TEACHING ABOUT INEQUALITY: STUDENT RESISTANCE, PARALYSIS, AND RAGE*

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Three classroom climates in courses focusing on inequality are identified, those of resistance, paralysis, and rage. In resistant classes, students deny the importance of class, gender, race, and other lines of stratification or fail to see their structural sources. In paralyzed classes, students are so overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of inequality that they become debilitated and depressed; social structures are reified, giving them a false aura of inevitability. In enraged classes, the existence of stratification sparks so much anger that students lash out in an unfocused manner that is often blind to the complexities of stratified societies. In this article, I offer suggestions for responding to each of these three classroom climates.

What makes courses in stratification most exciting to teach also makes them most difficult. The issues of power and powerlessness, advantage and disadvantage addressed in these courses are charged concepts. They encourage viewing the world as inhabited by winners and losers, locating oneself on this social map and, consequently, taking sides. Personal identities are shaped and loyalties formed around race, class, and gender. Not only does this characterize students, but also instructors, who bring with them racial, class, gender, and other identities. Courses focusing on class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and global stratification also tend to draw more politicized students and those who feel strongly about ranking systems. Their passion brings life to a class but can also present problems in channeling student anger and resentment in positive ways.

In this article I discuss three classroom climates—those of resistance, paralysis, and rage—that I have found in teaching courses on inequality over the last 15 years, first at a large state university and, most recently, at a small, private liberal arts university. These three classroom climates are not exhaustive, but they are the ones that I have most frequently encountered in teaching about inequality. These climates are a direct outgrowth of the heavy focus in such courses on issues of power and privilege. The identification of these classroom types can be thought of as a heuristic device. None of them exists in pure form nor do they arise in all classes. The level and composition of the class, the particular mixture of students, and the characteristics of the instructor, among other things, affect which climates are present in a particular class. Multiple classroom climates may be present at the same time. One of the challenges of teaching is to determine which climate predominates in a given class at a given moment.

THE RESISTING CLASS

Some students in the resisting class may deny the existence or importance of inequality or may argue that conditions are improving so rapidly that no intervention is needed. Other students may be aware of the basic contours of stratified societies but defensively deny that race, class, or sex differences result from unequal access to opportunity or other structural factors. They see individual deficiencies as responsible for poverty, and they look to individual tastes as an explanation for why African-Americans are concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods and why women are clustered in pink collar jobs.

Observers of American society, from Tocqueville to Bellah, have commented on the pervasive individualism—the tendency to affix individual credit or blame for wealth and poverty—in American society. With such an ideology, inequality becomes a legitimate sort-
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the bare essentials, much less for newspapers, life insurance, vacations, and the like. This exercise challenges students who resist seeing structural dimensions to poverty and instead, like most Americans, attribute poverty first and foremost to a "lack of thrift and proper money management" by the poor (Feagin 1975, p. 97).

- Guided fantasies are another exercise that can be used in a resistant class. I ask students at the beginning of my gender and society course to imagine that they were born as the other sex and to write about how their lives might be different. Then I invite students to read their essays to their classmates. This exercise is a good icebreaker and pushes those students who tend to explore only the abstract to think about the concrete dimensions of their own lives. A few perceptive, introspective students who share their thoughts and lives provide the courage their resistant classmates need to probe more deeply. Some students may continue to feel gender has not affected their lives much, but this belief no longer is likely to be an automatic assumption.

Some resistance in a stratification class comes from growing up in a homogeneous community and from inexperience, a common characteristic in young people. Often because they have not personally experienced what we teach and because they are accustomed to appealing to personal experience to test the validity of an argument or research finding, they are skeptical. A frequent remark in a gender course will be, "Well, I'm a woman and I've never been discriminated against." One solution is to present films and guest speakers. These presentations can give reality to inequalities that students have not personally experienced in a way that reading a scholarly article may not. Films such as The Business of America (1984), Racism 101 (1989), Pink Triangles (1982), and The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (1984), expose students to the realities of class-, race-, and sex-divided societies and to people who feel passionately about these divisions. A panel of gay men and lesbians from the university or nearby communities who talk about their experiences with employers, landlords, family, and friends, as well as answer student questions, illustrates the forms of discrimination encountered by gay men and lesbians and gives real faces and identities to people who are invisible to many students, except as caricatures in popular culture.

In short, resistant students need to be gently guided and challenged, encouraged to raise questions, to explore and voice concerns in an atmosphere that has respect for differences in viewpoint. Too many prescriptive statements by an instructor when teaching about inequality can smack of dogmatism and political correctness and are often deadly in a resistant class.

THE PARALYZED CLASS

Because so many sociology courses focus on the unequal distribution of power and privilege in a social system and on the structural and ideological bases of that inequality, they often promote depression, fatalism, and, consequently, paralysis in students. Stratification systems become reified: external, entrenched, and outside of human agency. Students give up. They don't want to talk about inequality anymore. The possibility of creating a more humane or just society through reforming or dismantling these structures seems beyond possibility. This belief is especially potent if no alternatives to present structures are offered. Too often in teaching about inequality, we critique without providing alternatives. Moreover, since few Americans believe in collectivism as an avenue for change, students feel the individual must face stratification systems alone, surmounting them through hard work, networking, and other self-help strategies. Too frequently courses on inequality are separated from those on social movements, with students in the former having a sense only of how oppressively inequitable societies have been without a sense of the possibility for transforming them.

Paralysis is particularly likely in times when collective mobilization is waning or under attack. Our students have witnessed the firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers, the announcement of givebacks by one union president after another, and the plummeting numbers in union membership nationwide. Certainly the mass movements of the 1930s and 1960s by industrial workers, the unemployed, African-Americans, women, students, and others are not in the historical memory of our students. In the current political climate, especially, the odds of redressing inequality may seem insurmountable to many students.

Films such as Union Maids (1973), which documents labor conditions in the 1930s and
1940s and the struggle for workers’ rights, demonstrate how collective action has changed the nature of the workplace. It is important for students to learn that many things they take for granted today, whether it is unemployment compensation, universal suffrage, or the ability to choose one’s seat on a bus, were radical ideas at one time and came about as the result of collective struggle—that is, human agency.

Some paralysis is the result of courses that lack an historical and cross-cultural referent. An ahistorical approach reifies the present; it denies the human origins of current stratification systems. It mythologizes current social structures as timeless and gives them an aura of inevitability (Stone 1988). To combat the resulting despair and bad faith that ensues, students need a sense of how stratification systems have unfolded and of how other societies have been organized. Cross-cultural comparisons illustrate that it is possible to have universal entitlement to health care, smaller salary differences between workers and managers, and lower levels of sexual violence than we have in our own society. The existence of concrete alternatives reduces some paralysis.

Personal and campus examples can be empowering for a paralyzed class. Every campus has stories of small rebellions which have helped to dismantle some of the traditional practices of stratified societies. I relate the story of two women faculty members at my university in the 1970s, who after petitioning unsuccessfully for change in the male-only, nude faculty swim hour, challenged the practice by jumping into the pool suited with their unsuited male colleagues. Shortly thereafter the pool was integrated. I also tell the story of the male student in my gender course who asked the manager of our campus bookstore why books on childcare, gardening, and cooking were shelved under “women’s interests,” pointing out that men are also interested in these issues. Other students in the class began putting books on women’s history, feminist theory, and books from our course in the “women’s interest” section, giving it a broader focus. As a result, that section no longer exists in the bookstore; Cookbooks are now under “cooking” not “women.” Paralyzed students need to hear these stories of people like themselves, on their own campus, who have shown that stratification systems can be bent. Gloria Steinem’s essay “Far from the Opposite Shore” (1983, pp. 341-62) can be used to supplement these local stories with further examples of “outrageous acts and everyday rebellions.”

**THE ENRAGED CLASS**

Stratification courses make many students angry, particularly those from disadvantaged origins or groups. Topics like racial harassment on college campuses, sexual violence against women, and cuts in funding for services for the poor spark feelings of injustice and outrage. For some students, the violent nature of hierarchical societies is not an abstraction. They have been brutalized personally by rape, racial harassment, or gay-bashing. Frequently their anger is not focused but rather is directed at the nearest representative of an advantaged group: a male student in a mostly female course on gender, a white student in a course on race. This anger, which may approach rage, can be debilitating and immobilizing. Moreover angry students often engage in reductionist thinking: everything wrong in the world is attributable to patriarchy or white racism or capitalist hegemony. Men are reduced to a gender with no redeeming qualities and women regarded as blameless in the maintenance of gender-stratified societies. A blindness to the complexities of hierarchical societies and the multiple forms that stratification takes may result.

A class with enraged students, or an enraged instructor, is seldom a tolerant one that encourages a free and honest exchange of ideas. Other students soon realize that there is a politically correct line and either give lip service to it or withdraw into resentful silence. They do not want to be accused of being racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. The class becomes irrevocably divided into exploiters and the exploited, victimizers and victims. The angry class becomes the divided class, students who do not speak to each other.

Certainly anger is a healthy response to injustice, an empowering emotion, and a necessary first step to political action. The purpose should not be to suppress student anger but to focus and direct it. Journals can help in that they allow students to recount personal experiences, including those that have engendered rage. Instructors then have the opportunity to respond to these experiences and feelings in a personal way. For students, understanding of the specific sources of anger is important for self-understanding; for instruc-
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examples of

ators, journals can be an invaluable resource for comprehending classroom dynamics.

Anonymous essays can allow students to say what they cannot say in class or to an instructor in a signed essay (Atwater 1987). With student permission, these essays can be used in class. In my gender course, I hand out statements written by campus women who have been sexually assaulted, sometimes by fathers or dates. In addition to providing a personalized account of the terror of sexual violence for those who have not experienced it, such statements may give those who have been silent about their own victimization the courage to confront it, name it, seek out help, and sometimes to speak about it in class. Some students have written unassigned essays about being sexually assaulted or about what it is like to be a gay student or a minority student on campus. Some have asked to read their essays in class or have asked me to read them in a subsequent class. This type of writing releases some of the anger, focuses it, and gives students a sense that by naming their own experiences they are educating others, helping students in similar situations, and thereby engaging in a political act to stop what has been done to them.

Films and guest speakers provide models of people who are angry but who have directed their anger in effective ways. The documentary film *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1990) shows Wells battling the lynching of African-Americans, race-segregated facilities, and suffrage laws that excluded women. Enraged classes need examples of people who have used their anger to dislodge its structural sources.

Satire, humor, and music can also be effective teaching tools in an angry, divided class. Satire and humor can illustrate the injustice of stratified societies, but in a lighter, more playful manner. It is cathartic for angry students to be able to laugh at some of the absurdities of stratified societies. Usually these students are from groups who are the brunt of popular humor. The type of humor I use turns the tables; rather than laughing at disadvantaged groups, it pokes fun at the divisions and hierarchies set up in stratified societies. Students convinced of the injustice of stratification enjoy this humor, but it is also less threatening to students who are in advantaged positions or who do not feel outraged by a system of stratification. Such humor draws in students in a light-hearted manner but usually ends by pulling no punches and making an important observation about stratified societies. My favorite source of humor in teaching courses on gender is the volume of feminist humor, *Pulling Our Own Strings*, edited by Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely (1980). A selection like “Menstruating Women are Unfit to be Mothers” is always well-received. Paul Fussell’s book *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (1990) illustrates class distinctions in American society in an irreverent, humorous manner, and Joseph Faulkner’s *Sociology through Humor* (1987) provides a collection of humorous essays, many related to issues of inequality.

Humor can also come from the stories of real life. In talking about Freudian theories of gender, I tell my students about the single mother who, wanting her five-year-old daughter to know what a male body looked like, gave her daughter and the daughter’s male cousin a bath together. Throughout the bath the daughter’s eyes were on her cousin’s penis. The mother began to wonder if Freud was right about penis envy. Finally the daughter leaned over to her mother and whispered in her mother’s ear, “It’s a good thing he doesn’t have that on his face!” These kinds of humorous stories provide relief for students who are enraged by the misogyny in Freud’s theories or in other works that we read.

Music can also work well in a class with enraged students. Songs like “Solidarity Forever,” “We Shall Overcome,” or Holly Near’s “Fight Back” (1976) are inspiring and give students a sense of the depth of feeling which binds together people struggling against one or more forms of inequality. Other music is humorous and playful but likewise provides a critique of stratified societies—for example, Red Shadow’s (1975) “Get Your Ass With the Class That’s Destined by History,” sung to the tune of an old Beach Boys’ song or Fred Small’s (1987) “Title IX,” in which he laments that his wife “used to cheer me as I ran my race; now I can’t keep her pace. She does wind sprints; I do the wash. I stuff zucchini while she’s playing squash.” Satire, political humor, and political music reduce some of the tension and dead-seriousness common in stratification classes and can bind a class together, empowering the students and teaching some important lessons.

These are a few of the teaching approaches I have used to address student resistance, paralysis, and rage in sociology courses on inequality. They do not work equally well in all
classes. Classes vary from one year to the next and change over the course of a semester. What works with some students in a class does not with others. There are typically multiple climates in a classroom, and addressing one climate that impedes learning may exacerbate others. This suggests the importance of constant fine-tuning and attention to how a class is unfolding—whether it is showing resistance, paralysis, rage, or some other response. These problems, common to sociology courses, require considerable sensitivity, imagination, and flexibility on the part of instructors.

REFERENCES


FILMS


MUSIC


SIMULATION GAME


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