

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Teaching Note
Explaining Economic Inequality Using the Film, *The Queen of Versailles*

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STILL FROM *THE QUEEN OF VERSAILLES* DIRECTED BY LAUREN GREENFIELD

In introductory classes on race and ethnicity, terms like wealth, economic inequality, and SES (socio-economic status) often take center stage during one chapter or another. There are numerous textbooks on this subject. But, I've had more success explaining these terms by using different media. To illustrate such important themes to non-economics majors, I often show and discuss *The Queen of Versailles*, a 2012 documentary that depicts the Siegel family's two-year meteoric descent from wealth (being worth billions of dollars) to rags (being worth "only" tens of millions of dollars).

Before showing the film, I assign readings to my students that clarify the differences between wages and salaries and between income and wealth. Wages are the payments workers receive after performing a job based upon an hourly rate. Salaries are compensation paid non-hourly workers, typically over a year's time. As for income, it consists of one's salary or wages combined with revenue from any other revenue stream, for example, investments. Wealth, on the other hand, is defined as financial assets along with those high-value items that are purchased with money (such as furs, cars, boats, houses, etc.). In contrast, the term 'socio-economic status' is more nuanced. According to Wickrama (888) quoting Coleman: "Socioeconomic status (SES) reflects one's position in the social structure [and] ...is a function of material capital (e.g., income and property), human capital (e.g., skills and knowledge), and social capital (e.g., social status, social support, and power)."

It is important that students understand these key economic terms before viewing the film because examples of wealth come forth quickly. When the film begins, the audience is immediately introduced to David Siegel, a wealthy businessman, Jackie, his college-educated, younger wife (by 30 years), and their large, eight-child family. David Siegel was not born wealthy. Instead, he acquired his wealth over time, by capitalizing on a real estate tip someone gave him. Elaborating on that idea, David built lodging on his land, sold portions of his properties as timeshares (short residential stays), and, ultimately, became one of the wealthiest, most successful timeshare resort business owners in the U.S. The film shows how hundreds of Siegel's employees earn a salary selling timeshares by talking Vegas visitors into "good investment" purchases. Scenes of the Siegel residence show the extent of the family's wealth: The Siegels live in a mansion staffed by several live-in nannies and countless housekeepers. We see one cook, one chauffer, and one pilot. But, it's implied that there might be more. Although the film is vague about some details, it suggests that the entire staff—except for the housekeepers and pilots (who are most likely hourly wage-earners)—is salaried.

It is not surprising to college students that some people—based on training, education, location, gender, etc.—earn more than others. Nevertheless, I have often wondered to what degree, if any, my students (some of whom are working full-/part-time jobs) envy the Siegels' lifestyle. Invariably, I sense admiration among some as evidenced by their smiles and forward leans as they position themselves to listen more intently. After all, the Siegels have a large income, they have opulent wealth, and they live an extravagant life of luxury. The Siegel children neither

work to support the family nor appear to contribute to the household by performing any chores. In fact, they don't even take care of their own pets. If all that weren't enough, David and Jackie are in the process of building the largest private home in America (worth an estimated \$300 million), equipped with two tennis courts, thirty bathrooms, a basketball court, and ten kitchens, just to name a few of the new mansion's features. As an example of the home's extravagance, one of Jackie's future clothes closets, when completed, will be the size of a small New York City studio apartment.

With each boast, faces of admiration seemingly change to ones of disapproval as "unnecessary" opulence increasingly clashes with students' personal values. However, looks of disgust are soon replaced by astonishment (and self-satisfied smirks) when the Siegels eventually lose everything after the stock market of 2008 fails. When the Siegels lose their wealth, there is a ripple effect: Vacationers-turned-timeshare owners find themselves unable to make their credit card payments and fall behind (or default) on their timeshare remittances. David must lay off timeshare employees because money is not coming in. The family must cut back on their parties and the Siegels are forced to slash their charitable contributions and otherwise drastically alter their normal spending habits. The employment of hourly workers—like the cook and most (if not all) of the housekeepers—is terminated. At least one full-time nanny retains her live-in position, but many other nannies and staff appear to be let go, as well.

Examples of SES are evident throughout the film. David's level of education is never stated but can be assumed to be limited. Nevertheless, his earning power, his connections to rich and famous entities (including former President George H.W. Bush, the elder, and the Miss America Association), and his wealth made his SES unmistakably high *before* the stock market failed. Even after being reduced to a poorer man, David's privilege, connections, and ever-diminishing wealth still make his SES higher than most people's. The Siegel's head nanny—who most likely possesses the same minimal high school education as Mr. Siegel—stands in stark contrast to him: Her SES as a woman of color who performs the ostensibly menial task of caring for the children of the rich, is not remunerated in any serious, monetary way despite her and David's apparently similar educational background. Though the head nanny has cared for the eight Siegel children for years, she has either *not* been paid enough as a live-in employee of the family to be able to afford to travel to the Philippines to see her son or has been prohibited, in some way, from taking personal time to make the trip. In spite of the head nanny's obvious dedication to the family—she consoles the somber children, reprimands the naughty ones, and is left to pick up the excrement of animals who relieve themselves in the home—she is not even treated as a guest for a day during the Siegel's Christmas party. Instead, she is the designated dancing holiday entertainment and expected to wear a reindeer suit for the party—which she does.

The Queen of Versailles ends in an untimely way. Throughout the documentary, Mr. Siegel grows increasingly irritated with the camera crew chronicling his struggle to restructure his debt. One day, he suddenly decides to no

longer allow filming of the documentary, thereby bringing the project to a screeching halt. Abrupt halt notwithstanding, the film holds the students' interest and helps them grasp the concepts of salary, wage, income, and wealth much better than just reading the textbook alone.

References

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