



The Gordon Commission
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Democracy, Meritocracy and the Uses of Education

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The Family Resemblances of Democracy and Meritocracy

Among dominant social and political discourses in the United States, “democracy” and “meritocracy” are both freighted with ideological, political and practical significance (Connolly 1974/1993). Democracy, arguably in its most ideal sense, champions a presupposed equality of persons, while meritocracy is a justification for social inequality (Arrow, Bowles & Durlauf 2000; Sen, 2000; McNamee & Miller, 2009). In common parlance, they often are used synonymously or in close association with the even more diffuse ideas of equality, fairness, justice, liberty, etc. Furthermore, some would argue that democracy and meritocracy are interpenetrating concepts even as democracy broadly refers to “rule by the people,” or majority consent, whereas meritocracy can be described as rule by a deserving elite.

Conflations between democracy and meritocracy are related to their idealized aspirations for a more just society and the rejection of arbitrary domination by aristocracy or birth and inheritance. Both democracy and meritocracy appeal to the potential ennobling of the person according to one’s individual ability, effort and virtue, as well as the collective liberties and protections. Additionally, both democracy and meritocracy are “incomplete” projects that, in the absence of critical reflection and practice, can as easily perpetuate social inequality as promote social justice. This paper will review the dominant themes of democracy and meritocracy as ideals, ideologies, practices and/or institutions. The “shadow” or “unfinished” characteristics of democratic and meritocratic practices will be explored in terms of broad historical and sociological patterns. A survey of the trends of access to educational opportunities and academic achievement in the United States will provide a sobering example of how uncritical receptions of democratic and meritocratic ideals simultaneously obfuscate and exacerbate the corrosive aspects of social inequality.

Democracy

Many authors have pointed to the protean and normative senses of “democracy,” ranging from a collection of values to which we aspire to a set of constitutionally defined political practices. As William Connolly, in *The Terms of Political Discourse*, warns: “The language of politics is not a neutral medium that conveys ideas independently formed; it is an institutionalized structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain

directions” (1974/1993: 1). Being “democratic” or living within a “democracy” can entail: the protection of civil liberties; representative political institutions; the alignment of political rule with the general will of the people; the premise of one person having one vote; civic standards for behaving “as if” everyone were equal; or greater autonomy and socioeconomic mobility, as determined by a putatively free enterprise system. (It is with the last two conceptions of democracy that we find proposed junctures between democracy and meritocracy.)

Historically and comparatively, we can evaluate the principal constructs and outcomes of democratic processes in different periods and societies. Throughout the history of Western democracy, there has been a tension between the eligibility and competency of the masses and the need for protections against tyranny (whether by elites or the people at large). The expansion of the pool of citizens allowed to participate within democracies has been accompanied by shifting considerations of the ideal democratic citizen. For example, Plato (1992; 1997) objected to democracy as the anarchic rule of the many informed by uneducated opinion. Aristotle (1981) offered that democracy could be effectively instituted with majority consent for representation by an aristocracy of excellence (*arête*). Even when entertaining the ideal that citizens were equal in some respects, it was unsupportable that citizens were “equal in all things,” (especially with regard to education and leadership capacity.) Furthermore, in an Aristotelian democracy, citizens could qualify for democratic participation only if they possessed sufficient wealth and education.

Beginning in the Roman republic and throughout 17th-century Europe, the strength and validity of a democracy was conceived to be dependent upon the popular support of a citizenry viewed as autonomous social agents active in legislative decision-making (Crick, 2002; Machiavelli, 1965). Active participation, in contrast to passive consent, was viewed as critical to the strength and endurance of the state in times of peace and war. In the period preceding the American and French revolutions, Rousseau (1985) argued for greater esteem for the abilities of the common man. Regardless of formal education and property ownership, citizens’ capacity for reasonable and conscientious deliberation of matters of public concerns cohered within a benevolent general will that was preferable to the *de facto* rule by a decadent aristocracy.

Following the brutalities of the French Revolution, attention was given to protecting the rights of the individual in relation to the majority. In the writings of Tocqueville (2003) and John Stuart Mill (2008), the citizen has the right to democratic participation as well as constitutional

protection of individual civil liberties. Tensions remain between individual freedoms, the protection of minorities and the power of majority opinion. Plato's concerns about mob rule are still reflected in anxieties about compulsory requirements for democratic participation (e.g., age, education, criminal record, etc.) and the potential for what Thomas Jefferson (1785) called "elective despotism." In the 20th century, models of modern democracy were subject to the inclusion of more citizens who had previously been barred from participation according to ethnicity, gender and wealth. Therefore, the power of the people within democracy has evolved in terms of how "the people" are conceived and the conditions and limits of collective rule.

Democracy and Meritocracy

Education and rigorous competition have always been principal methods of enacting a meritocratic order. The meritocratic ideals that were to inform French and American revolutionary periods had their origin in Confucian values that were instituted in Chinese civilizations such as the Han Dynasty (*circa* 200 B.C.) (Kazin, Edwards & Rothman, 2011; Sienkewicz 2003). These social reforms were taken in order to displace a ruling class based upon family inheritance, with civil bureaucracy based upon merit, as demonstrated through educational attainment, competitive examinations and performance of one's duties once appointed. Meritocratic ideals were eventually adopted by European Enlightenment thinkers (e.g., Voltaire) in efforts to reconstitute the social order beyond the confines of the ancient regime, and the more quotidian applications of meritocracy in Europe and the United States were used in the civil services as protective measures against corruption and political favoritism.

The leaders of the American Revolution and the founders of democracy in the United States resisted the tyranny of the British monarchy and instituted a government that safeguarded against unilateral power and unaccountability. Furthermore, the federal system was to provide a venue for national integration while providing for localized control. At the heart of this democracy were civil liberties that granted freedom of worship, the acquisition of wealth and freedom from outright coercion by others. The independence declared by the United States as a nation-state also was mirrored in the independence granted to those recognized as citizens. Alexis de Tocqueville (1967) viewed equality and individualism as key elements for the success of early democracy in the United States. The rejection of traditional claims to power by the aristocracy was the source of greater social equality, and allowed for greater autonomy and

independence. In de Tocqueville's estimation, individualism was a freedom that "disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures" (1967: 118). For its advocates like Jefferson, de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, the implementation of democratic values in United States afforded the opportunity for a "natural aristocracy" of talent and virtue to replace other systems of inequality based upon feudalist birthright, divine right, spoils of victory and caste societies, although slavery remained intact.

Meritocratic values undergird the ideology of the American Dream, which casts the United States as a profound experiment in democracy. Hochschild (1995) identifies the core beliefs of the American Dream as: (a) individuals can succeed on the basis of their autonomous decisions and actions; (b) this success is based upon moral virtue; and (c) equal opportunity applies to everyone regardless of origin or social identity. Meritocracy is generally held to be a social system within which individuals earn rewards according to their abilities and efforts. In the United States, the democratic ideal of individual freedom is attached to the presumption of relatively greater agency within a capitalist marketplace. One's fortune can be influenced by one's abilities, talents and efforts in relation to the needs, desires and values of the larger economy and society. Meritocracy provides an incentive for individual achievements that benefit the collective progress and resources of the society. Significant differences in power and resources are justified given the presumption that everyone has an equal or sufficiently reasonable chance of succeeding by virtue of individual merit. The resultant inequalities are apprehended as a Social Darwinist natural order of things and an indication of the inherent self-regulating tendencies of a free market in the distribution of resources (Adams, 1931; Carnegie, 1886; Hayek, 1945/1948).

McNamee and Miller (2007) argue that the widespread acceptance of meritocratic values in the United States exists regardless of real conditions of social stratification and the unequal distribution of resources and power. Rather, meritocracy is validated as a system that is fair within the ideal realm. As much as we would like to proceed as if equality is based solely upon the merit of individual actors, there are obvious discrepancies in fortune that have to do with the social contingencies of family inheritance, marriage, group affiliation and various forms of discrimination. The resilience of meritocratic explanations of inequality in light of ubiquitous contrary evidence also illustrates the ideological function of meritocracy in the maintenance of the social order.

Democracy and Meritocracy as Ideals and Ideologies

Democracy and meritocracy as ideological phenomena also reveal how dominant perspectives shape historical and present arrangements of social power. The industry and resourcefulness (individual and communal) of the early colonists and settlers and the institution of democracy delivered greater freedom and promise of ever expansive fortunes for propertied men of European descent and those who claimed property through colonization, slaveholding, homesteading, herding and prospecting. The history of nascent democracy and nation-building in the United States among voluntary immigrant populations obscures how the broadening horizons for some were in part realized through the brutal eclipses of basic human freedoms, for many others through land seizure, warfare, the persecution and containment of indigenous populations, the enslavement of African people and the subordination of women. These forms of oppression and subjugated labor underlie the advances made in the nation's formative forays into farming, commerce and industry. Nevertheless, the meritocratic and democratic values incorporated within the American Dream set the predominant narrative for the justification of success and failure. Further, meritocratic values carry explicit and implicit moral determinations of not only individual worth but cultural belonging as well.

The “Shadows” of Democracy and Meritocracy

Robert Dahl (1989) posits that the uncritical popularity of “democracy” as an idealized generality necessitates the articulation of a “shadow theory of democracy.” The shadow theory points our attention to the ignored, mystified, disavowed aspects of democratic practice. For Dahl, to deny the shadow is to jeopardize the integrity and the promise of democracy. The acknowledgement of the exclusion of entire groups from the democratic project according to class (property ownership), gender and ethnicity reveals the history of democracy as an evolving, progressive social enterprise. The shadow theory of democracy casts light upon two primary features of determining the validity of a democratic practice: (a) who constitutes “the people” who are to rule, and (b) the results of the democratic process.

Even as the shadow theory of democracy forces a rapprochement between idealizations and real consequences, Dahl suggests that democratic process — in contrast to aristocratic and totalitarian models of rule — holds greater potential for encouraging and supporting human development through the practice of individual freedom, self-determination and moral autonomy.

In Dahl's formulation, democracy presupposes three types of equality: the intrinsic equality of all people; the entitlement of all competent adults to have the autonomy to determine what is in their best interest; and political equality, as defined by the constitutional provisions for democratic practice. Democracy also generates social spaces and modes of interaction that allow for comparatively greater distribution and exchange of mutual interests and valued goods. In order for these conditions to flourish, Dahl argues, all people must have equal opportunities to realize these social goods and, therefore, "the democratic process becomes nothing less than a requirement of distributive justice" (1989: 312).

The promise as well as the compromise of equality within democratic practice is thrown into sharp relief by its historical record. We can trace the gains that have been made by those who have embraced and have been embraced in return by democratic citizenship. Conversely, we can review the bleak histories of those who have been refused full recognition of their rights to democratic citizenship, equality and freedom. We also know of the bitter contests between those who would deny and those who risk their lives in order to claim full access to democratic practice and civil protections. As Dahl observes:

The history of democratic development offers us encouragement, but it also posts a warning. For the story of democracy is as much a record of failures as of successes: of failures to transcend existing limits, of momentary breakthroughs followed by massive defeats, and sometimes of utopian ambitions followed by disillusionment and despair. (1989: 311-312)

Meritocracy, too, has shadow features that undermine its very validity as well as its compatibility with central features of democratic practice. As demonstrated in the brief discussion of the problems that attend distributions of educational resources, it is clear that the ethical acceptability of meritocracy, like democracy, depends upon conditions of equality and distributive justice that have yet to be comprehensively realized. As such, meritocratic claims to just deserts on the basis of equal opportunity to develop and demonstrate ability are arguably unfounded.

Michael Young, in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), illustrates the reproduction of the elite through venues of academic and technical training and testing. Young also notes, "If the rich and the powerful were encouraged by the general culture to believe that they fully deserved all that they had, how arrogant they could become, and, if they were convinced it was all for the common good, how ruthless in pursuing their own advantage" (1958/199: xvi). Young's critique of this "sad and fragile" society has often been ignored in favor of a cottage industry of academic

reification of the premises of meritocracy through research, policy and public discourse. Even when confronted with many critiques of meritocracy, the will to reward people based upon the morally arbitrary chances of birth (i.e., family socioeconomic status, abilities, talents, etc.) is robust. Meritocracy, at best, is a means for unequally distributing material and social goods while appealing to values of fairness and putative equality — an equality that has proven to be elusive in many circumstances, especially education.

Meritocracy and Justice: An Ethical Interlude

It is true that meritocracy, however flawed, is preferable to a feudal aristocracy or caste systems, and its legitimacy is based upon appeals to formal equality, fairness and just deserts. A libertarian perspective would hold that an inherently just system depends upon seemingly impersonal market forces within a society where access to jobs and opportunities should be equal. This formal equality, similar to that found in deliberations over democracy, is insufficient because it fails to adequately interrupt the reproduction of pre-existing social stratification (Rawls, 1971/1999). Theoretically, anyone can compete, but in practice, only some have the resources to learn how to best navigate the field of play, while still others will always succeed given superior ability. Even if we are to suspend the contributions of inborn capacities, the extent to which people expend great effort also is dependent upon circumstances that are beyond individual initiative. What is to become of those less fortunate in the context of these arbitrary conditions of family resources or inborn ability?

According to Rawls' egalitarian "difference principle" of justice, the fortunate should not be subjected to "leveling equality" measures and all members of society can potentially benefit from nurturing those with extraordinary ability. Rawls posits, "Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out" (1971/1999: 87). Rawls arrives at this position by applying the rationalist thought experiment of "the veil of ignorance," whereby people choose the most fair and just social arrangements for the distribution of goods while pretending that they could be born into such circumstances with any social identity and status (also see Harsanyi's [1953] "original position"). Therefore, if there is a likelihood that one will be born among the least fortunate, one is led to imagine the most just society.

There have been a number of critiques of Rawls' use of the "veil of ignorance" (e.g., utilitarian, communitarian, feminist, etc.). One objection put forth by Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel counters that the veil of ignorance necessary for Rawls' theory of justice radically attenuates a person's ability to make moral judgments at all. In defense of the inescapable dimensions of moral ontology or the irreducibly "encumbered" nature of social (and thereby moral) existence, Sandel (1998) contends that a sufficiently opaque veil of ignorance makes any meaningful moral judgment — even hypothetical — impossible.

Another critique of Rawls' "veil of ignorance" is found in Slavoj Žižek's *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Žižek suggests first that an egalitarian perspective can easily be adopted as a dangerously naturalized moral cover for the status quo; and second, that it is the very injustice of free market capitalism that makes subordinate status bearable:

In the Rawlsian model of the just society, social inequalities are tolerated only insofar as they help those at the bottom of ladder and insofar as they are based not on inherited hierarchies, but on natural inequalities, which are considered contingent, not merits. Even the British Conservatives seem now to be prepared to endorse Rawls' notion of justice: in December 2005 David Cameron, the newly elected Tory leader, signaled his intention of turning the Conservative Party into a defender of the underprivileged, declaring, "I think the test of all of our policies should be: what does it do for the people who have the least, the people on the bottom rung of the ladder?" But what Rawls doesn't see is how such a society would create conditions for an uncontrolled explosion of *ressentiment*: in it, I would know that my lower status is fully "justified" and would thus be deprived of the ploy of excusing my failure as the result of social injustice ... Friedrich Hayek knew that it was much easier to accept inequalities if one can claim that they come from an impersonal blind force: the good thing about the "irrationality" of the market and success and failure in capitalism is that it allows me precisely to perceive my failure or success as "undeserved," contingent. Remember the old motif of the market as the modern version of an imponderable fate. The fact that capitalism is not "just" is thus a key feature of what makes it acceptable to the majority (2008:88-89).

For Žižek, Rawls' notion of justice can be employed as an instance of what Bourdieu would call "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) — that is, the adoption and promulgation of commonsensical worldviews that allow dominated groups to assent to their relative deprivation as part of the natural order of things.

Further, Žižek draws upon Rousseau's (1754) discussion of the antisocial qualities of *amour-propre* — an early formulation of what psychologists might term

“social comparison” — to propose that it is simplistic to readily embrace egalitarianism while disavowing egotism and individualism as inherently antithetical to moral goodness. The subject in the throes of Rousseau’s *amour-propre* takes pleasure in the denial of benefits to others. As such, Zizek argues that the most basic forms of selfish behavior are not as poisonous to the promise of a just society as is the tendency to be overly concerned with others in a harmful way: “An evil person is thus *not* an egotist, ‘thinking only about his own interests.’ A true egotist is too busy taking care of his own good to cause misfortune to others. The primary vice of a bad person is that he is more preoccupied with others than with himself.” (2008:92)

Zizek’s insights resonate with Michael Young’s predictions about the importance of rationales regarding the superiority of the meritocratic elite that are palatable to the “undeserving.” Therein we find an unsettling realization that meritocratic arguments are as vital to justifying the perpetuation of failure and mediocrity for the majority as they are to rewarding the privileged and worthy few. The shadow theory of democracy acknowledges the history of systematic exclusion of many “Others” who found themselves outside of its charmed circle.

Competing ideas about equality, liberty and fairness have led to a particular kind of conflation of democracy and meritocracy in the present neoliberal climate. Conservative values cast equality as the antithesis of excellence, creativity and the development of highest potential among the most gifted members of society (e.g., Edmund Burke, Ayn Rand, etc.) Equality has a limited appeal for those championing the freedoms associated with privilege. Fairness has less to do with challenging the stagnant reign of the aristocracy of birth and is more concerned with shoring up the moral validity of a Social Darwinist “natural aristocracy” of talent. As Richard Seymour (2010) observes:

From being the credo of revolutionaries, meritocracy has become an axiom of liberal capitalism, so apparently self-evident that only the wicked or perverse would oppose it. Yet meritocracy, as a doctrine of hierarchy, also contradicts a founding tenet of the 18th century revolutionary legacy, that of equality. It appeals to a desire, that John Adams detected in Americans, for distinction in relation to one’s peers. This sense of mastery over others has long been manipulated by the right to accommodate even some of the poorest to their lot. The language of meritocracy is, or so I will argue, a language of class rule. (2010: 45-46)

An ethos that highlights individual achievements and behaviors and downplays the impact of structural conditions ushers in greater mistrust of the usefulness of government interventions for social security and the regulation of free market capitalism. Even though meritocratic ascendance is more often than not undergirded by the inheritance of privilege, the presence of a minority of high achievers from underrepresented groups offers the tenuous possibilities of social mobility. Against the backdrop of global market competition, the demands are ever more exacting. Not only are candidates for educational and employment opportunities required to demonstrate greater skill acquisition, they also face diminishing opportunities, job security and potential earnings as industrial labor is exported abroad, automated and supplanted by “immaterial,” service or technical labor (Tucker 2011; Zizek 2012). In such circumstances, a meritocratic social order is viewed as almost inevitable.

Recognition and the Shadows of Democracy and Meritocracy

In the most general terms, “recognition” can refer to the event of being seen or apprehended by others or given public attention or awards for one’s accomplishments. There are two other ways of construing “recognition” within social theory that are relevant to our discussion of democracy and meritocracy. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1973) use the concept of recognition to define one aspect of social exchange through which cultural, social and symbolic capital are granted to individuals based upon their possession of collectively valued dispositions and abilities. The identification of these forms of non-financial capital is central to their theory of how social inequalities are maintained and perpetuated within educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1996).

On the other hand, “misrecognition” is more than “not recognizing” others and the value of their attributes and abilities. Misrecognition points to taken-for-granted worldviews that not only normalize and naturalize power inequalities but also shape intentions and actions that reproduce these patterns of inequality. Misrecognition is directly relevant to accusations of symbolic violence made against meritocratic perspectives that fail to adequately acknowledge the role of arbitrary privilege. If one accepts that life under U.S. democracy is one of unmitigated equality, freedom and

liberty, attempts to explain the severity of social stratification would result in discourses of misrecognition and symbolic violence against subordinated social groups.

Another use of recognition is based upon Hegelian constructs of self-consciousness, reflexivity and intersubjectivity. and is currently found in the work of Axel Honneth and Judith Butler. Honneth and Butler use recognition in their philosophical formulations of the conditions for ethical relations within contexts of social and political power and reality construction. For Honneth, social and political conflicts are typically a matter of “mis-recognition.” or the withholding or withdrawal of recognition of Others in the distribution of social and material goods (Honneth, 1996; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Judith Butler applies the concept of recognition in order to critique dominant frameworks for apprehending suffering and state violence (e.g., war and occupation) as “grievable” or not. That is, recognition is embedded within the social and ethical frames for construing certain lives as more precious than others (Butler, 2010).

Relevant to our discussion of democracy and meritocracy is what Butler describes as “critical recognition.” Butler is concerned with the mediation of shared perceptions of the mass-scale death and destruction of wars against “the enemy.” The strategy of critical recognition might also be applied to less bloody forms of injustice and social suffering such as widespread intellectual and social underdevelopment, under- or unemployment, poverty, etc. Critical recognition requires that we go beyond articulating how certain people’s life chances have not been recognized as worthy of protection. Next, we must turn our attention to how our cultural and ethical conventions constitute the “recognizability” of others:

There is no challenge that recognition poses to the form of the human that has traditionally served as the norm of recognizability, since personhood is that very norm. The point, however, will be to ask how such norms operate to produce certain subjects as “recognizable” persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize. The problem is not merely how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differentially. What new norms are possible, and how are they wrought? What might be done to produce a more egalitarian set of conditions for recognizability? What might be done, in other words, to shift the very terms of recognizability in order to produce more radically democratic results? (2010: 6)

In the case of democratic and meritocratic considerations of academic opportunity, it is not enough to unpack the constructs as idealizations and to examine their historical constitution. It is also insufficient to point out the failures of democracy and meritocracy according to abstract ethical standards of equality and justice. Meticulous outlines of the descriptive and normative dimensions of democracy, merit, equality and the like are anemic without critical interrogations of the deployments of agency, interest and power in social life. Geuss' (2007) characterization of a realist query into political conditions as “who does what to whom and with what results for those concerned” is applicable to democratic practice and meritocratic distribution as exercised in the field of educational opportunities in the United States. Democracy and meritocracy as they are instantiated in discourse, policy and everyday activity can be construed as intentional failures — failures that nevertheless reap benefits for certain constituencies. A similar charge can be and has been presented with regard to the conditions within which this nation's children and young adults are educated.

Education as a Test Case for Democratic Practice and Meritocratic Reward

Educational attainment and performance is perceived as a key factor in determining merit, and many assume that education improves one's chances for gainful employment and is therefore the most transparent means for social mobility. Absent the larger society's commitment to an equal distribution of resources, academic institutions are held to be central sites for the redistribution of resources. Some proponents of meritocracy have argued that academic talent is equally distributed throughout the population regardless of socioeconomic status. Therefore, an academically promising student from modest means is presumed to have more opportunities afforded to her than a wealthy student with poor academic performance (Conant, 1938; 1940). By giving each child, from the beginning, equal educational opportunities, social institutions can more equitably select those who best qualify for advanced education and leadership positions. (In the past 30 to 40 years, however, greater attention has been paid to arguing that intelligence and assessment testing demonstrate a concentration of intellectual ability among certain ethnocultural groups. For this camp of meritocracy advocates, certain groups of young children may be estimated as less worthy of enhanced educational opportunities even when their options have been limited to obviously inferior venues (Arrow, Bowles & Durlauf, 2000.)

While opportunities do arise among a relatively small subpopulation of lower and middle SES groups, academic access and performance in the United States is strongly influenced by social class. Children from families with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to enter school with greater stores of cultural capital, attend better resourced schools, and have access to a wider range of academic supports and opportunities. Even within the same school district, public schools can offer different qualities of educational opportunities due to course offerings, the quality of the teaching staff, the socioeconomic status of the student body and more academically conducive school climates. In addition, upper SES parents enjoy greater political advantages when advocating for their children's needs with school officials (Lareau, 2000). Aside from family SES and the child's IQ, the other factors that strongly influence educational attainment are living in a two-parent family, being the child of a father who is highly educated, interacting with peers and family members who themselves value education and high achievement, and having access to a variety of math and science courses (McNamee & Miller, 2009).

From an early age, educational institutions identify and reward those students who demonstrate the most potential for academic success (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005). However, most academic institutions fail to identify and develop the abilities and potential of the gifted among lower-SES populations. Within the U.S. public school system, the majority of students are susceptible to academic tracking during their primary school years. Cognitive ability and academic performance generally only account for half of the variation in tracking decisions, and once a child is in a low- or high-performing track, they are less likely to transfer into higher or lower levels in their school careers. Educational institutions “recognize” the social capital that students bring from their homes and communities, reproduce social inequalities and safeguard the continuity of elite privilege (Apple, 2004; Apple, 2009; Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). In *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*, Heather Beth Johnson (2006) argues that the American Dream and the ideology of meritocracy allow us to overlook educational inequality and its devastating effects. The persistence of the idea that education is a primary institution of distributive justice and equality obscures the reality that:

... sets of opportunities for children of different race and class backgrounds, structurally unequal from the start, further perpetuate structured inequality. The ideology of the American Dream, perhaps strongest around the arena of education, legitimizes race and class inequality by

presenting these not as structures but as the inconsequential ramifications of meritocracy. In a context in which education is seen as the key to success and schools are persistently segregated and unequal, school decisions become pivotal for the life chances of a child. The ideology of meritocracy and the reality of the wealth gap operate together, and in the simple act of sending children to school, we contribute to perpetuating inequality. (2006: 172-173)

Nevertheless, within a traditional meritocratic framework, education is not always viewed as a set of passive endeavors with which millions comply year after year. Instead, academic attainment and performance can be construed as the active accumulation of academic and cultural human capital with which to compete and trade on the employment market. People, however young, may be cast as agents making human capital investments with which to increase their productivity and earnings (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961). By adolescence and young adulthood, academic records, degrees and credentials are taken as indicators of potential career trajectories (Collins, 1979). These individualistic perspectives assumed by meritocratic constructs of just rewards still do not adequately account for a number of structural variables (Blau & Duncan, 1967).

The definition of merit itself is a fluid, historical phenomenon that is socially constructed to reflect the values and interests of those with the power to institutionalize particular ideals and values (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Karabel, 2005). Educational institutions appraise and certify individual demonstrations of skill, knowledge and competencies, and the relevance and worth of these performances are always subject to shifting cultural values and market interests. For instance, the academic skills for which most students are prepared are not always aligned with the most lucrative careers (e.g., professional sports, popular entertainment and speculative finance, etc.), and markets do not necessarily reward the criteria for merit established by traditional academic institutions.

On a global scale, as societies become more technologically advanced, the demand for greater specialization favors those with higher academic performance and more education. At the same time, shifts from industry and manufacturing to service and advanced technocratic economies result in a smaller proportion of lower-skill employment opportunities. In addition, with the increasing globalization of capital, commerce and labor, projected employment opportunities and life chances are subject to greater risks and transformations. Therefore, educational and occupational attainment is explained by complex interactions of achieved and ascribed characteristics at the individual level, a host of intervening contexts of societal and

political-economic forces (on local, regional, national and international scales), and the fortune of one's life decisions (McNamee & Miller, 2009).

In step with the extraordinary inequality between the wealthiest and the most impoverished, educational opportunity in the United States ranges from world-class offerings to abject mediocrity or worse. The ubiquity of substandard public education among students of lower-SES ethnic minority groups is not only evidence of severe disparities in the local tax bases for educational funding; it also reveals the malevolence of meritocratic rationalization. When considering the disparities in educational and other developmental resources and supports in early childhood and elementary education, it is clear that meritocratic decision making is in play from the very beginning of a child's school career. Education is largely accepted as both a public and a private good and, depending upon one's perspectives about the function of education in society, it appears that some citizens are more worthy of access to educational excellence than the majority in the United States (Kozol, 2005; Larabee, 1997; Payne, 2008; Orfield & Easton, 1997).

As a public good, education in the United States is held as the principal means by which our youngest citizens are prepared to participate in a functional democracy and negotiate the labor market. A democracy is only as viable as the ability of its citizens to comprehend and deliberate upon a variety of political agendas. Public educational institutions also serve to develop mass-scale capacity for cooperative productivity in the workplace. These collectivist goals of "democratic equality" and "social efficiency" can conflict with a view of education as a private good for the purposes of social mobility (Larabee, 1997). Once education comes to be valued largely for its role in individual advancement, competition and social prestige, the means by which educational opportunities are distributed are likely to become more stratified and less egalitarian. The relative scarcity of high-quality educational resources and credentials potentially undermines collective stores of human capital, thereby threatening the maintenance of an adequately informed electorate and an effective labor force on a domestic and global scale.

A Cross-cultural Challenge to the Embrace of Inequality

Recently, international comparisons of educational attainment and achievement have demonstrated that the United States trails behind a number of countries in Western Europe and Asia. In the edited volume *Surpassing Shanghai* (2011), Tucker suggests that that the dominant

model for public education over the past century was not designed for universal excellence. Instead, it has produced a minimal standard of competency for the majority while reserving the best educational opportunities for the cultural and economic (and meritocratic) elite. Compared to other nations that invest in higher levels of educational development among the majority of their citizens, the United States has a lower proportion of citizens who meet or exceed the current global standards of academic preparedness as measured by instruments developed by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Among those nations that outperform the United States, Tucker and colleagues have identified some common features that are particularly relevant to this discussion of democratic, egalitarian and meritocratic perspectives. Nations with higher levels of achievement tend to have more demanding standards for curriculum and teacher quality throughout their public institutions of learning. In this way, excellence and equality (or universal distribution) are not necessarily construed as opposing agendas, and the role of public institutions is not as subject to derision and, perhaps consequently, inadequate funding. Many of these nations also are robust welfare states that provide free or subsidized public health and educational benefits, and greater resources are allocated to students in need of academic intervention.

One such country, Finland, has generated interest among those seeking strategies for educational reform in the United States. In line with Tucker's findings, Pasi Sahlberg, author of *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* (2011), attributes the success of the educational system in Finland to high standards of excellence in both curriculum and teaching, universal social benefits, and targeted supports for underperforming and comparatively underprivileged students. Sahlberg also describes an ethos within the Finnish educational system that promotes cooperation, collaboration, equality and trust. When Sahlberg cites a Finnish credo, "Real winners don't compete," it is difficult to imagine a more alien notion to dominant conceptions of achievement and success in the United States. Predictably, commentators in the United States often cite Finland's "homogeneity" and the "diversity" of the United States as barriers to the feasibility of adopting aspects of the Finnish model.

The Rehabilitation of Meritocratic Values and the Repudiation of Bad Faith

Historical and sociological accounts of social stratification in the United States amply demonstrate how access to democratic liberties and rights have been mirrored by the provision of

and access to educational opportunity. The slow process by which suffrage was granted to those who did not own property, to women and to subjugated ethnic minorities is similar to the patterns of reducing barriers for members of these same social groups at various levels of private and public educational institutions. While significant progress has been gained through (oftentimes) heroic mobilizations for social justice, the United States remains plagued by severe socioeconomic inequalities (that have increased over the past three decades).

While education has the potential to reduce inequality, it remains a principal venue for the reproduction of social stratification and the perpetuation of stigmatizing narratives of failure and social exclusion. In the United States, educational attainment and meritocratic social mobility is positive correlated with (family) socioeconomic status. It also can be argued that political representation and influence within our present democracy show similar patterns of association with SES. Seemingly, the most robust returns for democracy and meritocracy are subsumed within overarching networks, institutions and logics of hierarchical social power.

Nevertheless, the values of just reward and merit derive much of their ethical appeal from a foregoing assumption of relatively equal opportunity or “a level playing field” against which individual ability and effort are evaluated. In the midst of widespread and entrenched systems of educational inequality, the pervasive invocation of meritocratic guidelines in the determination of access to and the allocation of educational opportunity results in a malignant variant of “double consciousness” and a collective act of bad faith. It would seem that those to be held most accountable might be the legions of administrators, teachers, researchers and policymakers in field of education. However, the case can be made that adult citizens of conscience also should take responsibility for affirming the public good of access to high-quality education. The tendency to view education as a private good for social mobility threatens to erode collective awareness of and commitment to public education from early childhood through secondary levels (at the least). So too, an excessive accommodation of competition, exclusivity and stratification at the formative stages of human development suppresses collective levels of intellectual and social competency and subverts fundamental dimensions of social cohesion, mutuality and trust that nurture a democratic civil society.

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