

Working to Live, Living to Work

Michael Yates

CHAPTER THREE: (MIS)EDUCATION

I. Introduction

I don't know how many times my parents told me, "Do well in school. You can't get anywhere without an education." My mother said, "Maybe you should study to be an engineer. They make good money." Remarkably she thought of education not just in terms of money. She loved to read and she encouraged me to learn for learning's sake. Her father had been an educated person, and in her mind the more education you had the better person you were. Education was all the rage when I was young, just as it is now. Schooling of one kind or another is posited as the key to solving all of the nation's economic and social problems. Are people poor? It is because they don't have enough schooling. Is our country's productivity too low? It's because we don't know enough. Is there crime in the streets? Schooling is the cure. If everyone were literate; if we could all do basic math; if we were all connected to the internet--what a wonderful world it would be!

It is true that people with more education tend to have higher incomes. These days, it is also true that the gap between the incomes of those with high school diplomas and those with college degrees is widening. The question is why education is positively correlated with income. The neoclassical economists tell us that education makes people more productive at work, and it is this greater productivity which causes more educated persons to earn more money. But when we ask exactly how education makes us more productive, this simple chain of causation--from schooling to productivity to income--starts to unravel. It is typically posited that we improve our cognitive abilities by going to school, that is, we learn to think more clearly and thereby become better problem solvers. This greater thinking power translates into greater productivity in the workplace, and our employers can pay us more money because we add more to the employer's production than we would have had we not stayed in school.

The trouble with this line of reasoning is that it does not accord very well with the educational experiences of working-class people. It certainly does not accord with mine, as I shall try to show in some of the following essays. Here let me just say that I found my first 12 years of schooling to be a vast wasteland of stupidity, with a lot more time trying to get me to conform to middle class standards of behavior than to improving my cognitive abilities. Nor does it fit a more rigorous and impersonal analysis of schooling. Take, for example, the findings of economists, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, in their book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*. They show, first, that as the amount of education (measured in years of formal schooling) increases, the probability of ending up in the top one-fifth of the income distribution increases, just as the standard wisdom

predicts. However, years of schooling are proxies for increases in cognitive ability, the true source of the productivity increase which causes the higher incomes. So Bowles and Gintis then ask: what would we expect to happen if we held cognitive ability constant, that is, if we created a sample of people with different amounts of education but the exact same amount of cognitive ability? Using scores on standardized intelligence as measures of cognitive ability, they discovered that the relationship between years of schooling and the probability of having a high income remained virtually unchanged. What this means is that the connection between schooling and income appears to have nothing to do with our thinking ability. Rather we are rewarded simply for putting in the time!

Now here is something which helps me to make sense of my own experiences in school. I think of the thousands of hours sitting in uncomfortable seats, listening to boring and uninformed teachers, droning on about nothing in particular. Sit up straight. Write neatly. Salute the flag. Don't copy other people's work. Be on time. Keep at it and you will succeed. Show school spirit. Do what I tell you to do. Memorize a lot of stuff, from the Catholic catechism to the structure of local government. Read only approved texts and literature. Learn nothing about your country's real history, just a lot of dates and places and propaganda. Do all of these things and you will be prepared for the fate which was yours to begin with, namely a lifetime of singularly meaningless work. Bowles and Gintis also discovered that the personality characteristics rewarded by the schools were the same ones rewarded by employers, while those penalized in school were the same as those frowned upon by the bosses. Woe be the students and workers who are independent, aggressive, and creative. But glory be to those who are perseverant, punctual, obedient, tactful, and full of school spirit.

Naturally, a lot of people, especially those from the society's lower depths, who know in their hearts that something is wrong here, will not go the distance. They will drop out of school or do poorly in it. They will not conform, and they will thus seal their fate. Yet some of their peers will make it through, and some will even go on to college and a few of these will succeed there and a minority of these will end up with good jobs. Since nearly all of society conspires to have us believe that success in school is a prerequisite for success at work and that success in school is a matter of individual effort, those who do not make it will blame themselves, while those who do will assume that it was their superior effort and intelligence which made the difference. In this way the inequalities which define the world of work in a society such as ours are replicated without undue opposition. In this way the people who are going to get screwed in the workplace participate in their own exploitation, so that when they ask someday how it is that they ended up where they are, the answer will come back to them, "You did this to yourself."

In this chapter, I explore the connections between school and work. The first story, "Minstrel Show" suggests the ways in which the racism which characterized work in the United States when I was young was rooted in the schools. The second essay, "Taking the Pledge," illustrates the role which patriotism plays in preparing children for work, while the third, "The Invisible Hand" tells how I became an economist. As in all of the chapters, the last essay analyzes the stories and draws the appropriate conclusions.

II. Minstrel Show (In memory of Vincent Robertson)

The high point of that first year in high school was the minstrel show. Things had started off inauspiciously in the Fall of 1959. That great decade, the sixties, was soon to begin, but it was still the fifties in my home town, the boring, conservative, celebrate-America fifties. I was apprehensive about high school. I had spent the past six years in a small Catholic school, and, although I did not like the nuns and their regimentation, at least I had known all of my classmates. The sisters did their best to make conformists out of us: teachers had to be obeyed, and priests, and parents. Independent thinking was dangerous, the work of the devil.

Our eighth-grade teacher, Sister Herman Joseph, made memorization the basis of all of our learning. We would write down terms on the left-hand side of our notebook pages, and she would dictate the appropriate definitions for us to write on the right-hand side. Then we would stand around the room, and she would read out a definition. If you got it right, you kept standing; if you missed, if you sat down. Grades were based on how many rounds you remained standing. She had me keep the grade records, so I got to sit down at all times, and I also always got the first question. I had a good memory, so even if I had not studied, I could memorize all of the answers by the time it was my turn again. So getting a good grade was simple for me. Learning anything worthwhile was another matter. Sister's definition for the radical, Tom Paine, was "As great an infidel as Voltaire." Not that I learned anything about Tom Paine (or Voltaire) in high school. I did not, and only reflected back on the utterly incredible and reactionary definition in my notebook after I did learn something relevant in college.

At least Herman Joseph didn't beat us when we got the wrong answer. I still wince when I think of how her predecessor had banged a girl's head against the blackboard because she confused inches, feet, and yards. Perhaps this was teacher's way of preparing her to obey her husband; learn what he wanted or you'll get the thrashing you deserve. In any event, I had the highest grade average in the school, but Sister would not allow me to get the traditional award medal. She said that I learned too easily. Rewards went only to those who endured the appropriate suffering.

On my first day in high school, my home room teacher, who also taught Latin, called out the role, and when she got to me, yelled out "Melvin Yapp." This set my classmates into howls of laughter. She had glanced down at the last name on another roster, but some of my friends called me "Melvin" for quite awhile. Then there was science class, taught by a heavy-set farmer (he really did have a farm) with a beet red face and a penchant for looking up girls' dresses. I hated this class, especially after the teacher knocked one of the students clear out of his seat for talking. I feared mightily that this would happen to me. Two older students, repeating the class after failing it the year before, sat beside and behind me. They were always making fun of me. They would ask, "Getting any?" (meaning sex), but I was so naive that for a long time I thought that they were saying, "Git ninnny," which made no sense at all. When I looked at them dumbfounded, they would almost fall down laughing. The teacher was always picking on them, mocking their inability or unwillingness to learn the material. If I so much as smiled when this

happened, both of them would hit me when the teacher's back was turned. Then for at least a month, the two of them would grab me in the hall after class and drag me in the opposite direction of my next class, punching my arms and twisting my wrists all the while. Since they were bigger than I and there were two of them, physical confrontation seemed out of the question. So I hit upon an alternative strategy, one which I used successfully throughout high school.

I was always academically bright. My mother encouraged me to read a lot, and I did, everything from encyclopedias to novels to comic books. But being smart is not an unalloyed virtue in a place in which most young people are going to be factory workers or otherwise employed in jobs which do not require much formal education. If you stand out too much intellectually, you run the risk of social isolation and physical and verbal abuse. Luckily I was good at sports, too, especially baseball, which my father had me playing with much older kids by the age of six. He coached a youth team for boys nine through twelve, and he would bring me to the practices. I would take my turn at bat, and he would throw the ball pretty hard. If it hit me, I'd be too ashamed to cry; it wouldn't be the manly thing to do. Sports helped me then to develop strength and a little toughness. Nothing was more admired among men than sports ability and fighting prowess, and at least I had the former. I had an absolute aversion to fighting, and, most remarkably, I made it through high school without getting into a single fight. I did this by making special efforts to befriend the toughest boys. In the science class, I began to let the two bullies copy from me on the weekly quizzes. This helped them to pass and showed them that I had some courage. Soon the punches and the hallway abductions stopped; by the end of the year, the three of us were almost buddies.

I perfected this strategy over my years in high school and, with appropriate variations during my college years. I walked to high school, and I arrived long before classes started. I would wait in one of the stairwells for the kids who hung out there, guys from the shop classes, guys who smoked cigarettes and were not afraid to fight. We'd talk about sports or about teachers or I'd just listen. After awhile they'd think of me as a friendly and harmless person, but one who might help them out if they needed it. In my sophomore math class, I helped some of the basketball players get through algebra. I didn't like science classes, so later I enrolled in the regular physics class instead of the college prep course. This worked out well; I found the work easy but I helped a lot of the other students. That way no one would think that I considered myself better than them because I was smarter. Unfortunately the teacher forced me to transfer into the more advanced class. Outside of school, besides baseball, I learned how to bowl and to shoot pool with some skill; all of these sports helped me to be a regular guy even if I did get good grades. Another trick I learned was to prepare for each class during the one before. That way I never had to do any homework, showing my disdain for school and impressing my classmates.

The ninth-grade students were divided into seven sections. Students were placed into the sections according to performance on standardized tests and perhaps (although I have no personal knowledge of this) upon the demands of the more aggressive parents. These tests were culturally biased and in no way measured our potential abilities. So it is no

wonder that no black boys or girls were placed in the first three sections, the ones in which the students presumably had some chance of furthering their educations. There was a small black population in the town, segregated entirely at the south or "lower" end. About five to ten percent of my class was black, and it was in high school that I had my first encounters with black people. Not in my classes, because I was in the first section and this was lily-white, and as I think back on it now, comprised disproportionately of children from more middle class (i.e. not factory worker) families. Most of the black families in town were poor, although a few men worked in the glass factory and in the pottery. As I got to know my black classmates, it seemed to me that they were as smart as anyone else, but somehow they often had problems with their studies and, in general, the students and the teachers did not think that they were capable of good work. When a black student did excel in school, people would wonder in amazement how this could have happened.

Racism was such a fact of life that it was taken for granted. I never remember saying anything derogatory about any black person just because he or she was black. But in this I was probably exceptional, because guys were always commenting on the "niggers" or "coons" or "jungle bunnies." It was inconceivable that a white girl would date a black boy, and if she did, she would for ever after be dismissed as a slut. "She fucks niggers" was pretty much the same as "She has the plague" or "She has sex with animals." The boy would have to watch his back, because this was a reason for violence. And even if I did not use racial epithets, I still never missed an episode of "Amos and Andy" on television. We were forever talking about this show, much the way people talk about "Seinfeld" today. Except that we would laugh about the outrageously stereotyped behavior of the show's characters, implicitly accepting the idea that this was the way black people really did act. We would imitate the voices of the gullible "Andy," the con man "Kingfish," and the slow-witted janitor, "Lightin'." We would memorize lines, and I can remember some of them still.

The clear implication of all of this was that we considered black people as some sort of exotic species; they were not like us. They existed to make us laugh and to thrill us with their athletic prowess. Black women were thought of as over-sexed. People would say "You're not a man until you've split the black oak" (had sex with a black woman). No one ever challenged this kind of talk; to do so would mark you as a "nigger lover." Yet it was not necessarily bad to have black friends, as long as you understood that you were white. We suffered amazing delusions about the feelings of black persons. One of my good friends worked in his father's combination convenience store and gas station, located at the lower end of town. He was our expert on black life; he knew nearly every black person in town. We'd listen intently as he'd tell us about black folks, about the big fat whore who lived at the "Blue Goose" hotel, about the foolishness of the slow-witted "Dewey," about the strange antics of the sickly brother of the town's best basketball player. He said in a tone of superiority that he could call our black classmates "niggers" because he knew them so well. A few years later, I was drinking in a bar in a rough neighborhood. We had just bought a milkshake glass full of gin for a woman who said that it was her birthday. We were the only white persons in the place, and my companion,

a very fat ex-sailor, started to talk about "niggers." I told him to shut up, that that kind of talk could get us killed. He said, "Don't worry; they know me here."

I disliked all of my ninth-grade classes except one, English. Latin was difficult and boring. Fortunately our teacher was often sick, and the substitute knew nothing about languages, living or dead. Civics was taught by an old woman who really believed that it was important for us to know every detail of the mechanics of every level of government. Maybe she was right, but this material was as dry as dust to me. I've already mentioned the science class. I don't know which was worse, the teacher's brutality or the way he'd say, "Please you people," when we got on his nerves. I didn't mind algebra. It was taught by one of the school's legendary basketball players, and he made it interesting, telling us little tidbits like the Arabic root of the word "algebra." But my favorite class was English, which was taught by our favorite teacher, Mr. Conlon or "Skinny" for short.

Skinny was one of those teachers who seems like "one of the guys" to the students. He'd tell us jokes and let us in on some of the gossip of the school, the things that went on between the teachers and between them and the staff. This was an extraordinary thing in those days when the gap between student and teacher was a lot wider than it was to become later. He had us do unusual assignments, such as spontaneous speeches on a subject he'd name on the spot. We were his "best" students, but he had to teach many of the other sections as well. That year he had to teach the Section 7 class; these students were deemed hopeless by the school, which was why they were put there in the first place. Skinny let it be known that these kids were too dumb to learn, so he had devised alternative education for them. One of his tactics was to conduct arm wrestling contests among the boys in the class, among whom were some of the ninth grade's strongest. We thought that this was great stuff. Why waste your time on those who were impervious to learning, whose skulls were too thick to permeate? Better to prepare them for the hard manual labor that they were no doubt going to do for the rest of their lives.

Since we were his star pupils, Skinny gave us a special task, one which we took to with great enthusiasm. He organized us to perform a minstrel show for the entire class. We may have performed it for the whole school, but I cannot be sure of this. Only boys would actually act out the parts on stage, but the girls would do the rest of the work. I don't know where he got the "script," but minstrel shows were still performed by some civic organizations, so maybe he was a member of the Kiwanis Club or some other do-gooder organization and he got it from there. At any rate, we auditioned, were assigned roles, and began to rehearse. I remember that one of our section's science brains, a nice guy but a bit of a sissy, was chosen to play the straight man or "Interlocuter." The rest of us were given a variety of stock minstrel roles with standard minstrel names like "Rastus." We rehearsed diligently, learning a large number of lines. The main idea was that the Interlocuter would ask each of us questions, and we would answer in our best imitation of what we thought was southern black speech, tripping over the words and twisting them around nonsensically so that we would get a laugh out of the audience. Some of us also did skits, again with the idea of illustrating the natural stupidity and childishness of black folks.

The minstrel show was a great success; not a single teacher or administrator criticized it. We were all proud of our budding acting talents. We had enjoyed putting on black face and dressing in outlandish costumes. Best of all, we had relished being allowed to talk in front of a large audience the way the actors on "Amos and Andy" talked. We were assured that what we had done was good when my friend, the "expert," told us that he had talked to a black girl in our grade, and she had told him that she had not been offended.

I can say now that I do not think that I have ever done something which has shamed me more than the minstrel show. I do not remember that it bothered me then, but it has bothered me a good deal since. The grossness of it, the inhumanity of it, the way in which it degraded not just my black classmates but all black people, the completely casual way in which Skinny assigned it and we did it, all of these things make me sick now. The sad thing is the knowledge that so many of my teachers, people who should have known better, in 1960, than to have allowed this to happen, enjoyed it, committing themselves to the same racism which filled up the tree limbs with dead black bodies.

III. Taking the Pledge

In 1991, nearly 30 years after I had graduated from high school, my twin sons, then 12 years old and seventh graders at a Pittsburgh public school, read an interesting story in their language arts class. A young teacher, admired and respected by her students, refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance to the flag. For this act of conscience she was fired by the local school board. She filed suit, charging a violation of her First Amendment right of free speech. The court ordered her reinstatement, but in the end she decided not to return to her old job. After reading the story, the class discussed it with their teacher. He was of the view that it was wrong for the teacher not to stand because this was disrespectful to the beliefs of others. One of my sons agreed with the teacher in the story, arguing that no one should have to stand. Besides, he said, there was not "liberty and justice for all" in the United States, so the pledge was a lie. My son's comments were met with stern criticism by his teacher who quickly shut off further discussion.

A few days later, my wife and I met with our son's team of teachers. We mentioned the flag salute story to the language arts teacher and expressed our disappointment with his reaction to it. Wouldn't this have been a great opportunity to strengthen the students' understanding of the importance of free speech in a democracy? The teacher, bearded and casually dressed, tried to disarm us. He was a product of the sixties, he said, and did not personally care if the students said the pledge or not. But out of respect for the beliefs of others, the students had to stand. My wife disagreed; standing was the same thing as saying the words. She told him that our son had, in fact, been refusing to stand for the pledge in his home room and that we had sent the required note to the school stating that we did not object to his actions. The teacher said that this would be unacceptable in his home room; had our son been his charge, he would have had to stand in the hall during the pledge. My wife told him that if that had happened, the teacher would have faced a lawsuit, at which point the conversation ended.

For two weeks our son sat quietly at his desk during the pledge. Then we received a phone call from his teacher-team leader who left a message for us to contact her about a problem with our son. We could not reach her that day, and she did not return our calls. We worried about what our son had done. When he came home, he told us that his team leader was angry that he would not stand for the pledge. She had walked by his home room, seen that he was not standing, marched in and confronted him. When he refused to stand, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out of the room. I was so incensed that I ranted for three days, but we let it go because she did not do it again. Then, she called a second time. Could I speak with my son about his refusal to stand? He was setting a bad example for the other students. I asked her if maybe my son wasn't setting a good example by showing his classmates that we live in a free country, where people must respect differences. I told her that one of the reasons that we sent our children to the urban public schools was so that they would get to know children of different racial and cultural backgrounds and respect differences. If the teachers themselves did not respect differences among their students, then weren't we all in a lot of trouble? Finally, I reminded her that my son could not be legally required to stand for the pledge. In a distant voice, she said, Okay, she'd let it drop. I said goodbye, and she said, "Have a nice day."

Our other son, then fifteen, was a sophomore in a city high school. He wouldn't stand for the pledge either, and he too was hassled by his teachers. During his freshman year, his home room teacher insisted that he stand and when he refused, we got a phone call. After some discussion, his teacher said that we would have to write a letter giving our approval for our son's behavior. We refused to do this; our son continued to sit, and nothing happened. Until, that is, a substitute teacher confronted him and publicly berated him for insulting his country. Didn't he realize that the city's taxpayers were paying for his education? He told her that he had a job and paid taxes too. She persisted. Why wouldn't he stand? He just did not want to. Eventually he explained that he had moral reasons for not standing, and she gave up. But during the next year, this substitute became his regular home room teacher, and we went through another round. This time she pulled out all the stops to pressure us to get him to stand. She kept asking if he had a religious reason for not standing, implying that this would be acceptable. We told her that his reasons were moral, but she did not appear able to grasp this. Finally, she aimed her big gun by hinting that other students were harassing him, and there was a chance that he would be physically harmed. We advised her that she had better see to it that this did not happen, perhaps by explaining to the class that no one *had* to stand for the pledge. Our fears were allayed when our son told us that he had never been threatened and what the teacher really feared was that other students would refuse to stand.

We wasted a lot of energy trying to uphold our sons' right to peacefully refuse to salute a flag in a public-school classroom. We were surprised by the persistence of the teachers, and amazed and saddened by the ironies which abound here. Our younger son's antagonist was a black woman teaching in a school which had an overwhelmingly black student body. Their parents were, for the most part, poor, and they lived in neighborhoods ravaged by underemployment, substandard housing, drugs, gangs, and the highest rates of infant mortality in the nation. They faced the same brutal discrimination faced by all

black persons, and their prospects were bleak. Would it been too much to expect her to have seen the hypocrisy of the pledge of allegiance with its propaganda of "liberty and justice for all"? How could any black person believe this, let alone pledge allegiance to it?

All of the teacher-patriots are members of the powerful Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers. Through aggressive organizing and bargaining, punctuated in the early years by long strikes and defiance of court injunctions, this union has won contracts which are the envy of teachers across the state. City teachers are among the highest paid wage earners in the area; salaries in excess of \$60,000 per year are common. An excellent grievance procedure and system of local union stewards have practically eliminated the power of the School Board and the administration to arbitrarily discipline teachers. In other words, the union has secured the civil liberties of its members, their right to act as independent, self-respecting professionals. One would think, therefore, that the teachers would appreciate the importance of civil liberties. Yet this is far from being the case. It is fine for the teachers to stand up to their employers and demand that their rights be respected. Yet let a student demand the same and the teachers become as authoritarian as the steel moguls who once made their parents beg for their supper.

So, what is going on here? Why, in situations which must have been common knowledge in the two schools, did not a single teacher offer my sons support? Why had seemingly liberal and progressive teachers, loyal union members all, made such an issue out of what was essentially a mindless act of obedience to the state?

Several explanations might be offered. When teachers do things which students do not like, the teachers often try to pass the blame along to the administration. It is hard to see, however, how administrators could have punished a teacher whose students exercised their legal right not to salute the flag. If a teacher had been disciplined, the union would surely have filed and won a grievance. A second excuse might be that parents would have caused trouble if they had found out that students refused to say the pledge. Other students besides my sons had refused to stand for the pledge, but after receiving a call from a teacher, their parents ordered them to stand and they did. Teachers might have faced some parental anger, but teachers did not mind angry parents when they struck to benefit themselves. Besides, parents cannot do much to teachers so strongly protected by union contract. And, in any case, is it not the job of teachers to challenge their students to think critically about all issues, to be leaders who develop new ideas rather than just followers of old ones? If teachers never step outside conventional beliefs, they might not face parental antagonisms, but they also will not help their students to develop the imaginations necessary to solve the world's endless list of problems.

Another possible explanation might be that the teachers were, themselves, unaware or unwilling to exercise their duty to promote critical thinking. As a college teacher for the past 29 years, I can attest to the worthlessness of much of what passes for teacher education. Somehow it is imagined that a student who does not major in a subject area will know enough about a subject to teach it to others. The ignorance of education majors in a wide variety of subjects is legendary, yet they all manage to get A's in their education

classes. The person who taught my sons history or economics may never have taken an advanced course in these fields. Public school teachers are unlikely to have had a critical education or to have mastered a subject area, so it is little wonder that they might be incapable of making a critical analysis or instilling in their students the importance of civil liberties

Still, blaming the teachers begs a question: why are teachers so often lacking in critical intelligence? Why are they "trained" in what appears to be such a thoughtless manner? If, as our leaders keep telling us, our young people are inadequately educated, then why do our schools tread along the same tired paths? The time wasted trying to make my sons conform could have been spent teaching them to think for themselves.

To know why teachers expended such extraordinary effort to get my children to salute the flag, we have to ask what it is that schools are all about. In my view, schools are essentially purveyors of misinformation and promoters of behavior consistent with the requirements of the economic system. Most students are going to be workers someday. They will be expected to work hard at jobs requiring limited skills and to obey orders. Political and business leaders argue that the education system is failing because it is not producing people literate enough to do the work which will help the United States to compete with our economic rivals. But this is largely propaganda, which we can see clearly when these same critics also propose a return to the "basics" and renewed emphasis on discipline, the very things which are least likely to produce an educated citizenry. The truth is that the number of jobs requiring extensive technical, scientific, or literary skills is shrinking as a percentage of total employment. Our schools have always produced enough workers to fill these slots, and if they do not today, it is because the good students now want to make as much money as they can with as little effort as possible. Is there a shortage of lawyers or bond brokers or accountants? Would none of these people have been capable of becoming scientists or engineers?

No, what the schools are expected to do is churn out people who will do what they are told and not expect too much in return. What business leaders want is people who will work harder for less money and keep their mouths shut. They do not want liberally educated, critical thinkers, precisely because such people will ask questions and insist on their rights. It is one thing to get a few future lawyers to become scientists instead, but it is quite another to encourage people to develop themselves as fully as possible.

Flag saluting and the nationalism of which it is a vital part are perfect vehicles to produce the docile persons the system needs. They teach that obedience is more important than thinking. Someday students will have to obey their employers. Someday they will have to march off to war. What better way to get them ready than to make them pray to the flag everyday?

When we examine the so-called education crisis with a critical eye, we see that the schools have not failed. They are doing what they have always done, preparing people for a lifetime of thoughtless work and consumption. During the Gulf War, principals gave teachers yellow ribbons to pass out to their classes. The teachers did it. The students wore

them and wrote letters to the troops. Critical thinking, much less opposition, were virtually nonexistent. If actual death and destruction cannot elicit thought, economic warfare won't either.

All of this is not to say that there is no disaster in the public schools. There is, but it has little to do with the inability of our students to read and write. Our education crisis is a reflection of a deepening social malaise. Our society has become more polarized, with a small stratum of wealthy people confronting a mass of wealthless people facing grim futures. The poor, largely minority, students in our urban schools have little to look forward to; there is not and will not be meaningful work for them to do.

Teachers face sullen and unhappy young people, products of severe social dysfunction, and instead of trying to liberate them, they make them salute flags. This is not likely to work, so they will turn the screws tighter. The schools will become more prison-like. After all, more black men of college age are in prison than in college. It is an insidious system and likely to become more so.

IV. The Invisible Hand

Father Armand strode into class, tall and gaunt in his black monk's robe, and filled up the board with what looked like an outline. Some of us began to copy what he was writing, furiously scribbling in our new notebooks. Except for the noise made by his chalk, there was complete silence. We had all heard stories about him. He was brilliant. He was brutally strict. He was heir to a large fortune. We would be lucky to escape his class with a passing grade. When he finished at the board, he turned to face us, lit the first of many cigarettes, and began to tell us what we were in for. My stomach began to sink. Here was a man who could instill terror with a glance. I don't remember what that first lecture was about, except that he said that we would lose points on our exams for spelling mistakes and we had better come to class prepared. Maybe I did not belong here. Maybe I should have enrolled in one of the state teachers' colleges or just gone to work in the glass factory.

In my high school, we were not encouraged to go to the best schools no matter how bright we were. In fact, we were pretty much on our own, college and career-wise. The guidance counselors gave us tests to see what we were good at and then recommended that we get a job or join the army or go to technical school, or, if we were very smart, go to nursing school or one of the state colleges nearby. At least I had the sense to ignore their advise. One of my cousins had gone to a small Catholic liberal arts college, and I decided to apply there. My dad helped me fill out the application, and, not only did I get accepted but I got a scholarship. Which was fortunate because my parents could not have afforded the, by today's standards, fairly modest tuition, room, and board which the school charged. I thought of myself as having done something remarkable, simply by virtue of the fact that I was going to college at all and to one a little out of the ordinary at that. How naive I was not to know that my economic betters were going to schools that I could not have imagined even applying to.

Most of my classmates did not go on to college. Some took factory jobs; some became secretaries; and some went into the armed forces. I had no desire to do any of these things, so I was proud to be going to college, the first in my extended family to do so. I wouldn't be stuck in the glass factory like my father; I'd get a good job and make something of myself. If, that is, I worked hard and took advantage of the opportunities opening up to me. I felt a lot of pressure to succeed. I wanted to please my parents most of all, and I wanted to show the teachers who had not encouraged me (in fact, several of them detested me, because I hated to do all of the stupid things they wanted me to do) that I was a lot smarter than they were. I decided to major in economics. Not because I had any predisposition to do so; I had, in fact, no idea whatsoever what economics was. I had chosen it randomly. My father said that the application form required that I declare a major. I asked him to read down the list of majors. He read "biology," and I said "no." The same for chemistry. Then he got to "economics," and I said, "That sounds good. Put it down."

So, here I was in Father Armand's class, scared to death, wishing I'd gone a little further down the list of majors. But fear is sometimes a wonderful anodyne. I studied economics like a maniac, and I was rewarded with an "A." Better yet, other students began to regard me as someone who was smart. After economics, other subjects seemed easy, and I got "A's" in them as well. And best of all, I did not have to hide my brains. Here there were lots of bright people, and they were often admired. I remember a student in a history class, a "nerd" if ever there was one. The course was called "Renaissance and Reformation" (The one thing I remember from it was that there were monks in the middle ages selling not only wood from the true cross but milk from the Virgin Mary's breast. This was grist for the mill of my budding atheism.), and this student actually conversed with the teacher in Latin. I was bowled over.

Father Armand made his economics majors seem special, a chosen few deemed worthy enough to be instructed by him. So naturally we felt special. The other instructor, Father Callistus, had been a student of Armand's and was, so to speak, cut from the same cloth. He was even harder and stricter; he once threw me out of class on an examination day because I had forgotten to wear a tie. On another occasion he smacked me on the head when he caught me trying to help a classmate who got stuck while giving his class presentation. But he told us that he thought of us as his children, and this was said with such sincerity, that we would have walked through fire for him. Once we snuck him out of the monastery for a night at the race track. He flirted with the waitress at a restaurant and told us we could eat meat even though it was Friday. I was hooked.

The monotony and tyranny of high school had made me rebellious, but college seemed so liberating that there did not appear to be anything to rebel against. I was shocked by the system of hazing to which all freshmen were subjected. We were mercilessly hazed by the upperclassmen (it was an all male school) in a ritual called the "rules." We had to wear beanies and back signs, light cigarettes, carry trays in the cafeteria, and submit to room inspection at 6:00 every morning. The inspections were carried out with ruthlessness; beds were ripped apart and young men humiliated in every possible way. Some of my classmates were what then was characterized as effeminate or "sissies," and

these came in for special and disgustingly brutal scorn. One poor fellow was literally hounded right out of the school. At 7:00 we were allowed to attend mass and get some brief reprieve from the harassment. Some of us refused to do this, and we were then compelled to go outside and run around the statue of the monk who founded the school. All of this was supposed to bond us together as a class, but it only made me miserable. The first "free" day we had, on Sunday, I begged my father to come and take me off campus for the day. He was nice enough to do this, and we went bowling and out for a good meal.

Unfortunately, however, the hazing did not make me want to fight for its abolition. I actually joined the "rules" committee the next year and enjoyed tormenting a new class. Eventually I did join those who were opposed to this barbarity, but most students either supported "rules" or were indifferent to them. Later I would learn that people who are oppressed do not always or even usually rebel. Instead they either succumb to the "rules," even acting sometimes as if they were reasonable, or else looking for opportunities to oppress others. A law professor explained this once to a group of first-year students. Torturers are trained by being tortured, in much the same way that marines are trained to kill by being trained brutally. Lawyers are trained for the sometimes brutal behavior that they will have to inflict upon others by being subjected to the cruelties of their first year in law school. Workers hate their bosses, but many of them aspire to become supervisors.

But this ugly and repressive initiation did not seem to be connected to what went on in the classroom. You could be opposed to one but enjoy the other. In my second year, I told my mother that I would no longer go to church. However, my rejection of religion had little to do with any great intellectual insights. In fact, I still liked my theology classes. Maybe I was reacting to the hypocritical practices of some of the monks. The president of the college was a drunk who also had a "mistress," and he was only a more extreme version of a number of others. I wrote a scathing denunciation of the "sermon on the mount" in one theology class, but this was more to irritate the teacher, a holier than thou "visionary" whom I could not stand. In another class, I said to the teacher, "Now you and I both know that there is nothing in the chalice but wine and nothing in the host but bread, and the sooner the church gets rid of the mumbo-jumbo about these becoming the body and blood of Christ the better." Yet I liked this priest and enjoyed his class. I just thought that religion was stupid. Why waste my time with such an unnecessary thing? Why go to mass when I could sleep late?

It was liberating to reject my faith, especially because it unburdened me of some of the guilt which is the stock and trade of Catholicism. However, the abandonment of religion leaves a void. If the world does not operate according to God's will, how does it work? As I remember it, few of my teachers had much to say about this, presumably because most of them were practicing Catholics. Courses were disconnected entities, enjoyable in themselves but not offering much in the way of insight. I remember the frequent histrionics of my English teachers more than I remember what they taught me. The literature we read was great, but what did it mean? Similarly I loved studying about the past, but how did it connect to the present? What did it have to say about the civil rights movement and Viet Nam?

The teachers who did teach a coherent theory of the world were the economists, and this fact, along with the professors' strong personalities, attracted me to the subject. Economics seemed to have a simple but powerful explanation for the way things were. People were assumed to have unlimited wants for material things, while societies were presumed to have limited means to satisfy these wants. Economics was the science which explained how we went about making the choices necessary to resolve this dilemma.

What was especially attractive about economics was its elegance and its counter-intuitive logic. Human beings were assumed to be motivated solely by self-interest. In the marketplaces of capitalism, selfish buyers and sellers confronted and competed with one another. But, lo and behold, this heartless competition did not tear the society apart as the naive person might think. Instead, as if guided by an "invisible hand," the greed of the buyers and sellers resulted in socially optimal production and distribution. This magnificent outcome could be demonstrated with elegant graphs and proven with mathematics. Unlike the lesser social sciences, economics was a true science, whose mysteries could be grasped only by hard study and sacrifice. Those willing to do the work came to feel superior to those who had not been let in on the secrets of the market. A feeling no doubt similar to that felt by the monks, who were learning the secrets of God himself.

There were exceptions to the smooth functioning of the markets, and these were called "market failures." The markets could not guarantee any sort of equity in the distribution of society's wealth; nor could they guarantee a clean environment or the provision of essential public services such as police protection. However, in these cases, all that was needed was for a benign government to step in and do what the market did not. Not that much government was necessary, unless for some reason the economy went into a serious slump, and then the government could use the ideas of Keynes and manipulate its spending and taxes, running a deficit in its budget if necessary, to get the economy on track again.

The clear implications of economic theory are that it is good to be selfish and that we get what we deserve. It is not only not necessary to be kind and generous, it is socially destructive because such behavior interferes with the "invisible hand." What is more, in our economic system, we are, as Milton Friedman, great guru of the market and hero of my favorite instructor, put it, "free to choose." If I am unemployed, it is because I chose to be unemployed. In economic jargon, the gain to be had from not working (enjoying my leisure) outweighed the benefit to be had from working at the going wage rate. If I wanted a job, all I had to do was accept a lower wage rate, since selfish employers would naturally offer more jobs the lower the pay. Or, I could choose to invest in "human capital" by going to school and making myself productive enough to warrant an employer paying me more money. Finally, if I do not like my job, then I am free to quit. If no one likes a particular job, then employers will have to change it, that is, make it a better job, or pay a premium for its undesirable characteristics. In the end, the employers will supply those jobs which employees most desire.

As I became adept at economics, my teachers began to prepare me for graduate school and a career as a professor. I had already decided that I would become a teacher. I had a real knack for it. I was always so well prepared for exams that I had time to tutor others. I conducted seminars for my friends before history examinations in the dormitory lounges. Once when a student outside of our little group attended and began to make comments, the others shouted him down. I became Father Callistus's assistant, grading his statistics homework assignments. He also let me teach a few classes as did Father Armand. These were nerve-wracking experiences, and I made a dreadful error in a statistics class, but overall I knew that this was what I wanted to do.

Today when I tell my own students that I never worried about getting a job when I was in college, they look at me as if I were crazy. To most of them, the only point of a college education is to become more employable. I tell them that I took whatever courses interested me. The important thing was to "gain ze knowledge," as my Russian French teacher used to say. Luckily we were still in the great post-World War Two economic boom, and I had every reason to believe that a good job would be waiting for me no matter what I studied. I went to graduate school not so much because of the job it would get me, but because I wanted to continue to study.

Graduate school was not a happy experience. I was immersed in economics and I did very well. But most of the other students were too conservative for me. They had already begun to think like economists, whereas I had begun to notice some discrepancies between what we were learning and the world around me. They loved to sit around and discuss the workings of the "invisible hand," but didn't seem to care that their government was making a wasteland out of Southeast Asia and sending my high school friends off to be slaughtered. When one of the professors spent a class period talking about Vietnam (his salary was frozen for years because of his anti-war activism), the grad students had a fit. How dare he waste their time with matters that they would not be required to know for the comprehensive exams we would soon be required to pass? I kept asking my labor economics instructor when we were going to study labor unions. When we finally did and after he had grilled me through three consecutive three-hour seminars, he wondered aloud, "What do the unions want?" Collective action does not accord very well with the economists' belief that what motivates all persons is self-interest.

During my second year, the draft board decided that I belonged in the Army. At first, I just accepted the fact of being drafted and probably sent to Vietnam. But I did appeal my notice, and since the draft board would not draft me in the middle of a semester, I was able to drag out the procedure for quite a while. At some point I decided to fight back and with the help of a draft counselor and an anti-war biology professor, I filed suit against the Selective Service system on behalf of all graduate students. The lawyer worked for free but mine was not a priority case, so I actually had to type my own brief. Eventually the draft board and the attorney reached a compromise. The board reclassified me. They then drafted me again, but through appeals I delayed my induction for a few more months. One of my professors suggested that I should try to get a teaching job. I thought that this would be difficult since I did not have even a Master's degree at this point. However, in July of 1969, two months before I was scheduled to report to Fort Jackson,

South Carolina, another grad student backed out of a job offer at one of the University's branch campuses, in the flood-prone city of Johnstown. The school was desperate to hire someone, and I was desperate for a job. A perfect match! I arrived about one minute before the scheduled time for my interview after getting lost in the Western Pennsylvania mountains. The Dean asked me if I could teach four different classes in the Fall term. I lied and said yes. I got the job, and the draft board reclassified me yet again, and I have always been quite sure, saved my life. Now I could begin to teach my own students about the "invisible hand."

Economics teaches us that we choose our own path in life by the self-interested or "maximizing" decisions that we make. Little notice is taken of the different "facts of life" surrounding each person's choices or of the random events which impinge upon them. I did not want to go to Viet Nam, and I had no say in the government's decision to wage war there. I was in no way responsible for the decision of the University to deny me and other students fighting against the draft access to its battery of high-powered lawyers. The entire connection between the universities and the government affected me, but I had to take this as a given when I made my choices. At one point, I had to supply the draft board with proof that I was a student. I filled out the forms, but one of the deans, a super patriot and army reserve officer, neglected to send the form to the board. By fateful coincidence, a member of the draft board was friendly with my grandfather and remembered me as his newspaper boy. He called my grandfather and told him the form had to be in the board's hands within 24 hours. My grandfather told my parents and they called me. However, they could not reach me because I was sleeping at a friend's house after a night of drinking and pot smoking. In desperation, they phoned the economics department and spoke with the departmental secretary. Remarkably she secured the letter from the dean's office and had it delivered, fifty miles, by cab to the draft board. Suppose that she had not done this, that I had been drafted, that I had been blown to bits in the jungle. Would my parents have been able to console themselves in the knowledge that life was simply a matter of "choices?"

V. Reprise and Analysis

Education is said to be the great equalizer. The system of public education gives everyone the same chance to succeed in school. Schools are considered to be meritocracies that reward intellectual achievement regardless of social class background. It is important to succeed in school because education gives us the knowledge, the cognitive ability, that raises our potential productivity. The more potentially productive we are, the greater will be the demand for our labor. This is because employers, seeking to maximize their profits, will only hire us if we are believed to be able to add more to the employers' revenues than our wages add to the employers' costs. The more productive we are, the greater will be these additional revenues, and the higher our wages will be. The important thing is that no one is denied the right to do well in school. Then, no one will be denied the right to enjoy the good life, to live the "American dream." Those who fail to achieve material success must, according to this reasoning, have made poor choices, must have, in other words, chosen to fail at school when they had every chance to do well.

It is amazing that such arguments can be made with a straight face. Suppose that we first look at some facts about our economic system and then perform a thought experiment. Consider the distributions of wealth and income. In the United States, both distributions are extremely unequal. It is curious that while economics is supposed to be, in part, the study of the distribution of the goods and services produced through work, distribution is seldom discussed by economists. Indeed, in the nearly 40 courses in economics that I took, the inequality in distribution was never mentioned much less deplored. In graduate school, I learned that the "rewards" for productive activity, and owning property was considered a productive activity, varied according to the productivity of the participants in that activity. The implication, seldom directly stated, was that a corporate CEO "earns" more than a factory worker because he is so much more productive. The owners of the machines "earn" a great deal of money because their machines are very productive. But in any event, there is an incredible range between the income and wealth of the poor and those of the wealthy.

Wealth consists of those things, or assets, which have money value. We all have some wealth, but there is a world of difference between the shopping cart of the homeless person and the stock portfolio of a rich man. While the shopping cart is useful, it does not in itself provide its owner any income. The stocks (and bonds and real estate) of the better classes do, however, generate income in the form of dividends, interest, and rent. What is more, the assets may appreciate in value and beget still more income if sold. In addition, such assets can be inherited, so that the children of the well-to-do can become the recipients of the income. These possessions do not wear out as does the shopping cart and nearly all of the other assets of the less fortunate.

All of this would not make much difference were it not for the fact that nearly all of income-generating assets of the nation are owned by a tiny minority of persons. Just to take a couple of examples: the richest one percent of all families in the United States own 49.6% of all stocks, 62.4% of all bonds, 52.9% of all trusts, 61.6% of all unincorporated businesses, and 45.9% of all non-home real estate. The poorest 90% own 12.3% of these assets. This inequality has been growing for some time. Between 1962 and 1992, the top one percent increased its share of all wealth by 3.4 percentage points, while the share going to the bottom 80% fell by 2.4 percentage points. In dollar terms, the average wealth of the top one percent was nearly \$8,000, 000 in 1992, while that of the bottom 40% was a mere \$2,000.

Incomes (comprised of wages, rents, dividends, interest, and capital gains) are not as unevenly divided as is wealth, but the disparity between top and bottom is significant and also growing larger. In 1994 the poorest 20% of all families received 3.5% of all of the income, but the richest 5% took in 25.4% of the total. Between 1979 and 1994, the richest 5% garnered an additional 7.1% of the income pie, while the bottom 80% actually lost share. Incomes are now more unequal in the United States than at any time since the 1920s, and the United States has the distinction of having more inequality than any advanced capitalist economy. It is literally true that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

Imagine that all of the families in the country were standing in a gigantic open space. The oldest member of each family is selected and a line is formed. At the front of the line is the representative of the richest family, next is the person for the next richest family, and so on down the line to the end where stands the representative of the poorest family. Each person in line carries a large placard on which is listed the sources of the family's wealth and income. What would we notice if we carefully observed the line and the placards? The people in front would be overwhelmingly white and male. Most of them would get their income from the ownership of wealth, and many of them would have large amounts of inherited assets. For example, multi-billionaire George Soros recently had a yearly income of over one billion dollars. If we stretch the truth a little and assume that he worked for all of it, this amounts to a wage rate of more than \$500,000 an hour. It would take one of the millions of minimum wage workers in the country almost 100,000 hours (about 50 years) to earn what Mr. Soros "earns" every hour. If he went to work on the first day of the year, he would have his entire Social Security tax paid in about 7_ minutes.

As we moved down the line, more and more of the placards would indicate little or no wealth and most of income earned from work. Toward the back of the line, we would see a lot more people of color, and these would dominate the end of the line. Their signs would tell us that they had no wealth; in fact, most of them would have negative net worth because their debts would be larger than their assets. They would have nothing for their children to inherit. Mr. Soros, on the other hand, gets hundreds of millions of dollars in return on his assets each year, so his "principle" never diminishes; indeed, since he cannot spend all of his income, his wealth grows by default without any actions whatsoever on his part. I remember reading that poor George Bush was given \$1,000,000 by his father after he got out of the Armed Forces at the end of World War Two. He used this gift to make his fortune. By all accounts, Mr. Bush is barely literate, as is clear from a transcript of any of his press conferences. He did go to Yale, but I wonder if this mattered as much for his future success as the money he inherited and did nothing to earn.

We could show the distributions of wealth and income as a triangle, the top illustrating the relatively few people with very high incomes and wealth, and the wider base indicating the meager incomes and wealth of the lower classes. Visualize this triangle being placed on the left-hand side of a piece of paper. Next, consider the distribution of jobs, and think of jobs in terms of their characteristics, such as pay, benefits, working conditions, chances for advancement, availability of grievance procedures for workers, amount of control over the decisions which are important to the workers, etc. At the peak of the distribution would be the best jobs, and at the bottom would be the worst. A careful examination of the nature of the jobs in our economy tells us that, just as with income and wealth, there is a great gap between top and bottom.

At the top of the job distribution are those jobs which not only pay well but allow the workers to combine both the conceptualization of work and its execution, that is, jobs that are truly skilled. There are not many of these. Harry Braverman, in his now classic book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, estimated that such jobs comprised no more than 7% of all

jobs. These jobs would include the highest paid technical, scientific, and professional workers--most of the doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors, engineers, and craft workers. At the risk of oversimplifying, let us use median weekly pay as a proxy for the characteristics of the best jobs, and let us use \$1,000 per week as our cutoff point. In the table, "Median Weekly Earnings of Full-time Wage and Salary Workers By Detailed Occupation and Sex," published in the government journal, *Employment and Earnings*, we find that in 1996 there were 11 such occupations, ranging from personnel and labor relations managers to chemical engineers and airplane pilots. These jobs accounted for about 2.6 million persons (a little less than 3%) out of a total of 90.9 million people in all of the occupations listed. What is more, only **men** in these jobs had weekly earnings over \$1,000 per week. Using \$900 per week as the cutoff income increases the number of occupations from 11 to 23 and the number of workers from 2.6 million to 13.6 million (close to 15%) out of the 90.9 million total. The lower cutoff adds three occupations in which women had the requisite amount of weekly earnings.

Of course, there may be any number of good jobs that pay less than \$900 per week, but we must be careful when we say that lower paying jobs are good ones. On the one hand, clergy earn much less than \$900 per week on average, but ministers and priests no doubt consider their jobs to be good ones and often have their income supplemented by free housing. But on the other hand, wild claims are sometimes made for what I would consider to be pretty mundane jobs. Remember my debate with Robert Reich. He said that many cashiers had good jobs. As I said above, I was flabbergasted by his remarks. In 1996 there were approximately 1.2 million cashiers in the United States, of which about 75% were women. Their average weekly earnings were \$247, which yields a yearly income of \$12,844, considerably less than the official poverty level of income for a family of four. The next time you go to the supermarket, ask the cashier a few questions: do you earn a high income; do you work in pleasant surroundings; is your job relatively stress-free; do you control the pace and nature of your work; why are you wearing splints on your wrists? Cashiering cannot be considered good work, no matter how many quality circles and suggestion boxes the employer has.

At the bottom of the job distribution are the millions of bad jobs which take up the days and nights of so many men and women. Again using pay as a proxy for other job characteristics, let us use the poverty level of income for a family of four as our dividing line between the worst jobs and those that are slightly better. In 1995 the poverty level of income was \$15,569. A full-time, year-round worker (assuming this means 40 hours of work per week for 52 weeks or 2080 hours) would have to earn a wage rate of \$7.49 per hour to achieve this level of income, and as we have seen, in 1995 29.7% of all employment was in jobs which paid a poverty wage or less. For women this was 39.1% and for African-Americans, 36.8%. Both African-American and Hispanic women had poverty employment rates of more than 50%. It is well-known that the poverty level of income is too low to sustain a family in decent health over the long haul. Therefore, economists have defined more generous poverty level incomes. Suppose that we raise the poverty income by 20%, giving an income for a family of four in 1995 of \$19,461. This still would not allow much room for any sort of financial stress in the family. But even

so, fully 44.3% of total employment was in jobs paying a wage rate that would yield an income below this more generous poverty level.

Bad job features usually go together; a job that pays poorly will likely also have limited benefits and unhealthy and stressful working conditions. A few years ago, *The Wall Street Journal* featured an article on several awful jobs in which employment is growing rapidly. The article was titled, "9 to Nowhere: The Grim Side of '90s Job Growth," and described work in chicken processing plants, recycling plants, financial service companies, correctional facilities, and nursing homes. There are millions of workers employed in these jobs; nearly a quarter of a million work in chicken processing plants alone, as many employees as there are in our steel mills. The Dickensian character of the work has to be seen to be believed, but here is a quote from the article:

Department names inside poultry plants convey the grisly tasks involved: "scalding," "evisceration," "de-bone," "drip-line," "offal," "foot room," "giblet room." Feathers, blood, viscera and condemned carcasses are sent to malodorous rendering plants to be ground and cooked into animal feed. "They don't waste anything in a chicken plant--except the cackle."

. . . The work often was so fast-paced that it took on a zany chaos, with arms and boxes and poultry flying in every direction. At break times I would find fat globules and blood speckling my glasses, bits of chicken caught in my collar, water and slime soaking my feet and ankles and nicks covering my wrists. One woman working beside me wrapped her forearms in plastic tape because bits of chicken had gotten into her wounds and caused infection.

The speed and pressure of the line also isn't conducive to food hygiene. Chicken pieces often piled up into hillocks that eased off the conveyor belt and onto the floor. Though there are strict rules about the collection of such chicken, most workers I observed were too exhausted and apathetic to abide by them and simply scooped meat off the floor and back onto the conveyor belt.

As was true of the wealth and income hierarchy, the end of the job chain is much more likely to be inhabited by racial minorities and women. Try the following exercise some time. If you are in a large city, observe who is working in restaurant kitchens, who is doing the pushing and hauling, who are the sales clerks in the stores, who is delivering the pizza, who is watching the rich family's children, who is cleaning the hotel rooms, who is sweeping the floors of office buildings, who is collecting the trash. Then look at the people on the streets wearing suits and talking on cell phones or sitting in the private offices of banks and businesses or trading shares on the stock exchanges. You will notice that the same kinds of people do not do these two types of work. If you are ever out west or in Florida or any rural area during a harvest period, notice who is picking the crops.

Check out the overseers. Guess who lives in the big houses on the hills overlooking the fields?

There are, of course, "intermediate" jobs, those which pay decently but could not be called the best jobs. Miners, steel workers, automobile workers, school teachers, nurses, railroad employees, mechanics, construction workers, and the like comprise a significant share of employment. However, these jobs have a variety of undesirable characteristics. Mining is extremely dangerous and unhealthy; even high wage factory labor is mind-numbing and physically debilitating; nursing and teaching are quite stressful and expose the workers to disease and disability. So I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that there are not very many exceptional jobs in our economy, jobs in which it would be natural to say: "I live to work."

Think of the job structure as a triangle, with the few good jobs at the top, the poorest jobs across the bottom, and the intermediate ones in the middle. Again, if we place all of the job holders in a line, with those having the best jobs at the front, we would notice that the front is dominated by white males and that these men in turn came from families that tended to be at the front of the income/wealth line. As we moved back the line, we would see more women and minorities, people who come from families that are by and large at the same relative points in the income/wealth queue. It would be rare to find a person at the front of one line whose parents were at the end of the other one. Place the jobs triangle at the right-hand side of the paper on which you drew the income/wealth triangle.

It is time now for our thought experiment. In Pittsburgh, the city in which I live, there is an extraordinarily wealthy family, the Hillman's, with a net worth of several billion dollars. One of their homes, along once fashionable Fifth Avenue, is a gorgeous mansion on a magnificent piece of property. About three miles east of this residence is the Homewood section of the city, whose mean streets have been made famous by the writer, John Edgar Wideman. On North Lang Street there is a row of three connected apartments. One of the end apartments has been abandoned to the elements and no doubt the rodents and drug users. This is gang territory, and if you are African American, you do not go there wearing the wrong colors. Poverty, deep and grinding, is rampant on this street and in this neighborhood, which has one of the nation's highest infant mortality rates.

Consider two children, one born in the Hillman house and another born in the North Lang Street apartment. In the former there are two rich and influential parents, and in the latter there is a single mother working nights with three small children. In terms of our triangles, one child is born into a family at the top of both triangles, and the other one into a family at the base of the triangles. Let us ask some basic questions. Which mother will have the best health care, with regular visits to the doctor, medicine if needed, and a healthy diet? Which child is more likely to have a normal birth weight? Which child is more likely to get adequate nutrition and have good health care in early childhood? If the poor child does not have these things, who will return to this child the brain cells lost as a consequence? Which child is more likely to suffer the ill effects of lead poisoning? Which child is more likely to have an older sibling, just 12 years old, be responsible for

him when the mother is working at night? Which will be fed cookies for supper and be entertained by an old television set? If the two children get terribly ill in the middle of the night, which one will be more likely to make it to the emergency room in time? Which child will start school speaking standard English, wearing new clothes, and having someone at home to make sure the homework gets done? Which child will travel, and which will barely make it out of the neighborhood?

As the two children grow up, what sort of people will they meet? Which will be more likely to meet persons who will be useful to them when they are seeking admission to college or looking for a job or trying to find funding for a business venture? Which will be more likely to be hit by a stray bullet fired in a war over drug turf? Which will go to the better school? Which will have access to books, magazines, newspapers, computers in the home? Which one will wear worn-out clothes? Which one will be embarrassed because his clothes smell? Which one will be more likely to have caring teachers who work in well-equipped and safe schools? Which one will be afraid to tell the teacher that he does not have crayons and colored paper at home? Which child will learn the grammar and syntax of the rich? Which child will join a gang? Abuse drugs? Commit a crime? Be harassed by the police because he is black? When these two children face the labor market, which one will be more productive?

On our sheet of paper, we have two triangles, the one on the left representing the hierarchy of wealth and income, and that on the right representing the hierarchy of jobs. Given the transparent advantages which wealth confers on the children of wealthy families, it is apparent to anyone but an acolyte of the "invisible hand" doctrine that in an unmediated market economy, with few exceptions, the two triangles would become congruent. The positions which people had in the left triangle would become the positions they would get in the right one. Therefore, between the triangles, let us draw a straight vertical line, representing the levels of schooling from elementary school on the bottom to graduate and professional schools at the top. In our mythology, education serves as a mediating element between the triangles, transforming the naked inequality in wealth and income into "equality of opportunity." Somehow the instrumentality of education erases the disparities in peoples' economic starting points. Through schooling, we are given the chance to succeed in the labor market on an equal footing with everyone else, according to our merit.

Under the best of circumstances it is difficult to imagine that schools could usher in a meritocracy in the job market. Some movement from riches to best jobs can occur independently of schooling, that is, schooling can hardly be expected to completely overcome the effects of connections, inheritance, and family life. And it may not be possible to overcome all of the scars of poverty. However, there is no doubt that education can and sometimes does make a difference in a person's life prospects. But if schools were really established to generate "equality of opportunity," how would they have to be structured? For starters all schools would have to be pretty much alike in terms of resources. They would have to be free at all levels, or fees would have to be based strictly on ability to pay. It would be hard to justify private schools catering to the children of the already privileged. Schools would have to have student bodies as diverse

as the overall population; there could be no room for segregated schools. Within each school, extra resources would have to be devoted to the least privileged, so that they could begin to overcome the harshness of their environments. Those who administered the schools and taught in them would have to be in the forefront of efforts to deny to the well-heeled the power to use their wealth to perpetuate that power. In other words, "affirmative actions" would have to be the order of the day.

The reality of schooling in the United States is far removed from this ideal. In fact, there is no evidence that schools have ever approached or even tried to achieve it. Put bluntly, the poorer the students the poorer the schools; the greater the parents' wealth, the more and better schooling children receive. In his heartbreaking expose, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, Jonathan Kozol describes the disparities between the schools which serve the poor and those which educate the better classes. In polluted and decaying East St. Louis, here is what malnourished children already poisoned by lead have to face:

"Martin Luther King Junior High School," notes the *Post-Dispatch* in a story published in the early spring of 1989, "was evacuated Friday afternoon after sewage flowed into the kitchen. . . . The kitchen was closed and students were sent home." "On Monday," the paper continues, "East St. Louis Senior High School was awash in sewage for the second time this year." The school had to be shut down because of fumes and backed-up toilets." Sewage flowed into the basement, through the floor, then up into the kitchen and the students' bathrooms. The backup, we read, "occurred in the food preparation areas."

The classrooms are in dangerous disrepair, there is an absolute lack of every type of equipment, and textbooks are hopelessly outdated and in short supply. Such conditions characterize the schools of the poor and even the not so poor across the country. How long must it take for kids to realize that the awful shape of their schools reflects how little society thinks of them? How long before they get a clear picture of the odds against them and like a smart gambler refuse to participate?

In schools which serve a more economically diverse student body, the children of working people still receive inferior treatment, ranging from the tracking used in my school to more subtle biases. Students come into the schools with various amounts and kinds of what sociologists call "cultural capital," defined as "the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next." Students from wealthier families acquire the types of capital, including manners of speech, which the schools reward. I remember vividly my senior year English teacher condemning my use of vernacular speech in a paper I had written. What she was saying was that people who want to succeed do not use such speech. The schools systematically debase the knowledge, the habits, the speech, even the dress of the less privileged. This helps to "cool out" their expectations and make them amenable to filling the job slots reserved for them to begin with.

By comparison, the schools are made for the children of the upper and upper middle classes. I have a friend who grew up in a very rich town along the Atlantic coast south of

Boston. He attended a public school, too, but his was not at all like mine. He told me that most of his classmates went to Ivy League schools or small elite liberal arts college. He, himself, went to Brown. It did not seem to matter much what they majored in; the labor market had a place for them near the top. Like the young woman I met once at Hamilton College, a very posh college in upstate New York. She was serving drinks to people attending a conference at the college (honoring the centennial of the birth of the fascist poet, Ezra Pound, a graduate of Hamilton). She said that she was majoring in English, and, given that poorer kids would think this a most impractical major, I asked her what she was going to do after graduation. Without missing a beat, she said that she was going to go into investment banking! What I wouldn't have given for that kind of confidence.

Given the reality of schooling, it is no wonder that so much effort is devoted to education propaganda, to the notion that schools are engines of equality. We must be beaten to death with this idea so that we come to accept the inequality inherent in our economic system, so that the hierarchy of jobs seems to be the natural outcome of competition among people who had equal opportunities. When a few people from the bottom of the wealth/income triangle do make it to the top of the job triangle, this is seen as a proof that the system works as advertised. That these few have been brainwashed to act accordingly usually escapes attention. Thus I was trained to teach others about the "invisible hand," to extol the virtues of the magic of the marketplace. In this way, the school system reinforces stereotypes of the poor (and reinforces racism as well) and paves the way for the perennial popularity of genetic explanations for the inferior performance of those at the bottom of the wealth triangle in school and in the job market.

One final point must be made here. Suppose that the schools were structured in a thoroughly egalitarian manner, and that everyone capable of doing so (which would be just about everyone) attained a large dose of high-quality schooling. Tens of millions of talented people would come onto the labor market at any given time. What reason is there to believe that the job structure would change to match the aspirations of the job seekers for well-paid and meaningful work? The nature of the jobs is determined by the needs of the profit-seeking owners of capital and not by the desires of the workers. Current and prospective college teachers want their jobs to satisfy their need for creative labor, but this is, as we shall demonstrate in the next chapter, doing nothing to stop the degradation of this last bastion of craftsmanship.

VI. Postscript

The first essay in this chapter is dedicated to Vincent Robertson. He was a classmate of mine, born at the "lower end" of town to an alcoholic mother and a father he never knew. Bright, sensitive, a good athlete, a talented musician, Vincent was not able to overcome his multiple life handicaps. A local priest helped raise money to send him to college, but upon arrival at the school (the same one I was attending), he immediately squandered most of the cash on fine clothes, cigarettes, and liquor. Later he moved to Pittsburgh and was always trying to get me involved in one scheme or another. By then he was drinking heavily and using a variety of drugs. But he was still remarkably smart and articulate. He could wax poetic about philosophy or religion or modern jazz. After I left graduate

school, I lost track of him, partly on purpose. He would call my mother and ask about me, but I never returned the calls. Not long after, he was found dead, apparently murdered in a drug deal gone sour. He had made his choices and the "invisible hand" had taken care of the rest.