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## Commentary — From the Margins

### The Determining Determined

The democratization of opportunity, with its promise to eliminate classism and to empower repressed minority peoples, has silently but busily reformed and reproduced social poverty and fiscal inequality, apparent by who escaped the wrath of hurricane Katrina. In a short essay titled, “The Education Gap,” published in the New York Times September 25, 2005, David Brooks argues that colleges and universities form “one of the great inequality producing machines this country has known” (1st par.). He argues that education has become a determiner for not only economic success, but also for social, marital, and physical health success, and that education in one generation fosters or promotes education in succeeding generations through “passed down economic resources...expectations, habits, knowledge and cognitive abilities,” thereby producing “a hereditary meritocratic class” (5th par.). This hereditary meritocratic class, as privileged as feudal lords and industrial robber barons, but unlike the determined superstructure Marxism labeled bourgeois, forms the working base that determines a faceless servant class described in the maxim, You have the poor always with you (Matt 26:11 et al). Thus, education has turned social theory upside down without significantly altering either the stratification of society, or the makeup of the strata. Whereas the medieval elevation of military prowess produced a hierarchical landed gentry (when the possession of land was the principle source of wealth) throughout Western Europe, intellectual prowess is in the process of producing an empowered, elevated hierarchical base that lives longer, lives better, and lives atop a determined tidal pool of humanity. What was “up” remains up, while was what “down” remains down as old money and new money joust with degrees and patents, discoveries and principles, their tournaments held in a corporate world where apprentices are trumped by diplomas from Stanford or Harvard, Cal Poly or MIT.

But what happens when education doesn't produce either financial success or the better things of life? What happens when professional degrees are held by loggers, by commercial fishermen, by woodcarvers because no jobs are available within the fields of accomplishment?

When falling timber in Northcentral Idaho, I worked for a gypo who employed several men with Ph.D.s as bushelers, paid \$3.50 per thousand boardfeet for the timber they fell and bucked—who employed men with Ph.D.s as catskinners, as shovel operators. There were no jobs for these men at University of Idaho, at Montana, or Montana State, or Washington State. Their degrees were in fields where diversity policies had transformed them into educated drones, unable to feed themselves within the academic hive. So they worked as their fathers had, as their grandfathers had, their degrees reminders of unfilled promises made to yet another generation of rural peoples who, by faith, journeyed off prairies and out of mountain canyons to spend a decade trying to be part of communities that didn't understand why they came and were glad to see them go.

In Dutch Harbor, Alaska, I played chess with Ph.D.s crewing on seiners and crabbers, working alongside of high school dropouts and recent immigrants. Money was then in the fisheries, but so were drugs and high risk and broken families. A gram of coke was hanging bait for cannery rats, most of whom were young women from Spokane or Boise, intermountain cities far from the cold Bering Sea, green and yellow raingear, and PVC knee boots. Yet many of the cannery rats would return to colleges and universities where they would take that professional degree which ticketed them for success in a meritocratic dance, foregrounded against the backdrop of stormy seas and opportunity-stunted Ph.D.s.

I returned to college at midlife to take a M.F.A. degree in Creative Writing...words are a devalued commodity. Too many can be produced too easily. So I carve wood for a meager living: in ancient Israel, hewers of wood and drawers of water were the lowest class. And not much has changed since the days of Samuel, the prophet. Hewers of wood remain strangers in a privileged nation, and the stranger still lives by the sweat of his brow, regardless of whether that stranger is native born or an immigrant. That stranger drives a one or two-decade-old car or pickup, eats fried potatoes or refried beans, and buys his jeans from Wal-Mart (they look like the name brand jeans). And every once in a while, that stranger bleeds red blood for an educated class that protested the war in Vietnam and now questions the war in Iraq.

David Brooks might well be correct: democracy has turned the world upside down—and will continue to overturn the status quo until the values incorporated within its philosophical construct prevail against all comers. But democracy will not bring peace, or an end to natural disasters, both of which will increasingly affect impoverished peoples. Democracy will, however, produce a world order that appears more equitable, more just, more agreeable to that meritocratic class descended from those who burned draft cards, bras, and flags three and four decades ago. Meanwhile, though, the surplus Ph.D.s, produced in poverty, with degrees in the humanities, age quietly in hamlets like Weippe, Kooskia, Kamiah, Clarkia, their Stihl 075s and 090s replaced by Husqvarna 3120s. There are still a few standing sticks that warrant a three-foot bar and enough power to tip the tree over in a hurry. There are still dark canyons and impassible cliffs in the mountains of the West.

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