

American Education

Joseph Jordi Marques

East West Psychology Department, California Institute of Integral Studies

Knowledge Work and the Modern Academy (EWP-6330)

Dr. Stephen Julich

April 25, 2023

Acknowledgments

I'm very grateful for all the wonderful peers, teachers, and administrators that I've gotten to know over the years in the context of my American education. They make school meaningful and important to me.

Introduction

Academic work often brings up feelings of anxiety, stress, sadness and anger within me. It always has. I remember that as young as the age of five I couldn't hang out and play with the other kids in my neighborhood because of the homework assigned to me by school. That theme evolved into long stressful nights spent at my computer researching and typing to finish before a deadline. I dare say that writing this paper brought up all the old stress that I've felt my whole life around school, and pushed me to engage with it.

On the one hand, school is meant to be difficult and stressful for everyone. On the other hand, schooling nurtures students' faculties of understanding, communication, and connection. To what extent is schooling justifiable in my case, and overall? To what extent has it optimized my becoming? Towards what ends does school operate in general? Where are humanist ideals in conflict with authoritarian power structures? What does my personal experience with 16 years of school tell us about any of this?

In this paper, I engage with these questions and more through my direct experience with school in a narrative style, while weaving in relevant themes and quotes from our class and course material. The narrative is intended to balance a treatment of the healthy ideals espoused by humanist academic institutions with the undeniable limits of class and hierarchy within these same modern academic institutions. This will lay the foundation upon which I will discuss my insight into the cunning of these authoritarian structures. Finally, I conclude by summing it all up and offering suggestions for future writing.

Elementary School

I went to a classic American public elementary school in the birthplace of America, within walking distance of where the ‘shot heard around the world’ was fired. That gunshot ignited the American Revolutionary War. Us students were required to recite the pledge of allegiance to the United States of America every morning with our right hands on our hearts facing the American flag. The pledge ends with the phrase: with liberty and justice for all. We learned early on that these humanist ideals do not always accord with reality, but we’re getting there because we all must play our role in shaping a more free and just world. Enlightenment ideals of reason, equality and freedom were important to the culture there. The values of inclusiveness and diversity came naturally to us, and experiences of freedom and fun were intertwined with our structured school day during recess, lunch and after school free time. Humor and play was characteristic of my time at school to some extent, and authentic expression was encouraged. I made friends who had at least one parent native to another country, and this lead to a general view that we are stronger united with many varying perspectives than we are divided and caught in narratives of fear and bigotry. Freedom of expression was paramount, and limits on our freedoms were explained as being for our protection, or for our benefit in the long run. I learned that there are different restrictions on different classes of people. As a student, the restrictions that I was subject to were primarily meant to nurture my growth and protect me in my formative years. The structures of classes, homework and school in general, I came to understand, was meant to play a role in my long term liberation and empowerment. Future privileges and opportunities would be available to those of us who did as we were told and excelled academically. Those who did not perform so well in school would have a harder life. Both of my parents worked constantly to pay the bills, and they told me I’d have to make a living

for myself out there on my own some day. It would be easier for me with a good education, they said. They took their jobs seriously, and they told me that my job was to take my schooling seriously too. I complied, and it contributed to my experience of a relatively safe and healthy upbringing.

Middle School

My first year of middle school (sixth grade), I started socializing with a lot more people in school. The amount of people in school tripled and I found myself navigating complex social dynamics. My English and History classes were my favorites since they nurtured my expansion of consciousness through their emphasis on considering many different perspectives and putting myself in other people's (whether fictional or historical) shoes. I grasped the idea of the observer effect early on and felt an aversion to the blindspots of scientific fields. Science got me thinking in terms of systematic categorizations, experiments and judgments which are typical of modern non-optimal authority structures characteristic of systemic oppression. (Cohn, B. 2006)

Around this time, my parents and I all got our first cell phones and it felt great to be able to communicate with my friends in an unmediated way at my own discretion. I believe that using the cell phone increased my apprehension of self responsibility at that formative time, and I learned how to interact with my peers through this new and miraculous technology through trial and error.

At some point in seventh grade, cell phones were banned in school. If a teacher caught you with a phone, they were expected to take it away and punish you. This restriction felt disempowering to me and I have to admit, it filled me with sense of indignation. I thought that instead of banning cell phones, the school administration ought attempt to teach children how to

use this technology responsibly. I didn't know quite how to express my feelings or make meaningful change at that time. All I could say is that their actions conflicted with common sense and it wasn't fair. I disagreed with the rule. I felt a totalitarian energy behind it and I discerned that a fear of punishment was intended to be shaping my behavior. This contrasted with my ideal that a love of learning was the optimal driver for healthy growth, and that unreasonable restrictions on peoples freedoms would be stifling and depressing. I acquiesced and I was glad to finally graduate and get out of that school.

High School

Graduating to a new school in ninth grade was marked again by ethos of openness that I had felt in sixth grade. It seemed that since we were older now, we were responsible enough to have more freedom, and even a choice in some of our classes (electives). There were a lot of other students in this school - there were about 2000 of us spread across four grades.

I was interested in politics and government, so I joined the 'Model United Nations' club and I was elected to the student representative assembly. I also started videotaping the live broadcast of the school committee and selectmen's meetings for the public access TV station. In the middle of 10th grade, I watched from an adjoining room as a grant was presented to the school committee to install security cameras in the high school. \$10,000 was available for the purchase and installation of surveillance equipment in the hallways. Their pretext was protection, but I suspected that their true motive was control. With the use of this new surveillance technology, administrators could punish us for things that they saw through the camera. A fear of punishment would shape student behavior. I feel that becoming the person that I want to be should be an inside job, not something imposed by a fear of retribution from an authority. My

indignation at being recorded and my desire for my privacy was met by the justification that authority figures offered. They claimed that the cameras were for our protection. I did not accept this justification, and I still don't. As Noam Chomsky said, "the onus is on authority to justify itself. If my three year old grand daughter runs into the street and I grab her arm and pull her back, that's authority. It is justifiable, and I think we should accept that justification." (Chomsky, Special Interview) Ultimately, at Lexington High School, the students were old enough to clearly and critically reason with the administrators, whose attitude was to be basically deaf to student reasoning and to be generally authoritarian in the nature of their decision making process. I told them in schools own terms what school knows about authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles, and the importance of our shared value of authoritative parenting back then. To catch you up to speed and help you understand the importance of the difference, I created the following passage using Open AI technology regarding authoritarian parenting and authoritative parenting. Would love to hear your thoughts on including it here:

"In psychology, authoritative and authoritarian are two distinct styles of parenting that have different effects on children's development. Authoritative parenting is characterized by high levels of warmth, support, and communication between parents and children. Parents who use this style set clear expectations for their children's behavior, but also allow for some flexibility and negotiation. Children raised by authoritative parents tend to be independent, self-reliant, and socially responsible.

On the other hand, authoritarian parenting is characterized by strict rules and punishments, with little room for discussion or negotiation. Parents who use this style tend to be demanding and controlling, but may be low in warmth and support. Children raised by

authoritarian parents may be more obedient, but may also struggle with low self-esteem, anxiety, and social skills.

There are many scholarly works that discuss the differences between authoritative and authoritarian parenting. For example, Baumrind (1966) first proposed these two styles of parenting, and subsequent research has confirmed their distinct effects on children's development. Some other notable works include:

- Maccoby and Martin (1983) - a review of research on parenting styles that further distinguished between authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved parenting.
- Steinberg et al. (1994) - a study that found authoritative parenting to be associated with better outcomes for adolescents, including higher academic achievement and fewer behavior problems.
- Chen et al. (2015) - a meta-analysis that confirmed the link between authoritative parenting and positive outcomes for children, while authoritarian parenting was associated with negative outcomes.

Overall, the research suggests that authoritative parenting is a more effective and positive approach to raising children, compared to authoritarian parenting.”

I feel now that the primary parenting style I was raised with in my youth was authoritative, and it shaped my becoming in generally positive ways. My home life was a warm, healing & authoritative environment that fostered my development into a reasonable and relatively cooperative teen. What really rubbed me the wrong way was when authoritarian administrators imposed their arbitrary and unfair rules on students just because someone higher up in their administrative hierarchy had empowered them to do so. They got a sick joy from that.

BA in Philosophy

This personal struggle and feeling of cognitive dissonance lessened a little bit when I graduated from High School and left for a private small liberal arts college in Maine. There were no security cameras there, and a community composed of authoritative relationships nurtured students transitions from kids into independent and reasonable young adults. Bates' motto, *Amore ac Studio*, means 'with ardor and devotion' and 'for a love of learning'. Bates was founded by emancipationists in the wake of the American Civil War, and one of its more famous graduates was Benjamin Elijah Mays - the mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was a place where I felt a greater sense of freedom and intelligence. It was a place where bright students came from all over the world to attend, and where most of my teachers had ivy league degrees.

My first two years in college were marked by a wonderful expansion of my intellect and a deeper sense of self, fostered in part by newfound feelings of freedom. Two Deans in particular epitomized this ethos of openness - Holly and Keith. Both of them cared deeply about the college community and had been a part of it for about 20 years. We were all involved in the Bates outing club, which organized trips into nature for the students. It was an entirely student run organization that went back about 100 years. Its lasting effect is that it instills responsibility and leadership qualities in students who engage as part of a free and open society there. Holly and Keith were advisers to this club and I was an officer on and off, and if ever the rules were broken or somebody got hurt, they were the individuals with whom the duty of remediation or punishment rested. More often than not, their method was to listen and say "How can we help, or how can we all get through this together?" They would act as authoritative parental figures, not permissive neglecters or authoritarian abusers. The former is characteristic of an open society, while the latter is characteristic of closed ones (Popper, 2019)

Holly and Keith would make resources available to students who had gotten in trouble and attempt to guide them back on track with respect to their own individual direction of becoming. This really made sense to me and I'm grateful to have had two wonderful years where openness reigned at Bates. I went abroad for my junior year, and when I came back in 2014, everything had changed. The Bates Board of Trustees had appointed a new President who had been in the Harvard administration while I was away. She had climbed the ladders within that paradigm effectively. She hired her second in command, the Dean of Students, who had also been in the administration at Harvard.

As an elected representative in the Bates student government, I was privy to some of the drama occurring within the administration during my senior year. Apparently the Board and Bates College President were coming into conflict with Holly and Keith behind closed doors. The President wanted to crack down on under age parties and create an environment of fear and punishment for students who broke the rules. Holly, Keith and others were opposed to this, and tried to persuade the advocates of this overly totalitarian ethos of the merits of their open & authoritative style. They sought to give the students more credit regarding their ability to learn through making mistakes. The issue came to a head when Holly and Keith were unceremoniously fired by the president and her Dean of Students. The student body was saddened, those who were not numb were infuriated, and a vote of 'no confidence' in the Bates College Administration was brought before the members of the student government. The vote of no confidence was unanimous, with two exemptions. Rather than address this vote with a direct dialogue, it seems that the Dean of Students colluded with an unscrupulous temporary parliamentarian of the Representative Assembly to destroy the student government, and they

replaced it with a smaller body of appointees. What does this behavior imply about humanist institutions in general and their totalitarian impulses?

The temporary parliamentarian admitted later in a recorded conversation to rigging the election that dissolved our body, and it was common knowledge that the temporary parliamentarian was having regular Thursday night discussions with the Dean of Students. I somehow retained my seat in the body across this transition and played a vital role (among other senior members of the Representative Assembly) in revealing the truth to the new student assembly. It was not an option to appeal to the President regarding accountability for this unscrupulous behavior, since we suspected that they were colluding with others to silence us in the first place. We never had enough hard, non-circumstantial evidence to implicate the administrators and they were never held accountable. In retrospect, what I see now is that if I had been able to involve Holly and Keith's help in an appeal from the student body to the board of directors, the Dean of Students might have been held accountable.

This opens an alternative reality where Holy and Keith might have kept their jobs and restored balance. Humanist ideals are in balance with totalitarian power dynamics, an epistemology at the core of hierarchical humanist institutions. This dynamic is extensively discussed in the realm of post-modern philosophers and intellectuals. Heidegger, Foucault, and Spivak are the tip of the iceberg in terms of a plurality of perspectives making active contributions all the time.

As it was, my senior year at Bates was marked by regular reports of campus security or police barging in on friendly gatherings to inspect whether there was alcohol and under age students present simultaneously. I dealt with the trend towards closure of the society by working around it rather than confronting it directly. For example I guided 30 minutes of meditation every

weekday in the school chapel as president of the Dharma society, and I hosted weekly broad ranging and far-reaching discussions in my role as president of the Philosophy club. In my classes I learned the history of western philosophy across the four ages presented by Michael Segre in his book *Higher Education and the Growth of Knowledge*. (Segre, 2015) It is because of school that I can speak intelligently about Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Berkeley, Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant. The philosophers after Kant who refer back to this basic philosophical lineage are involved in a basic constellation that includes Neitzche, Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault, Rawls, Spivak, Popper, and Kuhn. These central figures are in turn referred to by academics and intellectuals, and are often cited after the word 'References' in the typical American Psychological Association (APA)⁷ manner. The closer I got to graduation, the more I began to count myself as part of a global community of intellectuals who reference their detailed works in their academic writings.

Maui

When I graduated from college, I longed for an environment and a culture that affirmed openness and rejected closure. The Aloha spirit of Hawaii spoke deeply to me, and a close friend from high school found a two bedroom house for us to stay in on an acre of organic garden. It was with pleasure that I moved to Maui with my backpack and the money I'd saved over the course of my whole life. My parents didn't want me to pay them back for their support of my academic journey, rather they wanted me to pay it forward, follow my heart, and enjoy becoming whoever I willed to be.

Deep indigenous roots inform the connection that people of all ages and backgrounds feel with Gaia, and with all the beauty and abundance that it naturally provides. Fresh fruit, veggies

and seafood nourish those beings who are fortunate to call this place home - colorful flowing clothing, smiles, and dirty bare feet are symbols of internal liberation.

I have traveled back to the Boston suburbs to see my family periodically, and each time I leave Maui I feel some kind of culture shock. On the mainland, there is a right way to be and a wrong way to be. In my home town, I feel this sense that I am who I am and that's OK, but really I should be a little bit different. I contrast this to how on Maui I feel that I am who I am, and not only is that OK, but that's great! Authenticity and uniqueness is something to be celebrated. Diversity is the reality, and word Aloha is an important part of the cultural vernacular. The Aloha spirit means to show up from a place of inspiration and love in your daily interactions with self and others. Values of self reliance and trusting one's intuition also play a role in the cultural milieu.

Ram Dass lived on Maui, and when I go to his house I feel a sense that all of us there are connected through our internal and collective commitment and conviction in the power of Love. There is a sense of collective presence, awe and wonder within the culture, which RD epitomized. He was just fine in spite of all the external conditions. He let go of his body, possessions, relationships, etc. and merged with what he called the oneness behind it all while he was still alive. The freedom he taught through his example is very profound. This freedom is not dependent upon degrees, jobs, class, status, prestige or lack thereof. Nor is it dependent on identity, age, language, background, or context. This freedom comes from a habit and practice of totally letting go, and engaging with the world from a standpoint of loving awareness. It is accessible by everyone and is totally universal. The freedom of spiritual enlightenment is different from the ideal of freedom formulated during the enlightenment period in Europe. In the latter sense, humanist forms of freedom have political and economic underpinnings. In the

former sense, Freedom is a divine and sacred distillation of our soul's special flavor, regardless of political or economic classifications.

Looking Back

In the years since graduating from college, I have been reflecting from a distance upon the hierarchical structures of the institutions I attended, and the nature of hierarchy and authority in general. Class structure is intimately linked to oppression, I see plainly that renaissance & enlightenment ideals of justice, morality, equality and freedom were cunningly married to hierarchical and patriarchal structures of authority and power in the form of modern institutions. These institutions are tethered together in a series of constellations which dominate the Earth politically, economically, and militarily. Heidegger writes that the end or goal of this domination is the age of the world picture. (Thompson, I. 2010) Popper exposes the classical roots of this deception in his lengthy treatment of Plato's philosopher king. (Popper, K. 2010) Related to this is Plato's noble lie, which Plato uses to justify his classist political project. Popper explains that Plato's philosopher king is a part of a class of intellectuals who are in relationship with the dominated classes. Both are connected by the moral values and liberal ideals that define enlightenment philosophy and date back to Aristotle & Plato. They felt that the dominating classes were justified in the exercise of authoritarian power to protect and advance their political and economic control. These structures of command can be easily identified with the help of Noam Chomsky, who recently said; "There are people who give orders, and there are people who follow orders. That's class." (Noam Chomsky, Through Conversations Podcast) Hierarchical institutions generally are the locus of money and power, and are part of constellations that share connections to colonial class structures. We must apply the enlightenment ideal of query to the

deeper question at issue: namely the moral standing of hierarchy, classism, power structures and authority within modern governmental, academic, and corporate institutions.

Where authority figures attempt to justify their actions, we all must judge these justifications for ourselves and decide if we accept the justifications. If we do not accept the justification in the case of arbitrary and over reaching actions for example, we must then decide what form of resistance is appropriate. Depending upon the degree of the disruptive force, civil disobedience and creative methods ought be applied by civilians to protest and balance out the consequences of arbitrary and over-reaching actions of unjustifiable authority for example. Ultimately the ends of harmony and balance ought be honored.

Looking Forward

When truly enlightened communities of the future sit in their circle and put life in the middle, they will aim to optimize maximum benefit to Gaia's long term welfare and happiness. The constellation of wisdom keepers and light workers aim to love and serve each other. They are opposed by forces that rely upon the arbitrary use of authority by operatives of centralized power structures in general. When representatives of such institutions attempt to justify their exercise of authority, everyone who is able and willing can decide for themselves whether they accept the justification or not. Unjust authority extends the authoritarian power and influence of hierarchical communities that dominate life and the Earth.

Modern academia affirms fundamental beliefs about the necessity of hierarchical power structures. Consider statements like "that's just the way things are", or "that's just how our system works". These examples tacitly acknowledge the aggravation inherent in being involved in 'the system'. Their best option is to attempt to guide the institution in a moral direction from

within. Arbitrary authority and hierarchical power structures within the global constellation of modern institutions must shift. Any conversation on the merits and demerits of the Modern Academy and class structure must address this fundamental issue.

Conclusion

I'm grateful to be looking back now with a fair amount of spacial and temporal distance. I am able to reflect clearly upon the hierarchical structures of the institutions I attended. There is a big difference between fear and respect regarding their influence on the becoming process - respect being my preference of the two motivational factors in childhood development. From one lens, the looters of the Earth, exploiters of both sea-dwellers and land-dwellers, built towering temples to knowledge and power that endure as reservoirs of money and military might. I see oppression as being intimately linked with institutionalized structures of authority.

Marx pointed out that capitalism must inevitably transform, in the same way that it was inevitable for feudalism to transform. He prophesied that a classless society was the next form of social organization that would broadly persist. This claim rests on an unexamined assumption - Marx did not account for the environmental crisis the Earth is currently facing. If human social organization is to persist at all, it will probably be in the context of a radically different biosphere. Marx, who wrote in the mid 19th century, could not have imagined how planet Earth has transformed since his time. Between nuclear related dangers, pollution of air, water and earth, deforestation, and the harm of pesticides and other chemicals, it's a miracle I'm able to sit here and type this all up. Perhaps hierarchical institutions will redeem themselves for the harm it has inflicted on our common home by rectifying the environmental crisis. I doubt it though, because the destruction/subjugation of the Earth is a crucial component of this totalitarian

ontology. In my future writings, I hope to describe some solutions to the problems that I have with how modern institutions (especially schools) are structured. For now I'll leave you with these questions: what future do you envision for yourself and your family? How would you transform the structure of American Education to make it less hierarchical and less authoritarian? How would this transformation be translatable to other modern institutions?

References

- Cohn, B. (2006). *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge the British in India*. Princeton Univ. Press.
- Noam Chomsky: On China, Artificial Intelligence, & The 2024 Presidential Election. [Video podcast episode]. (2023, April 16). In *Through Conversations Podcast*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av_0PhJdw9M
- Popper, K. (2019). *The Open Society and its Enemies: New One-Volume Edition* (L. Gerrard, Narr.) [Audiobook]. Tantor Audio. <https://www.scribd.com/listen/411312318>
- Thomson, I. (2010). *Heidegger's Aesthetics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. Stanford.edu. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>
- Segre, M. (2015). *Higher Education and the Growth of Knowledge*. Routledge.
- السياسة / الفلسفة اللغة / الحياة / نعوم تشومسكي / حيرة 56 / Noam Chomsky | Special Interview. (n.d.). www.youtube.com. Retrieved April 21, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTGoYXx0Kew>