

Some Heretical Thoughts on the Rat Race for the Top Jobs

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A society is an articulated structure of roles occupied by, and functions performed by, adult men and women. Every society, in order to continue in existence, must endlessly reproduce itself by preparing the young to occupy or perform those economic, governmental, religious, legal, military roles and functions, so that in time they can take the place of their parents' generation. Some of this work of social reproduction takes place in the family, some of it takes place in the workplace, some of it is carried on by formal and informal social groupings and organizations, and, especially in societies like ours, much of the work of social reproduction is assigned to the schools.

In an agricultural economy, young boys and girls learn to grow crops and tend flocks. In a hunter/gatherer economy, the young are taken along on foraging and hunting expeditions so that they can acquire the skills necessary to obtain food. In some societies, the young apprentice to carpenters, masons, wheelwrights, or silver smiths. They serve as pages to knights while they master the sword and mace. As acolytes, they learn the religious mysteries of the temple. They are articulated to barristers so that they may be initiated into the arcana of the law.

Now it happens, from time to time, that a young man or woman comes along who has a special gift for one or another of the adult social roles in his or her society. Some young women take naturally to the sword; some young men have a special gift for tending to the sick. Some people have green thumbs. Others are able to craft beautiful furniture with a chisel and saw. But no society can survive that **depends** on a regular

supply of outstandingly talented young people. A little reflection will make it clear that every society must define its adult social and economic roles so that **averagely** gifted young people can fill them.

How could it be otherwise? If the food supply were to depend on the talents of outstanding agronomers, the society would likely starve before those young Luther Burbanks appeared. If the governance needed for survival absolutely required the gifts of a Thomas Jefferson or an Elizabeth Tudor, then a society would be doomed, for even if such a leader were to appear, he or she would not likely be followed by another, and another, and another. Sooner or later, and probably sooner, a Millard Fillmore or George W. Bush would appear. The legal institutions of a society must be so fashioned that lawyers of average ability can manage its essential functions. The society will celebrate an Oliver Wendell Holmes, should one appear, but it cannot depend on a regular supply of jurisprudential giants.

The truth of these observations is reinforced by the fact that almost every society systematically excludes large portions of its population from whole ranges of adult roles and functions. Most societies up to the present have excluded women from the military, the law, medicine, government, and major portions of the economy. Similar exclusions are regularly imposed on groups identified by race, class, religion, or ethnicity. The effect of these exclusions, of course, is dramatically to decrease the pool from which young people will be drawn to fill adult roles, thus making it ever more unlikely that outstandingly talented boys and girls will be available. In effect, the more exclusionary a society is, the more it depends on its institutions being manageable by average talents.

In American society in recent decades, formal education has taken the place of almost every other social mechanism for preparing the young for adult life. The legal, medical, business, and military spheres have come to rely on schooling and the associated credentials and degrees to prepare young people and determine which among them shall be assigned to one or another adult role or function.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with society choosing this way of reproducing itself, although listening to lectures and taking written examinations is not always the best way to prepare for a productive role in adult society. But the process is powerfully warped and conditioned by an extraneous factor so pervasive that many of us fail even to recognize it for what it is. I refer to the steeply pyramidal structure of the rewards and privileges associated with the various roles in adult society. To state the point simply, in modern post-industrial societies, there are a relatively few really good jobs with big salaries and great benefits, and lots of mediocre jobs with small salaries and very few benefits. In a society like ours, the quality of life of a young person is determined almost entirely by what sort of job he or she ends up in, and that, in turn, is very considerably determined by the character and quantity of education he or she obtains.

Now, the top jobs [corporate lawyer, business manager, doctor, engineer, etc] are scarce, and their rewards are way out of proportion to those associated with jobs lower down on the pyramid. Hence, there is a ferocious competition for the scarce slots. Since we live in a society that gives lip service to fairness, justice, and equality, those who end up in the favored positions quite naturally tell themselves – and also tell those who fail to make it – that their success is a reward for extraordinary accomplishment. Those at the

top, they tell themselves in self-congratulatory fashion, are the truly gifted and exquisitely trained. But as we observed above, this is surely not true. No society, not even ours, can survive if it must rely on finding an endless supply of outstanding lawyers, doctors, or CEOs to fill its positions. The simple truth is that despite the ferocity of the competition, those in the favored roles are, by and large, only averagely competent at them . [Many years ago, a British child psychiatrist observed that nature only requires that women be “pretty good” mothers in order for their children to survive and flourish. This wise observation can be generalized to all of society’s reproductive efforts.]

Enter “metrics” – Grades, the SAT, the MCAS, and all the other impressively mathematical devices for sifting and sorting young people, of allocating them to scarce positions and justifying that allocation. These measuring exercises play absolutely no role at all in preparing young people for productive adult life. Their sole purpose is to decide, in an ostensibly objective and neutral fashion, which boys and girls will be allowed to ascend to the heights of the job pyramid.

In a society that depends on shepherding, all the young boys and girls learn to herd sheep. Some do it better than others, of course, but virtually all of them learn how to tend sheep sufficiently well to become shepherds. If someone were to propose that the boys and girls be tested every two years to determine their progress in shepherding, he would be laughed out of the village. But in our society, every stage from infancy to young adulthood is accompanied by batteries of “objective” [which is to say machine graded] tests, and at crucial junctures – the completion of secondary school, the transition to college, and later the transition to graduate study – success on these tests, however that

is defined, is treated as an absolute precondition for advancement to the next, more exclusive, stage of education, and thus for admission to the ever more lucrative jobs.

Now, after this system has been in place for a while, it quite naturally comes to be the case that the adults occupying the most favored social roles turn out to be the ones who performed unusually well on the various tests at each stage in their growing up. After all, since performance on the tests determines whether they are admitted to the cushy jobs, it is self-evident that those in the cushy jobs will be the ones who did well on the tests.

And now, by a flagrant bit of circular logic, society concludes that success on those tests is evidence of the outstanding ability absolutely required by the cushy jobs! After all, if the cushy jobs do NOT require outstanding ability and accomplishment, then how can we possibly justify their cushiness and their scarcity? And if the tests do not identify those special few capable of performing at the heights of the economy and society, then how can we explain the fact that those at the top have all done so well on the tests?

All of this is dangerous and arrant nonsense. And it is the nonsense on which our entire educational system rests. There is very little evidence that success in pre-school, in elementary school, in high school, on SAT exams, in college, on GRE exams, and in graduate school is intimately linked with the ability actually to perform well the jobs that are won by these strings of successes. It is of course true that the senior partners of the most prestigious law firms graduated from the most prestigious law schools. How could it be otherwise? Those are the schools at which the law firm's young associates are recruited. But has anyone ever done an

objective, double-blind evaluation of the work of such lawyers and of their counterparts at less prestigious firms who graduated from less prestigious law schools? We are no better able to carry out such evaluations of the performance of lawyers, doctors, and corporate executives than we are to evaluate the performance of auto mechanics. In the end, the “evidence” of the superiority of those in the privileged positions is the fact that they accumulated all the grades, degrees, and other markers that we have chosen to use as filters in allocating scarce desirable positions to an excess of applicants.

Let me say it again: virtually all of the boys and girls in our society are capable of learning how to perform well-compensated jobs in a perfectly adequate fashion, and most of them could perform creditably in even the most demanding jobs, if given half a chance and the proper preparation.

Since this is educational heresy in modern America, let me pull together the strands of my argument with two stories about my own personal experience. The first is an experience I had not in education, where I have spent my life, but on active duty in the Army, where I spent six months, more than fifty years ago. I am of the generation that faced a military draft, and I chose to satisfy my obligation by six years in the Army National Guard. The first six months of those years were spent on active duty, and the first eight weeks of that were devoted to what the Army calls Basic Training. As the name implies, this is the time during which the Army teaches young men [and now young women] to march, salute, polish their boots and make their beds, disassemble and assemble a rifle, even to shoot it a bit at targets, and generally to become *soldiers*. I did my Basic Training at Fort Dix in New Jersey.

On the first day of Basic, an angry, mean-looking sergeant started to yell at me and he pretty much kept on yelling for the entire eight weeks. Everything I did was wrong. I marched out of step, my salute was feeble, my fatigues were messy, my shoes were not properly shined, my bed was not made tight enough to bounce a quarter, and I didn't stand up straight. He threatened to make me get up at three a.m. to GI the barracks if things were out of place, to clean the latrines with a toothbrush, and to march me 'til I dropped. He wasn't yelling only at me, of course. He said he had never seen a sorrier collection of recruits, and he doubted that any of us would make it to the end of the eight weeks.

Somehow, miraculously, and to my great relief, I made it through Basic, *and so did every single one of the men in my company!* What is more, virtually every man in every eight week cycle in every year of the modern Army's existence makes it through Basic. You can count on the fingers of one hand the men who actually are drummed out of the Army for failing to meet its strenuous, rigorous standards.

The explanation of this astonishing record of success, so dramatically in contrast to the rather poor record of our country's educational institutions, is two-fold. First of all, the Army, in its great wisdom, demands of its recruits only what long experience has shown they are capable of. Despite all of the sergeant's threats and harangues, all of his brow-beating and chest-thumping, the tasks in Basic are aimed roughly at the lower end of what is average for the recruits. The Army's task is to motivate us to do what it already knows we are capable of doing, and to make us feel good about achieving what is, after all, an average performance.

The second reason for an almost perfect rate of success is that the Army holds those in charge responsible for the successful performance of the men they command. If recruits start dropping out of a Basic Training company, the Company commander will get a black mark on his record that will effectively ruin his career. That angry sergeant yelling at me will be raked over the coals by his commanding officer if I fail to do the requisite number of push-ups. The result, of course, is that those in charge do everything in their power to ensure the adequate performance of those whom they command.

My second experience, which stands in complete contrast to the first, occurred more than twenty years ago in South Africa, at the University of Durban-Westville, which I visited regularly in conjunction with a scholarship organization that I started called University Scholarships for South African Students. I was meeting with a self-assured, rather smug young White man who chaired the university's Economics Department and taught their big first year introductory course. Data I had obtained from the Registrar showed that in the previous year, only eleven percent of the students taking the course had passed. I expressed dismay at this appalling performance, and he agreed sadly, saying that the Black students were very poorly prepared. I asked him what made him think he was a teacher, if only one in ten of his students could pass his course. He was genuinely astonished at the suggestion that he had any responsibility to help his students master the material. I suggested that if he were the head of a hospital in which ninety percent of the patients died, he would be brought up on charges as a quack, but he remained thoroughly unrepentant.

The lesson I learn from these two stories, and from a lifetime in the Academy, is very simply this: Any group of averagely intelligent young boys and girls, given the

proper support, socialization, assistance, and opportunity, can prepare themselves to fill successfully one of the good jobs in American society. If a large proportion of the young people of some racial, ethnic, religious, or gendered group are failing to do this, the fault lies with the society, not with the boys and girls. Performance on so-called objective tests is neither evidence of, nor a prerequisite for, the ability to succeed in American society. The boys and girls of every city, town, or village in every society in the world, are capable of becoming averagely competent and productive members of the adult world. If they are failing to do so, it is the fault of the adults in the society. With attention, guidance, *and with the unshakable conviction on our part that they are going to succeed*, they will in fact succeed in becoming averagely successful.