

Marx's Marks: A+ or C-

A ⁺
damn

- or -



AN EASY SOCIALIST EXPERIMENT

Colleges, Universities and other institutions of higher learning have long been excessively populated with left-leaning individuals. Indeed the voting record of professors and their ilk may even rival that of the main-stream press, of which around 90% or more consistently vote democratic. Some academicians even today feel that Stalin was not as great a monster as Hitler because Stalin was a socialist, even though the number of deaths attributed to both (25 to 30 million) is comparable. While the University of Colorado's Ward Churchill is on the extreme side even for this group -- after all, not even most liberal arts professors publicly define Wall Street workers who perished on 9/11 as "little Eichmanns" -- the general thrust of his socialistic sentiments is not at all alien to most college campuses.

(For non-historians, Adolph Eichmann was the bookish SS administrator in charge of the Nazi's "Final Solution" -- which was the extermination of as many Jewish people as they could get their hands on -- who famously said he would "leap laughing into the grave with the knowledge that the blood of 6 million Jews was on his hands." He was deservedly executed -- by hanging -- in Israel in the early 1960s, after first hiding out in Argentina for years, on Garibaldi Street if I recall correctly.)

A Pure Meritocracy

Given this relative socialistic orientation among most academicians, what's truly astonishing is that the key work activity which all professors of all political stripes actually supervise and engender is the exact opposite of socialism, and indeed is the metaphorical epitome of a capitalistic system at least with respect to its critical characteristics.

In virtually all colleges nowadays, students compete fiercely for top grades. The top students get into the best graduate schools, and in turn receive the highest paying job offers. But especially in the most competitive of colleges like the Ivy League and their ilk, the competition for top grades is not driven as much by future prospects of affluence as much as it's an existential effort to achieve excellence, to strive, excel and out-compete. Top wrestlers want to win every match and top students want an "A" on every paper and exam. To those who are the most success-oriented, what drives them to train that extra hour or five or to put in that all-nighter to perfect a paper is not future monetary reward, but the existential urge to achieve triumph and competitive excellence for its own sake, to garner the prize of the win or the "A."

Usually the professors nurture and encourage these efforts to achieve individual academic excellence, and indeed are visibly reinforced themselves by the genuine efforts of top students to achieve competitive academic perfection to the extent possible. (At least, that's generally the case unless the student espouses politically incorrect opinions, in which case for some professors that student becomes effectively damned).

Thus in most instances, especially at the very top institutions, the professors oversee a system of academic "work production" which is as purely individualistic as

possible. That is, in most instances the students are graded as a direct result of their own individual performance, whereby those who work the hardest and have the greatest talent and drive, get the top grades.

Academic Hypocrisy

The reinforcement the students receive for their efforts – the grades, that is – is therefore exactly analogous to severe, unbridled capitalism where each individual is also reinforced solely based on the quality of their own individual work product and how much others value it. The academic analogy is in fact exact except for the facts that (a) it's a single individual – the professor – who determines the worth of the student's work product via the grade, whereas in a free capitalist market it's the society as a whole which determines the value of the work product, via how much the market will pay for it, and (b) although the grade is an extremely powerful reinforcing measure of work product quality (like money), it is not a medium of exchange (unlike money).

Colleges and universities are, in short, little factories for individual academic meritocracy notwithstanding the professors' generally professed preference for socialism when it comes to work product reward distribution outside their cloistered academic environment. Despite the Universities' socialistic leanings, they are metaphorically akin to raw unbridled capitalism in the essence of their being, which is their mode of academic operation in the classroom.

But, for truly ambitious and driven individuals the reward of winning tournaments and getting all "A" grades is at root little different than striving and competing with equal focus and ardor in business or any other field of professional endeavor.

Karl Marx

Karl Marx famously said "...to each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities..." Marx' preference was that all would homogenize their work product, such that all contributed what they could but the rewards for that effort were not to be correlated with the value of each individual's work product -- in contrast to capitalism or academic grade competition -- but rather would be allocated based on need. The critical linkage between individual performance and the reward for that performance is with Marx utterly trumped by the need to maximize the equality with which those rewards are allocated to all.

In short, Marx effectively redefined "equity" by collective need versus individual performance reinforcement.

It's this gaping, brobdingnagian chasm between (a) the espoused socialistic leaning of many or most professors with (b) the intensely individualistic system of reinforcement they emphasize in their classrooms, that encapsulates the "Academic Hypocrisy" noted above.

The Proposed Experiment

All college professors could today easily resolve this conflict, with a simple, painless yet rather definitive experiment. No grant would be required, but publication opportunities would abound, as would promotions and even tenure appointments (unless the Dean is a socialist).

The typical college class involves two or three major papers and an exam or two. Why not, on one of these, conduct an experiment where all the students' grades are homogenized instead of individualized? That is, the class would be told which paper or exam gets homogenized grades, and which gets individual grades, just as in an economic system one knows in advance if you'll get the full fruits of your labor, or a diluted version thereof. Each paper is graded using the same process and criteria, regardless of which system of grade allocation is applicable. In the Individualistic Allocation, the grades are allocated the traditional way and as such serves as the control. In the Socialistic Allocation, each student gets the same grade, which is simply the average grade of all the papers or exams in that batch, consistent with pure socialism.

Predictable Results?

If socialistic theory is correct, each student will work just as hard, and strive for excellence to the same extent regardless of whether the homogenized grades or individualized grades apply. Committed socialists like **President Obama** might even argue that effort and work quality would increase under the Socialistic Allocation of grades if the students have the proper collective orientation, and are sufficiently enlightened to identify with the class as a whole more than with themselves as lone individuals.

On the other hand if the vile, selfish capitalists are right, and if the students are more motivated by direct 100% personal reinforcement, then the overall quality of the papers will greatly deteriorate. Both **Adam Smith** and **BF Skinner** would likely wager that the highest achieving students will not expend the extra effort for excellence, since their efforts to do so will be undermined by those students more inclined to slack off and pass but not excel. They might further wager that more students will be inclined to do little or nothing, comfortable in the knowledge that the greater efforts of others will effectively **bail them out**.

But, this could easily be tested by comparing the quality of the papers in both batches. If the papers in the socialized, homogenized batch conform with ideal socialist theory, the students will be impelled through enlightened enthusiasm to produce extra-excellent papers, since the more work they put in, the better off everyone in the class will be, because all students will know that their extra effort will incrementally bring up the grade of everyone.

So, here we have a perfect, ready-made experimental lab from which to compare and contrast the two systems: one which (as now) provides a grade influenced solely by one's own effort and skill, versus one which minimizes the correlation between one's individual efforts and skill and one's grade, but – so the socialist theory goes – grips the students with a passionate love of the class as a whole and will therefore impel that much more sacrifice, effort and resultant quality.

Any Takers?

Probably not, unfortunately, because most professors are realistic enough (even if only in their classrooms) and know enough about students, to anticipate that this experiment would produce vastly inferior academic results and thereby degrade the quality of their own work product with respect to the students.

But even worse, most academicians will likely avoid this simple experiment because these predictable results would undermine the professors' ability to simultaneously believe that what is superior outside their classroom (i.e. socialism, where the needs of the many supersede the right of high achievers to keep the full grade of their income) will in fact only pollute any academic excellence within their own precious cloistered classrooms, were the same principles of diluted personal reinforcement to be likewise applied.

In other words, this elegant little experiment would illuminate and therefore shatter the academicians' comfortable Academic Hypocrisy, and as such can never be permitted to see the light of day. Far better to conduct this experiment on a national scale, when actual lives and futures and yea even the Fate of the Nation are at dire (albeit wholly unnecessary) risk, instead of the grades on their precious and pristine papers.....

Damocles
March, 2009