

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Different from Us: Teaching About the Rich After Occupy and the Great Recession

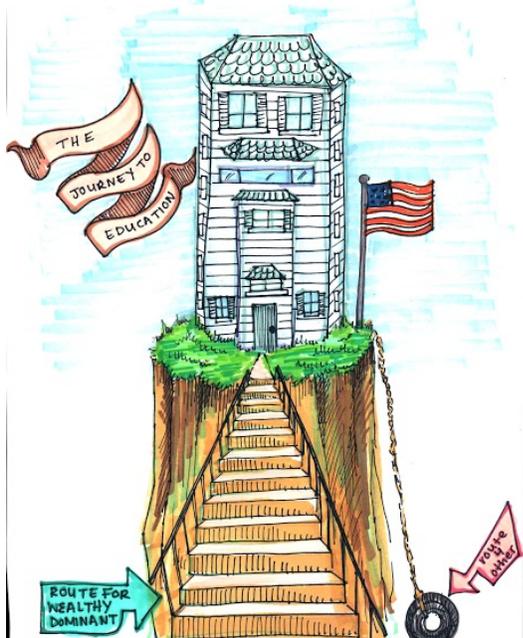
by Richard Ohmann



"IN THE SHADOW OF DEBT: PARTICIPATORY RELIEF"
HEALTH SCHULTZ, WITH SELF-ORGANIZED SEMINAR COLLECTIVE

In a famous imaginary exchange, F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "The rich are different from us." Ernest Hemingway replied, "Yes, they have more money." Most critics have thought the epigram attributed to Fitzgerald more perceptive about class in the United States than the one attributed to Hemingway. But if we're looking for a wry take on how class has been **understood**, in the media and among college students, Hemingway's comment is pretty good.

To be sure, runs mainstream ideology, rich people have a lot of money. So what? They earned it, and in America anyone who works hard can do likewise, or has a fair chance of doing likewise, or at least has a fair chance at a chicken in the pot and a car in the garage (as Hoover's 1928 campaign flyer put it). Neither individuals nor families are stuck in place. And besides, there **are** no social places; anyone who carries on as if better than others is a snob. There is or should be no class culture. Certainly there is no class system—maybe in the old country, but not here. We have a pluralist social order, not one in which wealth is power. And so on.



"JOURNEY TO EDUCATION" BRITTANY SAUTA

When *Radical Teacher* published a mini-cluster on "Teaching About the Upper Class" a few years ago (issue 85), that powerful myth was our starting place. Our students knew there were rich people—some of them **were** rich people. Others resented rich people. Few knew how rich rich people are, and those few did not by a long shot see rich people as a class that ruled a society. Their blindness "was and is an impediment to understanding the world," said Frinde Maher and I in our introduction. To overcome that impediment was the aim of all three *Radical Teacher* authors, especially Richie Zweigenhaft, in his "Teaching an Interdisciplinary Course on the American Upper Class." He listed as his top three aims: (1) trying "to help students understand that there is a class system in this country and that it has worked in rather predictable ways throughout the last 110 years"; (2) showing students that "those in the upper class are clearly connected to, but

not the same as, those who run the institutions of power"; and (3) helping them "realize that those. . . who are at the bottom of the class structure are very much affected by the advantages that those in the upper class have and work to maintain" (6).

When Greg Meyerson, Marcial González, and I began working on this topic, I first suggested titling our MLA session, "Teaching About the Rich, After Occupy." I wondered if Occupy's emphasis on the 1% and the 99% had come out of a new awareness of inequality and had spread that awareness, along with a lot of anger, to ever-wider segments of the 99%, including, especially, young people. Occupy's highlighting of student debt certainly brought the theme of inequality alive as a reality in almost every classroom where progressive teachers work to demystify the social order. Most students probably know not only that most of their classmates will owe lots of money when they finish college, but also that a national economic crisis is intensifying around student debt (more than a trillion dollars now, larger than the total of credit card debt, and so on), and that a political movement for non-payment arose during Occupy and continues today. Among many examples, see the web sites of Student Debt Crisis and Strike Debt; the latter organization's free booklet, "The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual" would make an excellent text for a unit on this subject.

1% lost a lot of their wealth before the turnaround in 2009, but bounced back quickly, while poor and working class people and most of those referred to as "middle class" lost ground at an even faster pace than they had during the previous three or four decades, and almost all the wealth that was recovered or newly created in the next five years went to the richest few per cent of Americans.

More than Occupy brought rich people into the light: the practices of rich Wall Streeters had tripped off the crash of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed. The 1% lost a lot of their wealth before the turnaround in 2009, but bounced back quickly, while poor and working class people and most of those referred to as "middle class" lost ground at an even faster pace than they had during the previous three or four decades, and almost all the wealth that was recovered or newly created in the next five years went to the richest few per cent of Americans. The result was a massive redistribution of wealth—upward. Meanwhile our political leaders did little to help the unemployed by stimulating the economy, and nothing to undo the regressive tax reforms of the Bush era. It became more and more obvious, even in the mainstream media, that Congressional rule was engineered by rich people—most spectacularly by those like the Koch brothers who used their wealth to buy undemocratic redistricting, to write union-busting state laws, to fund the Tea Party and

other fronts for capitalist accumulation, and, incidentally, to advance the ruin of Earth as habitat for our species and many others. What a spectacular, extended lesson in the workings of class society these past six years have been—a vast, painful MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).

It seems that many voters and some political leaders understood the teachings of Occupy and the Great Recession. Take Bill de Blasio's mayoral campaign. When I came back to New York in November, 2013, just about the first thing I heard on the radio was an excerpt from his victory speech. In it, to my surprise, he called the division of society into rich and poor "the defining challenge of our times" (de Blasio). Had I been there through de Blasio's "tale of two cities" campaign, I wouldn't have been so surprised. I would have heard many times of his intention to raise taxes on "the wealthiest" New Yorkers to fund pre-kindergarten programs for poor kids. (And all the other kids, too, but then most from well-to-do families already have such programs.) This was a small step toward expropriating the expropriators, no doubt, but how strange to hear it proposed by a mayor of New York, after the Bloomberg years. And the new guy de Blasio had spoken more than once at Occupy Wall Street's first encampment. Was his "an Occupy victory?" asked a host on radio station WBAI. A promo for the Brian Lehrer show on the City's NPR station invited us to listen in and find out just how the new mayor would fight inequality. Of course New York is not Dallas or Tulsa. But it's bigger, and de Blasio had won three-fourths of the vote.

I sniffed something fresh in the political air. Maybe the air of the college classroom had freshened, too? A 2011 Pew Research Center poll found that a slight majority of people in the 18-29 age group rated capitalism unfavorably; 49% thought well of socialism, 43% of capitalism (Eichler). Might radical teachers teach differently about rich people now than they would have a few years ago because students have breathed the new air for a while? Will that majority of students who tell pollsters they are down on capitalism want to learn more about it, and be ready to learn from a more advanced starting point?

Let me grant that few students and few older members of the 99% will have learned with clarity or rigor, from Occupy and the Great Recession, that "there is a class system in America," the first item on



"RICHARD SERRA URGENT DEBT TOUR" CASSIE THORNTON

the precarious academic job market to the trillion dollars in student debt—needs a lot of dot-connecting analysis. Marcial González and Greg Meyerson shine their dialectical lights into that dark systemic place. I will mention some other, more specific places that need illumination, after Occupy.

"The 1%": I bet almost every student in your classrooms knows the meaning of that phrase, knows that it implies dominance over the 99%, and knows that "we are the 99%." Does that add up to more class consciousness than college and university teachers could count on among their students a few years ago, on the first day of a semester? I do think so; and for sure, just by placing the term into everyday circulation, Occupy made talk about the rich more natural, less impolite, than before. Good start.

But in itself, the term "1%" is almost without descriptive content—itself a new mystification that needs radical puncturing. That could be a teaching challenge and opportunity. For instance, citizens (including students) do need to know how rich the rich actually are. Taxpayers at the lower edge of the top 1% earn in the neighborhood of \$400,000. That's not my neighborhood or yours, but if you teach in an ivied college or university, quite a few of the students in your classes have parents with incomes in that range—leaving them a couple of orders of magnitude downscale from Mark Zuckerberg's neighborhood. The 1% with the highest incomes straddle an important class line, with doctors and lawyers on one side and top brass at Goldman Sachs almost out of sight on the other. Furthermore, **income** is not nearly so important a guide as **wealth**, to an understanding of the upper class. Both the Occupy slogan and most analysis in mainstream media have fudged the distinction between wealth and income—a critical one, because inequality in wealth is much more severe than inequality in income: roughly 0.8 compared to a figure between



"COMMUNAL SOUND OF DEBT" CASSIE THORNTON

0.4 and 0.5, on the gini index, in which 0.0 would be perfect equality and 1.0 perfect inequality—i.e., a single person would have all the income, or all the wealth (for a clear account, see Inequality.org Staff. The Wikipedia articles on "List of Countries by Distribution of Wealth" and "List of Countries by Income Inequality" include charts ranking the countries of the world on inequality in income and wealth. See G. William Domhoff for an excellent overview and student resource).

In fact, it would be interesting to teach about the rule of the upper class as owing in good measure to their generosity, not greed—to their giving away lots of money.

Piles of individual wealth mass together, where the eccentricity of entrepreneurs and the upper-class chumminess of commercial bankers lose signs of the personal differences that generated them, and dissolve into the structure of capital. Learning about that would be an antidote to the implied theory that attributes success to individual greed and big profits to corporate greed. Critical understanding of capitalism can't rely on moral indignation. Greed is structural; it is produced by wealth, and vice versa.

In fact, it would be interesting to teach about the rule of the upper class as owing in good measure to their generosity, not greed—to their giving away lots of money. To be sure, students also need to appreciate how little it hurts the rich to give away millions. Mark Zuckerberg did not wince when he gave \$100 million to the Newark school system, in 2010. With a net worth of \$20 billion (much more, now), he could make gifts like that every year and not notice the hole in his pocket (Severns). Look behind a bare fact such as that Sheldon Adelson's net worth is \$35 billion, and see how painless it is for him to pay \$50 million, give or take a few, to oppose Obama's reelection; a similar amount to pay off a libel suit against an organization that said his casino in Macao was among other things a prostitution business; another fifty as a fine for money laundering; more than that to support Israel in various expensive ways; and so on. His wealth is around 10,000 times that of people toward the low end of the 1%, in whose company you can even find a few of the highest paid college professors.

The new billionaires have outrun the possibilities of luxury consumption. Recall Ken Lay's ten mansions and retreats, back in 2001, when the Enron scandal broke. Now, billionaires buy \$50 million penthouses as *pieds a terre* in Manhattan. Some buy personal, \$2 million submarines to add to their yacht collections. Space travel vacations, maybe immortality: it's fun to expose the follies of this new Gilded Age (ask students to check out the website Too Much for gaudy details as well as charts and figures). But the political point should not be the decadence or "greed" of the top few hundred families (not the 1% but more like the top 0.002 %), who have about as much wealth as the bottom half of the population taken together. The point

should be that the billionaires are pretty much driven into philanthropy, so-called. And that means using the social surplus—most of which is landing in their laps—to shape the future in ways that answer to their values and preferences.

Whether those preferences ostensibly serve the interests of all, or manipulatively advance the interests of the rich, including further accumulation and rule by their heirs and successors, may be a distinction without a difference. Kindly Bill and Melinda Gates may be trying to leave no child behind, while mean Charles and David Koch try to crush unions and immiserate working people, and while unphilanthropic, hyperactive Jeff Bezos, of Amazon.com, has to be "talked into" buying the *Washington Post* for \$250 million (Bercovici). Whatever their intentions and politics, activist philanthropists use piles of money to substitute their benevolent or scoundrelly wishes for the wishes of the 99%. For a critical example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (bolstered now by a \$2.5 million gift from Warren Buffett, and working alongside the Broad, Walton family, and Lumina foundations) is now in effect the U. S. Department of Education, in collaboration with its nominal boss, Arne Duncan (see Layton, for a detailed story of how these agents came together to drive fast adoption of the Common Core State Standards). They drive social reproduction along its path to high stakes testing, teacher-blaming, school-closing, and privatization of the public school system. They say they focus on education, one of the "biggest barriers that prevent people from making the most of their lives," and aim to fund "new methods to help students and teachers in the classroom" (Gates). I say, along with most of you *Radical Teacher* readers, that they focus on education in order to help turn kids into the (highly unequal) groups of workers the corporate order needs, in order to privatize schooling and so enlarge profits, and in order to make class rule seem natural (see Severns for a look at the political work Zuckerberg's \$100 million gift has been doing). Good topic for discussion and research, right? Inequality kills democracy. One way the rich are different from us is in being able to do that—in fact, unable **not** to do it, because as Hemingway put it, they have more money (Barkan, 2011; Barkan 2013).

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Looking at riches from this angle takes us back to the truth that wealth and power are structural. And relational:

the rich and the rest are not in a kind of American dream relation, or the relation posited by trickle-down economics; they are structurally antagonistic. Being rich is not just being different from other people; it is being dominant over them. The rich rule. Hegemonic processes obscure that truth, as does the conception of society as a 1% plus a 99%, superior though that analysis is to the pure ideology that Occupy contested. Occupy and the rise of the billionaires have removed a taboo from talk about class warfare, previously dismissed as fretful disturbance of the peace by sourpuss intellectuals. Now, a well-known TV figure near the edge of the mainstream, Bill Moyers, can, at an annual awards dinner, give a talk entitled "The Great American Class War: Plutocracy Versus Democracy" (Moyers). Warren Buffet can say, as he has on CNN (and elsewhere, with slight variations), "There's been class warfare going on for the last 20 years, and my class has won" (Buffett). Most students have heard, and many have been stirred by, revivals of old political ideas such as class struggle.

Besides class war, the ones I have skimmed through in this survey include **capitalist accumulation, wealth and its upward redistribution, the bourgeoisie, its luxury consumption, its control of the social surplus, its role in social reproduction, its rule—including by hegemonic processes.** Few readers of *Radical Teacher* are in a position to make categories such as these the main units of college (let alone high school) courses. Certainly I was not: I would teach about these ideas chiefly as fictional texts supplied the motive for doing so. How can students adequately learn about *Pride and Prejudice*, *Hard Times*, *Howards End*, *Age of Innocence*, the *U.S.A.* trilogy, *The Great Gatsby*, or even *The Sun Also Rises*, without going deeper than the conversation of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, to analyses in the marxian tradition? And without linking them to the world we inhabit now? I think students after Occupy are in a better position to learn about these things—have a greater **need** to learn about them—than students 20 years ago.

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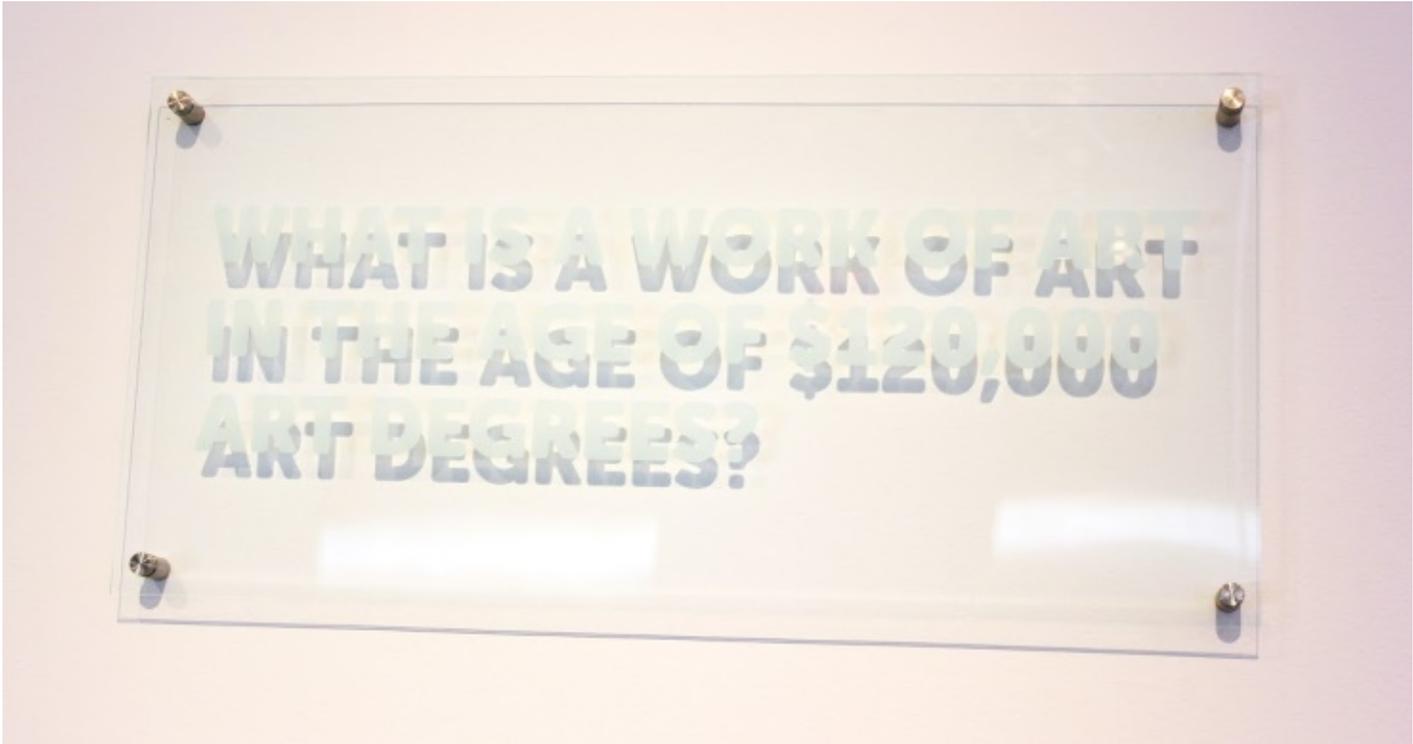
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"STATEMENTS"
CAROLINE WOLLARD, WITH BFAMFAPHD



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