

Reading Mann and Cubberley on the Myth of Equal Educational Opportunity: A Barthesian Critique

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The question this essay addresses is: “How can we read and demythologize the historical legacy of educational opportunity?”

“Equal Opportunity for All” is the historical promise of the public school. Tied to the American Creed of hard work and talent as the poor child’s ticket to upward mobility, this message continues to have a ready audience and dies hard. But the reality is that the public school has historically worked to reproduce social class divisions. To make the case, I use Roland Barthes’ structuralist model of critique. My intent is to expose the mythic content of seminal historical primary sources on equal opportunity written by Horace Mann and Ellwood Cubberley against a current assessment by Walter C. Parker.

BARTHES — STRUCTURALISM AND MYTH

Working as a structuralist, Barthes extends Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic paradigm in two ways.¹ First, he adapts the description of language as a sign system in order to read cultural phenomena. Using the triadic signifier (artifact), signified (meaning), sign (cultural significance) model, his aim is to take “gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complex associations of all these which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment” as languages (*MT*, 140).

Second, the significations he exposes reveal a process of the political formation of the citizen, hidden between the broken connections between sign systems. Put simply, Barthes’ concern is to reveal the latent mythological content overlaid on everyday life. Myth, in Barthes’ use, is a form of ideology. In the broadest sense, ideology is used to mean a false consciousness of socio/economic realities, a collective illusion which works “invisibly” to legitimate the political position of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Barthes argues that myth is an anonymous definition of the world meant to ratify capitalism as the natural order of things. Myth proclaims that the bourgeois culture is everyone’s, that there are no antagonistic class interests. He argues that this ideology is all pervasive, appearing in “our press, our films, our theater, our pulp fiction, our rituals, our justice, our remarks about the weather... the garments we wear — everything in everyday life. [But the crucial point is that] myth is a representation, a set of norms, which the bourgeoisie *has and makes us have*, of the relations between man and the world” (*Ibid.*). Practiced as a taken for granted part of daily life, the bourgeois myth *appears* a-political and a-historical. Quite simply, the bourgeois myth appears as natural (*Ibid.*). Indeed, mythic representations induce the illusion of membership in a single class so that victims might identify with the bourgeois picture of the world. Barthes argues, “it is from the moment when a typist earning twenty pounds a month *recognizes herself* in the big wedding of the bourgeoisie [that myth] achieves its full effect” (*Ibid.*, 141). The upshot is that the reality of culture is changed into a picture of culture and history is changed into

nature. And this image has a remarkable feature: it is upside-down. The status of the bourgeoisie is particular, historical: “[but] man as represented by it is universal, eternal. [Myth then is depoliticized speech] it gives things a natural and eternal justification... which is not that of explanation but that of a statement of fact” (*Ibid*, 154). With this introduction I shall turn to Barthes’s method.

BARTHES’S PARADIGM: AN APPLICATION AND METHOD

Barthes’ essay, “The Great Family of Man” is a paradigm case of the semiology of myth (*Ibid*, 100). The “object” deciphered is an exhibition of photographs shown in Paris, on loan from the United States. The aim of the show is to depict “the universality of human experience in the daily life of all the countries of the world. The message is that birth, death, work, knowledge, play, all are fundamental to the human condition; there is a family of man” (*Ibid.*). Although the images display an infinite variety, (diversity in skins, skulls, and customs are repeated to the point of an underlying exoticism), the leveling factor is that all men and women display the same archetypal behaviors the world over; there is an identical human essence shared by all. The unity of the human species moralized and sentimentalized by this exhibition tells the viewer that Nature not History is the ultimate fact of the human condition. What makes all of this mythic? Obviously, the photographs are of real people, but their pantomime of “archetypal behaviors” glosses over political differences between people, that is, “historical alienation; differences which are injustices” (*Ibid*, 101). As counter-examples to the myth Barthes asks if *skin color* makes no difference, why not ask the parents of the slain civil rights worker, Emmett Till, what *they* think of the Family of Man? Or if the conditions of work are universal, why not consult the North African colonials of the Goutte d’Or district what *they* think of the Family of Man?

Barthe’s explication of cultural myth depends upon exposing how objects (such as the Family of Man) or practices become signs that are produced by the junction of two semiological chains. The first chain is denotation; the second is connotation. The double signification of cultural myth is produced as the first system is joined to the second system. This means that the sign of the first chain is laterally “bumped” into a new position as signifier in the second sign chain. The diagram of the Family of Man myth looks like this:

Language Denotation	1. SIGNIFIER Photos of diverse human morphologies: skin, customs, etc.	2. SIGNIFIED Despite diversity, the archetypal behaviors depicted of birth, work, death are universal to the human essence.
Myth Connotation	3. SIGN The Family of Man is the fundamental reality.	Nature replaces history.
	I. SIGNIFIER Social/economic divisions are not real. The capitalist economy is natural.	II. SIGNIFIED
	III. SIGN	

Mythically, everyone works, all share the same essence, nature replaces history, class divisions disappear and this is the best of all possible worlds. Keeping Barthes' notion of myth in mind, I want to shift to an analysis of primary education texts. Beginning with Mann, my purpose is to expose the mythic structure and content of the message of equal opportunity.

MANN ON EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY

Horace Mann's nineteenth century crusade for the Common School used a rhetoric that speaks to us even today, especially on the score of equal opportunity. To flesh out how his words have taken on a mythic status I shall examine his texts: "Fifth Annual Report to the Board of Education of Massachusetts, 1842" and the "Twelfth Report," to the Board of Education of Massachusetts, 1849.²

The fundamental argument of the Fifth Report asks for a state-wide levy to finance the Common School of Massachusetts. Mann's scheme joins communal prosperity and individual upward mobility to an educated populace. Indeed, he argues that not to provide equal opportunity to all the children of Massachusetts is to condemn the state itself to a secondary economic status. Put simply, the Common School is to train the laboring classes to meet the needs of a burgeoning industrial economy. Curiously however, his tone is mixed: the rhetoric is at once non-politically-political. In overtly political terms, he ties the Common School to a legacy of the democratic ethos, yet, simultaneously the capitalist economy is presented non-politically as a natural condition of life.

The political rhetoric reads as follows:

The inequality in the means of education possessed by the children in the different towns and sections of the state is a subject of great moment? [Why? Because the founding fathers argued that] political advantages should be equal, and then, that celebrity or obscurity, wealth or poverty should depend upon individual merit. [However], the most influential and decisive measure for equalizing the original opportunities of men,...is equality in the means of education.³

But the problem that Mann confronted was that poorer and more sparsely populated districts could not support the school without government assistance. And even worse, other districts simply failed to comply with the law "[by] employing unapproved teachers, diverting school moneys to illegal purposes [and] resisting a uniformity of books."⁴ And secreted here almost as an afterthought is the onus placed upon the individual. He adds, "If equal opportunities of improvement are offered to all, the responsibility of using or neglecting them may justly be cast upon each individual."⁵ The theme of individual responsibility continues to be heard today and it seems now, as then, to be apolitical. I will return to this later. But the core of Mann's argument which can be reduced to a slogan repeated through the *Nation at Risk Report, 1983*, is clear: the schools must provide an educated workforce for the nation to prosper.⁶ The ideological stuff of this rhetoric derives from Mann's marriage of the Calvinist ethos to the needs of the emerging capitalist industrial state: A spiritually correct life demands work. And, whether one is among the elect (which is not merited) is signaled by one's prosperity. At this point, Mann ties the school to business interests. What is crucial is his acceptance of a natural hierarchy of capitalist over laborer. Moreover he prescribes an explicit model for the

commodification of the worker, in which individual human value is equated with profit for the employer. He says “the capitalist[s] are looking for the greatest amount of labor or the largest amount of money from their investments [the worker]; they do not promote a dunce to a station where he will destroy raw material or slacken industry.”⁷ By contrast, Mann asserts, “those [workers] with a good common school education rise to a higher and higher point.”⁸ The American Dream, then, is the natural conclusion of capitalism as are its attendant features of the profit motive, class division and the commodification of human life — all of which are tied to the public school.

However, it is too simplistic to brand Mann as a vulgar apologist for the capitalist state. His vision penetrated into a capitalist system of *haves* and *have nots*; and the middle class divisions accepted so naturally in the Fifth Report are precisely what he attacks about European economies in the Twelfth Report. The bottom line in the Twelfth Report is a plea for the “physical well being” of all the people of Massachusetts. Here, Mann argues for a morally correct capitalism which he calls the Massachusetts theory, one that he contrasts against the evils of Europe. The report is a warning: “American capitalists are imitating their European counterparts and the democracy is at risk. Under the European theory some are rich and many are wanting. [This situation Mann characterizes as] unchristian and heathen.”⁹ The riches of the European state take precedence over the population. The decadence of Europe is revealed in its “splendid treasures and golden regalia [in England], the Tower of London and Windsor Palace, [in France] the Louvre and Versailles... while thousands [in these countries and the rest of Europe]...are dying of starvation. [Mann attributes this condition to the European theory]...in which men are divided into classes, some to toil and earn, others to seize and enjoy.”¹⁰

This evil, Mann argues, is being reproduced in the United States as American capitalists emulate Europe. He explains, “The manufacturer or farmer prescribes the rate of wages he will give his work people, [and] he reduces those wages under whatever pretext he pleases. [The consequence is that a social chasm exists in which one class possess] all the wealth and education and the other become servile dependents.”¹¹ As a result, resentment grows between the propertied and the laboring classes. But Mann’s Massachusetts theory is meant to provide universal education with riches for all as the counter weight to class antagonism. From Barthes, the myth is diagrammed as this:

Language Denotation	1. SIGNIFIER European Theory is built on class division and is an immoral economy	2. SIGNIFIED America is emulating Europe in its division of have/have nots
Myth Connotation	3. SIGN Mass Theory of reform needed for just society. I. SIGNIFIER Schools produce riches and a morally correct capitalism. III. SIGN	Universal Education civilizes/ provides equal opportunity for all. II. SIGNIFIED

To summarize, equal opportunity in Mann presents antagonistic moral imperatives. The overarching value is the capitalist ethos. The state is the instrument of education and the common school is the highway to prosperity for all. But ultimately whether one succeeds or not is the individual's responsibility. The inherent contradiction in Mann's utopian capitalism is an economy that does not produce class divisions.

This problematic twist takes an opposite twist in Ellwood Cubberley's scheme for the governance of the school. His 1916 article, "The Organization of School Boards," ensconces a business model for the operation of the schools that turns equal opportunity on its head, while claiming the opposite.¹² Cubberley wants a reform in the method of selecting those who serve on school boards. His stated intent is to *depoliticize* school board operations and to make them more efficient and representative of the community. But a closer look shows Cubberley's plan is both political in its motivation and anti-egalitarian in its implementation.

THE CUBBERLY MODEL

Cubberley's first reform is to reduce the size of school boards. He argues "a small board of [5-7 men] is in every way more effective and more efficient body than a large one."¹³ His reasons: within a large body "real thinking...planning...executing is usually done by one half dozen to half a score of men."¹⁴ Such a group is less talkative, will not shift responsibility for its actions to others, will not apportion out patronage, and will not become "a public debating society."¹⁵ Coupled with the smaller board, Cubberley wants an at-large system of representation to replace the ward system that is in place. His argument, however, is a special pleading class analysis of power distribution. That analysis polarizes the city into two groups: the saved and the damned. The saved are the businessmen, successful and temperate; they want strong government. Such men represent the best characteristics of the population and are motivated to act for the good of the whole city. Such men want an at-large system but would not serve on a ward elected board whose "management of a school system is political, or personal or petty."¹⁶

Living apart from the best, the damned are the laboring classes characterized as an unsuccessful and intemperate lot. Cubberley describes their wards as "the fighting third,...the red light fourth,...the socialist ninth, [and] the high-brow fifth." This shorthand characterology describes the anarchical temper of such men who promote strife, represent only their ward and who are constantly directed toward securing funds, teachers, and janitors for the...schools they represent.¹⁷ To clinch the argument, Cubberley includes a demographic map of the city's wards. The prominent feature is of railway tracks that separate the upper two-thirds of the city from the lower: "Negro ward shacks," "saloons and tenements," and "the red-light district," represent the damned living on the wrong side of the tracks.

Cubberley's argument has all of the elements of political myth previously stated: nature, human essence, a morally correct capitalism and a depoliticized culture. To legitimate his argument he employs a principle of bourgeois reality that shows his version of events deriving from experience, that is, nature. Malefactors and enlightened actualize potentialities that are simply their human essence. The enlightened businessmen decide how the schools are to be run. And in a move that

effectively *disenfranchizes* the malefactors or *laboring classes*, Cubberley describes his scheme as one that *removes politics from education*. Here is the diagram:

Language	1. SIGNIFIER Ward Electoral system is corrupt.	2. SIGNIFIED Schools are governed by inefficient, anarchical political factions, including bad elements.
Denotation		
Myth	3. SIGN An apolitical at-large system is needed	Elected businessmen working bi-partisanly know what is best for all school constituencies.
Connotation	I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED
	A morally correct capitalism is sustained by equal opportunity schools.	
	III. SIGN	

Today arguments advanced by Mann and Cubberley appear too baldly undemocratic to even the most unsophisticated. For example, an embryonic scheme implied in Mann's paradigm is the tracking system of student placement and curricula. This device, however, has been unmasked as a *de-facto* mechanism of political repression long imposed upon poor and minority students; that is, those in the lowest tracks (overwhelming minorities) receive an inferior education which prevents access to middle class status. Now, seemingly more democratic schemes meant to better serve the poor minority student are in place. The latter is the subject of Walter C. Parker's essay, "The Urban Curriculum and the Allocating Function of Schools, 1985."¹⁸ Ironically, his analysis of the urban curriculum fits my description as a post-modern version on the mythic theme of equal educational opportunity.

PARKER ON THE SCHOOL AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Parker's essay summarizes the equal opportunity mythology reduced to the following political terms: "Democracy asks individuals to act as if social mobility were universally possible; status is to be won by individual effort, and rewards are to accrue to those who try. But democratic societies also need selective training institutions, and hierarchical work organizations permit increasingly fewer persons to succeed at ascending levels. Situations of opportunity are also situations of denial and failure" (*UC*, 179). As his example, Parker cites a so-called "effective" inner-city school, George Washington Carver High School of Atlanta, Georgia. Populated by inner city minorities and poor, the school has received "attention from Congress, the press, and scholars" (*Ibid.*, 180). Parker, however, questions if such a school is really effective. Certainly the school presents a specially designed curriculum tailored to the needs of these students, but he asks is this a sufficient knowledge base for entrance into the middle class? Programs such as Carver's, Parker claims, may mask the school's real political function, which is that of managing the contradiction between aspiration and denial.

His demonstration hinges on a comparison of the school's function to a con-game. The con-game includes the following players: a victim (called a con or a mark), the con-artist or perpetrator, and the con-artist's confederate (called the cooler). Once the con realizes something is wrong, that is, that s/he has been victimized by a fraudulent game, the cooler steps in. The cooler's job is to befriend the mark to keep him from calling the authorities or in some other way blowing the whistle on the con-game (*UC*, 181).

The analogy to the specialized inner-city curriculum is obvious. Parker reads this curriculum as inadequate. In his view these students are prevented from acquiring legitimate knowledge, that is, the kind that provides a foundation for entrance into a baccalaureate program as well as future middle class status/employment. The paradigm case is that of the junior college minority student who, completing course work, is denied entry into a four-year college. The individual appears as the one who has failed. In fact, the inadequacies of the specialized inner-city curricula come back to haunt the victim who is told and believes that s/he is inadequate. These who are denied their aspirations [are] skillfully handled so as to mollify them and adapt them to failure while the structural inevitability of their failure is concealed from them (*UC*, 179). Counselors act as coolers who reduce the student mark's sense of failure by providing alternatives, counseling and consolation. Their task is to let the less successful, in Parker's words, "be made to feel that their failure to attain was a personal failure. This reduces their inclination to inveigh against the system that first raised aspirations, only to shut the door" (*Ibid.*).

Thus, the school promotes the availability of the American Dream while channeling vertical mobility within society. Diagrammed the myth appears thusly:

Language	1. SIGNIFIER Schools provide aspiration/knowledge.	2. SIGNIFIED Minority/poor need special curricula to equalize chances.
Denotation		
Myth	3. SIGN American Dream is available to all.	Spaces are limited to the best.
Connotation	I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED
	Failure of the poor/minority student is individualized not institutional.	
	III. SIGN	

This analysis can be encapsulated by quoting Freire,

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and being about conformity to it, or it becomes...a means to [transform] their world" (*Ibid.*).

Indeed, in this final variation the equal opportunity myth is an instrument of conformity to the present system: the school performs its sorting function, essentializes the poor/minority student as not ready to move up, validates bourgeois political hegemony, reproduces class division, and presents this representation of the world as natural and apolitical.

CONCLUSION

Using two seminal primary texts and a topical example, I have attempted to demythologize the idea of equal educational opportunity. I applied Barthes critical model first to Horace Mann, then to Ellwood Cubberley and finally to Walter C. Parker's work. Mann's work espouses the Common School as the vehicle to protect both a capitalist industrial economy and individual upward mobility. Cubberley argues for a new way of governing the schools that would impose a business model, simultaneously disenfranchizing poor and minorities, while claiming to make opportunity more efficiently available. Parker reveals the connection between the fiction of equal opportunity and the sorting function of the school. And, despite historical variations of emphasis the equal educational opportunity myth retains certain commonalities. This is the summary diagram:

Language Denotation	1. SIGNIFIER Capitalist economy of socioeconomic classes is natural.	2. SIGNIFIED Education provides the vehicle for cultural riches.
Myth Connotation	3. SIGN Educational opportunity is available to all, regardless of sex, race, class.	The culture is a meriocratic system. Success or failure is the result of individual talent, work, intelligence and drive.
	I. SIGNIFIER The poor/minorities who do not advance are individually blameworthy: they receive both the education and social position they deserve.	II. SIGNIFIED
	III. SIGN	

It is a bitter irony that the legacy of equal educational opportunity remains a myth today. But, multicultural classrooms equipped with Barthes' technique of reading cultural mythologies may help students to breakdown the false consciousness which is at the historical core of the equal opportunity ideology, and to begin to reconstitute both a democratic consciousness and egalitarian political reality.

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: the Noonday Press, 1989), 140. This text will be cited as *MT* for all subsequent references.

2. Horace Mann, "Fifth Annual Report to the Board of Education of Massachusetts, 1842," in *Justice Ideology and Education*, ed., Edward Stevens and George H. Wood (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995), 26; Mann, "Twelfth Annual Report to the Board of Education of Massachusetts, 1849," in *Justice, Ideology, and Education*, eds., Edward Stevens and George H. Wood (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1995).
3. Mann, "Fifth Annual Report," 26.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. United States Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform: A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).
7. Mann, "Fifth Annual Report," 28.
8. Ibid.
9. Mann, "Twelfth Annual Report," 137.
10. Ibid., 139
11. Ibid.
12. Ellwood Cubberley, "The Organization of School Boards," in *Justice Ideology and Education*, ed., Edward Stevens and George H. Wood (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1995), 225.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 228.
17. Ibid., 227.
18. Walter C. Parker, "The Urban Curriculum and the Allocating Function of Schools," in *Justice Ideology and Education*, ed., Edward Stevens and George H. Wood (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1995). This text will be cited as *UC* for all subsequent references.