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Neither Necessary nor Sufficient

Community Education and the Fight against Poverty

John Marsh

I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.
—William Morris

“Education, Education, Education.” Or so the *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert (2007) recently titled one of his op-ed columns, and if this title sounds like a mantra to be chanted over and over and over again until our eyes turn glassy, that is because Herbert means it to be chanted over and over and over again. In the piece, Herbert rightly worries over the inequalities in income, unemployment, and incarceration rates among African American males of varying educational attainment. Sixty-seven percent of all black males who dropped out of high school are currently unemployed, Herbert notes, compared with unemployment rates of 43 percent for black males who graduated from high school and 14 percent for those who graduated from four-year colleges. For these and other reasons, Herbert argues, education is “the closest thing to a magic potion for black people that I can think of.” Turning the screw, Herbert adds, “For anyone deluded enough to question whether education is the ticket to a better life for black boys and men consider that a black male who drops out of high school is 60 times more likely to find himself in prison than one with a bachelor’s degree.”

As it happens, I am just deluded enough to question whether education is the ticket to a better life for black boys and men — or, at least, for

all black boys and men, or, for that matter, all people who find themselves unemployed, living in poverty, or even incarcerated. But Herbert is far from alone in his faith in education as an antipoverty cure—or far from alone in thinking that anyone who disagrees with that position must be “deluded.” In a 1999 Gallop opinion poll, roughly two-thirds of respondents thought that the government should help the poor either with more education or with better job training (Schiller 2004: 2). Indeed, in terms of conventional wisdom about poverty, perhaps none dominates our thinking so much as the belief that education (or lack of it) is behind poverty and thus that education (and more of it) will ameliorate it. I do not believe either of those things.

For anyone else, that may not be all that remarkable of a belief to hold about the causes of poverty or the cure for it. But I am the local founder and director of the Odyssey Project, a free, college-accredited course in the humanities offered to low-income adults, a course more or less premised on the belief “that liberal education is education to make people free, and it proceeds on the conviction that engagement with the humanities can offer individuals a way out of poverty by fostering habits of sustained reflection and skills of communication and critical thinking.” I did not compose those lines, but I trot them out every time I describe the program to someone, and, given how far my own views depart from them, I sometimes feel like a vegetarian managing a slaughterhouse—someone who has to keep what their left hand is doing from what their right hand does.

The Odyssey Project is the Illinois version of the Bard College Course in the Humanities, which provides free, college-level instruction in the humanities, with the award of college credits, to economically and educationally disadvantaged individuals. Between twenty-five and thirty students enroll in the course each fall, and students must be between the ages of eighteen and forty-five and live at 150 percent of the poverty level or lower. Once enrolled, students study five disciplines: literature, art history, moral philosophy, U.S. history, and critical thinking and writing. Classes meet twice per week over an eight-month period at sites—libraries, community centers—within the neighborhoods where students are likely to live, and the courses are taught by professors drawn from nearby universities. As much as possible, too, the financial barriers to higher education are removed. The Odyssey Project (also known as the Clemente Course) charges no tuition, and it provides books, transportation, and child care. Bard College, the academic sponsor of the course, grants six college credits to those who complete the program at a high academic level, and those credits can then be transferred to other colleges or universities. Since its inception in the early 1990s, the course has been offered

in fourteen states and the District of Columbia, in addition to the many affiliated courses—like the Odyssey Project—that might be called something else but adopt the same model and premises.

In 2005, the Illinois Humanities Council, based in Chicago, was running two Odyssey Project courses in the city, one on the north side and another on the south side, as well as a course in the state capital, Springfield. (The Springfield course has since stopped.) That year, I took a position as assistant director of the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Anxious to do more than just facilitate research in the humanities for faculty and graduate students, as important as that work is, I set out to bring the course to Urbana–Champaign, which, despite its reputation as a leafy college town, has considerable pockets of poverty and continues to suffer from its stark history of segregation. According to the 2000 census, the twin cities of Champaign-Urbana, with a combined population of 110,000 people, have poverty rates of 22.1 percent and 27.3 percent, respectively, which actually exceeds the poverty rate of Chicago, at 19.6 percent. Some of these Champaign-Urbana poor are impoverished graduate students, but most are not. Urbana–Champaign also has, literally, a wrong side of the tracks that separates the predominantly African American north side of town from the rest of the University of Illinois campus and its neighborhoods to the south. So with enough demand—that is, enough poor people—and an enormous university from which to draw faculty and resources, Champaign-Urbana seemed like an ideal place to start a course in the humanities, and in many ways it has been. In 2005, I set up the program, and as I write (mid-March 2008), we are coming upon the close of our second year.

There is much to be said about the program, both bad (the reluctance of some department executive officers at the university to cooperate with it and the severe attrition of students who, for a variety of understandable reasons, drop out of the course) and good (the generosity of the university to fund the program, the eagerness of faculty to teach in it, and the almost inconceivable drive of students to attend the course in the face of already overwhelming commitments—children, jobs, families). In this essay, though, I want to explore how the course fits into our beliefs about the relation between poverty and education; specifically, our beliefs about the relation between poverty and higher or postsecondary education. I worry that the Odyssey Project not only contributes to the belief that education can eradicate poverty but in some way exists because of that belief. In the end, I want to make a claim for the Odyssey Project and other community education projects not

for their role in combating poverty, though I am happy if they do that in their own small way, but on slightly different grounds, ones having to do with the value of a liberal arts education.

The Humanities Escape Route

I have said that in terms of conventional wisdom about poverty, perhaps none dominates our thinking so much as the belief that a lack of education causes poverty and that more education will fix it. In addition to Bob Herbert and 67 percent of Americans, all of whom place their antipoverty bets on education, there is Robert Reich, professor of social and economic policy at Brandeis University and former U.S. secretary of labor. Reich can be quite eloquent about the plight of what he calls “personal-service workers” in a global economy — nurses, physical therapists, and medical technicians on the high-wage end, restaurant workers, cabbies, retail workers, security guards, and hospital attendants on the low-wage end. The rewards of a global economy, he writes, tend to go not to personal-service workers but almost exclusively to the problem identifiers and solvers, the group Reich famously called “symbolic analysts.” “In contrast to that of symbolic analysts,” Reich noted in a 2003 op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal*, “the pay of most personal-service workers in the U.S. is stagnant or declining.” Reich’s solution? “Help spur upward mobility by getting more Americans a good education, including access to college.”

On the one hand, I applaud any program that involves getting more Americans a good education, and, speaking as a symbolic analyst, it is in fact nice work if you can get it. But I am disturbed by the somewhat bizarre faith Reich has in the U.S. and global economy to produce good jobs for all these symbolic analysts — and equally disturbed by what will happen to all of the nonsymbolic analysts left behind. By Reich’s logic, if I live in a nice house and you live in a decrepit one, the solution is not to make your house nicer but for you to sell it to some poor unfortunate and move into a nice house in my neighborhood. But as with jobs, we cannot abandon houses on the outskirts of town when we are ready to move to nicer digs. Someone — that poor unfortunate — will still live in your decrepit house and will still perform your impoverishing, personal-service labor long after you’ve left.

Indeed, as even Reich points out, regardless of how many symbolic analysts we train, the U.S. economy will continue to need personal-service workers — and in the next decade continue to need even more of them. “Computers and robots can’t do these jobs,” Reich rightly observes, “because they require care or attentiveness. Workers in other nations can’t do them because they must be done in person.” So what will happen to these workers? Or, if

we do succeed in getting them a good education and moving them into the ranks of symbolic analysts, what will happen to the workers who take their jobs? Reich doesn't say. One gets the impression, though, that Reich is above all concerned with American workers and their job prospects; as a result, he ends up consigning legal and undocumented immigrants to the ranks of the personal-service sector. Even if we could stomach this scenario, the numbers will not work. There are more personal-service-sector jobs than there are immigrants. Even if the numbers did work, though, the United States would still have a poor and working-poor problem — although perhaps its racial and ethnic demographic will have changed. But the point is that we cannot all be symbolic analysts. Someone has to take care of our symbolic analyzing minds when the bodies that house them need to eat, get driven to the airport, be clothed, be protected, or be taken care of when those bodies start falling apart.¹

A similar problem appears when we begin to examine the conventional wisdom behind the Odyssey Project as Earl Shorris originally conceived it in the mid-1990s. For Shorris, at the time a journalist, social critic, novelist, and contributing editor at *Harper's Magazine*, education — specifically, an education in the humanities — offered a magic potion not just for black men or boys, as Herbert believes, but for poor people in general. Shorris (1997: 50) theorized that “numerous forces — hunger, isolation, illness, landlords, police, abuse, neighbors, drugs, criminals, and racism, among many others — exert themselves on the poor at all times and enclose them, making up a ‘surround of force’ from which, it seems, they cannot escape.” Shorris believed that this surround of force “was what kept the poor from being political, and that the absence of politics in their lives was what kept them poor” (50). By “political,” Shorris was careful to say that he did not mean something as prosaic as voting in an election, but rather “activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city-state” (50). In order to enter the public world of politics, Shorris conjectured, the poor first had to learn to reflect, and one learned how to reflect by studying the humanities. “If the political life was the way out of poverty, the humanities provided an entrance to reflection and the political life. The poor did not need anyone to release them; an escape route existed” (51–52).

Shorris never stated explicitly how the political life would lead the poor out of poverty. Presumably, the poor were to organize, though against whom or for what Shorris never says. That he arranged for graduates to receive college credit for the course, however, suggests the primary way he imagined the poor would make their way out of poverty — by going to college.

It could well be that an education, even an education in the humanities, will enable some people to escape from poverty or near poverty. But the problem arises when education becomes the only escape route from poverty — because that road from poverty will very quickly get bottlenecked. And the problem is larger than Reich and Shorris, who are, again, far from alone in their inflated hopes for education and how it might solve our most pressing economic problems. In a recent excerpt from his book *The Disposable American: Layoffs and Their Consequences*, Louis Uchitelle (2006), who covers business, labor, and economics for the *New York Times*, documents how “the myth” of education and retraining has dominated our thinking about unemployment in the last decade and a half. That myth, Uchitelle could have added, has also dominated our thinking about poverty. As Uchitelle describes it,

The presumption — promoted by economists, educators, business executives and nearly all of the nation’s political leaders, Democrats and Republicans alike — holds that in America’s vibrant and flexible economy there is work, at good pay, for the educated and skilled. The unemployed [or, for that matter, the poor] need only to get themselves educated and skilled and the work will materialize. Education and training create the jobs, according to this way of thinking. Or, put another way, an appropriate job at decent pay materializes for every trained or educated worker.

That myth, however, “evaporated” for the aircraft mechanics and other workers whom Uchitelle follows as they are laid off and then channeled into the relentlessly upbeat world of career workshops in which the recently unemployed learn how to write resumes and how to interview, undergo personality evaluations and job counseling, and, if they’re lucky, receive tuition grants to go to community colleges. These workers quickly discover, however, what we symbolic analysts have seemingly yet to discover, which is that, as Uchitelle reminds us, “Most of the unfilled jobs pay low wages and require relatively little skill.” “From the spring of 2003 to the spring of 2004,” he notes, “more than 55 percent of the hiring was at wages of \$13.25 an hour or less: hotel and restaurant workers, health care employees, temporary replacements and the like.” As Uchitelle points out, “That trend is likely to continue. Seven of the 10 occupations expected to grow fastest from 2002 to 2012, according to the Labor Department, pay less than \$13.25 an hour, on average: retail salesclerks, customer service representatives, food service workers, cashiers, janitors, nurse’s aids and hospital orderlies.” Moreover, as Uchitelle explains, “That \$13.25 threshold is important. . . . That is roughly the income that a

family of four must have in many parts of the country to maintain a standard of living minimally above the poverty level.”

It bears saying, then, even if it risks belaboring the obvious, that the vast majority of the poor and, especially, the working poor are poor *not* because they are not educated enough, but because they do not work enough (because of either unemployment, disability, or disinclination) or because they are not paid enough for the work that they do. To hold otherwise is, as Uchitelle reminds us, “an innocuous way to address the politics of unemployment [and, again, I would add the politics of poverty] without strengthening either the bargaining power of workers or the federal government’s role in bolstering labor markets.” It amounts, moreover, to “a psychological pat on the back for the nonpoor,” as the economist Bradley Schiller points out (2004: 7). If the poor are poor because they are not educated enough, then the higher incomes of the *nonpoor* must reflect their higher educations — thus absolving them, in theory, from any responsibility to the poor. After all, if the poor are poor because they have not worked hard enough in schools, went to savagely unequal schools, or did not have the opportunity to go to school at all, then they are not poor because the well-off do not pay enough in taxes or because the well-off prefer to pay less for goods and services even though doing so may consign those who make and sell those goods and services to a life of working poverty. Rather, all we need to do is to fix the schools, and, voilà, problem solved.

I fear, then, that the Odyssey Project, like Robert Reich and, until recently, nearly all of our nation’s economic and political leaders, is part of a larger trend that believes we can solve the problem of poverty through education and not through economics. To be sure, we can solve some poverty through education. Some, perhaps even many, students who graduate from the Odyssey Project will go on to college, thereby improving their lives. Other students may have no desire to go on to college but, as many of our students have, are seeking to model a commitment to education to their own children, who may, perhaps, benefit from seeing this commitment in their parents. Or, as Danielle Allen, dean of the humanities at the University of Chicago and longtime instructor in the Chicago Odyssey Project, described in a fall 2006 talk she gave on the University of Illinois campus, some graduates of the Odyssey Project may well gain the confidence and, equally important, the rhetorical skills needed to, for example, ask for a raise. But as solutions to poverty and inequality in this country, these do not seem terribly practical or even, admittedly, all that inspiring.

The Odyssey Project Reconsidered

So one might wonder, if I think that the Odyssey Project as an antipoverty program is misguided at best and self-interested at worst, why I keep showing up for class every night, why I keep losing sleep over which of the students has dropped out and which is barely hanging on, and why I keep bothering people about their money and their time for the course who would really prefer not to be bothered about their money and their time at all. I keep doing so for two main reasons, among others, and they both trump the misgivings I have about the program.

First, I believe in the Odyssey Project because it *is* the case, as Herbert (2007) puts it, that “it is becoming very hard for anyone to succeed in this society without a college education.” A recent study by the economists Frank Levy and Richard Murbane has shown that, in 1979, a thirty-year-old college grad earned 17 percent more than a thirty-year-old high school grad. Now the gap is over 50 percent (Caldwell 2007). In other words, if someone wants to make more than \$13.25 an hour, if she wants her family to not live in poverty, she had better go to college. As I have tried to spell out above, I deeply regret that that is the economy we live in. But so long as it is, and so long as we profess to believe in equality of opportunity, then everyone has the right to try to succeed in that economy, and if the only way to do that is through a college education, then we ought to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to go or to go back to college. As I have tried to argue, however, ensuring that everyone has a right to a college education is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for battling poverty. It may increase the equality of opportunity, but it will do comparatively little for the problem of equality and poverty proper other than, perhaps, ever so lightly shuffling the deck of who is poor and who isn’t.

Second, I believe in the Odyssey Project because just as everyone has a right to the economic opportunities that higher education allows, they also have a right to the less tangible benefits higher education affords as well—specifically, whatever it is one gains by studying the liberal arts. In “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” William Carlos Williams (2005: 1283) wrote:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

I should note that in my experience as an academic, I have lost track of the number of times administrators, provosts, and deans, who are sometimes at a loss for what to say to humanists, have recited these lines. Truth be told, I often have trouble deciding whether the lines are self-aggrandizing, hyperbolic, or both. But we should not hold any of this against Williams because they perhaps express what Aristotle put better in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a work that the Champaign–Urbana Odyssey Project students read in the fall of our first year. In that work, Aristotle (1998: 267) famously argues that “perfect happiness is a contemplative activity,” by which I take him to mean that human happiness ultimately depends on creating the conditions—economic and educational—that would allow someone to reflect on what it means to be human and what it means to live in a society of humans. Just as everyone has the right to succeed, then, everyone also ought to have the right to happiness—which, following Aristotle, can be defined in part as the right to study the humanities. I should hasten to add that this belief entails no defense of the great books. Indeed, I care less about *what* Odyssey Project students—or any students—read than that they have an opportunity to read, reflect on, and discuss literary, historical, or philosophical works or works of art with other people.

One can make the point a slightly different way. Liberals tend to justify the liberal arts by saying that their role is to educate students to participate in democracy. Most academics and administrators would quickly second that goal. But that formulation has always struck me as odd. Our democracy comprises more people than just those who attend or graduate from four-year universities. That a society should prepare only those graduates to participate in a democracy seems alarmingly undemocratic.

In sum, then, education can neither diagnose nor cure the problem of poverty and inequality in American life. But that is not quite the same thing as saying that education has no role to play in our thinking about poverty and inequality. Quite the opposite. Indeed, in my high, utopian moments, I believe that we ought to combat poverty and working poverty in order to create the conditions—economic security, health, free time—that would enable people to read poetry and achieve, as Aristotle has it, perfect happiness through contemplation. In other words, education may not solve poverty, but it—both education and the liberal arts as a social good—ought to be one of the reasons why we try to solve poverty at all.

As hardheaded as I like to imagine I am when it comes to economics, then I am equally softheaded when it comes to the humanities. I must, I tell myself, have devoted my life to reading, teaching, and writing for loftier

reasons than just status or disinclination toward most other sorts of work. Presumably, too, I am not unique, and those good reasons hold (or would hold) for others as well. And when I think about what those reasons might be, I frequently return to ideas the historian Arthur Schlesinger offered not long before his death in early 2007 in an article on the importance of studying history. Schlesinger (2006: 14) wrote, “History is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As a person deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.” For “history” in Schlesinger’s formulation, I substitute its close, older cousin “the humanities,” but in most other respects Schlesinger’s analogy holds. To be sure, generations of people have got along well enough — occasionally extraordinarily well — with neither a sophisticated historical consciousness nor much of any familiarity with the humanities as academics would define them. Nevertheless, I believe that people are quite simply better off if given the chance to think about where we — an individual, the nation, humanity, however that “we” is defined — have been and where we are going; better able, too, to deal with our individual and collective present and future. So if in the final analysis the Odyssey Project does not do much else, for those who want it, it does do that. And that is no small thing.

Note

1. To Reich’s credit, he seems to have come around on this point. In a 2008 *New York Times* op-ed, he argues that “the only way to keep the economy going over the long run is to increase the wages of the bottom two-thirds of Americans.” The country can do that, he elaborates, through a larger earned-income tax credit for low-income workers, stronger unions, harsher fines for employers that violate a worker’s right to organize, and better schools for children in lower- and moderate-income communities.

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