

Class Counts: Education, Inequality, and the Shrinking Middle Class

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Title: Class Counts: Education, Inequality, and the Shrinking Middle Class

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Public education is no longer the engine of social and economic mobility. With increasing income disparities and inequality of educational opportunity, education is no longer society's "great equalizer." While America believes in social mobility – that one generation or individual can and should rise above the previous generation or family's attainment level – facts show this is becoming increasingly difficult.

In his new book, *Class Counts*, Allan Ornstein explores the extreme differences in income and wealth. "Merit...is becoming a diminishing asset," he writes (p. 172). The democratic system breaks down when inherited wealth becomes entrenched and when the gap between the wealthy and unwealthy (*with similar amounts of education*) becomes increasingly lopsided. As "the relationship between education and income diminishes – and class, rank, and privilege increasingly outweigh talent, ability, and performance," public schools become less an engine for meritocracy or social mobility (p. 175). If we reduce mobility based on merit, do we also reduce public schools' role as a means for talented but less affluent students to rise, economically and socially?

Ornstein considers the growing divide between rich and common people to be America's number one social and economic issue – rivaling the problem of terrorism. Increasingly, one's social class may matter more than one's education level as people try to achieve the American Dream. We have long known that disenfranchised students have difficulty meeting schools' academic goals. We are now moving towards middle class students becoming educationally disenfranchised. If the middle class cannot use public schools to advance their education and opportunities, what hope is there for less affluent students? What does this mean for our larger society and our democracy? These unsettling questions deserve serious and thoughtful discussion.

Ornstein admits that *Class Counts* "is a 340-page ramble" (p. xi). Having grown up during the Cold War, Ornstein observes that some of his New York P.S. 42 classmates who lacked pedigree, legacy, or inherited wealth, power, or privilege went on to achieve solid middle class American lifestyles. Many did not. Given a similar economic outlook, Ornstein suggests, most in his generation would be in much worse socio-economic shape had they grown up today.

Class Counts contains eight chapters, each developing and reinforcing his main theme with ample statistics and references to and from well-known historical icons, authors, economists, and pop culture heroes. In Chapter 1, "Historical Thoughts of Equality and Inequality," Ornstein promptly introduces himself as an advocate with a

distinctive political, economic, and social message of a fair and just society. Chapter 2, “1776 – And Beyond: Elitist Versus Enlightened Thought” reviews the founding fathers’ ideas about democracy and equality and the growth of a new form of equality – the respect for talent, hard work, and merit. Chapter 3, “Patrician Influence and Social/Educational Thought” considers how capitalism can be undemocratic, how the intellectual merit-based elite have aggravated social inequalities, and the changing relationship between education and income.

Chapter 4, “What is Equality?” discusses education’s role and limits in promoting social and economic equality. In Chapter 5, “Education, Mobility, and the American Dream,” Ornstein looks at conservative and liberal thought concerning social class and builds a case for how merit’s declining power to secure higher earnings or advancement is seriously compromising the American Dream. Chapter 6, “The Golden Years are Over,” looks at the disappearing social contract between American capitalism and American workers and how globalization is impacting workers. In Chapter 7, “World Inequality,” Ornstein explains why it is more necessary than ever for us to know our world and make informed choices, asking what educators can do to prepare students for the world of 2050 and beyond. Finally, Chapter 8, “Wishful Thinking: Recommendations and Solutions,” describes Ornstein’s suggestions for a sane fiscal policy to deal with current economic and social issues.

Class Counts is readable, timely, and engaging but not concise. Ornstein uses a shotgun rather than a laser focus. Through several chapters and hundreds of pages, he fluidly integrates varying viewpoints, historical and literary figures, and time frames about class and culture at a breakneck pace. On one page (p. 159), for example, his references include entertainer Johnny Cash, biologist Charles Darwin, economists Paul Klugman, Robert Reich and Alan Greenspan, authors F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ayn Rand, actors John Travolta and James Dean, Beat-poet Alan Ginsburg, and writer-scholar Dinesh D’Souza. Ornstein weaves his argument with threads of many colors.

Likewise, Ornstein uses abundant facts to reinforce his case. For instance, he cites that in the last fifteen years, real household income rose 2 percent for the bottom 90 percent of Americans, but rose 57 percent for the top 1 percent of wage earners. It soared 85 percent for the top 0.1 percent, and skyrocketed 112 percent for the top 0.01 percent! The data supporting his thesis are thoughtful, persuasive, and plentiful.

Although Ornstein is an educator and his book draws disturbing implications for public schools, *Class Counts* is not really about education. Public education is the book’s impetus rather than its heart. Instead, Ornstein presents a broad history of class and wealth inequality with repercussions for public education. Americans have come to believe in public schools’ capacity to mediate opportunities for individuals to earn equality through individual merit, hard work, and talent. Increasing class and wealth disparities are placing this critical tenet at risk. Since Ornstein writes for educators as citizens rather than as practitioners, he offers no concrete suggestions for educational leadership, school organization or operations, curriculum, or instruction.

As a teaching tool, however, *Class Counts* makes a useful resource for lively and relevant discussions for doctoral level social justice or educational leadership and policy courses. It would effectively supplement an advanced educational foundations course. This book raises unsettling questions about public schools’ continued role in maintaining our democratic society with ramifications for social policy if not practice. Likewise, educators and their students will find *Class Counts* helps them become more informed voters.

A closer look at each chapter highlights Ornstein’s extensive intellectual wanderings as he builds his case for political action.

Chapter 1 – Ornstein discusses western civilization’s views on poverty and income inequality, social class and privilege from the Bible through today, generously name-dropping from Egypt’s Pharaoh to entertainer Johnny Cash and critical theorist Peter McLaren along the way.

Chapter 2 - Our founding fathers debated whether the country should be run by an aristocracy of the bright and wealthy or by the general masses that did not even understand the debate’s abstractions. The founders finally

agreed that America's hope rested with an educated populace. Without losing its social class distinctions, the American Revolution gave the common man a new "equality" based on equal justice under law as well as through individual merit, hard work, and talent.

Chapter 3 – Ornstein argues that a small percentage of wealthy Americans is gobbling up most of the earnings and wealth, and education alone cannot equalize wealth or income. Race and class still matter. The U.S. has a history of unequal schooling related to class dating back to colonial America. For example, to this day, class issues persist at Harvard and Yale, with no more than 3 to 4 percent of student body representing low- and working-class white students (p. 110).

Chapter 4 – Horace Mann envisioned schools as "the great equalizer" that would assimilate immigrants into the American culture as well as reward merit, talent, and effort. Ornstein traces the changes in social mobility from Thomas Jefferson to Andrew Jackson to the present, offering statistics to show that income quintiles have "hardened," decreasing social mobility. He concludes that, "Education as a social category or variable cannot alone reduce inequality or uplift the masses... Only if inequalities of income and wealth are kept within a limited range can education be used as an equalizer" (p. 150).

Chapter 5 – Ornstein contends that the belief that if you went to school and worked hard, you would almost be assured a middle class lifestyle and decent retirement is dying. The rules have changed, jeopardizing middle class students' status and life chances. To bring it home, he asks,

What is the value of an education and what is happening to the middle class when a teacher can barely afford a bungalow, and some captain of industry, entertainer, or sports figure lives a more luxurious life than the land barons of the aristocratic Old World that we had hoped to eliminate in the New World?" (p. 188)

Chapter 6 – Our economy has changed, and not everyone is benefiting. Ornstein looks at how liberals and conservatives disagree about ways to assist the poor and working Americans, the impact on college savings plans, Medicare, and Social Security.

Chapter 7 - In a globalized world, Ornstein observes that, "Americans are not necessarily ugly or mean-spirited people; ...but possess a low global IQ because we have been protected by the oceans for centuries" (pp. 252-253), and it is time for us to develop a global consciousness.

Chapter 8 - The author offers recommendations and solutions, most of which involve restructuring Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, healthcare, college tuition, and taxes. For educators, he encourages using a more relevant, globalized curriculum and reminders to become informed voters.

Class Counts is not a mainstream education theory text. While it fits within the progressive tradition, it lacks the clear articulation of how educators can constructively respond, apart from voting for liberal legislators who will work for societal change. It also ignores wider definitions of education that move beyond its economic value.

Nonetheless, it deserves attention. Do public schools still offer a meritocracy where talented and able students can work hard, learn, and gain the attitudes, knowledge, and skills essential for social and economic advancement? What is the relationship between schooling and education, and which should our public schools be providing? Has our culture changed so much that even middle class students with a good education have little chance of making the social and economic gains available only a few generations ago? The answers have great importance to our public schools and society.