

Intelligence and Class Distinction: An Unintended Consequence of Meritocracy

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the social processes in place that encourage intelligence stratification and why this is a problem we should be deeply concerned about. Those who are not part of the upward meritocratic trend represent a challenge in the form of a new class based on intelligence. Government will have to find ways to adapt to the new labor market and ensure that those who pursue legitimate and hard work continue to be valued and maintained in a way that prevents them from slipping into poverty.

Keywords: Higher education, class, stratification, educational level, meritocracy, government, policy

Over the past one hundred years the United States has made significant gains in moving toward a more meritocratic educational system. Programs such as the GI Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act), The War Against Poverty, Affirmative Action, Head Start, and Civil Rights legislation have expanded access and opportunity to education. Admittedly, much work remains to be done, yet as a nation, we have invested enormous financial and political capital into expanding educational opportunity and trying to change the nation's culture and attitudes.

Stratification in American society has historically been based on social class rather than intelligence. The assumption being that intelligence was more equally distributed across the population. With the expansion of educational opportunity stratification began to shift from social factors to intelligence. The purpose of this paper is to examine the social processes in place that encourage intelligence stratification and why this is a problem we should be deeply concerned about.

In order to make any interpretations about intelligence and class, we must first define intelligence. There are several different traditions that view intelligence, particularly in terms of how it is defined, and influenced by genetics. The classical tradition holds, among other standards, that intelligence as measured by intelligence quotient (IQ) tests are largely stable over the course of a person's life (Codica, 2014). Intelligence is therefore considered reflective of general reasoning ability, and is regarded as a better indicator of intelligence than more specific tasks (Codica, 2014).

This tradition also subscribes to the idea that intelligence is inheritable within the range of no less than 40 percent and no more than 80 percent (Herrnstein and Murray 1994, 23). Some of the most compelling evidence on intelligence inheritability has been based on investigations of twins who were separated shortly after birth and raised by different families (Plomin and Loehin, 1989: 331-342).

The Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory posits that intelligence can be improved over the span of one's life; however, due to individual differences some may show gains in certain areas but not others. This theory is far more cautious about making genetic connections to intelligence. Partly this is due to how MI theory views intelligence in a more complex manner than the traditionalist perspective. MI theory is based on the existence of a number of different intelligences rather than a single general intelligence. At this point, it remains to be determined through scientific studies whether the distinct intelligences supported by MI have a genetic basis (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, and Gardner, 2011: 485-503).

These different perspectives disagree on some terms; however, they all have in common the acceptance that there is a general concept of intelligence and this ability varies among individuals. They also all leave room for differences among individuals and are not to be considered absolute and universal.

Alienation

One of the core Marxist concepts concerns alienation. Marx addresses the notion of alienation as it relates to the antagonistic struggle between capitalist and worker (Marx, 1961, p. 67), it is also possible to conceive of alienation as being an element of modern American educational systems. To understand how students become alienated as they progress from high school to college it is first necessary to understand what is meant by the term alienation.

Karl Marx's theory of alienation describes the estrangement (*Entfremdung*) of people from aspects of their *Gattungswesen* ("species-essence") as a consequence of living in a society of stratified social classes. The alienation from the self is a consequence of being a mechanistic part of a social class, the condition of which estranges a person from their humanity. Alienation or Estranged Labor as it is described by Marx arises from a disconnect between property owners and the propertyless workers (Marx, 1961: 67). Marx describes the worker in a capitalist society as being separated from their product as a power that is independent of the producer. For example, if a worker creates a table the table itself becomes an objectification of that worker's labor. However, the table itself is a material object that is independent in the market from the labor that was used to produce it. Marx writes, "So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more the object the worker produces the fewer he can possess and the more he falls under the dominion of his product, capital" (Marx, 1961: 7). Alienation is a core concept for the progress of capital society.

Alienation for Marx occurs in four ways. First is the separation of the activity of the laborer and the laborer themselves. Second, from that separation production becomes an alienating process. Third, the effects of alienation affect all of humanity and thus finally the process of alienation leads to competition between individuals within society (Padgett, 2007: 5-6). In summary, the individual gets separated from their product, the product becomes an object unto itself. This process affects all of humanity and thus creates a situation of competition between laborers. For example, imagine the worker on the assembly line. The worker creates the tire for a vehicle. This tire is an object independent of the worker, thus there is no connection to its production. The next step in the assembly line creates the engine. Again, another alienated product. Each piece is part of a larger car, without a connection to the workers who assemble the car. The workers in turn compete against each other for promotions and more money.

Mills wrote, "Formal requirements for entry into different jobs and expectations of ascent tend to become fixed on educational levels" (Mills, 1966: 266). Lyotard also connects the economic force of alienation and education similar to Mills. Lyotard wrote, "The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professional student is... no longer 'Is it true' but 'What use is it'" (Lyotard, 1984: 51). In the context of mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is similar to 'Is it Saleable?' (Lyotard, 1984: 51). Considering further the process of Alienation, and self-alienation, Petrovic writes,

Man alienates the products of his labor because he alienates his labor activity, because his own activity becomes for him an alien activity, an activity in which he does not affirm but denies himself, an activity which does not free but subjugates him (Petrovic, 1963: 419-426).

The quote is very telling in understanding the ways in which the individual who may be engaged in an activity is both participating and is alienated at the same time. Take for example a student taking the SAT. They may be taking the test, but they are also not connected to the educational process that generated the test. They are also not freed by being successful in the test taking endeavor, they are in fact further subjugated in competition with other students for the best access to college.

In considering the concept of alienation two key ideas can be applied when envisioning the process of a student moving from high school to college. First, is in the relationship between the act of production and the products. In thinking of the high school students, it is possible to envision their scholastic record as being an alienated product. Meaning the record itself is separated from the creator or producer of the academic standing and has taken on an identity of its own. A way of viewing this would be in conceptualizing the college application packet. The packet is composed of several parts, including GPA, grades and standardized test scores. In the interest of objectivity there is very little opportunity to see the creator of the academic record merely the results. This creates a type of alienation, where the product in this case the academic record is separated from the producer.

Second, the act of production and the production activities, this means the process by which a produce creates a product. In looking at the process of a high school student preparing for college the elements of alienation apply. First the student increasingly becomes disconnected from their educational products as they begin the process of standardized testing and preparing for college admission. In this way the process of academia becomes about creating a successful college applicant and less about learning new ideas or concepts. The ultimate challenge of alienation comes from the structural bias the result from the separation of the produce from the product. As an independent product the scholastic record is susceptible to bias since there is no physical producer easily connected to it. For example, when a student gets rejected from a college, the students themselves is not rejects their academic record is, thus is it easier to separate the concerns and consequences of structural bias if the rejection is of an object and not a person.

Processes that Encourage Intelligence Stratification

We have already briefly examined the role of genetics in determining intelligence. However, we need to examine this in more detail in order to better understand how it causes social separation. Research on social mobility from one generation to the next reveals that children of parents in the bottom five percent of the nation's income level have a less than one in twenty chance of rising to the top five percent of the income level. They also have less than one chance in four of rising to the average income level (Hartigan and Wigtor, 1989). While such studies do enlighten us on the limitations of class transition, they do not mention the role of inherited intelligence. If we subscribe to the theory that intelligence is inherited, even if we may disagree about the degree of inheritability compared to environment, we must acknowledge that inheritability plays some role.

Other social processes take place that are related to intelligence. We are likely all familiar with the old saying that opposites attract. However, social science research suggests there are some characteristics in which likes attract. This phenomenon has implications for separation by intelligence. The idea of likes attracting is known as assortative mating has been shown to have increased since World War II. The increase in people seeking mates with similar characteristics was found to be most pronounced among college graduates, which suggests intelligence as a relevant factor. The chances of a college graduate marrying someone without an undergraduate degree was 44 percent in 1940, and declined to 33 percent by 1980 (Mare, 1991: 15-32). These findings, because they are based on people at the upper levels of intelligence, suggest intelligence plays a role in how we select marriage partners. There are other factors as well that people use to select mates, yet even these pertain to the benefits intelligence confers on individuals. As risk of sounding crass, an intelligent spouse with a college education, has the potential to make a greater financial contribution to the marriage and potential family unit.

The social circles in which we operate have shifted considerably since World War II. This is partly due to the greater emergence of women into the workplace. Before this time men encountered potential wives from the social circles largely determined by his socioeconomic states. These included neighborhood, church, and other social organizations (Herrnstein and Murray 1994: 23). With the greater presence of women in the workplace men now are more likely to find a wife who was selected for her career for the same reasons of intelligence and educational achievement. Therefore, a woman's potential to financial contribute to marriage and family has begun to assume the same weight in selecting a partner (Bus, 1987: 335-351; Qian and Preston, 1993: 482-495).

One can try to take comfort in the idea that children from lower socioeconomic families rise based on educational opportunity. It is true that programs to identify and direct qualified youth toward higher education have made progress, and this progress is likely to continue (Herrnstein and Murray 1994 ; 113-115). Where it may have taken as many as five generations to see class movement, it can now take place in a single generation (The Brookings Institute, 2006). Over the past half-century intelligence and education have become more important in determining class and wealth than one's class origins (Rindermann, 2008: 127-142; Rindermann and Weede, 2006: 511-524; Weede and Kamph, 2002: 361-380). When we combine this with the fact that people seek marital partners with like characteristics a picture emerges of increased segregation based on education, intelligence, and income regardless of one's social class origin.

The implications of these social processes have been to propel those with high intelligence into social circles where they are likely to marry those with similar levels of intelligence. Given the inheritable nature of intelligence, this will result in the growth of subsequent generations of a cognitive elite in positions of social authority and privilege. To refer to it as a "caste" would be too strong a term; however, the production of a class of people who are partly there due to inherited factors raises concern about a disconnect from the lowest social segments. The intellectual elite have become increasingly separated from other groups and are more likely to intermarry perpetuating a social class where intelligence is a determinant of success and is inherited.

Implications

At this point one may wonder about the role of environment in intelligence and possible implications. Again, we turn to social science research to provide answers and help us draw some implications for the future. Families who belong to the economic and intellectual elite are more likely to send their children to private schools, live in neighborhoods with greater tax resources to form better quality public schools, have financial resources to hire tutors, vacation in areas that are culturally enriching, attend social functions that while entertaining also have educational value, and as a family value and encourage education and high performance in school.

Likewise, the solidification of lower classes also based on intelligence is as troubling, if not more so. When intelligence was more equally distributed across the population those at the lowest socioeconomic levels had opportunities for upward mobility. These opportunities have expanded greatly since World War II. However, we cannot ignore the possibility that the same social processes that benefitted the highly intelligent, may work to the disadvantage of those at the lower end of intelligence spectrum. The theoretic basis of alienation within the capitalist mode of production is that the worker invariably loses the ability to determine life and destiny when deprived of the right to think (conceive) of themselves as the director of their own actions; to determine the character of said actions; to define relationships with other people;

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognizes estrangement as its own power, and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated, this means that they cease to exist in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and in the reality of an inhuman existence.

Those who are not part of the upward meritocratic trend represent a challenge in the form of a new class based on intelligence. Government will have to find ways to adapt to the new labor market and ensure that those who pursue legitimate and hard work continue to be valued and maintained in a way that prevents them from slipping into poverty. One radical proposal is a shift toward guaranteed basic income. This idea suggests we eliminate government bureaucracies that distribute public housing benefits or Social Security, and instead use the money to provide citizens with a guaranteed income (Covert, 2018, 33). Such a measure would require enormous financial redistribution that may override many individual's sensibilities about the extent to which they would want government involved in their lives.

A less intrusive, but still complicated recommendation, is to reform social values to place greater esteem on people with many different kinds and levels of ability. While this is certainly far less invasive than massive wealth redistribution, the task of shifting social values on a large scale is highly challenging.

The degree of separation between classes has grown over the past several decades, and the social science research that has been conducted on the subject suggests such separation will only continue. The problem of class separation based on intelligence cannot be reversed; however, there may be initiatives to alleviate the consequences. How this may be done will depend on to what extent we are comfortable permitting the government to intrude in the lives of ourselves and our fellow citizens.

In considering alienation it is important to make a distinction between Marx and Durkheim's theory of anomie. The focus for this paper is on Marxist alienation and the relationship between power and the individual. Ludz argued that alienation in Marx is "a problem of power defined as domination, a concept conspicuously absent from the anomie perspective" (Springer, 1976: 6). Alienation occurs as part of the power structures within the educational and social process. The power structures eventually subjugate the individual to the point at which they are consumed. Marcuse wrote, "the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere, and in all forms" (Marcuse, 1964: 6). C. Wright Mills in the book *White Collar*, described the role of education in what he called the "new society." Mills argued that education in this society served as the key to one's economic fate. Education then becomes an integral part of the capitalist system in the white-collar new society.

Mann as well contended that salability of knowledge effects the ways in which students approach education (Mann, 2001: 7-19). The connection between the individual and the power/knowledge structure of modern economic society set the stage for the effects of alienation. Sarup argued that "education is a mode of production involving pupils and teachers and knowledge is both private property and cultural capital. Schools are factories" (Sarup, 1979: 129). Sidorkin follows Sarup in describing learning as a form of production and also addresses the production of non-real objects such as test scores and grades (Sidorkin, 2004: 251-262).

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