

Social Justice, Deferred Complicity, and the Moral Plight of the Wealthy.

A Response to “With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility”: Privileged Students’ Conceptions of Justice-Oriented Citizenship”

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ABSTRACT

Faced with the facts of economic inequality, the wealthy are confronted with a particular set of moral, social, and political questions, not least of which is the question of how to preserve a sense of being a “good” human being. In the case of justifying privilege, the problem becomes how to position oneself as being uniquely able to enact a superior moral character. In this response to Swalwell’s article, we argue that her data show how being good and having moral standing is a social outcome that is premised on the unequally distributed ability to do certain things, to enact certain roles, and to mobilize particular discourses. Swalwell demonstrated the complicated ways in which privileged students understand what it means to have a commitment to social justice, and her analysis raises questions about the possibility of as well as the potential for educating students with economic privilege toward social justice commitments. In this response we highlight the important symbolic role that economically disadvantaged groups play in the imaginary of students who attend elite private schools and what this illustrates about the ways in which they are complicit in sustaining social inequality.

This article is a response to:

Swalwell, K. (2013). With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Privileged Students’ Conceptions of Justice-Oriented Citizenship. *Democracy & Education*, 21(1). Article 5. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/Iss1/5>.

*Late at night, with TV’s hungry child;
his belly swells.
Well, for the price of a coke, or a smoke,
I could keep alive those hungry eyes.
Man, take a look again;
everyday things change, oh,
but basically you and me stay the same.*

—“Seek Up,” Dave Matthews

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA WAS FOUNDED ON AN antiaristocratic conception of democracy based on equal opportunity. Yet the fact that social and economic advantages enable some people to both further and ensure their economic wealth runs against the most basic assumption of such a conception, that those who succeed do so out of their own skill and hard work. When doubts arise about such assumptions, the wealthy are faced with the

task of convincing everyone—especially themselves—of the legitimacy of their class interests in order to preserve their power. To do this, the wealthy are confronted with a particular set of moral, social, and political questions, not least of which is the question of how to preserve a sense of being a “good” human being. In the case of justifying privilege, the problem becomes how to

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position oneself as being uniquely able to enact a superior moral character. What is more complicated and must remain hidden is that the very ability to enact good citizenship and moral character is premised on the economic and social advantages that such enactments justify. Being good and having moral standing is a social outcome that is premised on the unequally distributed ability to do certain things, to enact certain roles, and to mobilize particular discourses.

It may seem counterintuitive that economically advantaged individuals would be concerned with and committed to social and economic justice, since they are the ones who benefit most from inequality. Since social justice efforts are commonly understood as a challenge to economically privileged groups in order to increase the representation and empowerment of oppressed groups, it might seem strange that people with economic privilege would support such efforts. Such commitments might seem even stranger if we consider that people with economic privilege often have limited opportunities for direct contact and experiences with individuals outside of their class context. They also tend to lack an analysis of their own privilege and how it is related to the oppression suffered by disadvantaged groups (Stuber, 2010; Wildman, 1996). In fact, individuals with economic privilege have little awareness of economic oppression and sometimes deny that it even exists, instead blaming the poor for their circumstances (Johnson, 2001; Lazarre, 1996; Sleeter, 2000). While these various factors could easily support the ostensibly common sense assumption that privileged people are unlikely to support social justice efforts, what is more interesting is the fact that they often do. Indeed, in so-called capitalist democracies like the United States, a commitment to the improvement of the lives of the disadvantaged—at least in rhetoric—is crucial to the public image of economically privileged groups.

These commitments are not always understood as *social justice*, a phrase that is often associated with leftist and progressive politics. At the same time, because *justice* and *being just* have a common genealogy with notions of *being right* and *moral authority*, justifying privilege is always wrapped within a conception of justice and moral character. Understanding how economically privileged individuals make sense of justice in general and social justice in particular reveals a great deal about their self-construction as “good” people. An analysis of privilege reveals a great deal about how much privilege is defined through its lack. The wealthy need the poor, not only because their abundance in part produces poverty but also because the poor play a critical symbolic and affective role in how the wealthy understand themselves. Like the hungry African child on the television who must be kept alive for the entertainment of late-night infomercial viewers across the United States, the poor must be kept poor so that the rich always have someone upon whom to enact their self-righteousness.

It is here that Swalwell’s analysis in her article (2013), “With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Privileged Students’ Conceptions of Justice-Oriented Citizenship,” sheds some fascinating light. Exploring how privileged adolescents respond to educational efforts encouraging them to become justice oriented

reveals a great deal about the fact that equity and justice are important themes in the self-construction of some wealthy elites. Swalwell demonstrated the complicated—although not all that surprising—ways in which these privileged students understand what it means to have a commitment to social justice. Her analysis raises questions about the possibility of as well as the potential for educating students with economic privilege toward social justice commitments.

Implied throughout Swalwell’s article is the assumption that to be justice oriented, whatever it entails, is one way in which individuals demonstrate their “good moral character.” The assumption that to be a “good citizen” is also to be a “good person” is embedded in the framework of civic education through which she examined these students’ conceptions of social justice. Surely one would expect privileged individuals who identify as justice oriented, as do the adolescents in Swalwell’s study, to express concern for others’ interests. Yet what stands out from the data presented is the students’ concern with presenting themselves as good people with good moral character.

As both of us have demonstrated elsewhere, part of what motivates privileged adolescents to engage in benevolent acts, especially community service activities, is the ability to present themselves to others as caring, engaged, and generous (Howard, 2010). Their involvement in benevolent acts serves not only as a useful way of forming a more positive self-image but also has considerable ideological value in diverting attention away from their privileged circumstances. Their benevolent acts place them in a positive light while serving to protect, rationalize, and legitimize their advantages (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). More specifically, these youths use a variety of ideological frames and operations in describing their involvement in community service to rationalize their schooling and life advantages, construct between-class divisions, and establish within-class solidarity.

Again, this is not to say that the students interviewed by Swalwell do not care for those who suffer from the consequences of economic inequality and are simply motivated by a rational calculation to present themselves as good people. Rather, what we want to underscore here is the important symbolic role that economically disadvantaged groups play in the imaginary of students who attend elite private schools such as Kent Academy. While we value Swalwell’s argument regarding the disjuncture between the aims of justice-oriented programs and how the students themselves understand their own commitments to social justice, we want to suggest that such a disjuncture is not only unsurprising but also predictable. These differing views of what it means to be justice oriented share in common the fact that they are all manifestations of the ways in which the complicity of economically advantaged students is deferred to the very moment in which they declare a commitment to social justice, however construed. At that moment, and particularly in the context of an elite school committed to social justice, the suffering of the poor becomes the fodder through which these students enact a sense of moral standing. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) argued that such “deferred complicity” becomes evident in those cathartic moments when our sense of what it means to be a “normal” person is

reflected back to us through an oblique recognition of “other people’s suffering” (p. 41).

Each of the “performative identities” that Swalwell described provides evidence of the ways in which the poor constitute a key signifier through which the wealthy justify their own privilege and come to see themselves as good people. First, for those who espouse a meritocratic outlook, other people’s suffering is a confirmation that they are worthy of their privilege because they worked hard. Positioning themselves as part of the solution through acts of charity, the meritocratic logic mobilizes other people’s suffering as a way to construct a self that is caring, knowledgeable, and cosmopolitan. At the most egregious level, knowledge of other peoples’ suffering becomes material for sounding “really cool,” as one student put it (p. 5), and for appearing informed and well educated. Second, the Benevolent Benefactor frame positions elites as the moral authority, “as a model toward which those with less should strive,” as Swalwell explained (p. 6). Such “benefactors” confirm their status by engaging in acts that corroborate their superiority over those without privilege, without whom benevolence—as part of what it means to be a good person—cannot be enacted. The poor, of course, can never achieve such moral standing, precisely because what defines them as poor is the lack of the very economic resources that allow wealthy benefactors to enact their moral character.

In the third instance, the very possibility of “opting out” (p. 5), as one participant put it, and becoming resigned to the fact of inequality in the comfort of an elite school is an option that only economic privilege can afford. As Nietzsche (1996) argued, the kind of ascetic ideal expressed through the image of someone like Henry David Thoreau is itself the product of a process of moral self-constitution that further obscures the power of economic privilege. Such a position is not all that surprising. Even when people from privileged groups have an awareness of oppression and see the need for social justice work, they may feel that it is useless to try to change things or that there is little they can do. They may feel inadequate, powerless, overwhelmed, or hopeless to bring about change (Goodman, 2001). Such feelings are akin to the kind of paralyzing “White guilt” that many Whites experience when they become aware of how they are implicated in racism and benefit from White supremacy. And like White guilt, the move toward resignation once again underscores the economic privilege implied in having that option.

At the opposite end of the Resigned, Swalwell described the frame of the Activist Ally as the one that “is best suited” (p. 7) to the conception of justice-oriented citizenship that Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argued is most consistent with a social justice education. Clearly this is Swalwell’s preferred position, and the one she wants to promote as the desirable outcome of a social justice education for students with economic privilege. We do not necessarily disagree, but we want to caution that such a frame is not innocent and is also implied in the kind of deferred (while differed) complicity in other people’s suffering that is more evident in the previous frames. The students who embrace this frame describe a desire for being *with the people*, talking to and getting to know the poor and their needs. Once again, such desires are wrapped in a

conception of the wealthy as moral and deserving, which requires suffering others (i.e., “the people”) as a way to enact “good citizenship.” In a sense, this is articulated at the level of the school, since the very reputation of the Kent Academy as a justice-oriented, elite, private school rides on the fact that it caters to the academic, social and, in the end, moral needs of those who can afford to attend such a school. This is not really paradoxical, as Swalwell suggested; the school, and its students, builds an identification as a “good school” and as “good citizens” on the backs of the very people whose lives they presumably want to change but without whom they would have no referent for self-definition. The hungry child must be kept alive, “but basically you and me stay the same.”

Swalwell seemed to project her own hopes on the words of students like Dylan and Cora, and in doing so ended up claiming more than the data make apparent, suggesting that they engage in practices informed by “an iterative relationship between thinking and doing that loops knowledge and understanding with action” (p. 7). Yet we know nothing about whether and how these students actually do anything to practice what they seem to preach or whether and how anything they do yields “mutual transformation and societal improvement” (p. 6). We can assume, however, that their college applications will be filled with statements about their concern for the well-being of others as they craft the kind of admissions profile that will yield an equally elite college education (Stevens, 2007; see also Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011).

Brantlinger (2003) pointed out that in democracies, “dominant groups must have some degree of permission from subordinates to exert control over them; that consensus is achieved by circulating ideologies that obfuscate the rankings and power imbalances that work against equity for peripheral groups” (pp. 5–6). This projection of self as justice oriented, therefore, has considerable ideological value—in diverting attention away from the power of dominant groups and convincing subordinates that they are concerned for others and are compassionate, kind, and giving. Such ideological messages that place the wealthy in a positive light protect their class interests and power, raising questions about whether and how individuals with economic privilege can ever be effectively involved in social justice efforts and what their role should be. On the one hand, it may be that providing access to the economic resources necessary to support social justice efforts is reason enough to persist in instilling justice-oriented values on young elites (Brantlinger, 2003; Goodman, 2001). On the other hand, if providing such resources only serves to reinforce the hierarchical positioning of wealthy elites as morally superior and as capable of enacting the ultimate form of good citizenship by becoming allies with the poor, fundamental social change is highly unlikely.

Swalwell noted that there are also subjective reasons why economically privileged students should engage in social justice work and embrace an “activist ally” conception of citizenship. “Improving their own lives” (p. 6) is part of what is at stake for these privileged youths as they are also “dehumanized by injustice” (p. 7). We agree that inequality and economic oppression have a deleterious effect on everyone involved. However, we are suspicious of the conceptions of what it means to be human that are reinforced when

elites enact a particular version of “good citizenship” by engaging in social justice work. Seeking self-improvement through what Chouliaraki (2011) called “ironic” solidary efforts runs the risk of becoming “a matter of crafting artful stories that situate the self at the heart of their communicative structure” (p. 370). While ostensibly about activism, such efforts really have at stake the moral salvation of economically privileged individuals without any significant change in the very material conditions that enable them to engage as allies in the first place.

In some sense, what this means is that we need to pay particular attention to what we mean by *activism* when we examine privileged individuals’ commitments toward social justice. This is especially important given that there is always an element of asserting oneself in activism by assuming roles based on the sense of entitlement that elites internalize through their schooling (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). Unless economically privileged individuals are willing to examine their sense of entitlement and challenge their own privileged ways of knowing and doing, being in solidarity with less fortunate others will remain about improving themselves. At an institutional level, this means that schools like the Kent Academy would have to put their very reputations—along with their economic privilege—on the line by becoming not just more diverse, as Swalwell suggested, but by shifting the very fabric of privilege that clothes their elite reputations.

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