ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

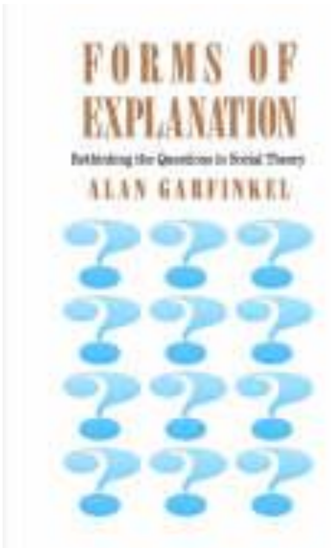
A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

"It's Not Personal, It's Business: or Teaching Structural Explanation " (at an HBCU)

by Greg Meyerson

"PORTRAIT OF MAYA ANGELOU" BY SARAH CHAVARRIA

Needless to say, the dominant explanatory framework among our students generally is still individualism, and when it comes to their career trajectories, American dreams and equal opportunities predominate. Where I currently teach, the Historically Black University (HBCU) of civil rights fame North Carolina A and T University, it is more complicated. The common sense ideology of our HBCU combines bits of "radical" rhetoric of a nationalist character—from revolutionary, militant nationalism to Afrocentrism—with protest rhetoric from the civil rights tradition fond of citing Frederick Douglass on the relevance of struggle to change, and a stunningly naïve success rhetoric, that in isolation resembles undiluted American Dream talk. Many of my students (just like those at non HBCUs) think they will be, well, rich. A central characteristic of this HBCU common sense is then to combine incoherently (as ideology does) anti-establishment talk of structures and systems with "you can make it if you try" talk. What this means in practice is that class is actually collapsed into "race," so that structures and systems amount to "the white power structure." This "power structure" is not in the historical materialist sense a structure at all but a reification of a collective mind. My approach to teaching structure and system in this context requires the concept of forms of explanation in order to distinguish structural from individualist forms of explanation while allowing "racial categories" to be (momentarily) set aside—and thus to bring into view with maximum clarity the class structures and capitalist imperatives within which "race" and racism operate. Below, I share three instances of such practice.



Alan Garfinkel, in *Forms of Explanation*, offers a neat example of a structural explanation of a grade distribution. I have modified it for my own purposes.

There are 50 students in the class (we could make it one hundred in recognition of Occupy). The professor has imposed a severe curve on the distribution so that there can be 1 A, 5 Bs, 10 Cs, 20 Ds and 14 Fs. In the example, "Mary" gets the A. "She wrote an original and thoughtful final," Garfinkel notes (Garfinkel, 41). But this would be inadequate as an answer to the question "Why did Mary get the only A?"

It is misleading because it might give the impression that writing a good final was sufficient to get the A. You could go down the list of 50 students, offering up properties of their papers that led to the evaluation. "If we take each person in the class and ask why that person got the grade he or she got, we have fifty answers to the question why Mary got an A, Bob got a B," Greg and Marcial got Ds and Dick, or Richard, as the teacher would no doubt call him, unfortunately, received an F (Garfinkel, 43). But if we were trying to explain the distribution of grades, the answers to the fifty questions would have not just little to do but **absolutely nothing** to do with it. If there were no curve, the 50 reasons might carry explanatory weight. But here, it is the curve that explains the distribution. As you might imagine, I use this example to model crudely inequality in the global economy and so to make the point that the inequality cannot be explained by individual effort; that individualist explanations of inequality fail. And the explanation for the inequality must be structural.

The model allows a nice comparison between conservative, liberal and radical views of distribution. For conservatives, the distribution is as it should be. Insofar as there is in fact a curve imposed upon the distribution by the imperatives of a capitalist system, the conservative naturalizes the inequality. Liberals may very well want to eliminate the inequalities, but if our liberal fails to address the curve, for whatever reason, she will succeed only in moving around the inequalities, not eliminating them, whatever she may or may not want.

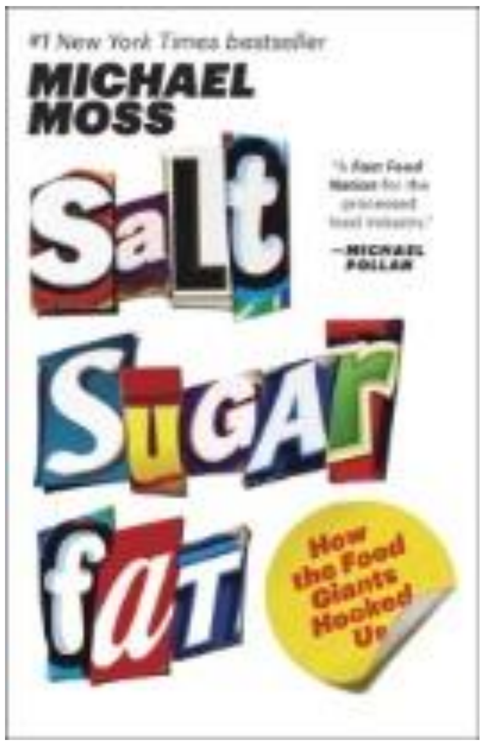
This particular version of the model leaves out sexism and racism. But a second version of the model incorporates racialized and gendered distribution effects, which would not change the distribution itself but would reshuffle (i.e. "moving around the inequalities") the names and identities so that a larger percentage of white men, for example, got the As and Bs. The first model where race and gender effects are abstracted out is crucial for understanding the precise role that racism and sexism play in reproducing class structures. The class structure generates the inequality. Racism and sexism distribute that inequality and legitimate it in order to facilitate social control and thus the reproduction of class rule. My more progressive students routinely use terms like "racial capitalism" or "structural racism," without being clear on what precisely these terms mean.

It is crucial to show students that capitalism is fundamentally ("structurally") unequal under any arrangement and this simple model accomplishes the task. It is only when they see that the inequality itself is a necessary product of the capitalist system that they can locate racism as ideology and social control and not something intrinsic to white people, for example, in the form of a fundamentally capitalist and racist psychology. Terms like "structural racism" and "racialized capitalism" can mean diametrically opposed things, even as both terms carry a radical penumbra associated with being "against the system." One interpretation of the phrase can be historically materialist and another, for example, Afrocentrist, or some incoherent amalgam of the two, which reduces to some form of psychoanalysis or culturalism. I have an Afrocentric colleague who can view at once racial capitalism and white people as the problem since whites are in this view innately capitalist while blacks are innately anti-capitalist. And my student and friend (one of the two to whom this essay is dedicated) came to reject a Marxist Afrocentrism (in favor of a class analysis of racism) once he saw its faulty conflation of role and soul, individual and structure. **This simple example played a significant role in enabling this paradigm shift.** When Engels

http://radicalteacher.library.pitt.edu No. 101 (Winter 2015) DOI 10.5195/rt.2015.197

says (or a close paraphrase) that capitalism does not solve its problems, but moves them around, think of the fundamental problem as exploitation and inequality. One central way capitalism moves the problem around is by racializing and gendering the inequality in order in effect to blame it on those it most oppresses—the better to exploit (and reproduce that exploitation) the working class as a whole.

Let us note that the model has many limitations. Here's one. The analogue to the ruling class here would be the professor imposing the curve. This is not a useful analogy although the disanalogies may be useful pedagogically. The professor could presumably eliminate the curve if she wanted and is herself not subject to it whereas the capitalist class, while they may rule, is subject to a system they cannot in fact fully control even as they make use of this uncontrollability—i.e. the phenomenon called disaster capitalism.



That the rich may not particularly like key elements of their system is indicated in my next example, from Michael Moss's discussion of the Food Giants in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*. This is one of the best books for teaching both the limits of individualist explanations in their many guises and the power of structural explanations rooted in the contradictory imperatives of capital accumulation, all the more persuasive as it is written by someone who never articulates a sentence about capitalism.

The food giants make up an industry characterized by a fierce profit/competition imperative in a market with high sunk costs (asset inertia). This imperative determines Food Giant behavior, overriding or trumping any and all contradictory processes. One striking feature of this book is Moss's focus on the repeated failure of industry higher-ups of conscience, one section of "the rich," to change industry practice even though they know precisely what's going on. This is the case even in the instance where a Food Giant (Kraft) is persuaded by the arguments of said industry higher-up of conscience and attempts to make across the board changes in food production practice.

But the aforementioned structural imperative undermines efforts at regulation, especially and strikingly self-regulation. Kraft on the one hand genuinely wishes to address the obesity epidemic (I don't doubt their sincerity and I think it's important not to doubt their sincerity if we are to understand what's really happening here) and on the other hand must obey the competitive imperative if it is going to survive. In a nutshell, the dynamic goes like this: Kraft launched a set of anti-obesity initiatives only to face increased competition from their rivals. As Daryl Brewster, head of the Nabisco division, noted, when Hershey "came in attacking the cookie space with more indulgent products," we were put "in one of those interesting squeezes that big companies can find themselves in" (Moss, 260). Kraft responded domestically with a slew of fattier, sweeter cookies: Triple Double Oreo (also the name of an Olympic dive), the Banana Split Crème Oreo, the Oreo Fudge Sundae Crème, the Dairy Queen Blizzard Crème Oreo, the Oreo Golden Double Stuf, and culminating in the "Oreo Cakester" (Moss, 262).

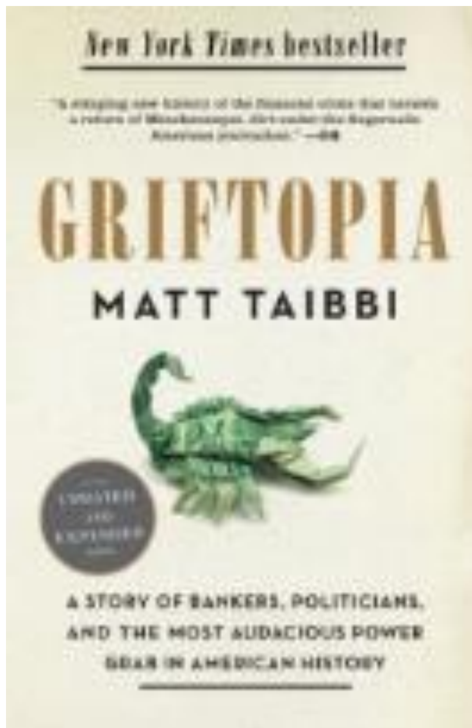
Internationally, they expanded, especially in India, kicked off by a marketing campaign to teach "the country's population of 1.2 billion how to eat an Oreo properly" (Moss, 258). Half of their profits came from their global expansion.

This example points to the very important fact of variation in the industry. There are many individuals, even powerful ones, who work in industries like this who know what's going on and oppose it. That said, it's clear that the selective pressure of the capitalist imperative will weed out or co-opt some of this variation, that part that does not adequately serve the accumulation imperative. One of Moss's "good capitalists" is Jeffrey Dunn, former President and Chief Operating Officer for Coca Cola in North and South America. Well, long story short, he had his St. Paul moment in the Brazilian favelas where he saw the negative health impacts of his favorite product. What happened? This man, who in his rivalry with Pepsi said he "wanted to see a lot of bodybags," tried to make some changes, marketing the bottled water brand (in what is known as line extensions), but far more controversially, getting Coke out of the public schools (thus leaving the field to Pepsi.) The largest bottler of Coke asked "for Dunn's head" (Moss, 117). Dunn was fired.

Interestingly, Dunn decided to try his hand at good capitalist and head up a company that markets carrots as snack food. The idea is to use the techniques of Coca Cola on behalf of healthier products. He's found a niche market alongside and not in competition with the food giants. The good capitalist has not affected Food Giant hegemony.

Moss shows that self-regulation does not work and state regulation in the United States is constantly compromised by the power of the Food Giants. In his lengthy discussion of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and U. S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A), he notes that the latter views itself as "a populist arm of the government." Abraham Lincoln, who created the department in 1862, called it "'the People's Department" (Moss, 212). But Moss contends that "the People's Department of Lincoln's imaginings has long been enmeshed in a conflict of interest that undermines its populist roots” (Moss, 213). So the U.S.D.A has a dual role to play—protecting the people’s health on the one hand and on the other placating and nurturing the “300 or so companies that form the $1 trillion industry of food manufacturing” (Moss, 213). As we might expect, the two sides are not equal. It’s not that the health side (the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion) is merely public relations. The health advocates for the U.S.D.A are sincere and hard working. But “its lowly rank in the pecking order is not only reflected in its satellite office status” but “in the amount of money it’s allowed to spend in pursuit of healthier food: its annual budget clocking in at .0045 percent of the agency’s overall outlays of $146 billion” (Moss, 214).

Moss’s solutions—education and regulation—to the problem make little sense, in fact contradicting his own evidence, even as they are the common sense and in fact the student’s common sense—a pragmatist version of problem solving (if there’s a problem, fix it) that is itself a form of individualist explanation.Moss notes that other nations like Finland and England have done a better job of regulation (against the Food Giants) than the United States. But he omits to ask why, leaving us to assume that countries just act like individuals writ large, and so system imperatives are once again hidden from view. The key question is “under what circumstances can state regulation trump the accumulation imperative?”



If you look at the history of corporations, there have been periods where they welcomed regulation because it was in their own interests. Complying with the regulations cost money that helped knock out the smaller competition (as with timber industries in the early 20th century). In the case of successful regulation: 1) the state entities must be strong enough, and the general tendency these days is to weaken them; and 2) you need a contradiction between the industry in question and, I would suggest, the system as a whole. I think this is what happened in case of tobacco in 1998 where Moss himself notes that the successful lawsuit against big tobacco brought “by more than 40 states” was necessitated by the fact that their “health care systems were buckling from having to cover the growing numbers of people made sick by smoking induced illnesses” (Moss, 247). In the case of Finland and England, the Food Giants are not based in these countries, and these countries as part of the worldwide competitive imperative need to defend their own accumulation imperatives against that of their rivals, and that will involve state regulation against the other guys. I should say that the education part of his solution is especially lame and comes down to “reading this book can make a difference.”

I have taught this book to undergraduates several times and, once it is pointed out, they do see the inconsistency between Moss’s (structural) diagnosis and his solutions.

My final example and in many ways the most topical turns to the financial crisis. This material, I should say, has not yet been yet taught in my classes. I am trying it out here first.

The left liberal view (and version of individualism) of the recent financial crisis is represented by a book like Matt Taibbi’s *Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids and the Long Con that is Breaking America.* Taibbi views what he calls “the grifter class” as responsible for the crisis. He sees elites of both major political parties as part of this class and views the Tea Party as the newest form of racism for dividing poor whites and blacks. Sounds pretty “structural” on the surface as it speaks forcefully of strategies of divide and conquer that have formed a central part of Marxian theories of racism but also liberal theories of racism (Frederick Douglass made the case against divide and conquer in eloquent ways without questioning capitalism).

Yet Taibbi’s argument is not an argument about structural imperatives. The grifter class is not exactly the ruling class or if it is, it’s a ruling class gone bad, turned from its formerly productive and relatively equitable ways by “the bad rich,” represented by Alan Greenspan and Goldman Sachs, but especially the former.

For Taibbi, Greenspan is that “one-in-a-billion asshole” (“the biggest asshole in the universe”) who can single handedly make things way worse (Taibbi, 35). His ideology and practice is continually described as insane and greedy and Taibbi spends a fair number of pages doing a mini biography to trace Greenspan’s relation to Ayn Rand and her ideas: the source of Greenspan’s world destroying one-in-a-billion assholitude. In short, Greenspan is “key to understanding this generation’s financial disaster”:

> *He repeatedly used the financial might of the state to jet fuel the insanely regressive pyramid scheme of the bubble economy which like actual casinos proved to be a highly efficient method for converting the scattered savings of individual Schmuck-citizens into the concentrated holdings of a few private individuals. (Taibbi, 53)*

In short, Taibbi focuses on Goldman Sachs and Alan Greenspan (the bad rich) as representative of a group that in effect engineered a coup of sorts, a power grab, displacing productive (and relatively equitable) capitalism in favor of neoliberalism. A major assumption of this model, note the similarity to Moss, is that inequality and lack of regulation both cause crisis (itself caused by "greed"), but that both can be remedied under capitalism if there is enough political will to do something like "take back our country."

In essence, the left liberal argument is that there is good capitalism and bad capitalism, these capitalisms are distinct, and the good can be chosen over the bad or vice versa. Not surprisingly, with this kind of choice available, both good and bad capitalism can be represented by good and bad people who have good and bad policy flowing from their characters. Good policy is reduced inequality and greater regulation. Bad policy is more inequality and less regulation, a financialized economy, overreliance on debt, and bubbles.

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The historical materialist view challenges all of these assumptions. Good and bad capitalism are dialectically related moments of a contradictory crisis ridden unity. Taking regulation first, the view offered here is that what we call neoliberalism, casino capitalism, financialized capitalism, etc. was not simply a policy choice which we could reject in favor of good capitalism, whether understood as productive capitalism, hi wage hi productivity capitalism, Keynesianism, return to the gold standard, whatever.

Neoliberalism was itself a response to prior system level contradictions. Capitalist ideology must, as Chris Harman notes in *Zombie Capitalism*, "pin the blame on something other than capitalism as such," and must in effect "veer" from ideologies of free markets to state intervention back to deregulation and back again to state intervention.

The blowing of bubbles (whether the dot com or the housing bubble) was not simply a *choice* made by greedy capitalists (led by Alan Greenspan) to reproduce capital accumulation in unsustainable ways. Finance-led bubbles provided a profitable outlet for a productive economy that otherwise would have gone stagnant. Bubbles in other words were necessary even if themselves rooted in the contradictions which they tried to solve but could only defer. Harman notes that such bubbles (from the eighties on) were "central in ensuring markets that neither its (the supposedly productive economy) own investment nor what it paid its workers could provide": without the 'housing' and 'subprime' mortgage bubble, there would have been very little recovery from the recession of 2001-2 (Harman, 287).

Before ending, I do not want to give the impression that while regulation failed in the past, leading to deregulation, that the swing to regulation this time around will solve the problems. Focus on capitalist imperatives once again can help us. In his section of *Zombie Capitalism* called appropriately, "the system in a noose," Chris Harman notes:

> *The two long term tendencies pointed to by Marx—for the rate of profit to fall on the one hand and for the concentration and centralization of capital on the other—combine to put the whole system in a noose. The attempts of capitals and the states in which they are based to wriggle out of it can only increase the tensions between them—and the pain they inflict on those whose labour sustains them. (Harman, 303)*

The system is the key, so that, as Neil Davidson says, "[once] accumulation is engaged upon it is not a choice, rational or otherwise, because there are no alternatives, other than ceasing to be a capitalist: if this option is rejected, then capitalists are subject to a compulsion terrible, severe and inescapeable."

Once the structures and imperatives are brought clearly into view—revealing the errors of individualist "explanation," racialized or not—racism must, as I've noted but it's worth repeating, be brought back into the picture. This might require pointing out that the "pain" inflicted on labor continues to operate through a racialized and gendered division of labor in the service of class rule. Or, in the specific case of the latest financial crisis, how "the rich" fueled their speculation via a sub-prime crisis characterized by highly racialized marketing and then, in a specifically right wing discourse, managed to blame the whole thing on the nefarious forces (racial minorities plus liberal elites) that underlay the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977.

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To conclude with a brief return to teaching practice, the material on the financial crisis could easily be integrated into a section in a critical theory course on crisis: though I would make this specific discussion of the financial crisis part of the larger question of capitalism, environmental racism and the ecological crisis (anthologies of critical theory now routinely include sections on eco-criticism). And I would be strongly inclined to pair liberal anti-racist analyses of the ecological crisis and environmental racism found in books like Van Jones' *The Green Collar Economy* with Marxist treatments of the same subject matter that reject the good capitalism/bad capitalism distinction underpinning Jones' efforts: books like Joel Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature* or Minqi Li's *The Rise of China: and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy.*

Most of us are familiar with Gerald Graff's idea of "teaching the conflicts." It's an idea that I have benefited from as a teacher. But while Graff's idea assumes a detached point of view from which to observe the theoretical conflicts that are current or "live" in any discipline, radical teachers can and should go beyond tracking disciplinary debates and zoom in on theoretical conflicts that we ought to focus on, conflicts that need both theoretical and practical resolution. This essay, which argues for the superior explanatory power of structural explanations against various "individualist" rivals, suggests studying and teaching the conflicts that can most help us to understand a world in dire need of change.