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# Class, Race, and Higher Education in America<sup>1</sup>

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## Social Class and Higher Education

Mass higher education in the United States, with universal access in many places, has many functions that it shares with similar institutions around the world. However, it has one function which is perhaps unique to us: it is the central instrument for the legitimation of a society around the principle of broad (and in principle, equal), opportunities open to all individuals, opportunities to improve themselves and to make their careers and lives through their own efforts and talents. Our 3,500 accredited colleges and universities, offering course work at every level of standard and difficulty to an enormously diverse student body, serve a wide variety of functions for the students and for the society at large. While most of them offer some liberal and general studies, they serve as the chief avenue of entry to middle class occupations--even to quite modest lower-middle class occupations, which in most countries would not require or reward exposure to post-secondary education. These institutions, without the kinds of educational ceilings common in European non-university forms of post-secondary schooling, encourage students to raise their aspirations through further study, full or part-time, and provide the possibility of transfer to advanced studies elsewhere if they do not have such provisions themselves. They thus reflect and reinforce the radical individualism of American values, a set of values deeply opposed to socialist principles which center on cooperative efforts at group advancement, and on the common effort to create a society whose members all profit (more or less equally) from the common effort. American higher education, as a system, both serves and celebrates the American Dream of individual careers open to talents, a dream given much of its institutional reality in the contemporary world precisely by America's system of mass higher education offering a clear alternative to socialist principles of class identification and horizontal loyalty. The contrast between these competitive visions is captured in the stirring appeal of Eugene Debs, the last socialist leader in the United States with any significant following (he gained nearly a million votes

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<sup>1</sup> Published in Gary Marks and Larry Diamond, eds., *Reexamining Democracy*, London, Sage Publications, 1992, pp. 275-293.

for President on the Socialist ticket in 1920), when he called on his followers, most of them in the working class, to "Rise with your class, not out of it."

Mass higher education in the United States (and to some extent elsewhere as well)<sup>2</sup> is deeply opposed to this vision of society, to which it offers the alternative exhortation "Rise out of your class, not with it." That unexpressed call (unexpressed precisely because it is understood beyond need for explication by all Americans) touches a fundamental chord in American society, and not least among its workers and immigrants. It is a long-standing cliché of American life that parents say with fervor of their children: "I want them to have a better life than I have had," a better life seen as achievable not through collective or political action, but through more and better education, and in recent decades, through college education. George Ticknor, then a professor at Harvard, expressed an American truism in 1825 when he observed: "There is, at this moment, hardly a father in our country, who does not count among his chief anxieties, and most earnest hopes, the desire to give his children a better education than he has been able to obtain for himself." (Rudolph, p. 216.) In the same year, the president of the University of Nashville, then near the frontier, declared that "...every individual, who wishes to rise above the level of a mere labourer at task-work, ought to endeavor to obtain a liberal education." (Rudolph, p. 214). Already 160 years ago, "every individual," not just gentlemen, as in most of Europe, was being exhorted to rise out of the ranks of the "mere day labourer" through education. And while higher education in the U.S. would not be providing the means of social mobility for large numbers for a century or more, and not for the whole society until after World War II, the sense of the possibilities for achievement through education are there very early indeed. And these are the expressions not of radical leaders, but of members of the solid professional middle class who believe that they are voicing perfectly ordinary middle-class sentiments, not those of political radicalism.

The idea of higher education as an instrument of mobility for poor young men "making their way" was present in America throughout the eighteenth century. But it required the enormous growth in the numbers of colleges after 1800, the fierce competition among them, and the effect this competition had on the costs of college attendance, to bring large numbers of penurious students to college.

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2 In Western European countries, fewer youth of modest social origins have taken advantage of the call to mobility inherent in mass higher education, in part because of tight restraints on access to higher education, restraints chiefly through a class-linked stratification of the secondary school system, and of related requirements and standards for entry to higher education. But institutions of higher education everywhere serve to weaken working class ties and affiliations.

Allmendinger, an historian of this period, notes that

"poor young men, sometimes described as "needy" or "indigent" or even "paupers" gathered in large numbers in the colleges of New England during the years between 1800 and 1860. They came down from the hill towns, where opportunities were few, to the small colleges at Hanover or Williamstown or Brunswick. Even before New York State and Ohio drew many of their kind to the West, they began to infiltrate--almost imperceptibly at first--the student population. They did not want new farm lands, nor would they try to find places at home as hired workers in an agricultural proletariat; they joined, instead, a rural intelligentsia of students and teachers aspiring to the middle class professions." (p.8)<sup>3</sup>

The proliferation of colleges in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century resulted chiefly from the weakening of political constraints on their establishment. In the Colonies, as in most countries to this day, governments (in America the Colonial governments) controlled the establishment of colleges and universities through their control over the awarding of charters to institutions that allow them to award degrees. Governments almost everywhere have had political and religious reason for limiting the numbers of institutions of higher education; moreover, new universities have been subsidized by the state or been given guarantees of their continued survival. The Revolution in America greatly weakened central state power, over higher education as over almost everything else. The Constitution took education (including higher education) completely out of the authority of the federal government; it took both federal and state governments out of the direct administration of the new independent colleges springing up everywhere after the Revolution, and it also removed any firm commitment by government of public funds for their support. The hundreds of new colleges that sprang up between the Revolution and the Civil War, many sponsored by the competitive Protestant denominations, had few academic or social pretensions, and in their need they were open and available to poor students. It did not take the democratic revolutions of the post-World War II era to create the

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<sup>3</sup> Allmendinger did his research on poor students in the emerging colleges of New England, but I believe that the patterns he describes were also to be found in the much larger number of small, modest, largely denominational colleges springing up along the Western frontier. Indeed, then as now "one clear sign of the presence of the poor was the increasing maturity of the student population...Men in their middle twenties now enrolled in large numbers, along with boys in their early teens...Many had started trades, and then having changed their minds, had continued in their work to get money for education. This brought about a mixing of the social classes, as well as ages..." (p. 9). It was crucial that these new, mostly "private" colleges were cheap, not too far away, provided charity (i.e., student aid), and were not too particular about their students' academic preparation. The students' education was also substantially subsidized--indeed, made possible--by the tiny salaries paid to the teaching staff who themselves did not have the dignity of the guilds of learned men in the old countries.

possibility of a college education for poor youth; America had its democratic revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century, and especially the freeing of higher education from the control of the state, created the potential for the expansion of access, for mass higher education in the United States, but that potential was only fulfilled after the Second World War. (Rothblatt and Trow, 1992 ; Trow, 1991).

This spirit of individual aspiration, opportunity and achievement, present throughout our history but taking special force during and after the Revolution, is at marked variance with socialist principles of collective aspiration, opportunity and achievement. It is at odds also with the instruments of that collective spirit, notably trade unions and the European socialist (or social democratic) parties of the past century, along with the cultural institutions which were created in many European nations around those institutions. Those institutions -- schools, newspapers, sports clubs, cooperative, and others -- together contributed not just a political/economic movement, but an alternative sub-culture, the achievement of socialism in everyday life even before the triumph of socialism nationally.<sup>4</sup> But this sub-culture tied the individual worker firmly to his class; it did not encourage mobility out of it. And even the adult education it provided was aimed at raising the moral and cultural level of workers, not at providing them an avenue of mobility into the middle class: they characteristically offered "humanistic" studies designed to raise the cultural level of the working class members of the sub-culture, not vocational courses designed to equip its members for mobility up and out of their class. For example, the studies provided the British working man in his leisure hours by the Mechanics' Institutes, and later by the Worker's Education Association, pivoted around literature and "pure" science, not professional engineering.<sup>5</sup>

Mass higher education is the enemy of a class-oriented society, and of class-oriented institutions such as trade unions. In the United States it has always been so, but dramatically so since enrollments have broadened and grown to include large numbers who would formerly have joined the labor force directly from high

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<sup>4</sup> On the concept of an "occupational community" in the American context facilitating the development of class-based institutions, see Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1956).

<sup>5</sup> Writing in the 1920s, Lillian Herstein observed that "the differentiation between adult and workers' education . . . has been stated and can be accepted. The responsibility of providing schooling for those who are seeking a way out of industry by means of education can be placed on the public schools. Workers' education should concern itself, let us grant, with those who are willing to be the apostles of a new order. "Labor education," says Mr. Horace Kallen . . . "should become conversant with control rather than escape." "From "Realities in Workers' Education," in J.B.S. Hardman, (1928), pp. 378-379.

school. The turning point was World War II, when the wartime effort created a quasi-socialist society for a few years without affecting the underlying individualistic ethos of the society (with the partial exception of its academic and intellectual elites). At the end of WW II, American trade unions enrolled nearly 40 percent of the non-agricultural labor force, the highest level it ever achieved. It reached this level largely on the strength of war-time governmental requirements that firms having contracts with the government allow trade union organization of their labor force, a policy which in part reflected the close connections between organized labor and the Northern wing of the Democratic Party, and in part because of the usefulness of the unions in organizing a war-time labor force and supporting the war. When the war-time rules were rescinded, along with the direct role of the government in the economy, and a little later the decline of the industries in which unions were heavily represented (e.g., steel and mining), the proportion of the labor force in unions declined precipitously. During the 45 years since WW II, while enrollments in higher education have grown from 1.5 million to over 14 million, and the proportion of the age grade enrolled in colleges and universities increased from 15% to about 50%, the proportion of the non-farm labor force in trade unions fell from roughly 40% just after World War II to about 19% in 1988, and in the private sector to 14%.<sup>6</sup> (The figures for California show the same pattern: the proportion of union members as a percent of non-farm wage and salary workers in 1951 was 41%; in 1987, it was 19%).<sup>7</sup>

I am not suggesting a simple direct causal relationship between these figures -- e.g., that all those who didn't join the unions were going to college instead. Both sets of figures point to and reflect even more fundamental changes in the economy and society, changes which also occurred in other societies, but which in the U.S. took on characteristically individualistic forms. As traditional heavy industry and the big manual occupations such as mining and cargo handling, which everywhere have been the heart of the trade union movement, declined, other occupations grew which required (or came to be seen as requiring) a post-secondary education. In the U.S. this meant a massive growth of enrollment in the same institutions which had educated the older social and professional elite groups, and in the reinforcement of the individualistic ethos of opportunity and social mobility. All horizontal bondings which might inhibit or discourage individual mobility were

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<sup>6</sup> See Bureau of the Census, Table 689, p. 419. Calculated from data in the Handbook of Labor Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bulletin 2340, August 1989, Table 68, p. 290 and Historical Statistics of the U.S.: Colonial Times to 1970, Series D927-939, pp. 176-177. The proportion of union members as a percentage of non-farm wage and salary workers in 1951 was 41%; in 1987 it was 19% (Fay and Fay, eds., 1990, p. 235).

<sup>7</sup> California Dept. of Finance, in Fay and Fay, eds. (1990), p. 235.

avoided or weakened -- not only trade union membership, but also church membership, and neighborhood and friendship ties. At the very least, they were modified and made instruments of this individual mobility, as, for example, family ties. The family, for most people (outside of a small social elite which could pass on substantial wealth across generations), became not the source of an individual's inherited social status, but a launching pad for an individual career, with the advantages of money and higher social status translated into opportunities for more and better formal education, and thus of better life chances for individual achievement and mobility. Indeed, the very idea of a "career," the planned sequence of upward steps in a chosen occupation, as against a series of jobs gained and changed in the course of working life, is in the United States now largely a function of some experience of higher education; it is hard to have a career without having been to college. And a "career" is inherently the property of the individual, and not that of an organization or class.

Institutions have survived in America by adapting to the conditions of a society marked by easy social and geographical mobility. Already in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as George Homans shows, New England farmers (not peasants) were alert to the main chance; only one farm in five was passed on from father to son, and thus only one farm in 25 stayed in the same family over three generations. New England farmers' sons left for better land in the West or for better opportunities in other callings, as Americans have always done. Those who remained farmers showed little attachment to the land, but rather to the idea of individual betterment: a betterment that in many cases also included attendance at a state land-grant university, with its school of agriculture, and use of the university's agricultural research and demonstration units.

After World War II, the trade union movement survived least well because it could not adapt to social mobility; unions are intrinsically instruments of horizontal bonding, and are the enemy of individual achievement and mobility except for the tiny number who could make the unions a career. (Many of its leaders were and are college educated, and came to the unions out of ideological commitment rather than as a reflection of common class membership). The absence in America of a solidly based socialist party and its related institutions narrowed further the possible reconciliation of class-linked organizations with some possibilities for individual mobility and achievement within the labor movement, as, for example, has been possible in Sweden and the U.K., until recently.

The radically individualistic spirit of America is also opposed to a more conservative concept of social organizations which envisions society as organized around status groups and strata or corporate guilds, the careers (or, echoing Weber,

the life fates) of whose members are closely tied to those larger social entities. That spirit is embedded in most Western European societies, whether governed by social democratic or more conservative parties. And while market forces (the economic reflections of an individualistic ethos) has been gaining ascendancy everywhere over more corporatist modes of economic organization, it is still resisted by most European systems of higher education, or is adapted within close constraints on access. Such constraints, tying access to universities to highly selective upper secondary schools, minimize the power of the consumer and thus limit (or at least postpone) the emergence of a system of higher education at the service of the society rather than of the state, or of specific elite strata which will serve the state.

American society, throughout its history has, for many reasons, provided an unfriendly environment for socialist ideas and institutions. The absence of a feudal past, our early extension of the vote to all white men, the frontier, our relative affluence, our ethnic heterogeneity, religious roots and social mobility have all been cited as explanations of why the U.S. has been and continues to be the only industrialized society in the world without a significant socialist movement or party.<sup>8</sup> Mass higher education has been an important element in this "unfriendly environment," especially over the past half century. And it works in a variety of ways. For example, mass higher education, especially since the great expansion following World War II, has drained off from the working and lower middle classes many of their brightest and ablest young men and women -- not only the most intelligent, but also those with the most energy and initiative -- making for a kind of brain drain out of the working class, and weakening its organizations.

Ironically, the strong cultural emphasis on social mobility, on "getting ahead" in life, may have accounted equally for the leaders who governed and ran the unions, the businessmen they bargained with, and the mob bosses with whom they all too often were allied. Strong aspirations for personal achievement, for getting ahead, drive Americans of all kinds to seek avenues of mobility of all kinds, both legitimate and illegitimate. The chief legitimate avenues have been through speculation in land, entrepreneurship, and education. The latter two have historically been alternative routes up, for different groups in different generations. The chief illegitimate channel of mobility, of course, is crime, both blue and white collar, of which we have a fair amount. And white collar crime increasingly requires an M.B.A., or at least the opportunities and access gained through higher education, both its skills and its connections. These channels have all been in competition with one another throughout American history, a competition that has

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<sup>8</sup> The literature on the problem is very large. See, for example, John H.M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds (1974).



provided the story for much of our literature, and even more of our movies. Since WW II, they have become complementary. One can still start a small grocery store in an ethnic neighborhood without a college degree, but you need a college education to be a consultant about anything, or to provide the sophisticated services of modern urban life.

But all of this--the multiple channels of mobility open to ordinary people, and the ambitions behind them--are strongly corrosive of all institutions which depend on horizontal solidarity and collective improvement, not least the labor unions.<sup>9</sup> The brain drain through education out of the unions of their best and brightest young members is part, but only part, of that corrosion; it is one of the mechanisms of that corrosion.

We can see this also when we look at the last great period of union growth in the U.S.--the creation of the big industrial unions--the steel workers, the automobile workers, the electrical workers, and then the CIO--during the Great Depression of the 1930's. This period preceded the great expansion of American higher education; while our system in the 30's was large by European standards, it was still exceptional then for poor or working class youth to go to a college or university.<sup>10</sup> For the ordinary industrial worker, something closer to the classic conditions of class struggle between labor and capital seemed to prevail. The new industrial unions, -- led to some considerable extent by socialists such as Walter Reuther and his brother in the Auto Workers -- had broader dreams and hopes for what a labor movement could do to reshape the politics, the economics, and indeed the basic character of American society. Such unions could evoke the deep loyalties of their members, and could also be a real alternative to "getting ahead" as the guiding principle of life. It was perhaps not a fair test for the unions, since during most of that decade there was not much chance for anybody to get ahead in the U.S. Still, perhaps for the first and last time in the United States, large numbers of people could envision building a working-class movement, one with real weight and influence on one of the two major political parties. The Roosevelt Democratic coalition provided an opening, with the more radical or visionary union leaders seeing perhaps a labor party of their own in the future.

Indeed, there seemed to be some historical warrant for such hopes; had not the democratic socialist and labor parties of Western Europe emerged out of just such coalitions with liberal bourgeois parties thirty to fifty years earlier? Could the U.S. replicate that history? Some, in any event, believed so.

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<sup>9</sup> This applies also to research universities, which try (with only partial success) to harness the individual ambitions of scholars and scientists to the welfare of the institution.

Yet another element contributed to the building of working class institutions during those Depression years, and that is the production, really for the first time, of a sizeable group of unemployed college and university graduate many of whom had themselves come from working or lower middle class backgrounds. Many had grown up in homes with socialist ties or sympathies, "red diaper babies," as they were called, and had early taken advantage of relatively open access to higher education, particularly to free urban public universities such as New York's City College, and Temple University in Philadelphia. Moreover, many of these young men were themselves socialists -- both of the democratic and communist varieties. For these young men, job prospects in the thirties were poor. Some, trained as economists or sociologists, could find work in the expanding welfare agencies of the New Deal, and could believe themselves contributing in that way to a nascent socialism in America. Others threw in their lot with the new unions, sometimes serving an apprenticeship on the shop floor and then getting elected to union office. Some went directly into union management by appointment to a staff position, as aides and advisors to the new, more politically minded, socialist minded leaders. Sometimes the young men who went from college into the unions were members of the Communist Party; and occasionally they were members of the Socialist Party of America. But for a short while, union leadership offered the prospect of a real ideologically-oriented career for a small number of college educated youth.<sup>11</sup>

But the dream of a politically relevant mass labor movement, one which would evolve into an independent Labor Party embodying socialist principles, died with World War II.<sup>12</sup> It more obviously collapsed with the election of Truman in 1948, because that kept the labor movement inside the Democratic Party. The pent-up war-time demand fueled an immediate boom; moreover, the government

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<sup>11</sup> At the end of W.W. II, when C. Wright Mills did the study reported in his New Men of Power, (1948), his sample of American labor leaders was distinctly better educated than the American adult population. Already a quarter of AFL and a third of the CIO leaders had been to college, as compared with only 10% of adult Americans.

<sup>12</sup> I remember going to a meeting of a democratic socialist group in 1946. It was addressed by a young Irving Howe, later to become the distinguished literary critic, professor, and editor of a small socialist journal. He gave a gloomy speech, anticipating a major economic collapse in America, an event which, in his view, would give socialists an opportunity to create a mass party. (It was perhaps always a handicap for socialists in America that they had to seem to hope for, and not just predict, depression and misery, before they came to the cheerier part). I was a bit skeptical of the imminence of a depression in America, and afterwards asked the speaker how the socialist movement would respond if there were no depression. His answer, with its hard realism, surprised and impressed me. "If capitalism can buy the workers off with low unemployment and good wages," he said, "it deserves to win." Howe was betting his life that it couldn't meet those tests. It could, and it did.

economists had learned something from the New Deal and the war about how central government interventions could avoid deep depressions as well as shorten and mitigate recessions. The growing economy, together with the GI Bill, encouraged and supported literally millions of veterans to go back to college, and the subtle permeation of democratic sentiments and higher aspirations throughout the society created a burst of demand for access to post-secondary education. The educational system thus grew to meet the demand. There were similar tendencies in all western European countries; the difference is that in the U.S., demand for education at every level drives supply; at the level of higher education, it is not constrained by either resources or academic standards. In 1950, a comprehensive secondary system was already bringing fifty percent of the young to high school graduation; that figure by 1990 was about 75%. During those post-war decades, the U.S. built and opened hundreds and hundreds of colleges of every kind, in some years nearly one every day, under the implicit, sometimes explicit doctrine that "Something is better than nothing; let the future worry about standards. Right now, let us provide as good an education as possible for as many as possible."

And so between 1940 and 1970, nationwide enrollments rose from about 1.5 million to about 8.5 million. By 1991, enrollment in all American colleges and universities was about 14 million. Roughly two-thirds of high school graduates get some exposure to post-secondary education in the seven years directly after high school graduation, meaning roughly half of the age cohort. And some 44% of the whole labor force, including of course older people, have now had some exposure to post-secondary education.

The enormous expansion of the post-war years changed the perceptions of higher education among broad strata who had never before seen it as a realistic possibility for people like themselves. Higher education thus became for many the vehicle for social mobility that high school graduation had been for the half century between 1890 and 1940. Those fifty years had seen the growth of a broad system of state-supported secondary education all over the country. While higher education had actually served as a vehicle of mobility for many before 1945, especially for youth from farms preparing themselves for teaching, and for such educationally precocious ethnic groups as Jews and Armenians, it had not been seen as available for career making and mobility by broad segments of the population, as it came to be seen after WW II.

The significance of WW II as a watershed of values and attitudes ushering in the mass higher education that followed is suggested by the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. John Steinbeck's powerful novel, which was published in 1939, is about the mid 30's in America, the Great Depression, and the migration of thousands of

impoverished farmers from Oklahoma and Arkansas (the "Okies" of American history) to California. This great internal migration can best be compared to the post WW II mass immigrations to California from other countries: Mexicans, Chinese from Hong Kong and Singapore, Vietnamese, Koreans and Phillipinos. Like the Okies, these more recent immigrants from around the Pacific Rim are predominantly poor people, and they in turn resemble the earlier European migrations of the decades from 1860-1925. But the extent to which (and the ways in which) these different groups have used education in their strategies of acculturation have differed. *The Grapes of Wrath*, like so much of Depression-era literature, is a story infused with socialist values, marked by anger at the exploitation of workers by employers, and the condemnation of injustice and inequality. It is a story of the class struggle, even if in the non-ideological form in which that struggle was experienced and expressed by the migratory workers created by the Depression and fleeing to California from the Dust Bowl.

At the end of that novel, Casey, the itinerant preacher turned union organizer, is clubbed to death by some goons, thugs hired by the big farm company (or agro-business), to break a strike of migratory workers. In the melee, Tom Joad is injured, but in turn kills the company thug, thus becoming a fugitive. He hides out in a field for a few days near his family, whose members are picking cotton for starvation wages. Ma Joad comes out to him to give him some food, and to tell him he must go away to avoid arrest. He agrees, and in a final stirring speech tells her that he is going to take up Casey's work, become a union organizer allied with poor people like himself against the rich and the exploitative. Ma asks where she will be able to find him, and his answer to her moves us over half a century later.

"Well, maybe like Casey says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but only a piece of a big one ... And then it don't matter -- then I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be everywhere -- wherever you look. Wherever you look. Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. . .I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad . . .And when our folks eat the stuff they raise, an' live in the houses they build -- why, I'll be there."

Tom goes out to fight for his people, the ordinary poor people pushed around by big corporations and their cops and thugs--a man committing his life to the struggle to rise with his class, not out of it. "Like Casey says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one."

What Tom Joad does not say to his Ma, in that hole in the ground where he's hiding near the box cars in which she and the rest of his family are living and starving along with the other cotton-pickers in pre-war California--is:

"Ma, I've got to go and make it on my own. This is my chance to find out who I am, and what I'm made of. So, Ma, I'm going to Fresno State College down the road. If they don't take me in I'll go to one of these community colleges springin' up all over the place, and I'll work my way through school, and get my bachelor's degree, and then get my state license, and mebbe an MBA, and buy and sell real estate. Maybe I'll start up my own little consulting firm, and make a pile of money, and build a big house for you and Pa and Rose a'Sharon and the kids, with four bathrooms and a swimming pool."

Tom doesn't say that, but he might have done so, in a different novel, out of a different but equally authentic American tradition. What Tom didn't say is essentially what migrants both to and within America have said since our beginning, and certainly what most of Tom's successors have said in the great migrations to California since WW II. These new immigrants, and the children and grand-children of the Okies too -- the descendents of the Joads and their friends from Oklahoma -- have flooded into California's colleges and universities, which have expanded enormously in number and size to meet that demand. Since WW II,

very little has been heard in California of "rising with your class," and a great deal about the need to create more truly equal opportunities for individual advancement for all, rich and poor, black, brown and white, through education--and especially through higher education.

There is in American history and popular culture a heroic saga to compete with the socialist saga, the heroic story of the self-made man rising through his own talents and industry. The saga is also often about the loneliness of that climb, and the pain that accompanies the breaking of strong ties to family, class, ethnic group, and even of friendship -- a different kind of sacrifice in a different kind of struggle. We hear it first in the stories of the frontiersman, and in the saga of Swedish emigration to America in Moberg's great epic. It is a sacrifice not for social ties, ties of class and ethnicity, but of ties; and that can be an equally wrenching sacrifice. We see and hear it endlessly, in the films and stories of men and women rising out of the urban slums and neighborhoods of the big Eastern melting pot cities, and it often has a bitter and sardonic twist of failed ambition and thwarted aspiration. But after WW II, that saga usually includes attendance at college or university, as that becomes the alternative to failure or crime.

Today, we are not hearing many heroic sagas about young men and women struggling out of the barrios (the Mexican-American slums of Los Angeles) up to UCLA and law school, and onto a partnership in a big law firm or elected office. We are not hearing many black sagas of the rise out of the "projects"--the public housing units which have become black slums, up to UC Berkeley and beyond. These sagas are waiting to be told; it may be that we haven't heard many yet because they don't seem heroic to those who experience them. Or maybe the tellers are too busy just now making it up the ladder to write about it.

## **Race, Ethnicity, and Higher Education**

A culture is defined, in part, by what it feels guilty about. Western European nations, on the whole, feel guilty about their working classes, about the sacrifices they made during the rapid industrialization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, about their substantial exclusion from opportunities to get good health care, recreation and leisure, good education, economic security and security in old age, and to share in the high culture of their society. Much of public policy in European countries over the past hundred years, and more rapidly over the past 50 years, has been aimed at ameliorating and reducing those disadvantages linked to class.

Americans, in contrast, are remarkably free of guilt toward working class people, individually or collectively. There is, of course, an enormous body of legislation on the books which aims at helping people who are, as we used to put it, "down on their luck," or as we would say now say, "disadvantaged." Some of it is federal law, much is state law.

The United States has more social legislation on the books than Europeans give us credit for, and less, probably, than we need. But it has not been put there, for the most part, out of a sense of class guilt. If we have any national policy regarding social or economic class, it is an educational policy designed not to strengthen the working class, or ameliorate its conditions, but to abolish it. The American dream, I believe, is that eventually everyone will be either self-employed, or a salaried professional, and higher education is the instrument for the achievement of both.

If Americans do not feel especially guilty about the "working class" --even if they accept that there is such a thing--we as a nation still feel intensely guilty about our history of race relations, and especially about our history of black slavery, and the elaborate social and legal machinery (much of it at the state level) for the subordination of blacks from the end of Reconstruction after the Civil War, all the way to the burst of Supreme Court decisions and legislation that marked the racial revolution of the 1950's and 1960's. There is, of course, still plenty of racist sentiment in the society, though the polls show less all the time. But at the level of public policy, policies which are put in place by legislatures who are elected for the most part by white voters, the commitment to what only can be called a pro-minority policy is strong and persistent. The general term for pro-minority policies, policies aimed at benefiting particular racial or ethnic groups, is "affirmative action." Affirmative action is pervasive throughout American society - - in the hiring policies of private business, in public housing, in federal employment and its policies for contracting in the private sector for goods and services; in the military -- throughout the society we see the influence of affirmative action programs. Nowhere can the presence of affirmative action be seen more clearly than in the policies of higher education. It is apparent not only in the public institutions, in response to legislative or government pressure, but also in private institutions, in response chiefly to the powerful dictates of a collective conscience -- a force which also operates in publicly supported institutions, where its effects are mixed up with those of expediency and institutional responsiveness to external pressures from government and interest groups.

"Affirmative action" as a concept and a set of institutional policies is the subject of intense debate and controversy, chiefly centering on whether

governmental intervention in favor of racial or ethnic groups should be aimed at equalizing the opportunities for achievement and advancement of members of that group, or whether those efforts should continue in ways that will ensure instead the equality of achievement itself for that group, as compared with the more advantaged groups in the society. The differences between these conceptions -- of equality of opportunity, or of achievement -- are large, and the issue is still in doubt; all such issues in America end up in the Supreme Court, which determines what are the constitutional rights of the groups and individuals involved.

While sharp differences exist about the proper scope of "affirmative action" in American higher education, and the appropriate degree of governmental or institutional intervention against the free play of competitive meritocracy, there is a near unanimity in our colleges and universities that some kind and degree of affirmative action is appropriate and necessary.

Affirmative action makes the contrast sharp between our policies regarding class and our policies regarding race. Perhaps I can capture the difference in the realm of higher education by observing that I cannot remember ever hearing a California legislator demand that the university increase access to it for the sons and daughters of working class families. Moreover, a recent report of the Organization for Educational and Cultural Development (OECD) in California higher education could not say what proportion of the students at Berkeley are of working class origins; our statistics are simply not collected that way. Chapter 2 of that OECD report, "Planning and Market in Higher Education," treats "education and stratification," and "education and social selection," familiar categories when analyzing European education systems. But its authors are unable to discuss specifically Californian issues within these categories; the necessary statistics are not available, and the discussions carried on in California are rarely couched in these terms. It is the only chapter which rests completely on European perspectives and theories; its distance from Californian realities is apparent by contrast with the rest of the report.

The failure of traditional models of social stratification and social mobility to illuminate California's society helps clarify American exceptionalism. Elsewhere in advanced societies, education is seen as a vehicle or instrument for social mobility, both between generations and within a single lifetime. Social class is ordinarily defined by the physical nature of one's job or occupation, by the income it commands, or the status it enjoys, or the sense of horizontal identity it engenders, or by some combination of these dimensions of class position. In California at the end of the twentieth century, education is not so much a vehicle or channel to higher social status as it is itself the defining feature of one's social status. To



"place" a person in the social world, one ordinarily asks where one went to "school" (i.e., college or university), and perhaps whether one finished and took a degree, and what one studied. (In 1987, fewer than 20% of Californians 25 years and older had not graduated from high school; nearly half had attended college, and the proportions are much higher among the younger cohorts).<sup>16</sup> It is less important what one happens to be working at at any given moment, since people change jobs and occupations frequently, and what they do, or appear to do, correlates poorly with their education. And education predicts their lifestyles, attitudes and loyalties much better than does whether they are "manual" workers, or self-employed, or in one of the other ordinary categories of social stratification.

Ethnicity is the other great defining feature of Californians; if one knows a person's ethnicity and formal education, one knows a great deal about them. In contrast to the paucity of data on the class positions of Californians, the official statistics are rich in ethnic and racial data. The legislature is constantly affirming the importance of special efforts to recruit, retain, graduate, and sponsor members of disadvantaged minority groups. (In California, this includes blacks and Hispanics, but now excludes almost all those of Asian origin. They are too successful to qualify for the special benefits and attention of affirmative action policies). Many university policies pivot around racial issues, enormous amounts of statistics are collected within racial and ethnic categories, and discussions of affirmative action (mostly how to strengthen it, and make it more effective in the university) are central themes in academia, from the departmental level on up.

In California, as elsewhere in the U.S., student admissions are heavily influenced by affirmative action policies. As just one example of these policies, the proportion of blacks and Hispanics in the entering freshman class at U.C. Berkeley rose from about 11% in 1983 to about 29% in 1990, more than doubling their proportions. The percentages of Asians in entering classes remained roughly constant at 29%, while the proportion of white enrollees fell from 58% to about 37%.<sup>13</sup> This was accomplished by applying quite different criteria for admissions to students in these different racial and ethnic groups. Similar policies are in place in almost every American college and university; the numbers in many are not as dramatic as at Berkeley only because they have fewer minority applicants.

Two questions might be asked: (1) How can we explain these quite dramatic policies, and (2) Why has there not been a vigorous backlash by the now discriminated-against white students, and their parents?

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<sup>13</sup> Figures provided by the Office of Student Research, University of California at Berkeley.

Part of the answer to both questions is surely the sense of guilt among white Americans toward certain minority groups, especially blacks and Native Americans, that I spoke of earlier. But the other, related reason arises out of a national commitment to achieving a genuinely multi-racial society, one in which blacks and other minorities are represented in numbers roughly similar to their proportion within the population at large, and are represented proportionally in the leadership of all the institutions of the society -- in its political, economic, military and educational institutions. To attain leadership in almost all of these social institutions, experience of, if not a degree from, an institution of higher education is a necessity. And that, in a word, is the driving force behind these affirmative action policies in higher education -- policies, keyed to the mobility of individuals through competitive performance.

Blacks and Hispanics in America have made conspicuous progress in some areas of national life, but less in others. I'll be speaking here mainly of blacks; the situation of recent immigrants from Mexico is similar in some respects, but different in others.

Blacks are very well represented in all ranks of our armed forces; General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, our highest ranking military officer during the war with Iraq, is only the most prominent. Blacks have also done well in politics; thousands have been elected to local and municipal office, many are in Congress, the mayor of almost every big city in the country is black, and a black man has recently been elected governor of Virginia.

Blacks as a whole have done much less well economically, or in the leadership of economic institutions, or in academic life. A few figures can stand for all: in 1988, 625 Americans nationwide received Ph.D.'s in mathematics or computer science. Of those, only two were black. Of the roughly 500 doctorates in marine, atmospheric and earth sciences, only another two were black. The problems are not confined to the physical or natural sciences: in that same year of 1988, only 5 American-born blacks gained Ph.D.'s in anthropology; 11 were granted doctorates in economics, 7 in political science, and 14 in sociology.<sup>14</sup> This is the situation in a country with 3,500 colleges and universities, most of which require a Ph.D. for a regular tenure-track appointment.

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<sup>14</sup> National Science Foundation. 1990, Table 47, p. 151.

The indicators of educational handicaps for blacks in the U.S. are many and striking, and go all the way back to performance in grade school, on up to scores on national tests of scholastic aptitude. Blacks do not enter colleges or universities in proportions that reflect their proportions in the general population. A university like Berkeley can attract and admit blacks at higher rates than their proportion in the California population, but nationally, despite many academic and financial support efforts on the part of these colleges, only about seven percent of college and university enrollments are black, as compared to their 12% proportion of the population. This represents a huge improvement over the terribly low numbers before the racial revolution of the 1960's, but it's sad to say that that figure of seven percent has not changed much in the past 15 years, and indeed has declined somewhat for young black males.

Moreover, blacks are far more likely to drop out of college before graduation, and those who do graduate are much less likely to go on to graduate school than their white counterparts.

All of this may help explain something of the near-desperate efforts American colleges and research universities have been making to enroll black undergraduates, hoping that some will do well, gain entry to graduate studies, and that perhaps some growing fraction of those will opt for a career in science or scholarship, while still others will enter both old and new professions, thus providing leadership not only to these institutions but to the black community at large.

American universities, and not least those in California, have been making great efforts to identify talented minority youngsters at the secondary and even primary levels, and have encouraged and sponsored those individuals for university entry. In these and related ways, American higher education has become a part, indeed a central part, of a national effort to transform American blacks from a racial caste into a "normal" American ethnic group. A caste, of course, is a social category in which membership defines an individual's life fate permanently, even more rigidly than that of class, while membership in an ethnic group in the American context says something about an individual's origins, but in principle does not define or limit present or future prospects. The nature and strength of an individual's connections with an ethnic group are, in principle, voluntary; one may use them as an aid to individual advancement, but those ties need not be a hindrance to personal achievement. The reality behind these norms, of course, varies. It is great for most "old" ethnic groups, more problematical for, say, recent Mexican immigrants, and most for blacks. Since WW II, to be treated as

an ethnic rather than a racial group has become an increasing reality for most people of Asian origins, both recent immigrants and the children of earlier immigrants. There is remarkably little racial prejudice today against Asian Americans of any kind. Racial identity is still a handicap for blacks--although less so for middle class, well-educated blacks than for the less well-educated. Thus, education is still the quickest road to ethnic status for blacks.

The nation's preference for ethnic rather than racial identities and relations is clear historically. The United States, on the whole, has not had an enviable record in race relations. On the other hand, it has had a comparatively good record on ethnic relations, starting with the assimilation and integration of peoples from all over the world to a common, overriding identity as Americans. Scholars still argue whether the metaphor of the "melting pot" is the best way to describe this process, or whether some other term is necessary to describe the nature and mechanisms of this process. Whatever they decide, in the United States, Protestants and Catholics of Irish origins live peacefully side by side, as do Jews and Arabs and Maronite Christians; Turks and Armenians, and so on. A multi-ethnic society is our model of a good society; it encompasses the possibility of continuing strong voluntary cultural ties to one's ethnic origins. And the historical images of the mobility of whole ethnic groups reflect the parallel mobility of their individual members. We have watched these mobility patterns over two, three, four, and more generations, with the first poor immigrants from an ethnic group coming in at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, living usually in ethnic enclaves (sometimes miscalled ghettos), speaking the mother tongue, and striving to advance their children's opportunities. This next generation tends to get more education, and then to move out of those neighborhoods into whatever suburbia of American life the individual's ambition, talent, and achievement will allow. The ethnic ties may remain strong into the third and even fourth generation, but usually only when these ties aid rather than hinder individual mobility.

This is of course a greatly oversimplified model of reality, but not too far from popular image and sentiment. In some sense, for Americans, this is the way things are supposed to be. To some important extent, the racial revolution of the 60's, the enormous changes in law, and the parallel changes in sentiment and institutional behavior, have brought American blacks into this model. The 60's also gave to blacks the political and social freedom (and to some extent the economic affluence) of a rising ethnic group, rather than that of a low and despised caste, while permitting up to half or two thirds to move into the mainstream of American life. Perhaps a third live middle class lives (i.e., have careers as opposed to jobs), and perhaps half are in reasonably stable working class occupations. But somewhere between 15% and 25% of blacks (2%-3% of the whole American

population), comprise an underclass, living mostly in the central cities, caught in a morass of problems: crime, alcoholism, drugs, the collapse of family ties and responsibility; child and spousal abuse, and welfare dependency. These are the things that constitute the greatest problem facing American society; thus far we have been conspicuously unsuccessful in our approaches to it and to them.

For the rest of the black population, movement is visible and appreciable, if too slow. It may be reasonably fast by the standards, say, of the Irish in America in the 1860's, or the Italians in the 1920's. But that rate of change is not acceptable by or for blacks in 1990, both because of our special guilt regarding blacks in the U.S., and also because of our heightened standards regarding the rights and opportunities due all citizens. Moreover, blacks also point out that they are not new immigrants, but have been in America as a group longer than most white ethnic groups and all Asians, though some proportion of the black population seems always to fill the niche left by the most recent immigrant group, at the bottom of the social and economic ladder.

Nevertheless, affirmative action throughout American life, but most especially in higher education, is a conscious effort to accelerate the transformation of blacks as a whole from a racial into an ethnic group, and this accelerates their mobility as a group by accelerating their mobility as individuals, upward through American society. Looked at another way, it is an effort to accomplish for blacks in one generation what may have taken two generations for Irish or Swedish Americans, and perhaps three for Italian and Polish Americans. It is, in short, a set of policies designed to improve the opportunities for individual members of certain racial and ethnic groups towards whom we as a society feel especially guilty. These efforts are made by many social institutions, and not just the government, to improve life chances, to enable blacks to rise in the society, with a common goal being for some significant proportion of blacks to take their places in leadership positions in all the social institutions.

The final irony is that policies designed to improve and thus equalize life chances for disadvantaged individuals may, by the very character of the enormous advantages they carry for designated ethnic and racial groups, be creating status groups whose members, and especially whose leaders, have more to gain through emphasizing their group memberships than by asserting their independence of group ties. These patterns, and their associated ideological claims and assertions, point to a new kind of permanent, racially-based group identity, which differs from the old in being voluntary and privileged, rather than involuntary and disadvantaged.

These new claims to racial identity and cultural autonomy involve stronger horizontal bondings than do most class-based institutions, such as trade unions or socialist parties. Unlike working class identification, "race consciousness" does not inhibit or discourage college attendance, but is brought onto the campuses by the next generation of minority groups themselves. It is clear that the assertion of the primacy of racial identity for most blacks and Hispanics arises out of a shared life experience; not so clear that it anticipates a shared life fate. That poses a special challenge to minority group leadership, which has to struggle against the corrosive effect on the primacy of racial identity posed by an institution which in principle is indifferent to it, and which prepares people for life in a competitive world which is also, and increasingly, indifferent to racial identity. The intense efforts currently being made to rationalize and reinforce the primacy of racial identity in the colleges and universities where the future leadership of racial groups is being educated and prepared--by "multiculturalism" in the curriculum, and social segregation outside the classroom -- attests to the sharp tensions created by these new forms of horizontal bonding in institutions which have led society in throwing them off. The danger is that the new conceptions of permanent and self-conscious racial groups may be no more assimilable to the classic models of an ethnically diverse society of individual careers and achievement than the old caste groups. This raises many more questions for higher education, but at the least suggests that public policies often have perverse and unintended effects. Sometimes they generate new problems as great as the ones they overcome. But higher education in America has already had some experience with those ironies of history and public policy.

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