

How Schools Inhibit the Autonomy of the Middle Class

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Peter Giampietro's central argument is that schools can be places where autonomy is not facilitated and where "possibilities are circumscribed." He writes, (a) "schools limit students' possible self-narrations by constraining the narrative material available for self-understanding," and (b) "schools offer certain types of social experiences that thereby influence the contexts in which certain types of narrative constructs are more likely to be relevant or expected." Further, (c) schools normally favor the markers of middle-class identity by investing them with symbolic value; the result is that the superficial markers of middle-class identity are translated to signify greater intelligence and academic motivation. In short, "schooling commodifies and fetishizes the very definition of the educated person." Many of Giampietro's claims are well supported in the empirical literature, and I agree that many teachers interpret the cues of the working class and working poor (attire, parent employment, address, speech styles, interactive behaviors) to mean that these children are *less intelligent*, *less motivated*, or *less apt to learn*. Consequently, many teachers invest less time and effort on the working class and, despite their good intentions, lower their expectations through practices like ability grouping.

I am also in general agreement with Giampietro's argument for autonomy as a desirable educational good. Liberals generally value autonomy for the way in which it implies free association and choice, but more importantly for the critical reflection that autonomous selves purportedly exercise over said associations and choices. Critical reflection also requires that persons have an informed awareness of alternatives and that they are able to make comparative judgments about those alternatives. Importantly, Giampietro follows other liberals by embracing (rather than disavowing) the manner in which our reflective choices are given meaning *because* they are grounded in "legitimate starting points," or cultural narratives that inform how we view the world.

Therefore, I am also deeply sympathetic to the manner in which he has situated his discussion of autonomy within a broader understanding of (cultural) identity coherence. Giampietro does not employ the notion of culture in his essay, but it seems to me that the context-dependent narrative material he describes comes from cultural sources. Cultural understandings, of course, need not be limited to *one* culture, but are variegated and layered, evolve over time, and therefore facilitate opportunities for creative responses in rescripting our identities in ways that may or may not be "coherent." These cultural understandings are rarely if ever "fixed"; instead, persons continually respond to new circumstances, opportunities, and challenges. This more fluid understanding of culture and the narrative self is at odds with Giampietro's notion of a "relatively stable core self-conception." However, I will put this important omission aside.

In what follows, I will focus on two difficulties with Giampietro's conception of autonomy. First, I believe that he presents autonomy in his paper as an all-or-nothing affair, not conceding that autonomy admits of degrees or that the autonomous self assumes many guises and forms of expression according to need and circumstance. One has the impression throughout his essay that working-class children in the main are simply *incapable* of autonomy under the current schooling regime. I will argue that this is wrong. Second, I believe that Giampietro conflates autonomy with *social privilege*. I concur with him that everyone possesses a "narrative construct that we experience as foundational" and that social class contributes essential material to that cultural narrative. Even so, it is not at all clear to me that working-class children are less likely to be autonomous than their more socially-privileged peers. Indeed, I take the position that the opposite is more likely to be the case.

To consider my first point, we need to get a better sense of what Giampietro assumes autonomy to entail. In many places he suggests that autonomy consists of "nonreactive resistance," of exploring "the world and its rich possibilities," and of the ability to "harmonize across social contexts." Elsewhere, he writes that there is a "world-traveling critical narrator...at the center of the autonomy project." Yet given that Giampietro endorses the view that identity conceptions are tethered to specific cultural understandings and begin from "legitimate starting points," how exactly are the working class and working poor less capable of critically reflecting upon their social context? That schools engage in commodity fetishism by helping students to "forge relatively coherent narrative understandings" is doubtlessly true for many. Yet critical pedagogy (an important literature that Giampietro only briefly mentions), argues that students are rarely as passive as he seems to suggest.

Giampietro's description of schools is too totalizing and assumes a singularly reproductive understanding of schools. While it may be true that many schools "transform a variety of dominant-class practices and norms into identity traits associated with academic success," is this all that schools do? The question is too broadly conceptual to concede empirical data that might suggest otherwise. The reader comes away from Giampietro's essay with the rather depressing notion that autonomy is in short supply for children whose cultural narratives do not match the official school version. His one-sided description assumes (1) that schools *in toto* do not facilitate the autonomy of the working class while they do so for the middle class (but this is highly contestable), and (2) that autonomy is not being fostered by other means, enabling children to "world cross" between home, work, and school.

Even if schools managed to foil the autonomy of the working class (and this is a stretch), surely there are other ways to foster autonomy. For example, home cultures very often work powerfully against the conceptions of self provided by schools. Indeed, many (Chinese, Latino, Jewish) children from working-class and working-poor families hail from robust ethnic and religious subcultures that provide a cultural base from which to critique societal norms. For many black students, there is not so much a lack of autonomy as a rejection of white middle-class values and

norms, especially as middle-class whiteness symbolizes academic success in the school system. In its place one finds an array of “community forces” that either compete with or reject middle-class and color-blind notions of autonomy.¹ So, does Giampietro have solely in mind *white* working class children?² He does not say.

This leads me to my second point: that Giampietro conflates autonomy with social privilege. First, I would argue that the “pre-delimited” or heteronomous cultural notions of self that Giampietro attributes solely to working-class children are more likely to describe *middle-class* and *affluent* children. Why should we believe that schools enable middle-class children to become autonomous in the way that he describes if schools have in fact commodified and fetishized their values and cultural narratives? It is certainly true that wealth affords greater possibilities for meaningful employment, better health, nicer housing, and leisure; yet none of these ensure more critical reflection upon one’s circumstances or upon the power structures that ensure stratification. The challenge facing much of the working class is not typically an absence of autonomous reflection but rather a lack of material resources necessary to strengthen agency and fight off despair.

Middle-class status has its advantages, to be sure, but I doubt that one of them is being better equipped with the tools to “harmonize across social contexts,” especially if one continually inhabits spaces that support and maintain privilege. In most cases, middle-class (white) children do not have to cross social contexts that challenge their “identity coherence” unless they choose to; indeed, the quintessential indicator of middle-class white privilege is the prerogative to not question one’s normative position. Consequently, the middle class is far less likely to reflect upon the structures that confirm meritocratic myths and reward them for their false consciousness about who they are and what they deserve, creating “intellectual passivity and ideological quietude.”³ Conversely, working-class and working-poor children routinely are expected to cross back and forth between cultural worlds and in so doing are likely to gain a much greater self-awareness, to know what opportunities they have (or do not), and how systems of privilege are structured to favor the (mostly white) middle class.⁴

All of this leaves one to wonder just how middle-class children resemble anything like the “critical narrator” that Giampietro extols in his essay. His autonomous self strikes me very much as the sort of unaware cosmopolitanism that frequently incites rage among the dispossessed (precisely *because* of the oblivion middle-class privilege implies), and which working-class children will vehemently reject as an elitist and denigrating sham.⁵ Social privilege can not be mistaken for autonomy if by this we mean a reflective and critical awareness of one’s choices (though not necessarily the power to control the conditions of one’s life), including how things *might* have been were the privileges and prerogatives of middle-class entitlement to be removed. Schools can certainly do more to supply the necessary conditions for the development of autonomy. Yet as long as schools continue to enshrine the narrative conceptions of the middle class, it is their autonomy that I worry schools inhibit.

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1. See John Ogbu, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003).
 2. This raises a very interesting question: why are *white* working class and working poor less able than others to critical reflect upon their situation or to imaginatively cross-cultural worlds? See Lois Weis, *Working Class Without Work: High School Students in a De-Industrializing Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and her more recent *Class Reunion: The Remaking of the American White Working Class* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
 3. Jean Anyon, "Social Class and School Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* 11 (1981): 3–42.
 4. Also see Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Children Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough, UK: Saxon House, 1977); Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban High School* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
 5. For a discussion, see Anyon, "Social Class and School Knowledge."