

The Educated Underclass

The Educated Underclass

Students and the Promise
of Social Mobility

Gary Roth

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Introduction

This is a book about class, and also about the division of the populace into distinct strata. I use college students as my entrée into these themes, since this is the part of the population with which I am so familiar. Most people, including my students, identify themselves as part of a vast middle class, to which virtually everybody, they claim, belongs. It is an understanding of class based on occupations, income, places of residence, consumerism, and education. Otherwise, there are just the rich and the poor, not really social classes as much as clusters of the fortunate and unfortunate. As one student explained: “until I came to college, I had never heard of the working class. There were only the lower, middle, and upper classes.”

When spoken to about class, or asked to probe its deeper significance, these students have a great deal to say, but left on their own, the discourse of class is not one in which they engage. It is easy to spot students whose previous coursework focused on such issues. They discuss the working class without hesitation, as if their education has already made them upwardly mobile.

To talk about class is part of the process of moving beyond it. It's why students from elite backgrounds speak about class so effortlessly, having grown up with a terminology that is pervasive throughout the upper orders of society. The discussion of class presupposes a wide view of social affairs, one that is directed outward and beyond. To speak about class without rancor is to speak from a distance, itself a measure of privilege.

Nonetheless, few people outside the classroom still mention the working class except in negative terms. It is a terminology that dates to the not-so-distant past. It is also a terminology that has taken on an antiquarian tone, despite its continued use. “Working people” is a common alternative. “Working poor” is popular within journalism and policy discussions. In politics, “working Americans” has become a universal descriptor. In everyday parlance, though, the middle class is the new working class. The working class per se has morphed into a remnant of a dysfunctional capitalism.

Education and class

Class is relational, representing a position of dependency on a social system that works according to its own logic, not to that of the people who serve it. “Wealth”, Paul Mattick writes, “appears to be a matter of commodity ownership, or the possession of money, a means to ownership, rather than a relationship between people manifested in differential access to goods.”¹

Material things separate people and make them unequal economically, people who otherwise are uniquely diverse in their individuality and who also share a similar fate vis-à-vis society at large. A focus on class emphasizes those aspects of social reality that people have in common, such as the dependence on employment and laboring activity, whereas difference and differences are stressed by the social sciences.

How to understand the role of education within these two realms of equality and inequality is the task I have set for *The Educated Underclass*. On the one side is the everyday world of commodities, money, possessions, and income inequality; on the other, a broader domain that evokes a status that is society-

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wide and absolute. Fitting these two realities together is not a simple matter. The working population, for instance, tends to downplay its importance within the productive chain in order to focus on rewards promised to it in the sphere of income and consumption.

Because my starting point is experienced reality, albeit viewed with a critical eye, I use some of the same terminology and ways of examining social relations as the people I am investigating. It is my intention, nonetheless, to also show that a huge working class is reemerging, one that reaches deeply into what had been separated out during the late twentieth century as the middle class.

Of special interest to me are the mechanisms through which social strata are reproduced. Education plays an outsized role in this process. Social class within capitalism is, to a much greater extent than commonly acknowledged, hereditary. But it is hereditary in an odd sense of the word. Maintaining one's social position requires considerable ongoing effort, not just for parents but for their children as well. Education is one of the key vehicles where jockeying for social position takes place. It is where the competitive process finds its fullest expression in terms of intergenerational transmission.

Education is also an implement through which smaller portions of the population are able to evade these same class strictures. For these limited numbers, education becomes the independent variable that accounts for their rise within the social hierarchy. For everyone else, education represents a barrier that prevents economic mobility. Educational limits often work in conjunction with other variables—such as gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, and more—to keep people within their relative socioeconomic domains.

Capitalism has had a halting existence since its beginning. Not even the few brief prosperous decades after World War II could overcome capitalism's tendency to lurch from one difficult situation to another. But it has also occasioned a tremendous expansion of productive capacities and with it an enormous proliferation of commodities.

Machine-determined productivity has reached unimagined levels. Karl Marx marveled at the dexterity of the economic system when writing his magnum opus, *Capital*. Reporting on productivity within English silk factories between 1856 and 1862, he noted that the workforce had declined by 7 percent, even though the number of spindles handled by the employees increased by 27 percent, and the number of looms by 16 percent.² J. H. Clapham documented the immense increase in productive power in continental Europe for the entirety of the nineteenth century, while David Landes brought matters up-to-date for the next half-century, noting for instance that iron and steel production increased from 41.6 to 79.4 tons per worker per annum between 1912 and 1931.³

Clearly, both production and productivity increase simultaneously. The authors of *The State of Working America* calculate that "productivity grew 80.4 percent between 1973 and 2011," even though "median worker pay grew just 10.7 percent."⁴ This simple comparison reveals the fate of the working population during the past decades. Measured over a 38-year period, a 10.7 percent increase in remuneration constitutes barely any change at all. Nothing since has altered this equation. Production far outstrips compensation, a circumstance that speaks to the essence of the economic system.

Education has become an intermediary institution between a social system that habitually sputters and declines while ever-greater amounts of consumer products are dangled in front of

the system's workforce. The result: a dynamic fraught with all sorts of negative possibilities, both socially and psychologically. The theme to which this book is devoted is that of the re-creation of a working class that was thought to have all but evolved out of existence some decades ago. College students and their fate in the world of employment serve as a good point of entry into the class system. These students are drawn from across the class spectrum and then dispersed back into many of these same realms.

The issue of underemployment for college graduates—that is, employment in positions that do not require a four-year degree—has attracted attention periodically, whenever the percentage of graduates without adequate employment skyrocketed in comparison to previous conditions. The 1970s were one such moment. The 1990s were another.

Both periods, like today, were times of considerable economic turmoil and adjustment in the domestic and international arenas. The 1970s stand out because students had been central to the protest movements that spanned the globe. There were a host of civil rights, anti-war, identity-oriented, and national liberation movements; today, we witness Occupy, the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and the rekindling of anti-authoritarian protests.

In each of these instances, the production of college graduates clashed with the ability of the system to absorb them. Richard Freeman, whose *The Overeducated American* describes this phenomenon in great detail, wrote: “recipients of ... degrees in most fields accepted salaries in the early 1970s at real rates of pay far below those of their predecessors—and often in jobs quite divorced from their field of study and well below their levels of aspiration.”⁵

The 1960s rejection of American society due to endemic inequalities and constant war-making morphed during the following decade into an inability to integrate into the job market because of altered economic conditions. Half a century later, we are able to recognize a recurring pattern that was only dimly glimpsed at its onset: college graduates on a downward trajectory socially and economically.

There is, nonetheless, a critical difference between then and now. During the latter decades of the twentieth century, the college-educated population was not yet the object of economic restructuring. Instead, the deindustrialization of the factory-employed proletariat was predominant. Despite the economic stagnation that characterized the decade following their emergence from the university system, the great majority of college graduates during the 1960s and 1970s eventually found jobs, even as large portions of the working class were losing theirs. Factory-placed robots and the movement of production facilities to low-wage regions of the world was the leitmotif of a lost profitability that machines were expected to restore.

The computerization of skilled work is a more recent development, which has occurred simultaneously with the casualization of labor, that is, its partial transformation into part-time and intermittent employment. These developments deepened dramatically during the 1990s and coincided with a renewed intensification of the deindustrializing processes already underway since the 1970s.

Throughout these decades, the factory proletariat shrank as a proportion of an ever-expanding workforce. Since the turn of the new century, it has also declined in absolute numbers. The transition from a relative reduction to an absolute drop has not yet taken hold for the college-educated population. Current

discussions regarding robotics, artificial intelligence, and big data suggest, however, that such a shift is not far distant.⁶

Class alone

The Educated Underclass begins with the separation of the population into discrete strata according to the level of education that individuals have achieved. I proceed by means of an outcomes assessment; in other words, I disregard educational intent and examine solely education's role in the segmentation of the population into identifiably different income levels (or "classes" in popular parlance). In Chapter 2, I examine some of the mechanisms through which upward and downward mobility become possible due to the overriding factors of economic growth (or stagnation) on the one hand, and the influence of family income and parental education on the other. The next chapter contains a short history of the interplay between higher education and social class, where I pay close attention to the stratification of the population into working- and middle-class segments during the heyday of capitalist development following World War II.

Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the last decades of the twentieth century. Even though life proceeded as if social class relations had been frozen in place, the thoroughgoing reorganization of the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy set the stage for an analogous reorganization of the workworld that college graduates inhabit. The final chapters concentrate on the re-formation of a working class that has also begun to think of itself in just those terms.

Throughout the book, I assume a reader who is not conversant with the relevant literatures, debates, and discussions from which I draw material. The endnotes are a guide to some of

the many signature contributions. I have also made use of data and diagrams, since there are always multiple means to arrive at the same point. Each subfield is characterized by a far-reaching set of scholarly articles and popular books, a testament to the growth of the university system over the past three-quarters of a century.

Both quantitative and qualitative data are now available, for instance, to track the vastly different rates of college attendance, persistence, and graduation that depend on a person's family background and familial well-being, a theme addressed in the opening chapters.⁷ Another subfield includes accounts by academics and professionals from working-class and poor backgrounds, as they navigate areas of society to which they were not privy as children.⁸ Still other literatures exist for each topic tackled in the book. These subfields are often invisible except to those who exist within or immediately adjacent to them; in other words, these are academic fields which nonetheless can be quite helpful in teasing out salient points that warrant close scrutiny.

Much of the literature is policy-oriented, itself a form of utopian thinking within a society notoriously difficult to change in ways that work to the benefit of the general population. Despite the trenchant criticisms of specific aspects of society, the literature rarely embarks on a wider investigation into the factors that prevent policy suggestions from becoming reality. It is simply imagined that the political world can undo what the economy hath wrought and vested interests have maintained.

The market economy is at root wasteful of human talent and resources alike. The overproduction of commodities, to return to an earlier theme, is commonplace, notwithstanding economists' assertions to the contrary. No business habitually underestimates its market, with the sole exception, perhaps, of

monopolistic enterprises that limit supplies in order to keep prices high. Even at the height of “monopoly capitalism” in the decades immediately following World War II, all other business activity was subject to fierce competitive pressure.

Nor are markets ever stable, a function of a competitive process that constantly reemerges due to the ever-present need for profits. By the 1970s, oligopolistic practices had declined dramatically, only to be rekindled under the new global regime that emerged subsequently. While the production process is fully planned by each business entity, demand continues to resemble the fruit and vegetable markets of yore.

These very same dynamics are replicated in the field of education, even though they are also skewed because of the role of government in the funding and regulation of that world. An extremely complicated situation awaits college graduates. For several decades, higher wages have been combined with an inability to find educationally appropriate employment, a situation that defies every tenet of the economics profession. What follows in this book is an examination of that edge of reality where education and economy produce results just the opposite of what in theory is claimed that they will do. Hence, the title: *The Educated Underclass*.

A note on race, gender, and geography

For the most part, I do not focus on issues of race and gender, not because these aren't important, but because my aim is to explicate the role of higher education in perpetuating social class divisions. As a rule, race and class run parallel to one another, in that adverse circumstances are exacerbated through their interaction. Almost anything that impacts whites negatively has impacted blacks even more so.

Integration of any sort—educational, occupational, or residential—indicates a drawing together of communities that were previously held distant. Whites are still less disadvantaged for sure, but the gulf that once separated people according to race and ethnicity has grown narrower over time. We have instead groups that suffer different intensities of deprivation—insufficient and banal, unfulfilling employment, inadequate social services, and an educational system that promises much more than it can deliver.

How one views race has direct implications for the understanding of class. These are two overlapping and mutually reinforcing characteristics that are best initially comprehended as separate dynamics in order to then understand their interactions together.

Nor is it prudent to rely on catchall categories. The concept of “*latinx*,” for instance, masks huge differences within that population. The same is true for other categories, such as religion, national origin, and sexual orientation. Each requires a distinct mode of comprehension due to the manner by which it continues to function as a means to sort people into differential categories.

Gender takes us in altogether different directions. When restrictions are lifted and harassment reduced, women tend to outpace men in nearly every field of endeavor. The majority of high school, undergraduate, and graduate degrees are now awarded to women. Women always earned more high school diplomas in order to teach in the rapidly expanding public education system. They have earned greater numbers of associate degrees ever since 1978, bachelor’s degrees since 1982, master’s degrees since 1987, and doctoral degrees since 2006.⁹

While the deindustrialization of the late twentieth century simultaneously reduced men's wages and prompted them to leave the labor force, women found paid employment at unprecedented rates and with higher compensation than previously.¹⁰ For 30 percent of married (heterosexual) couples, women now earn more than their husbands.¹¹ Education at all levels helped make this possible.

Deindustrialization was thus a positive social development for women, a circumstance largely overlooked within the gendered perspectives that characterize analyses of this phenomenon. There is much more to be said about how this double-sided adjustment to the workforce altered society in quite fundamental ways, but nonetheless deindustrialization also included an emancipatory component.

Race in combination with gender complicates matters once again. Single mothers within the African American community, for instance, have been subjected to woeful wages and a dearth of adequate services for themselves and their children in terms of health, housing, and education. More paid jobs may be available to them, but the employment world has since been restructured such that two full-time employees are now needed to adequately support a single family. Except for occasional mentions of prominent trends, however, I do not explore the interaction of class with race, ethnicity, or gender to any great degree.

International trends are also left out of consideration in the pages that follow, despite the prevalence of college students and underemployed college graduates in recent protest movements around the globe. To name only a few: Tunisia during the Arab Spring, Hong Kong to preserve a political system that is rapidly fading, and Quebec Province in Canada, where a popular and widespread student strike slowed the trend towards the pri-

vatization of higher education by means of tuition hikes. Elsewhere, students have become an export commodity because both the post-secondary educational systems and the domestic job markets are too limited to absorb them—India, Pakistan, Turkey, and China being outstanding examples.