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Book Review: Excellence vs. Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?

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Book Review

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Ornstein, A. C. (2016). *Excellence vs. equality: Can society achieve both goals?* New York, NY: Routledge. 188 pp., \$23.23-\$49.95(paperback). ISBN-13:978-1138940901; ISBN-10:1138940909

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Exhausted from the 2015-2016 election season, one may want to escape its overheated rhetoric and nasty partisanship. But the societal conditions that led Democrats, Republicans, and Independents to assert loudly, “The system is rigged!” hangs in the air. Ordinary folks feel left behind and wronged. They believe that they are working harder than ever and getting nowhere, perhaps even falling backwards, experiencing few chances for mobility or success. From millennials to retired Boomers, countless American voters are frustrated and angry. Their concerns are real, and we ignore their issues at our peril.

In his new book, *Excellence vs. Equality*, Allan C. Ornstein, professor of education at St. Johns University, asks how we as a nation address the question: “Can our society achieve both excellence and equality?” Using reinforcing references and data points, Ornstein deconstructs the issues of opportunity, excellence, equality, meritocracy, and inherited wealth and describes their impact on economic mobility and achieving the American dream. How we answer his question will shape our society and “the kind of people we are—or *think* we are” (see Ornstein, 2014).

Excellence vs. Equality’s Organization

Ornstein arranges his book with an introduction, five chapters, references, and index. The *Introduction* briefly presents the liberal (i.e., social contract) and conservative (i.e., personal responsibility) viewpoints on our society’s inequality. Ornstein opines the lack of opportunity and incentives to question one’s assumptions or create grounds for compromise. Education cannot overcome the wide inequalities of wealth and power created by variations of birth

and background. Policies and laws—based on what the society views as fair, just, and for the common good—are needed if ordinary people are to have opportunity and social mobility (and if our democracy is to survive).

Chapter 1, “The Search for Talent,” describes Americans’ traditional reliance on education as a key means of creating opportunities for economic and social mobility. Today’s globalization and technology have caught countless Americans unprepared, and the future of the American workers’ ability to compete is in question. Chapter 2, “Excellence, Equality, and Education,” affirms the links between education, excellence, and equality. Ornstein argues that public schools cannot compensate for the tremendous variations in wealth and status among communities. Determining how to promote both equal educational opportunities—especially for children less privileged and of varied abilities—and educational excellence remains a challenge.

Chapter 3, “Socio-Economic Class and Mobility,” considers that extreme inequality is tilting the playing field too much for education, hard work, and talent to overcome the differences that students bring from home. Because the very rich play by different rules than the rest of us, those in the working, middle, and mildly affluent classes have become “unknowing victims duped by the people they trusted” (p. 104). Unless everyone has the opportunity to succeed and enact personal responsibility, people lose commitment to their society. Chapter 4, “Innovation and Human Capital,” asks whether we are “mechanizing and computerizing ourselves into obsolescence.” The Internet and globalization are transforming the American workplace. Companies are outsourcing middle-class and white-collar jobs to emerging nations with well-educated individuals willing to work for significantly lower wages than American scientists, engineers, or accountants. The results are more economic dislocation and less mobility, opportunity, and status for ordinary Americans.

Chapter 5, “Beyond Excellence,” relates how the United States is dismantling its middle class, democracy’s backbone, for a new moneyed aristocracy. A skilled versus unskilled gap is growing between American workers. Yet for many, college is not providing sufficient return on its costly investment; parents and students are questioning its economic value. When a critical mass of ordinary people believe that they cannot get a decent job, think the system is stacked against them, and see few chances for mobility or success, divisiveness and polarization result. *Opportunity* is the key.

Review

A keen (if dystopian) observer of the American scene, Ornstein helps readers to understand the electorate’s churning ire and distrust of political, economic,

and media elites. Although his book title and polished language are not those one typically hears on the campaign rope line or at candidate rallies, his prose delivers the same message:

- The American political and economic systems are “rigged” by the elites against ordinary people.
- Opportunity and mobility are severely limited for most workers.
- Most of the money our economy generates goes to the top 1 percent—Wall Street, big banks, the sports and entertainment elite, and corporate CEOs—at the expense of the other 99 percent.
- Education is no longer the great equalizer.
- Colleges’ meager outcomes do not justify their high costs.

As Ornstein sees it, differences in children’s *social capital*—their class culture and available family and community resources—lead to a “system of inequality in how they perform in school and the kinds of jobs they eventually obtain” (p. 45). Even our celebrated meritocracy—in which education, hard work and talent facilitate upward mobility—aggravates inequalities (p. 83) and can be blind to the reality that some people didn’t “make it” because of bad luck (p. 89). For most of us, Ornstein concludes, the American Dream is dead.

By contrasting *excellence* with *equality*, Ornstein poses a provocative dilemma. Without excellence (however defined and measured), individuals—and our nation—cannot compete successfully in the international marketplace. Without equality (however defined and measured), individuals will lack the opportunities to advance their knowledge, skills, and pathways to economic and social mobility. In the end, these qualities are interdependent yet different, and both are necessary for a successfully functioning economy and democracy.

But when financial capital—rather than education or human capital—determines income and wealth, inequality grows. And when enough people feel dislocated from the larger society for a long enough time, their discontent and anger increases. People can give voice to their preferred political solutions at the ballot box. Or, if they find themselves constantly stymied, polarized, and infuriated, they may take their rage to the streets. When this happens Our commitment to each other, our communities, our institutions, and our democracy also suffer.

Ornstein challenges readers to remove our rationalizations and parochial blinders and see more clearly. For example, claiming that America is becoming unable to compete in a technical and global marketplace, he writes, “What we have done is to convince ourselves that our traditional global edge in entrepreneurship and innovation can compensate for our decline in

educational achievement. It cannot—and in the long term, we are deceiving ourselves” (pp. 32-33). And when considering the reality of achieving the American dream, he asks rhetorically, can a child whose parents earning \$1000 a week (before taxes and withholdings) compete with a child whose household income is \$10,000 a week—or more? (p. 34).

Finally, Ornstein concludes that while our society can live with *moderate* inequality, *extreme* inequality is extremely harmful. Moderate inequality results from striving and success, a society that distinguishes between excellence and mediocrity, and rewards people according to their performance. He admits that not everyone would agree with this assertion. By contrast, the lack of money and influence contribute to rampant inequality in our society and lead to “debt, decline, and despair among working- and middle-class America” (p. 83). Thus, as a society, we must address both excellence and equality or face the consequences of not doing so. Political and social compromise are needed, regardless of their short supply.

Although this paperback edition was published in 2016, *Excellence vs. Equality* was written before the raucous 2016 election season, a political process that firmly ended Ornstein’s conjecture that “surprisingly, no one has rebelled” (p. 96). He is correct, however, when he writes, “we have unwittingly created a distorted system of rewards—a rigged game and an upside-down economy” (p. 169) that raises questions of fairness and equity and stirs class resentment. Main Street’s anger toward the elites and money class *is growing*. Ornstein’s treatise helps explain the outsider dynamic roiling both established major political parties and national institutions, a clear-eyed view essential if we are to propose and enact appropriate solutions.

Ornstein offers broad policy recommendations to limit major inequalities of opportunity and mobility. He implores our government to represent the public interest—the common good—instead of the special interest. In his view, every democratic nation needs to devise and implement a politically acceptable floor and ceiling for income and wealth to reduce inequality if mobility and opportunity are to be realities for every citizen (especially least advantaged groups). Changing U.S. tax laws would be a start. Acting in accord with a set of political, economic, and moral principles that reflect our history and values would help. He also suggests a fair and varied “set of parameters to find talent; . . . an equitable system for achievement; rigorous standards to define excellence . . . and multiple chances for late bloomers, slow runners, and disadvantaged groups” (pp. 105-106). Making selective colleges more accessible to working class and middle-income students would advance this idea.

The sincerity and passion with which Ornstein addresses his topic is evident. His writing style is thoughtful and conversational. He supports his thesis with sufficient data points and occasional dry humor. By critique, his narrative is somewhat disjointed, wordy, and repetitive. The pace is leisurely and occasionally rambling. He takes time to explore tangents—such how to protect oneself from data fraud or identify theft. He also includes material already familiar to those most likely to read this book—namely, the history of American education from colonial days through the Coleman Report, its reanalysis, and related studies—to illustrate that the education's most important variables that affect student outcomes lie outside schools. Readers might get the sense that Ornstein has taken a well-conceived and focused essay and stretched it into a five-chapter book.

Contributions to the Field

Ornstein succeeds in making his point. The world has changed. Education *without inputs from students' family and social capital* is no longer the great equalizer or vehicle for social and economic mobility. Ornstein points to weaknesses in traditional and revisionist arguments about school and opportunity and suggests that education critics from the right and left overstate their cases. In their place, he offers information to help us all better understand why many Americans feel disenfranchised from their aspirations and rage toward the governing elites. Can we as a society achieve both excellence and equality? We had better try. Our own and our democracy's well-being depends on it. By offering only broad policy outlines that might remedy this situation, Ornstein opens this can (of worms). He expects others to kick it down the road.

Authors' Note

Drs. Kaplan and Owings are the 2008 corecipients of the Virginia Educational Research Association's Charles Edgar Clear Award for Consistent and Significant Research and Scholarship and both were named 2014 Distinguished Fellows of Research and Practice of the National Education Finance Academy.

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