

Condemnations of Class in Higher Education: Cultural Capital and Socioeconomic Inequality

Ryan Smedberg

Professor Lynda Dexheimer

Abstract: The intention of this paper is to explore the unforeseen and tacit disparities that exist within higher education. The inequalities I am writing about are found across the boundaries of socio-economic class, and are constituted by the inherent advantages of forms of child rearing and upbringing that are practiced by higher-class families—or what Pierre Bourdieu defines as cultural capital. Institutions of higher education, I have found, recognize and endorse the cultural capital of the middle and higher classes more so than that of the working class. This results not only in differing and unequal abilities for academic success, but also in a disparity of experience.

Arriving at a university is an intimidating and challenging experience. Adapting to the various material and social complexities of campus life is a daunting challenge for some. Arguably, that adaptation to a high-intensity education environment is easier for some than others. It can be concluded from the research that individuals of middle- and upper-class backgrounds achieve overall greater excellence than lower- and working-class individuals. Recent headlines and editorials have struggled with this question, and the issue is becoming more of a mainstream topic within the United States¹. Many theorists and thinkers in education have engaged with the question of social mobility and education attainment. To address this question it is important to turn to the deeply influential work of sociologist Annette Lareau, and her writing on cultural capital, which was adapted from the French

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/education/poor-students-struggle-as-class-plays-a-greater-role-in-success.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/24/national/class/EDUCATION-FINAL.html?pagewanted=all>

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The theoretical framework of cultural capital explains how social advantages and class values are repeated and preserved among upper-class families. Within this discussion, I shall address the structurally determined nature of cultural capital and how it relates to education. The writings of the cultural critic Henry Giroux, and the sociologist Peter Kaufman, dispute this determinacy by focusing on the agency of the individual and the free will involved in the role of the social actors being discussed. Scholars Lyn Tett, Paul Dimaggio, and Jason Kaufman offer intriguing case studies that interact with the questions of cultural capital and social reproduction. Tett produces many examples of how students from varying socio-economic backgrounds adapt to the environment of higher education. In his research, Paul DiMaggio analyzes the impact of parental education levels, cultural capital, high-school success, and higher education attainment. Jason Kaufman developed a case study of the relationship between extra-curricular activities, high-culture exposure, and high education attainment. The theories of these authors contribute to a more comprehensive understanding to differentiate students within an educational environment across class-based distinctions.

The nature of my study is to investigate a prominent inequality that exists within a realm of merit and equal opportunity — the significance of which could lead to institutional change and adaptation — to better compensate disadvantaged students who have yet to be recognized. I speculate that students from privileged social classes are better equipped with cultural capital to operate successfully within university environments that understandably subscribe to middle- and higher-class values. As a result, lower- and working-class students begin their university experience at a disadvantage. The disparity between the family experience and learned social attributes affects the ability of the student to proficiently acclimate to the university environment. However, as Giroux and Kaufman note, individual agency must also be accounted for, and the determinism of a cultural capital model must be held into question. Lastly, an account of the students being discussed

within the theoretical analyses noted above deserve a voice and presence as lived social actors², and as such they will provide a very grounded understanding of the global phenomena of class stratification that plagues higher education.

The U.S Trend

The climate of equality derived through a university education in the United States is a fallacy. The availability of a university education has certainly increased over the last few decades as a result of the G.I. Bill; however, class mobility for the lower classes has stagnated while access to elite universities has been preserved for the higher classes. A thirty-year study of education attainment within the United States conducted by professors Alexander Astin and Leticia Oseguera outlines an intriguing trend of equity decline. Astin and Oseguera measured the level of access various social classes had within highly selective universities within the United States (based upon rate of admissions). Their results not only concluded that a disparity was apparent within higher education attainment across class boundaries, but that this disparity was indeed worsening, and in 2004 this disparity was in a more severe state than it has been for the past thirty years (Astin and Oseguera 334).

A major factor in the analysis conducted by Astin and Oseguera was whether or not the students being observed had parents who were highly educated. It is evident that there is a correlation between parental education and student attainment of selective higher education, and in fact “today, students with highly educated parents out-number first-generation students by better than six to one (62 percent vs. 9 percent)” (Astin and Oseguera 331). Students hailing from highly educated families have, and, as far as this longitudinal study shows, have always had, apparent access to higher education in ways that are not available to the less affluent classes: “In other words, over the past 30 years students

² By lived social actors I mean testimonies that provide information on the experience or phenomenology of inequalities. The lived experience testimonies provide data that statistics and quantifications simply do not capture.

from the best educated families have managed to maintain the same high rate of access to highly selective colleges and universities—about 1 in 5—in spite of the fact that their numbers have more than doubled during this same period” (Astin and Oseguera 331-332). University admission rates of students whose parents do not have a university or college education have declined. As a result, the great grade inflation that has made higher education more popular seems to have further protected the security of the higher classes’ access to elite institutions. Now that impressive applicants with impressive grades are so plentiful, other forms of credentialing and legitimating are utilized to measure the acumen of students, and cultural capital has a more forceful hold upon the future of students than ever (Astin and Oseguera 337). The subtle, yet extravagant, ripples of cultural capital and social reproduction are plentiful within a scrupulous observation of U.S higher education, and the research provided by Astin and Oseguera is a perfect case example of such phenomena at play.

Prometheus-Bound: Cultural Capital and Critical Theory

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu first conceptualized cultural capital; however, Annette Lareau adapted this concept to terms of education and exposed intriguing and disturbing social phenomena of inequality which all too often slip beneath the conscious vigilance of educators. Cultural capital can be understood as the values, practices, and perceptions that are distinct to each differing social class. Middle- and higher-class families for instance, are often characterized as well-educated, informed of current events, metropolitan, and intimate with the liberal arts. Lower- and working-class families exhibit qualities of hard labor and insular cultural practices that inevitably block exposure to other social practices. While conducting an analytical comparison of a middle-class and a working-class school within the United States, Lareau notes: “The childrearing patterns of the two groups also differed, particularly in the leisure time activities they encouraged” (Lareau 81). This is important in that it may explain unseen differences between working-class and middle-class students. The parents who are accustomed to summer camp

excursions better prepare their children for higher education because they value such leisure-time activities as worthwhile experiences. The Promethean qualities of higher education are merely perpetuating social hierarchies within a realm of seemingly equal opportunity and merit because of such differences in class-based values and child-rearing practices.

Lyn Tett further supports Lareau’s theory of cultural capital in her study of how working-class individuals adapt to prestigious university settings. She concludes that the university is somewhat of an alien setting with unfamiliar norms and practices to the working-class students and in fact “students frequently report that they have to confront negative attitudes towards their study from friends, parents, and partners” (Tett 262). Recordings of hostility among working-class communities towards higher education lay within a stark comparison to the middle class guarantee of a quality education. According to Tett, the environment of the university itself acts as an obstacle: “As Ball and colleagues (2000: 4) have shown, working-class people usually position ‘themselves “outside” of HE [higher education]’ (in other words, they construct HE as an alien place). Even those who do make their way into HE do so on the basis that they are potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as ‘owners’ of it. The position is more extreme in an elite university dominated by young, middle-class students, for whom HE is an unquestioned destination” (Tett 257). The unconscious relationship assumed by the working class with higher education in no way represents that of a expected destination of progress. Perhaps the most intriguing excerpt from Tett’s work is a terse piece of an interview with a young working-class student who ardently insists, “I bring my experience of being working-class and I know that means that I have something important to offer... Being working-class isn’t just about being deprived” (Tett 257). The student signals a self-awareness of economic disadvantage and distance from the norms of university culture. Much of Tett’s article reveals similar testimony, and leads one to conclude that not only do working-class students lack the

cultural capital to comfortably adapt to the university setting, but also the university itself enforces the values of middle- and upper-class culture. Lareau echoes this sort of institutional and apparatus-based inequality as she affirms, “It is important to stress that if the schools were to promote a different type of family-school relationship, the class culture of middle-class parents might not yield a social profit” (Lareau 82). While there seems to be a relationship between inherited cultural capital and academic success, we cannot understand this relationship as being wholly deterministic. Beyond socio-cultural influence, humans possess thought, and a voice to express this thought. Humans are agents with the potential for resistance.

Viva La Resistance: Agency and Resistance

All students are individuals with will and choice, and this cannot be completely overshadowed by the theoretical clench of cultural capital, however intuitive it may be. The testimony within Tett’s and Lareau’s work reveals an influence that seems unavoidable, yet Peter Kaufman offers another perspective by saying “by itself cultural capital does not guarantee success, nor is it a ‘simple byproduct or reflection of class position but merely actively deployed’” (P. Kaufman 262). Peter Kaufman, a sociologist from SUNY, offers a study of the experiences of various middle-class individuals within college, some of whom were graduated alumni and others still active undergraduates. The results declared that cultural capital and social reproduction as “familial process,” (as Tett and Lareau argued) seemed to have an acute impact on academic and even career success, but in no way guaranteed such success. One middle-class individual, Kaufman notes, even dropped out of college despite his parents’ success and educational backgrounds (Kaufman 262). Agency is of great importance when it comes to questions of social mobility; however, Kaufman points out the individual who dropped out of college acquired a well-paying occupation, and “interestingly, he acquired this job through his father’s contacts suggesting that middle-class structural resources may even benefit those who reject reproduction” (Kaufman 263). Such persistent evidence

in favor of cultural capital theories is lamented by social critic Henry Giroux, who says that “neither position provides the foundation for a theory of education that links structures and institutions to human agency and action in a dialectical manner” (Giroux 261). Giroux’s concerns lay primarily within the lack of free will within cultural capital theory, and he argues that working-class students, and the otherwise economically oppressed, have the ability to contest and revolt against their conditions, contradicting the confines of capital.

Paul DiMaggio, a Princeton sociologist, warns through his in-depth statistical analysis of class correlations to high school success and higher education attainment that “the relatively low correlations between parental education and cultural capital are notable. An analysis of the responses of a cross-sectional sample of American adults to questions that included a broader range of cultural attendance activities, but required a greater specificity as to the extent of the activity, found correlations of both occupational status and educational attainment with culture consumption of approximately .40 (Gruenberg, 1975:200)” (DiMaggio 198). DiMaggio questions the validity of generalizing a correlation between high-culture leisure activities and socioeconomic status as recipes for success, which is the *prima facie* assumption for most cultural capital theorists. Clearly, the relationship between the inheritance of cultural capital and progeny success is complicated in the sense that it is not quite clear which forms of capital are being transmuted into success—for example, parental education, occupation, leisure activities, etc.

However, despite the lack of agency addressed and the generalizations that DiMaggio, Giroux, and Jason Kaufman point out, cultural capital remains visible as an explanation for why students of the lower classes exhibit difficulty in excelling within environments of high education. There are moments of agency and “resistance and contestation” but there still seems to be a conflict of values that differ greatly between working-class and middle-class communities (P. Kaufman 2005). Visits to the museum and summers at camp are the

natural experiences of the middle-class child. It appears that because of these experiences, the child is given significant advantage in future education and career experiences. Jason Kaufman also points out that even if the working-class individual were to attempt to mimic this sort of cultural participation that is prevalent among the middle class, the same results of success do not yield: “On the one hand, students who go to museums with their parents (or whose parents go alone) are much more likely to go to elite colleges than other college-going students. (Students who go to museums but have parents who do not go to museums appear to receive no such “boost” at the elite college level, however)” (J. Kaufman 160). The findings of Kaufman are vital for understanding that cultural capital restrictions are manifested not simply by the way in which one spends their afternoons, but rather in the cultural experience (child rearing, family networks, cultural affinities, etc.) a person emerges from. A working-class individual could indeed spend much time reading classical literature and visiting museums during his or her spare time; however, this does not automatically transfer said individual into a privileged class. Socioeconomic class is defined by the tacit nature of cultural capital, and pervades through a complex of social reproduction, yielding a particular sort of experience.

The Working-Class Experience

While sociological theory does much to express complex social phenomena into a comprehensive language, the actual accounts and testimonies of the students discussed are vital to understanding the lived experience of social inequality. Diane Reay, Jacqueline Davies, Miriam David, and Stephen Ball compiled a 2001 study of non-traditional students (first-generation, working-class) enrolled in higher education within the United Kingdom. Their transcript of student testimony reveals several intriguing insights into the psychological and material opposition working-class students face within higher education.

Most if not all of the testimonies gathered by Reay et al. display a concern among working-class individuals to find the right academic place that will not present the various material and psychological

challenges students face when becoming involved with academic affairs. There is significant weight upon the word *choice*: a choice for working-class students situates enlightenment and education at the expense of becoming impoverished and financially unstable as a result of tuition costs and commuting expenses. One student is recorded saying: “Yes, I live near Putney Bridge, and Roehampton, for locality Roehampton appeals, because I can go home for tea. And I also thought about being a poor student and I thought well, it’s about 90 pence on the bus” (Reay et al. 861). Students suffer in this case from a restraint of locality, and “are operating within a very limited space of choice, in which, for example, an extra few stops on the tube can place an institution beyond the boundaries of conceivable choice” (Reay et al. 861). This spatial obstacle, which intertwines financial flexibility, is not quite captured by cultural capital theories, but exhibits a very real-world take on unstated struggles for lower-class students.

When working-class individuals choose to attend a university to cultivate their minds and engage in intellectual opportunities not found elsewhere, economic quagmires often bog down hope for success. This is confirmed by one student in Reay’s study who has “been getting no help from home: ‘I’ve had to find the money for rent, food, everything basically, and there’s no way I can get the work done anymore. I’m too exhausted’” (Reay et al. 862). Education at the university level is a challenging experience that, in order to succeed, requires a high level of commitment. The college experience is a crucial period of metamorphosis and opening of the mind, but instead becomes a frantic and nervous flood of unfulfilled priorities for the ordinary working-class student. Another student recounts similar experiences at college: “I started to work for Safeways, and it has had a big effect on my education, because mostly I say I am coping, but what really happens is you are kidding yourself, when you say you are coping because you are not, there is so much to do” (Reay et al. 862). The apparatus of university education assumes that one has the time to devote themselves to many hours of intensive studying a week, to comprehend materials,

and to be held accountable for said materials during examinations. These assumptions pertain to the higher-class students, who appear to be more comfortable in intense academic settings. A student from an affluent background can easily afford to take a semester's time off of work to focus on their studies because they have the economic aid of their parents. As previously mentioned, the working-class individual during the academic year is bound to subsistence living because there is little or no financial support from home. This pressure to rise above geographic chains and financial pressures results in a much discomforted and stressful experience in education for the working-class individual, and the stress doesn't end there. The first-generation student is in a bewildering position adapting to the academic culture and this has numerous psychological implications.

Among the many obstacles facing working-class and first generation students within higher education, there are psychological factors that have to be taken into account. Disparities and differences are not only realized within the material world, but also exist within a student's conscious, self-positioning of class. The central theme in much of the recorded student testimony revolves around a notion of the "right university," which plays a major role in the accessibility working-class students have to elite institutions (Reay et al. 867). The words of one particular working-class student of African descent were exceptionally revealing:

"It's been really scary thinking that you could have made the wrong decision, very anxiety inducing... I think it's more difficult if no one in your family's been there. I think in a funny sort of way it's more difficult if you're black too... because you want to go to a good university but you don't want to stick out like a sore thumb. It's a bit sad isn't it? I've sort of avoided all the universities which aren't seen as so good. If you're black and not very middle-class and want to do well, then you end up choosing places where people like you don't go and I think that's difficult" (Reay et al. 866).

This account implicates the inexorable influences of race (which my

discussion here does not address), though she also hints at a sort of socioeconomic alienation, in which she seems to understand middle-class students as being a different sort of people, and elite universities as an unfamiliar place—often not the "right place." Similarly, a middle-class student during an interview exhibited an overt "othering" of less selective institutions and the students that comprise the roster of those institutions: "I don't think I could actually get on with people if they got very bad grades and then got into a bad university, due to the simple class of persons there... bottom of the intellect and who deserved to be there academically" (Reay et al. 865). The lived experience of students appears to differ greatly across class boundaries, and this is evidence of social disparity manifesting itself beyond mere income or even cultural capital, but also being represented in differing life and psychological experiences among students from different backgrounds.

Conclusion

Education is an ideal and rite of passage for the citizen—an opportunity to develop the creative and intellectual faculties that will go on to profoundly impact the way one views and acts within this world. This is claimed within the United States not to be a privilege of the privileged classes, but an equal right and necessity to all. Higher education has indeed expanded and enrollments are rising; however, the experience of education is greatly stratified across class lines (Austin and Oseguera). We are presented with testimonies of students facing similar challenges within the U.K, as they recount worries of financing their education and languishing within an academic culture that seems intentionally fitted for the higher-class students (Reay et al.). It is clear from this data that socioeconomic standing puts particular students at a great disadvantage when it comes to academic achievement, and one might very well find this to be an obvious financial inevitability; though, the research provided by Annette Lareau and Lynn Tett provides, through critical theory, a sociological explanation which demonstrates the very core of the issue. Higher-class students have an advantage of cultural capital and home support which sometimes even takes the

form of being highly formalized to the university setting (Kaufmann). The working-class cultural capital, however, does little to train one for intellectual endeavors; rather, it molds one into an efficient worker. While it is important to note that cultural capital is not a deterministic model of human nature, as expressed by Henry Giroux, the experiences within higher education among different class backgrounds are radically different. We must also bring into consideration the student loan crisis within the United States and how this could potentially further inequality³. It is not an outlandish notion to compare the student loan crisis with the sub-prime mortgage debacle where predatory lending practices wiped out the economic stability of the lower and working classes.⁴ Education within the United States is supposed to be an education of advancement and prosperity—the paragon and flag holder of American opportunity – and yet the data conveys quite clearly that it works to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities, securing power for the elite class at the expense of others (Apple 1982). Such injustices should not continue if we hope to facilitate a free democracy in which all citizens have equal voice regardless of their beginnings. Such disparities can no longer continue to deaden the spirits of so many who are fooled into tales of the egalitarian academy and those who suffer through a seemingly inescapable lived experience of degradation.

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³ <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/national/2012/04/student-loan-debt-isnt-just-young-persons-problem/50749/>

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/03/dont-panic-wall-sts-going-crazy-for-student-loans-but-this-is-no-bubble/273682/>

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