chances in a fashion unimaginable in most other systems of higher education."

The community college and American ideology

The rapid rise of the junior college in the postwar years made the American system of higher education, which already enrolled a far higher proportion of young people than the system of any other country (Ben-David, 1966; Poignant, 1969), markedly more accessible than it had ever been. From a comparative perspective, what was genuinely new about the community college was not that it charged no tuition or that it made it possible for people to attend college while living at home; after all, many European universities had long been free of charge (indeed, some provided students with stipends for living expenses) and possessed no residential facilities whatsoever. The community college's innovative character resided instead in three of its other features; it offered two rather than four (or more) years of higher education, it provided both academic *and* vocational programs within the same institution, and it was open to the entire population, including adults (and, in some states, even those who had not completed high school).

In a sense, the public two-year college brought to higher education the "comprehensive" model that Americans had introduced to secondary education: universal access, relatively weak boundaries between curricular offerings, and an orientation of service to the entire community. As part of this service orientation, the two-year institution was geographically dispersed so as to provide maximum accessibility; by 1980, over 90 percent of the population was within commuting distance of one of the nation's more than 900 community colleges.

In its very design, the junior college was an expression of the longstanding American pattern of avoiding sharp segmentation between different types of institutions. While the typical pattern in European and other countries has been to draw a sharp line between the "university" and other forms of "postsecondary" education, such barriers have been consciously rejected in the United States. Instead, boundaries between institutions of different types

are relatively permeable, with transferable course credits being the "coin" that makes exchange possible (Clark, 1983: 62). Though the community college is the lowest track in America's highly stratified structure of higher education, it nonetheless is connected – through the possibility of transfer with credit – to the system's most prestigious institutions. Thus a student from East Los Angeles Community College, a predominantly Hispanic institution in a poor urban neighborhood, can in principle transfer to the University of California at Berkeley; in reality, however, only 16 Hispanic students (a rate of well under five percent) transferred to all eight campuses of the University of California in the fall of 1986 (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1987: 25). Yet even imagining such a move from a British polytechnic to Oxbridge or from a French *institute universitaire de technologie* to the Ecole Normale Superieure conveys a sense of just how different the American system is from some of its European counterparts.

In offering both academic and vocational subjects within the same institution, the community college was continuing an already well-established pattern in American higher education of refusing to create strong institutional boundaries between traditional and newly emerging fields of study. This tradition first became institutionalized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the nation's great land-grant universities which were pioneers in introducing such fields of study as agriculture, business, and education. If European universities were slow to integrate into their curricular offerings subjects other than the classical ones of law, medicine, and divinity, the American university eagerly embraced new fields of study such as the social sciences and readily provided training for a wide variety of scientific, technical, and professional occupations (Ben-David, 1966; 1972). The community college extended this pragmatic and utilitarian educational tradition, refusing to exclude virtually any field of study for which there was – or might be – popular demand. And in both community colleges and four-year institutions, students retained the right to change their field of study, sometimes switching from "liberal arts" to "vocational" subjects or vice versa.

Even the seemingly rigid boundary between student and non-student has been eroded by the fluidity of the American system. With the rise of the community college, students could easily enroll in higher education on a part-time basis, often retaining full-time jobs while acquiring student status. In recent years, four-year colleges and universities in search of new student markets have also increased their part-time offerings, following the communitycollege pattern of enrolling growing numbers of adult students. But it is the community college that is the quintessential open-door institution, and the proliferation of opportunities for part-time attendance at any point in the life cycle has powerfully reinforced the belief that it is *never* too late for individual talent to reveal itself – and to be rewarded.

American education and the perception of "classlessness"

From a comparative and historical perspective, the distinctiveness of American education is therefore apparent. What is less clear, however, is what effect, if any, this peculiar structure has had on the political and ideological tenor of American life. While such effects are notoriously elusive, we would like to suggest that they have in fact been present and that their impact has been considerable. Indeed, it is our contention that the perceived "classlessness" of American society is integrally associated with the character of its educational system.

By their very mode of organization, educational systems may tend to promote a sense that the boundaries between social groups are clearly defined and formidable or that they are fluid and easily traversed. In Europe, as noted earlier, systems have historically segregated dominant and subordinate groups in separate institutions, where they instructed them in distinct curricula. Unintentionally or not, such segmented structures are powerful instruments of class socialization, for they are crucibles in which distinctive class cultures may be forged and recreated from generation to generation (Cookson and Persell, 1985). If the effect of segmented systems is to reinforce the level of experienced social distance between groups, non-segmented systems tend to reduce such distance (Ringer, 1979: 267–268). In the United States, the relative lack of such segmentation in both secondary and higher education has highlighted the seeming permeability of class boundaries.

The very structure of the American educational system may thus be seen as both an institutional embodiment of the ideology of equal opportunity and a constant source of reinforcement of it. By avoiding early selection and providing numerous opportunities to show one's talents, the educational system reaffirms the core national belief that any individual, no matter how humble the circumstances of his birth, can rise as far as ability and hard work will take him. In this regard, the provision of opportunities for success well into adulthood is an effective means of keeping hopes for individual mobility alive long after they would have been extinguished in a less open system. Former President of the Carnegie Corporation and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner (1961: 137) put the matter bluntly: "our principle of multiple chances is not a sentimental compromise with efficient procedures but a measure well calculated to reduce the tensions to which our system is subject."

With everyone, regardless of social origins, given not just one but many opportunities to succeed, the American educational system has been a powerful instrument for the dissemination of meritocratic ideology. For if opportunities for success were made available by the system to all who showed talent and industry, then it followed that failure must reflect a deficiency of individu-

al ability and/or effort (Piven and Cloward, 1980). The message sent out by the schools – a message magnified by the apparent openness and fluidity of the system – was that those who "made it" did so because they had personal qualities that others lacked.

The widespread provision of opportunities for individual advancement through education, a number of prominent educators have argued, was crucial if the masses were to retain faith in the American dream of upward mobility. As the famous anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, writing in collaboration with Robert J. Havighurst and Martin B. Loeb, put the matter in *Who Shall Be Educated?*:

> The educational system promotes social solidarity, or social cohesion, partly through its provisions for social mobility. A society has social solidarity when its members believe that they have a substantial common ground of interest – that they gain more than they lose by sticking together and maintaining intact their political and social institutions. A certain amount of social mobility seems necessary to maintain social cohesion in our class-structured society. The possibility of rising in the social scale in order to secure a larger share of the privileges of the society makes people willing to "stick together" and "play the game" as long as they believe it gives them a fair deal (Warner, *et al.*, 1944: 157).

"Educators," Warner and his colleagues suggested, "should try to adjust the educational system so that it produces a degree and kind of social mobility ... which will keep the society healthy and alive" (Warner *et al.*, 1944: 158).

Harvard president James Bryant Conant went even further than Warner in his vision of what a meritocratic system of education could accomplish; for him, the schools, by providing equality of opportunity and thereby avoiding the inheritance of position, would produce a "classless" society. In characteristic American fashion, Conant made clear the "classless society" which he had in mind was compatible with substantial inequality; indeed he explicitly described it in his 1940 article, "Education for a Classless Society," as characterized by a "differentiation of labors with a corresponding differentiation in types of education" (Conant, 1940: 594). One of the fundamental objectives of such a society would be to assiduously avoid the "continuous perpetuation from generation to generation of even small differences." For such intergenerational transmission of privileges "soon produces class consciousness" (Conant, 1940: 598).

A concomitant of these meritocratic ideas is an emphasis on individual mobility rather than group solidarity. Class consciousness has, to be sure, never been especially pronounced in the United States as compared to Europe. Many factors militated against the development of a sense of common fate among the American working classes, including the exceptional salience of racial and ethnic cleavages, the early extension of the franchise to all adult white males, and widespread geographic mobility (Karabel, 1979). Yet among those features of American life hindering the growth of class consciousness

must be counted its education system. As it developed over the course of the last century, the American education system – with its rejection of early selection, its openness, its lack of segmentation, its sheer size, and its commitment to the provision of multiple chances to succeed – almost certainly reinforced the national emphasis on individual rather than collective advancement. An institutional embodiment of the national preoccupation with upward mobility, the educational system in its normal daily operations gave renewed vigor to the traditional American belief that, as James Conant (1940: 598) put it, "each generation may start life afresh and ... hard work and ability ... find their just rewards." By providing the "ladders of ascent" for which Carnegie (1886, 1889) and others had called a century ago *and* multiple opportunities to climb them, the schools infused the American dream of individual advancement with new life.

The enormous emphasis on equality of opportunity institutionalized by the schools has contributed to the relative weakness of class consciousness in the United States in subtle but significant ways. As we noted earlier, the relative lack of segmentation in American education both mirrors and accentuates the apparent fluidity of class boundaries. Moreover, unsegmented schools provide fewer opportunities for the emergence of distinct class sub-cultures than segmented schools. Class-linked modes of dress, speech, and deportment (both academic and non-academic) may, of course, be reinforced by internal divisions within "comprehensive" high schools – a point documented by numerous studies (see, for example, Stinchcombe, 1964 and Macleod, 1987). Nonetheless, it is most unlikely that such schools are as favorable environments for the development of distinct class subcultures as segmented institutions which provide separate and unequal education for students of different class backgrounds. Finally, segmented schooling tends, as Fritz Ringer (1979: 258) has argued to "make social differences seem profound and indelible." By increasing social distance between dominant and subordinate groups, sharp educational segmentation fosters the development of class consciousness.

As one of the most distinctive components of the educational system, the two-year college also contributes to the process of working-class fragmentation, for its very openness to adults transmits the message that it is never too late for the individual to climb onto the ladder of educational mobility and improve his or her position by acquiring additional credentials. Individuals located at the bottom rungs of the class structure thus have an alternative to the strategy of trying to improve their situation through collective action; they can, through ability and effort, use the system of part-time education for adults to rise *from* their class rather than *with* it.

As in other societies, the educational system in the United States plays an important role in the reproduction of inequality from generation to generation. In spite of the apparent openness of the system, a wide body of empirical

evidence shows stubborn gaps in educational attainment between students of different social backgrounds and a significant under-representation in the upper tiers of the system of minority students and students from working-class backgrounds (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Jencks *et al.*, 1972; Karabel, 1972; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Jencks *et al.*, 1979). The qualities that lead to success in the education system are no doubt partly personal, but they are also to a considerable degree linked to advantages of birth, and especially to family cultural resources (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 1979; DiMaggio, 1982).

In addition to its role in transmitting inequalities, the American educational system may well contribute to the legitimation of these inequalities. The very structure of American schooling has the effect of obscuring the substantial level of transmission of privilege that actually does occur. And it probably does so more effectively than segmented systems on the European model, for the workings of these systems are socially transparent. It is difficult, for example, to miss the social-class implications of the traditional division of British secondary education into secondary modern, technical, grammar, and "public" schools; the class implications of such a system are relatively obvious. In comparison, the American educational system conveys a strikingly democratic appearance through the formal avoidance of sharp and final divisions, the continuous rather than segmented character of institutional prestige hierarchies, and its apparent openness. Overall, the contribution of the American educational system to the reproduction of inequality is relatively opaque. And as a general proposition, it seems likely that the more opaque the mode of reproducing inequalities, the more effective it is likely to be in legitimating these inequalities.

The American educational system and the vast network of community colleges that comprises one of its most distinguishing features may thus be seen as integral elements of a social order that emphasizes individual advancement over collective advancement, personal success over group solidarity, and equality of opportunity over equality of condition. In a way that was not entirely intended, it may also be very important for veiling some of the gaps between American ideals and American practice.

Some interesting comparative evidence exists that indirectly bears on this empirical argument. While the United States is, compared to other advanced capitalist countries, exceptionally generous in its allocation of resources to higher education, it is unusually stingy in its expenditures for social welfare (Heidenheimer, 1973, 1981). In a comparative study of patterns of public expenditure in 21 countries. Wilensky (1975: 7, 122) reports a negative correlation of −.41 between spending for social security and rates of enrollment in higher education; strikingly, the United States ranks twentieth in the former but first in the latter. While there are important exceptions (the Netherlands and Belgium, for example, exhibit relatively high expenditures in both cate-

gories), for the majority of countries, one kind of expenditure seems to substitute, to some degree, for the other. Moreover, various studies of the income distribution of the advanced capitalist countries place the United States at or near the very bottom of the list in terms of income equality (Sawyer, 1976; Reich, 1983).

In the United States, the extraordinary level of national resources invested in higher education has helped keep the American dream of individual advancement alive under drastically changed circumstances. But this national preoccupation with inequality of opportunity may be the other side of a relative lack of concern with equality per se – a lack of concern that is a core feature of American exceptionalism and continues to distinguish the United States from many other advanced societies, where powerful labor unions and working-class parties have been instrumental in the creation of genuine social "safety nets" below which vulnerable individuals may not fall.[2]

Notes

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1. The starting point for most discussions of American "exceptionalism" is the 1906 work by the German sociologist, Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* Sombart's question has been a lifelong concern of Seymour Martin Lipset (1950; 1963; 1977; 1983) and has also been examined in recent years by Katznelson (1978; 1981), Karabel (1979), Davis (1986), Howe (1985), and Mink (1986).
2. From a comparative perspective, evidence from a variety of sources suggests that societies with high degrees of working-class organization (as measured, for example, by unionization and/or strength of electoral support for socialist, social democratic, and other left-of-center political parties) tend to have strong Welfare States (Hibbs, 1976, 1977; Cameron, 1978, 1982; Korpi, 1978, 1983; Esping-Anderson, 1984). Within this framework, the relative lack of class consciousness and organization among American workers may be viewed as causally connected to the weakness of the American Welfare State.

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