Middle-Class Curriculum and the Failure of "Achievement"

El currículo de clase media y el fracaso del "logro"

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Resumen:

Uno oye a menudo la frase "logro escolar" repetirse como un mantra en la retórica educativa actual. Sin embargo, QUÉ es lo que precisamente hay que lograr raramente se aclara. El "logro" se ha convertido en un fin en sí mismo. Desde los inicios del siglo XIX, los críticos de la cultura occidental han identificado esta búsqueda irracional del éxito como uno de los principales ingredientes del malestar moderno. Este ensayo examina la manera en la que esta búsqueda irracional infunde la institución escolar y ciega nuestra cultura frente a la urgente tarea de formular buenos fines educativos. Aunque el criticismo del ensayo emana principalmente desde el sistema educativo de los Estados Unidos, críticas similares pueden aplicarse a occidente y al mundo moderno.

Palabras clave: Modernidad, crítica cultural, rendimiento académico.

Abstract:

One hears the phrase "academic achievement" repeated mantra-like in popular educational rhetoric today. However, precisely WHAT is to be achieved is rarely if ever made clear. "Achievement" has become an end in itself. Since the early 19th century, Western cultural critics have identified this irrational pursuit of success as a major ingredient of the modern malaise. This essay examines the way in which that irrational pursuit infuses the institution of the school and blinds our culture to the urgent task of

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formulating worthy educational aims. Although the essay's criticism emanates principally from the education system of the United States, similar criticisms may apply to the expanse of the western and modern world.

Keywords: Modernity, cultural criticism, academic achievement.

1. Introduction

I have titled this paper "Middle-Class Curriculum and the Failure of 'Achievement'" as a critique of modern, middle-class educational values. While my criticisms focus specifically upon the education system of the United States, those conditions, situations, habits, and mentalities being criticized emanate from a cultural history that is shared by many modern and western nations. The "failure of achievement" may express itself in various ways amongst a diversity of the world's cultures and nonetheless share an essential *geist,* or spirit.

Let me say up-front that I am not against students learning. In fact it may be a tautology to say that public schools, in their task to deliver on the hopes and promises of education, are dreadfully underachieving. Test scores are too low, too many students fail to graduate, and too many who do graduate cannot properly read or write.[2] Moreover, there is a preponderance of adults in the United States—all products of its education system—who are incapable of recognizing the difference between fact and myth and are therefore woefully susceptible to the appeals of propaganda and fear mongering.[3] Although today's world demands that we educate ourselves as never before, I will argue that the popular mantra of "academic achievement", both lay and professional, has become the clarion call of an irrational pursuit of achievement as an end in itself. This blinds American culture to its urgent task of reflecting upon proper and worthy educational aims.

2. What "achievement" means

As it is uttered in common parlance, the term 'educational achievement' carries with it heavy undertones of modern, middle-class values. Although the term 'middle-class' can be used in a variety of ways, I will employ it much in the same manner that Marx did; referring to the mid-level professional class living within a capitalist state.[4] According to Marx, what was most peculiar to this new, bourgeois middle-class was the fact that its traditional moral and ethical ecology had largely been transformed into a bureaucratic and commodity-based mode of relation. Capital, in the form of money, concealed the social

[2] For example, the United States 2007-2008 average freshman graduation rate for minorities—Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans included—stood below 65%. Rampell, C., Graduation Rates by State and Race, *New York Times,* 2/06/2010:
http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/graduation-rates-by-state-and-race/.

[3] In the 2008 United States federal elections, the candidate spending the most money on their campaign won office in more than 9 out of 10 races, including the Presidency. This is not a new trend by any means. Its implication is that citizens vote for candidates, not necessarily based on their merit, but on the candidate's propagandized message and image. Quite literally, political offices may be bought. The average price tag for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008 was just over $1 million. Source: "Money Wins Presidency and 9 out of 10 Congressional Offices in Priciest U.S. Election Ever", *Open Secrets Center for Responsive Politics*, November 5/11/ 2008:
http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2008/11/money-wins-white-house-and.html.

[4] *Encyclopedia of Marxism*, http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/.

nature of economic relationships. Drawn away from traditional community networks to new laboring jobs in the cities, strangers related to each other, not *qua persons*, but *qua* impersonal *roles*, such as employee and employer, manager and laborer. Within this new dynamic even such sacred things as conscience, honor, and dignity became salable by their holders as commodities.[5]

Perhaps the richest resource available for gaining a true feel and appreciation for the early 19th-century movement toward bourgeois culture is the literature of its time, written by those who experienced it most viscerally. During the early 19th century, the genre of literary Realism developed as an attempt to accurately portray the emerging reality of bourgeois culture and society.[6] Although this genre's artists typically wrote "fiction" stories, they were attempting to capture—if only in metaphor—the true feel of their time and place.[7] What we see in their writings is a world in which notions of 'success' have become detached from traditional moral and ethical valuations of life.

Still, the disciplined social scientist might say that literature is hopelessly subjective and therefore a flawed "method" of analyzing cultural history. Authors inject their own personalities, eccentricities, and biases into their work. Their plots and characters correlate to nothing that actually happened in the real world. Such an objective-minded social scientist would be mistaken, however. The goal of historical scholarship is not to see history from a god's-eye-view. There is no way to see the world but through human eyes—we hope that the pen of the artist can disrupt the ordinariness into which our daily affairs are sunken and reveal to us what has always been present, albeit unseen. In an obituary following the death of Richard Milhous Nixon, the 37th President of the United States, the journalist Hunter Thompson typed the following words regarding objectivity in journalism:

> "Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism—which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful"[8].

Although Thompson always saw Nixon as a "monster straight out of Grendel," Nixon appealed to the objective-minded news media as a sort of American hero, an honest and virtuous man of common stock who had overcome the odds to achieve great success in life.[9] He won his 1972 bid for re-election by a landslide margin.[10] Early into Nixon's second term in office, he was exposed by the Watergate scandal as a criminal who had lied to the American people and attempted to cheat the electoral system.[11] The unfolding of his

[5] Harvey, D., *The Limits to Capital*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, 1-34.

[6] Kramer, L. The Novel as Art and Social Criticism, *European Thought and Culture in the 19th Century* [mp3 audio lecture], The Teaching Company, 2001.

[7] Some philosophers, Richard Rorty foremost amongst them, treat literature as primary source material for "doing philosophy". Good literature is good metaphor and, according to Rorty, the most worthwhile sort of philosophy is that which gives us good metaphors with which to think and live. Human beings are metaphor machines. See: Rorty, R., *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979.

[8] Thompson, H., He Was a Crook, *Rolling Stone*, 16/06/1994, pp. 42-44. Note: Horatio Alger was an author of fictional stories that characterized the prototypical American Dream: honest, hard-working folks who rose "from rags to riches."

[9] Ibid.

[10] Nixon carried 49 out of 50 states in the election. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1972

[11] Nixon, a Republican President, was tied to the agents who broke into the (opposing political party) Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in 1972. Several of Nixon's administration

presidency sowed seeds of deep suspicion in the public mind which are still evident today. The point of Thompson's quote is that the author must transcend the standard rules of 'objectivity' in order to reveal what is unseen, yet present and felt.

The French Realist authors Stendhal and Honore de Balzac portrayed a form of cultural decline attendant to the eclipse of aristocratic society. According to Balzac, as prospects for social mobility improved in France, folks turned the time and energy that they had once devoted to intellectual development toward jobs and money-making. The salons, which had formerly served as epicenters for the exchange of important ideas, became instead venues for gossip and social climbing. This was a culture that had become obsessed only with wealth and social status. Honest, moral values seem to have disappeared from the lives of the author's characters.[12]

In his intensely psychological 1830 novel, *The Red and the Black*, Stendhal sought to encapsulate the modern bourgeois condition in his main character, Julien Sorel. Although born into a working-class family, Sorel has ambition to climb the social ladder and live as an aristocrat. Sadly, this ambition ends up corrupting all of his life's passions and commitments. After seeking and finally winning the affection of two aristocratic women, his desire for status compels him to control and subjugate those women, treating them as means to the end of his social advance. Toward the conclusion of the novel, Sorel attempts to murder the lover who dared to thwart his aspirations. He is tried in court, found guilty, and guillotined. For Stendhal, Sorel represents a great and novel dilemma in modern bourgeois society: the prospect of winning power, position, and influence, albeit at the cost of love and honor. Stendhal saw an early 19th-century French culture faced with losing its core values and meanings, its traditional moral, religious, and artistic valuations of life. *The Red and the Black*, subtitled "*A Chronicle of 1830*", closes with Sorel's rumination over how hollow his life had become and how impoverished his ideal of "doing well" had really been.[13] Recall that this novel and the entire literary genre with which it was associated were attempts by artists to describe reality, the world and its people as they actually and truly were. Thus far I have been speaking of the emergence of bourgeois, middle-class culture and its criticisms in Europe. Although similar cultural processes affected the United States, they did so within a unique context, producing distinctive middle-class values.

The American Dream of rising from rags to riches was once epitomized in the historical character of Benjamin Franklin. Young Ben Franklin is the prototypically practical man, singularly devoted to the pursuit of material success in life. Born into a family of modest means, Franklin disciplined his character into near-puritanical form, excising all distractions and vices, calculating efficiency and effectiveness into each hour of his day.[14] One can imagine him as the inspiration for Thomas Huxley's description of the ideally educated man, which he penned in 1868:

> "That man, I think, has had a liberal education who has been so trained in his youth that his body is the ready sevant of his will, and does with ease and pleasure all the work, that as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine, with all the parts of equal strength, and in smooth working order; ready like a steam engine to be turned to any kind of work…"[15].

officials were tried, convicted, and incarcerated as a result of the criminal activity. The incident led to Nixon's resignation. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watergate

[12] Kramer, op. cit.

[13] Stendhal, G. *The Red and the Black: A Chronicle of 1830*, New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1916.

[14] See: Hollinger, D., and Capper, C., *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume I, 1630-1865*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 99-112.

[15] See: McLuhan, M., *The Guttenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965, p. 172.

By his forty-second birthday, Franklin had retired from a successful and lucrative career in the printing industry. The rest of his life he devoted to noble leisure: philosophy, science, and diplomacy. Although Franklin's character is undoubtedly admirable, the eventual transportation of his all-American values into the bourgeois culture and industrial economy of the next century would contribute significantly to the disenchantment of the modern world.[16]

It is important to recognize that Franklin lived in a time and place that knew neither the large-scale industrial economies of the next century nor their attendant bourgeois culture. The early, pre-industrial economies of the colonial era remained predominantly local in nature and daily business transactions typically involved face-to-face elements of personal interaction. That is, one most often knew with whom one was dealing and also knew where that person lived and slept at night. The virtue of such small-town economics was that business relationships could remain a part of the moral and ethical ecology of local community life. When doing business with one's neighbors, despite whatever measure of success an individual may achieve, that individual remained socially and economically dependent upon the welfare and wellbeing of the entire community. Under these circumstances, the maintenance of personal reputation remained vital to one's livelihood. However, by the nature of the new industrial economy, it became increasingly possible—and often probable—for business to transcend local economies and their attendant moral and ethical ecologies. Individuals began to achieve 'success' independent of— even at the expense of—the 'success' of the community. [17]

In his novel, *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, Mark Twain wrote of a stranger who descends upon a "morally incorruptible" small town carrying a sack of gold coins. As Twain tells it, this gold presents to the town couples the possibility of becoming sufficiently wealthy so as to escape economic interdependence with their neighbors and thus to escape involvement in the town's moral and ethical ecology.[18] Tremendous individual wealth makes the maintenance of personal reputation seem an unnecessary burden. One could, if one wanted, live irresponsibly and despicably without suffering any of the traditional consequences. Metaphorically, the sack of gold represents the threat that the new 20th-century scales of economy posed to traditional ways of life. This new industrial economy disconnected professional lives from traditional moral and ethical dimensions of community life, while at the same time leaving the culture invested with Franklin's old valuation of the assiduous pursuit of success. Said differently, social and economic ambitions, for-all-practical-purposes, separated themselves from morality and ethics as they had previously been understood. The man who swindles old widows out of their lives' savings during the week, yet who sleeps well and finds acceptance as a brother in Christ at church on Sunday, is a distinctly modern archetype.

[16] Modern 'disenchantment' has been articulated in a variety of ways. For a satisfactory treatment, see: Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985. This team of authors articulates the way in which the modern person is pulled between two opposing forces: on one side, a longing for community and social attachment; on the other side, a cultural nexus that assaults social and community ties by compelling an atomistic individualism.

[17] McWilliams, M. C., American Political Thought since the Civil War: Progressivism, Twain's 'The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg' [mp3 audio lecture], Haverford College, 9/02/2005: www.haverford.edu/pols/faculty/mcwilliams/pols268/.

[18] Twain, M., *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg: And Other Stories and Essays*, New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1900.

From the 1950's onward, American education, as well as American culture at large, has been plagued by an ascetic pursuit of success that is divorced from traditional social-moral-ethical responsibility and divorced from old European intellectualism. During the 1980's, the trend of adorning one's automobile with bumper stickers reading, "My Child Is an Honor Student at _____ Middle School", began to spread. Having a child on the honor role became one way for parents to publicly display to others that *their* child was better than, or at least as good as, the other kids in the neighborhood. *Note bene:* The school honor roll does not symbolize some commonly-understood attainment of knowledge or wisdom. Simply, it means that the student has performed well relative to other students within an institution. It was not the content of achievement, but achievement-in-and-of-itself that had come to matter and be so proudly displayed by middle-class parents. Certainly this same cultural attitude toward 'academic achievement' buoyed energetic public reception of the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report.[19]

In 1983, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, issued the *Nation at Risk* report, which charged that American education had fallen behind the rest of the world. He went so far as to claim that American schools had become so pathetic that the country would consider it an act of war had they been imposed upon us by another nation. Bell specifically identified commerce, industry, science, and technology as the areas in which American innovation had been flagging. Nevertheless, it was not the specific manner or way in which American education had 'fallen behind' the rest of the world that caused such a stir. By invoking war and international competition, the Administration had employed a powerful rhetorical tool to stimulate American culture's drive for success, no matter what that success specifically entailed. Since that time nearly thirty years ago, it has become difficult to avoid hearing in popular discourse how far America has fallen behind countries such as China and Denmark in terms of educational 'achievement'.[20] Few Americans care that the mathematics and science skills being compared represent a very small slice of what accounts for a properly educated person. We do not compare artistic and social skills, for example, things which are terribly important although not easily amenable to measurement. The basic fallacy of 'academic achievement' as iterated in American culture today is that it accepts unquestioningly the content and parameters of 'success' as defined by narrow political interests. Although Americans are determined to win the educational race, we maintain a disinterested agnosticism regarding its destination.

There is a scene from John Irving's 1989 novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, which captures in metaphor American culture's irrational pursuit of achievement. Living in Canada as an American ex-patriot, John, the story's narrator, encounters a car full of Americans who are lost and trying to find a nearby church. Miscommunication ensues, resulting in the flustered mother of the family treating John as if he were an idiot. Insulted, John feigns that he has no idea where the church is. So the car drives on in the wrong direction. The narrator comments about the family that, "[t]heir plans were certainly unclear, but they exhibited an exemplary American firmness."[21] Unsure of where it is headed, American education drives on.

[19] The report is available online at:
http://datacenter.spps.org/sites/2259653e-ffb3-45ba-8fd6-04a024ecf7a4/uploads/SOTW_A_Nation_at_Risk_1983.pdf.

[20] The American schools are often blamed for the country's economic troubles. The strongest message from the current Obama Administration concerning the aims and purposes of education is that schools must prepare students for competition in the global economy.
See: http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/educate-innovate.

[21] Irving, J., *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1989, pp. 323-324.

What is true for public K-12 education is also true for colleges and universities. During the 1960's economists first statistically and theoretically linked higher education to American middle-class ascendance. Although the "democratization" of colleges and universities that occurred in the sixties is certainly laudable in that it granted increased access to previously marginalized groups, higher education came in effect during this time to be colonized by a new brand of bourgeois, middle-class student who sought neither intellectual growth nor social change, but a credential as guaranteed access to future income and social status. In becoming largely a means to the end of getting money, the content and character of higher education changed significantly. By the 1970's, proportions of students studying the humanities had dropped precipitously while business and accounting enrollments had ballooned.[22] From 1971 to 2001, the Higher Education Research Institute identified marked shifts in students' stated reasons for attending college. In 1971, the top three answers given as reasons for going to college included: "to help others who are in difficulty", "to become an authority in my field", and "to keep up to date on politics." By 2001, "being very well-off financially" topped the list.[23] Today's college students hear the question asked by their relatives, "what are you going to do with your degree?" as a euphemism for, "how are you going to use your degree to get money?" Few persons in the United States, including countless university faculty, can even begin to talk about higher education as anything other than preparation for a career, a means to the end of attaining individual 'success' as measured by wealth and social status.

3. Unmotivated to "achieve"

Student motivation is perhaps the single greatest topic of educational research today. Schools typically treat unmotivated and underachieving students as pathological; and to a considerable extent they may be absolutely right. Many students are indeed lazy and lacking in healthy, middle-class work ethics. These students could stand to benefit from a militaristic-style education that compels them to develop better habits and mentalities. Yet, we might also do well to take some unmotivated and underachieving students seriously, as individuals who reject the horizons of achievement handed down to them by their school and society, and as cultural critics who only lack the more sophisticated powers of articulation wielded by great writers.[24] These students may "act out" in school because they lack the language with which to give expression to their malaise.

It is almost a normative practice in American culture for a child to answer "nothing" to the parent's question, "What did you learn in school today?" Consider that this is an instructed matter, something that a child must learn as an appropriate answer to the question. How would a child learn this? Undoubtedly it is learned from the parents who return home from work every day looking tired and defeated and having nothing interesting to report. The undeniable fact is that most of the jobs in our economy are depressingly dull and monotonous. Children pick up on this. They pick up on the notion that the hours between 9am and 5pm are the hours when the spirit dies. Moreover, they sense that their schooling is preparing them to enter this soul-crushing workaday world. A young woman

[22] Harrington, M., Education and Social Change, *The First Theodore Brameld Annual Lecture*, lost citation.

[23] Donoghue, F., *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 91.

[24] See: McDermott, R., Inarticulateness, in *Linguistics in Context: Connecting Observation and Understanding*, ed. D. Tannen, Norwood, Alex Publishing Corporation, 1988, pp. 37-68.

who listens to political speeches or who reads any state board of regents' report on education will know that the principal aim of her schooling is to fit her into a slot in the economy, whether it be as a scientist, engineer, corporate executive, or fast food cashier.[25] It behooves us to consider whether modern education embodies Julien Sorel's attitude toward life and to ponder the extent to which, in the *geist* of Twain's *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, education has become divorced from the moral and ethical ecologies of healthy social life. At its worst, the American Dream that is sold through our schools now amounts to the dim hope of attaining sufficient wealth so that one may live as irresponsibly and despicably as one wants without suffering any consequences.

Despite what detractors may say, American culture can be impressively self-critical. Criticisms of the hollowness of bourgeois, middle-class life abound in the American film industry—including criticisms aimed at adolescence and the institution of the school. Take, for example, any Hollywood movie ever made in the past half century about a suburban, middle-class high school. Adolescents who struggle against a banal and hollow suburban culture almost unerringly assume the role of the hero while adults and conformist students who value narrow-minded academic achievement play the parts of the boobs and villains. Ultimately, the film's protagonist must quest to realize his or her true identity amidst a stultifying culture of popularity and conformity. As Robert Bulman points out in his book, *Hollywood Goes to High School*, there *are* movies made which do not fit this cookie-cutter plot—such movies do not, however, sell tickets. American audiences prefer stories whose suburban, middle-class heroes ultimately succeed in life by rejecting academic achievement and the culture of the school.[26] I suggest that the Hollywood high school film genre criticizes not just American schools, but American culture at large.

When first released in 1969, the film *The Graduate* proved a smash hit with audiences. Essentially this was a story about a prodigal son, played by Dustin Hoffman, who returns home from Berkeley, California as a college graduate, but rejects the life horizons of wealth, status, and career success that he has inherited from his parents. There is a scene in which a family friend encourages the protagonist to go into the plastics business. The word 'plastic' is symbolic here, meaning 'inauthentic' or 'false'. The whole scheme of life's value, meaning, and purpose expressed by this older generation strikes Hoffman's character as 'plastic'. To follow the family friend's advice would amount to spiritual suicide. More recently, the 1999 films *Office Space* and *Fight Club* tell the same story, albeit without making reference to schools. *Office Space*, a Hollywood spinoff of the daily Dilbert cartoons, parodies the banality and sorrow of modern office culture. Faced with a growing nihilistic psychosis regarding his life and career, the film's protagonist heals himself by giving up entirely the idea of "being a good employee": coming to work when he feels like it, ignoring his boss, and inciting his office-mates to steal from the company. Ironically, management recognizes his new nonchalant attitude as a mark of leadership, promoting him while at the same time laying off his hard-working colleagues. The whole idea of "being a good employee" is exposed as a scam and a farce. Similarly, the film *Fight Club* depicts the bourgeois workaday world as an empty and meaningless theater in which men and women spend at least eight hours of their days doing things for which they have absolutely no interest, in order only to make enough money to purchase things which they do not need

[25] See: Ohio Board of Regents, *Third Report on the Condition of Higher Education in Ohio*, March, 2010: http://www.uso.edu/downloads/reports/ConditionReport-3.pdf.

[26] Bullman, R., *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture*, New York, Worth Publishers, 2005. As an exemplary Hollywood film in this genre, see: *The Breakfast Club*, directed by John Hughes, Universal Studios, 1985.

and do not really want. The hero character of *Fight Club* breaks out of his morbid life by blowing up his apartment together with all the material possessions he had spent years toiling to accumulate. The fighting in the film is merely a way of disconnecting from the shallow pretentiousness of the modern world and reconnecting to one's authentic self.

I suspect that there is a reason why each of these films criticizing modern bourgeois life has attracted large audiences. Likely it is the same reason that the Realist novels of the mid-19th century attained lasting distinction. Audiences find humor in these stories because they are true, at least in some significant way. As Mohammad Ali once said, "My way of joking is to tell the truth. That's the funniest joke in the world."[27] Americans take courage from characters who suggest that it is possible to reject bourgeois society's middling measures of success and create more vibrant and meaningful life horizons of our own. Brad Pitt's character in *Fight Club* affirms our lurking sentiment when he addresses the audience to say, "You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not your fucking khakis."[28] We feel that there must be something more to life than this.[29] Nevertheless, many of us who instinctively reject the morbidity depicted in these films continue to live it out in our daily lives at work and school, "under the illusion that [we] are contributing to a free society."[30]

4. Conclusion

There is a scene in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* where Biff Loman says to his mother, "I can't take hold, mom. I can't take hold of some kind of life." Here Biff succinctly expresses the modern identity crisis: despite "doing well" we lack the sense of satisfaction that one would expect to accompany success. It is the very notion of 'success' in the modern form that lacks grounding in traditional and meaningful valuations of life. The resulting identity crisis is not merely psychological, but educational. We have imported the factory personnel department into our schools and suburbs.[31]

Still, this is not to say that lack of motivation to excel academically is an inherently good thing. As mentioned before, some students are indeed lazy and lacking in healthy, middle-class work ethics. We all know someone in our lives who could benefit from the motivation, structure, and discipline provided by the Marine Corps. Young students, for their own good, certainly need motivation, structure, and discipline. The challenge to educators is to recognize the difference between an unhealthy lack of motivation and the student who has good reason not to be motivated—whose rejection of 'academic achievement' offers inarticulate cultural criticism in its dismissal of bourgeois society's impoverished horizons of 'achievement'.

[27] Thompson, H., *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time (Gonzo Papers Volume One)*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1992, p. 565.

[28] *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999.

[29] Although professional philosophers tend to shy away from serious philosophical treatment of Hollywood movies, Stanley Cavell has consistently expressed belief in their philosophical import. He asserts that people are often interested in popular films for good reasons: they puzzle, provoke, and inspire us. The special job of the philosopher, says Cavell, is to "think undistractedly about [this stuff that] we can't help thinking about" Cavell, S., Philosophy and Film Criticism, *Conversations with History*, Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, 2002, p. 4: http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Cavell/cavell-con0.html.

[30] Bellah, et al., op. cit., p. 210.

[31] Benne, K., Education in the Quest for Identity and Community, *The Boyd H. Bode Memorial Lectures*, Columbus, Ohio State University Publications Office, 1961, p. 36.

While it is certainly beyond the purview of schools to cure the modern malaise, one worthy and attainable aim of education may be to help young boys and girls develop a more sophisticated articulation of the cultural situation in which they find themselves; in essence, to help them discover the cultural waters of meaning into which they are born and the horizons of life's meaning, purpose, and value which they inherit.[32] This would entail a trained capacity to recognize some Hollywood films and works of literature not simply as diversions, but as critical cultural texts whose worlds and characters are real, at least in some significant way. Such a capacity would likely tame rather than increase our power.[33] It could never fit within the parameters of academic achievement as currently defined because its benefits cannot be easily measured and scaled. Rather, the advantage of this sort of education might present itself in the long run as a culture that is better able to understand itself and more adept at recognizing the difference between fact and myth. Yet as long as our educational institutions continue to compel the blind pursuit of achievement in the educational rat race to the top without stopping to consider *what* is being achieved, and as long as faculty in our colleges of education continue to give courage and aid to the rhetoric of achievement merely for the sake of furthering their own careers, we will continue not only to fall short of, but actually to work against the sort of rigorous and robust education that we so badly need.

[32] The term "modern malaise" is illustrated extensively by Charles Taylor. While I do not mean to borrow the term's literal meaning from him, my use here carries with it the same spirit or general sense. Summarily, Taylor sees the modern, industrialized world as fostering three malaises: 1) individualism, 2) intensified instrumental reason (particularly troubling in regards to social relationships), and 3) loss of freedom. Together, these contribute to the "disenchantment" of the modern world. See: Taylor, C., *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003.

[33] See: Hook, S., *Education and the Taming of Power*, La Salle, Open Court Publishing Company, 1973.