

9 Conclusion: Beyond Explaining Why

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Whatever Rosa did when she neatly deconstructed the reading lesson by reciting the rule “back to Fred, back to Anna, and Maria and back to me,” she was not passively or mechanically reproducing “her culture” (*habitus*, learning-disabled self, motivational structure, or whatever). She was actively performing something that made sense immediately both locally, within the unfolding of a day in her school, and translocally, at the school-building level and at the national levels where School is affirmed. Her response was an achievement in all the senses of the word. Her statement was not the statement one would necessarily expect, but her peers and her teacher received this difference and acted with it. This acknowledgment demonstrates that she was an active agent who could not be ignored. Rosa’s statements highlight the property of all human action: It was more and less than was required, it elaborated possibilities, and it dramatized restrictions. It made culture, or better, it was culture, culture in process, transforming nature (earlier history) and substituting a new fact for the fact that might have been offered to her peers and the teacher. The class was not quite the same afterward: The teacher’s headache likely grew worse, Rosa’s possible fate as a future special education student was confirmed, and her classmates were spared another moment when they might have been caught not knowing something. Together they made something for each other. They built their current life together and prepared the way for their future life apart. They did not abolish their conditions; nor did they construct them in their full elaboration. Rather, they used what they were given to furnish the rooms in which they had been placed. Through their work, the School and the Class became This school and This class in a temporary particularity. But neither School nor Class originated with them, and the furniture they assembled was disassembled almost as soon as they had finished their work together. The year ended. Rosa and the teacher went their separate ways; the (sub-sub-sub-) culture that they had built together died just as all cultures do sooner or later.

Our analysis deliberately did not seek to explain “why” Rosa, as a particular person, did what she did. Rather, it sought to analyze and understand the world in

which it makes sense for her to be identified by all as not knowing how to read. We offered no answer to why Adam had a bad day, why Sheila appeared to be doing better than Joe, why the singers in the choir at the Inn of the Good Shepherd or the students in West Side High School went through complex scenes with little problem and were still placed within institutional failure and the students of Allwin remained successful, sure of themselves and of their future place in society in spite of daily ritual failures on a multitude of tests that remained "fun." We specifically refuse to ask any "why" question of Rosa, Adam, Sheila, or any of the others. We also refuse to ask such questions of the groups in which they can be commonsensically located (child, girl, African American, daughter of poor or working-class parent, involuntary minority, or whatever). There is no gain we can fathom in attempting to answer "why" Sikhs do better than Mexicans somewhere in California in the 1990s.

We refuse to place ourselves within the long tradition of work that has toyed with "why" questions. Answers to these questions make too much common sense to be trusted. Why did this individual fail? Answer: There is something wrong with Adam's wiring (neurology) or programming (negative early childhood experiences). Answer: Sheila's parents are better educators than Joe's. Answer: The young adults in the choir and West Side High are the product of their mothers' bad nutrition in utero, their parents limited education, a neighborhood with gang leaders who devalue formal education while offering other strategies for survival. Why did this individual succeed? These answers are no better. Answer: The children of some recent immigrants, Maxine Hong Kingston, for example, profit from the single-mindedness of their parents. Answer: The children of Allwin have healthy mothers, competent parents pressing them to accept their school's yoke, and neighbors demonstrably prosperous through formal instruction. Their temporary personal difficulties may be alleviated and remediated by tutors, therapists, and the time to mature slowly away from the bureaucratic mechanisms that place children in tracks that cannot be jumped. All these answers make sense, but they are fundamentally misleading because they prevent us from confronting the source of the categories used to explain.

Other answers apparently move us away from an investigation of personal characteristics as the causes of success or failure—but not much. For every "why" question to the perennial wonder about Johnny's not learning to read, there are "because" explanations that start with the observation that in general, members of Johnny's ethnic, class, racial, or gender group do not learn to read in the same numbers as members of other groups. In the particular history of one child or even of one group at a certain moment in its history, the reasons may suggest a historical sequence that, step-by-step, leads to a particular fate. Given this theorizing, it is not surprising to find an all but illiterate student in West Side High School: After all, wasn't Johnny a severely malnourished infant, born to poor parents, and then placed in an inner-city school with a special education bureaucracy that tracked him, expelled him, and eventually gave him another chance to gain a high school diploma that remains worthless in comparison to the diploma a student from Allwin is getting at the same time? It is also not surprising given the history of immigration into the Americas

that black and Hispanic children should be the overwhelming majority of those who end up in the West Side Highs of the United States. Slavery, the conditions of the movement of southern blacks into the urban North, and so on—all this “explains” why malnutrition, poverty, getting acquired by special education, and other problems are not distributed randomly across all the groups of the body politic. All these answers make sense, but they are just as misleading if they prevent us from confronting American Education as a cultural system, that is, as institutionalized discourses and rituals. In America, no *particular* person need fail, and failure need not be confined to the children of any *particular* groups. But half the children must fall below average, and therein lies the problem that concerns us.

This problem needs emphasizing: Random distribution of success and failure along all possible groupings would not abolish the success/failure complex. One can imagine an American world in which whites and blacks, men and women, succeed and fail in exactly the same ratio. This world would be “fairer,” but it would remain structurally the *same* cultural world. Social scientists who worry about education in the United States must focus directly on the success/failure complex as a historical construct, a culture, something that we must call America. In this particularly structured social field, it makes sense to fail at becoming educated and to have this failure used as justification for one’s eventual fate; it is “American” to worry about who is failing and to look for remedies that might make the whole thing more palatable. Above all, America is to be found where these worries, resistances, and struggles have produced massive institutions with profound implications on local and personal everyday life.¹

To present America as a culture to America is no easy task, for the very vocabulary available for expression makes it difficult to focus directly on its specificity as a liberal, industrial, egalitarian, capitalistic, democratic polity that is concerned with fostering the “best” and demonstrating absolute fairness. The rhetorical forms available to us make it particularly difficult to talk simultaneously about the division of labor in an industrial society, about an ideology that explains how individuals are distributed among the available positions, and about the processes—particularly education—that move human beings into these positions, along with their own more specialized ideological conversations. We must understand simultaneously (1) the distinctions made between workers at McDonald’s and their corporate managers, (2) the processes that place human beings in either position, and (3) the conversations that justify their fate. Concretely, we are attempting to make it possible to talk about the implicit proposition underlying all reform rhetoric that in the best of all American worlds, hamburger flippers (and their corporate managers) would come from among those who are best attuned to the position, those whose psychological qualities make them particularly suited to the task and essentially happy with it (even if they need the help of various therapies to convince them that their fate is the best fate they could have achieved and that they should learn to accept “who they really are”).

Much sociological reasoning finds it easy to think deterministically about the relationship between all aspects of the problem. For a while it seemed sensible to think

that "modernization" or "industrialization" required that industrial labor had to be divided, an educated workforce was necessary, and various means had to be devised to recruit the best people. More recently, the success of Japan has introduced a doubt: The many cogs of a complex industrial whole could be arranged in quite a different fashion and still produce what Euro-American cultures have prided themselves as being particularly good at producing. If one widens a little the comparative grid, one finds more societies with complex divisions of labor that reveal the open nature of so-called organizational necessities. All societies divide labor among human beings, but the exact arrangement of this division varies quite significantly, and the variation can produce different conditions for the people alive in them. In this perspective, India is an interesting case both because it is historically related to Euro-America and because it has kept for a long time an ideological foundation so revolting to America that its dominant category, caste, is repeatedly used to refer to what all agree is worst about America. The work of Louis Dumont (1980) determinedly highlights the contrast between India and Euro-America at the level that concerns us, that is, at the intersection among major institutions, ideology, and local experience. Dumont shows how Hindu philosophers, political leaders, and local people, together and sometimes in long-standing conflict with each other, elaborated both a complex theory justifying specified rankings and an even more complex set of institutions enforcing caste segmentation in interaction and various mechanisms for changing the relative position of castes vis-à-vis each other. For Dumont, all people in India, even many who are not Hindu or the many who are fighting specifically against caste ideology, must take caste into account. It is inescapable. More important for us, Dumont affirms that in India, caste segmentation is a fundamental value inscribed in myth, religion, and everyday practice—including the resistance to caste. In America, by contrast, it is egalitarian individualism that is inscribed in myth, religion, and everyday practice, and this has major consequences. It is only in an egalitarian universe that the worry about inequality makes sense. The vision of equality for all guides all revolts against the status quo, and solutions rebuild both the democratic foundation and the difficulties that are its products. There is, for example, something fascinating about the messianic tone of writings on the value of "multiculturalism" in the United States. It is a movement that bills itself as resisting what it often calls the "conservative mainstream." And yet a powerful voice in that movement claims that multicultural education is working "to create equal educational opportunities for all students" (Banks 1996: 21). What could be more perennial than the worry that after 200 years of political democracy and after 30 years of various wars on poverty and a multitude of experimental programs, books must still be written about "savage inequalities" in American Education (Kozol 1991).

The problem, of course, is not with the hope that something can be done about inequalities. The problem lies in that the worry about inequalities, as stated and debated by authors such as Banks or Kozol, invites a focus on the individuals who remain unequal, as units of analysis as well as units of ethical and political concern. America provides several ready-made ways of talking and arguing about humanity.

In its glory, when the focus was on personal freedom, responsibility, and empowerment, the American discourse helped establish a workable political system, and this discourse continues to drive its transformation. Analytically, it has also given us complex psychologies that have illuminated much about life behind the eyes. The same discourse has a dark side, particularly when used analytically to talk about differential performance by individuals. Given a system well tuned to let individual talents bloom and to allow all individuals to be different, differences in achievement can be directly attributable to individuals: Picasso could paint but not sing; Einstein could advance physics but not write poetry. Individual merit is not distributed equally, and "that's the way the world is," says the discourse. Some people have inherently differentiated capacities and disabilities. This discourse easily drifts into the worst form of racism when it appears that groups can be ranked by the achievements of the people to be identified with it. At its extreme, it can lead to a specific denial of the full humanity of those who failed. It is now easy to see through the early forms of racism. But the discourse process is still very much alive: Books like *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) are still being written, and worse, they are criticized in the same terms as they are written. More difficult to see through are attempts at justifying differential achievement by identifying particular abilities. Picasso and Einstein with their spectacular talents are overly stereotyped cases. Many psychologists continue to try to identify what might make persons particularly suited to flipping hamburgers or managing the corporation. Note that if they succeeded, protests against the differentiated fates of both persons would lose all legitimacy: When democracy as a political system is finally perfectly tuned, each person will be fully responsible for the occupied position, however uncomfortable or degrading. There is a major problem here, for it is unlikely, of course, that those who have been diagnosed as best suited for menial positions, however fair the diagnosis, would not continue to protest.

This is the problem that the privileged discourse of analytic individualism cannot handle even though it is fundamental to what Myrdal once identified as the "American dilemma": "the ever-raging conflict between . . . the 'American Creed' . . . and the valuations . . . of individual and group living" ([1944] 1962: lxxi). But Myrdal did not go as far as one must go. This is why we turned to Dumont, who by way of a comparison between individualistic Euro-America and caste-based India, went much further. The conflict Myrdal talked about is not one between the American ideal and the real as it can be found in the United States. The conflict is not between one's faith and one's actions. Rather, the dramatic evolution of American history is the direct product of the ideal: Racism and its equivalents are the paradoxical product of an ideology dedicated to human equality and freedom, passionately concerned with the individual, and thereby essentially unable to deal with personal differences in constraining social fields (Dumont 1980).

A second discourse developed out of American ideology starts with the premise that human beings are always found at work *together* in groups or, in the word most typical of this tradition, in *community*. This discourse is concerned with social

processes, and at its best, it is magnificently sensitive to the efforts all persons put in to make sense of each other. But this very sensitivity, because it privileges the point of view of persons who construct and are constructed by conditions, can easily collapse an intuition about joint construction into a more normal statement about the constitution of individuals. The slide from "people working hard together in poverty" to "individuals who *are* poor" is easy to perform. The rhetorical shift makes it easy to move one more step and to argue that "poverty" or "disabilities" are diseases that are the proximate cause of people's difficulties and that they are in need of one-on-one help designed to cure them of their disease. By this transformation, what people have done in common becomes "theirs" both because they shape it and because they are shaped by it. The conditions and products people find when they are born become "their identity" and "their culture." We are back with individuals with inherent qualities. We are back to a moral phrasing that may eventually be as dangerous in its implications for analysis and institutional practice as the pure psychologism of the first discourse. As the discourse evolves, people are socialized into "their" community, and they internalize the values and orientations of "their" peers. In the best of all democratic worlds, they are consensually responsible for their conditions; they have, so to speak, voted through their act for a particular form of community life and a particular place within it.

If one is concerned with transforming the landscape of institutions in the United States, one must directly confront the implication of the discourse about community, consensus, and social identity when it is used to analyze or, worse, "explain" the fates of particular persons in difficulties, the organization of particular unpleasant conditions, and the relationship between the two. A conversation based on words like "socialization," "identity," "community," "culture" (as in "multi-cultural-ism") leads to an endless search for the conditions that skew achievement: ethnicity, class, race, gender, and so on. This search only appears to move attention away from the victim. Eventually, it brings the analytic attention back to the individual as the unit that was socialized into this or that position and has now paradoxical ownership of that which makes differentiated success. With the mainstreaming of "multiculturalism," this discourse may have achieved even more ideological power than it ever had. Missing, again, is any theoretical mechanism for understanding the differentiation of positions and confronting, for example, the process that differentiates hamburger flipping from the management of hamburger flipping and then justifies who is found occupying each position.

Twentieth-century American social thought has repeatedly been recaptured by a discourse of individual responsibility and pain. The intention to think socially is not sufficient without a good understanding of the mechanisms that make it difficult to do so. The evolution of early pragmatism into a social psychology, much against the wishes of the mature Dewey and G. H. Mead, and its reintegration into a psychology of personality (identity) is not a matter of historical happenstance. The same processes blunted what was powerful in the work of Benedict or Parsons, and it makes it difficult to develop what is essential in the work of Bateson, Vygotsky, or Bourdieu.

There is something profoundly systematic about this evolution, and we are resisting it. Our goal has been to gain a more determined control of our own discourse by emphasizing the structuring powers of America. As a culture or ideology, individualism does not quite blind people to the cultural facts of their collective making. Individualism does not keep people in America from complaining about individualism. People in America are not necessarily "individualists" as a property of their selves. But neither does the discourse of individualism allow easy or effective talk about these cultural facts. Always already refocusing attention on the person as an analytic unit as well as a moral center impoverishes analyses of social processes by offering new qualities of persons as explanations for their fate. This kind of analysis may appear social, but it hides ever more completely the interactional processes that construct social differentiations in history. Social qualities are not the products of personal choices or inner potentialities but the end results of joint activity over long periods, end results that become the next settings and resources persons use to construct their lives. White and black, upper-class and lower-class, Hamden Heights and Manhattan Valley, Jewish and Italian, Japanese and Chicano, male and female—all these dichotomies are, by their very definition in American culture, dependent on each other or, as we like to say in the technical literature, mutually constructed: No blacks, then no whites; no upper class, then no middle or lower class. If the people on the bottom resist, they make it harder for those on top, who resist further; together, what they resist is the America that has carved out for them the limited world that sets them against each other. Individualism is not a property of people "believing" in it or "valuing" it. It is the current state of an evolutionary process that has made new conditions for persons to live with and remake.

These considerations may seem to take us too far into social theory and away from educational issues. We hope to have shown this is not so. Educational processes are too central to American ideology to be examined solely from within. Our refusal to answer the question "why" Johnny can't read is part of our resistance in this wider context: Our decision is to focus on the question itself, on when, where, and how the "why question" has allowed us to uncover, however partially, the cultural structures that frame questions and answers, ideologically and practically, while hiding themselves. We must face America before we can get to Johnny.

In conclusion, we have taken the position that Rosa, for example, is not so much "Hispanic" as "interpreted as Hispanic"—even perhaps by herself. As an actor, "she" is not on her way to Special Education; her movement in this direction is something that happens to her in the hands of others using what still others constructed. It has little to do with any determining quality of her self. We emphasize these currents that move her around even as we affirm her own resistance and productivity. Rosa is active as what we called a radical 我. She is not drifting, she is swimming, and this can be shown in the detail of her behavior with others. The complexity of our position partially lies in the fact that we are both resisting America, by emphasizing the external facticity of society, and revealing it, by building our argument on the most extreme version of individualism. We do not to seek radically to transform the dem-

ocratic discourse available to us. As persons we have not the power to do so, and we are not sure it would be a good idea. As political actors, we are quite sure that all human beings are equal, *individuals* in the absolute sense of the term. This is a moral and metaphysical commitment that we share with the rest of America. Our concern is with the next step. We insist that it must become a matter of scientific postulate that individuals are active within structured social fields. Rosa and the teacher, like all the participants in the scenes we have examined, are absolutely equal in that they are both at work in a setting neither one controls. A classroom is not a consensual community; nor is it a group of persons more or less socialized to the same patterns. A classroom is a single divided field that places the teacher and Rosa in different positions that invite activities of various prescribed forms. Similarly, the kids of Manhattan Valley and those of Hamden Heights are equal, though again, they are placed in different positions and are given different resources. It is not surprising that their activity should reveal itself fully sensitive to their respective positions and resources and that they should *appear* unequal in a context organized for the recognition of inequality.

This is where matters get delicate. The relationship between sensitivity and position or resources must not be understood in a correlational or, worse, causal fashion: Activity is not "dependent" on resource. Activity reveals the radical 我 at work, struggling, resisting, transforming, never passive or overwhelmed. This must be the starting point even if every evidence demonstrates that some activity does not produce anything that remains permanently for others to take into account. Rosa's protest may not take her out of special education, but it is a protest, an act of defiance exquisitely sensitive to its conditions. It is not the product of "her" learning disability; nor is it the product of some untapped quality of perception or knowledge that a proper educational psychology, institutionalized into a special program in an enlightened school, could use to inflect her fate. The set of fates that are available to people is not in the hands of any particular person. At the moment when the teacher passed her over, she was alone in the world, alive, moved to act, absolutely equal, even if she did not make, or "fact," anything for anyone—except perhaps for herself.

To speak about a radical 我 is obviously a move within Euro-American individualism even if inscribed in Chinese. We have not sought to escape the culture and traditions that structure our fields. But we are calling for a theory of human activity founded on the analytic acknowledgment of both the collective and the individual as nothing more than different perspectives on the same realities. It may be true there is nothing to society but single actors, but society, as it arises through the interaction of persons in history, is something systematically different from any persons and, to the extent that it is not under the control of any person, can be said to be "greater"—in the sense of both different and infinitely more powerful—than the individuals taken one at a time. It may be true that every personal self is a social construction deeply shaped by early and continuing experiences. Something of one's own personal history must be "internalized." But social interaction is not dependent on internalization. Participation in school is not dependent on understanding schooling. Partici-

pation in school is dependent on the existence of specific, legitimate means for acquiring the many actors who together keep the School alive. Labor in complex societies will always be divided, and human beings will be placed within the positions historically developed to reproduce the society. Human beings as actors, however, do not have to accept the way labor was divided or the methods used to place human beings into positions. If our analysis is right, no human being can ever be this acquiescent. All, like Rosa, are alive and at work. Culture as given is not destiny.

Our emphasis on a radical 我 in a historically constructed world is intended to counteract both psychological and sociological determinisms. Human beings do not *adapt* to culture; they *work with* and they *make* culture. They do not create out of nothing, and what they make always exhibits the traces of the materials they borrow and how it was used in earlier interactions. Children from the inner cities of America necessarily exhibit poverty in their activity, and if they are being acquired by Learning Disability as an institutional possibility, they will also exhibit the signs of LD. This recognition must not be mistaken with a diagnosis that the children "are" poor, deprived, or otherwise disabled. More controversially, if children carry on their faces an African phenotype, they will be seen by their parents, neighbors, peers, teachers, and social workers as African American or black depending on the political orientation of each significant other—and they will exhibit African Americanness (or blackness) as a token of the type even if only in their efforts to not play a part all know can be hurtful to all involved. Whether the children "are" (from birth) or "become" (through various processes) African American or black is a secondary matter of personal construction. To use something is not to *be* this thing. And when one is used by something, this something does not become "one's" thing.

We sketch this most controversial implication of our analytic posture to move to a more prescriptive level. If we refuse to give a "because" to the "why" questions put to us, what else can we offer? Defensively, we wish to protect those who are subjected to the School from any further action by the School—particularly from anything that starts with an identification of the child as a person with qualities to be discovered by agents of the School. This could be couched as a concern with the "privacy" of the child—privacy from all who, whatever their intentions, attempt to identify and pigeonhole selves. This could also be phrased as based on a fundamental trust in the power of *individuals*, each and all as a radical 我 in action, to make the best of their human conditions. It is certainly a call for those acquired by positions of authority—teachers, counselors, psychologists, and researchers, among many others—to work at becoming aware of the practical consequences of their actions: What do they *make* for others? Above all, we call for a critique of authoritative intentionality. We suspect, controversially, that the most dangerous moral prescription is the unassailable one that education must "help children one at a time, starting from where each is." Given that this implies an investigation into identifiable qualities of the child, it must involve an invasion of privacy. There is little evidence that the florescence of special educational programs has done much to improve the chances of inner-city children, and there is much evidence that there are systematic reasons for this. This

lack of improvement is not due to programs that have been ill conceived by evil people with sinister motives. We assume instead that the programs were well conceived by good people with the most enlightened motives; they may still end up as the tools of the worst that Euro-American forms of industrialization produces. Inevitably, working with individuals must start with an identification of specific persons as somehow in need of charitable help. It must then proceed with the development of specialized bureaucracies peopled by persons with particular qualities (training, expertise, authority). Inevitably such bureaucracies, as social entities different and more powerful than the people who made them or presently occupy them, take a life of their own that is not often in tune with the original moral impulse (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Edelman 1977). The noble Public School envisioned by Horace Mann becomes PS 1000 in New York City, a complex cog in a system of complex cogs. The idealistic progressivism of John Dewey becomes the dumbed-down curriculum of some high schools. Neither Mann nor Dewey are responsible for what others did with their injunctions. In their time, they may not have had the tools necessary to imagine what could be done with them. Practical educational philosophy is now in a different position.

Positively, we would say that a democracy must help all children "starting with the culture that specifies where children are to be placed." By culture, once again, we mean the institutionalized practices inhabited and used by human beings. We do not mean their minds or selves. The reformist impulse must refocus itself on the institutions that America has evolved over the past 200 years and on the often hidden relationships between them. Why does one need a high school diploma to collect garbage in New York City or an MA to teach in its schools (Berg 1969)? Why should education, as a lifelong process of shaping one's very being and character, be linked to getting particular jobs at particular times? Why, even more minimally, should one reach one's place in society through failure: Why should one be recruited into garbage collecting through a process of failing in school (not getting good enough grades at consequential times to be moved to a college-bound track)? Why is it that an interest in the constitution of the self should take the form of a ranking on some scale? Why should anyone ever be tested for intelligence given that almost everyone will be identified eventually as "not as intelligent as" everyone else? Why indeed should it appear liberalizing to identify "new" forms of intelligence and to develop new tests to measure people? The existence of a statistical relationship between IQ (or self-esteem, etc.) and the ability to perform certain tasks must not be the basis of any action making something for a child. At best, the relationship is statistical and thus tells us little about the possible fates of any particular child. At worst, the identification of the child by a score on a test locks the child in position. In either case, it does nothing to change the system of stratification or to alleviate the problems it can make for those in lower rungs. Whether a test is normed on a scale of 1600 (the SAT) or on a scale of 2 (Pass/Fail), the structural properties are the same. The possibility that one will "fail" is there, inescapable. It may be the case that certain jobs require specifiable skills. One can be properly tested for such skills, and whatever pain may come with failure on

this test has to be accepted. But the set of these jobs and skills may be much more limited than has been institutionalized, and there is certainly no reason to seek to identify (lack of) "aptitudes" for jobs that one may never be called upon to perform or, worse, as a means of discouraging a person from trying.

We must, with Adam, "try to make it a better day" for those for whom we have a responsibility. As we do try, we must understand why it has been so difficult to make better days. If we are right in the stance we have illustrated throughout this book, we must above all accept that to make it a better day for Adam, the first and perhaps only step is to turn away from him and to trust him to work with us while we examine what all others, including ourselves, are doing around him. We hope we have shown how this must be so.

NOTES

1. As we mentioned, "America" is one form of a larger culture area within which most European cultures, and now most of the world's culture, must be included. America does have quite a distinct "flavor" within this area. Finally, our presentation of "America" is to be understood as a structural model highlighting certain properties of the historical situation (Lévi-Strauss [1958] 1963a).