

Autonomy, Identity, and the Role of Narrative: Another Look at Commodity Fetishism

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Rather than being the sites of exploration and possibility that we imagine them to be, schools are for many students future-limiting places where possibilities are circumscribed. I argue that schools limit the fundamental goal that many teachers hold: inspiring our students to be self-directed, to think for themselves or, put another way, to be autonomous. Such limitation is especially true for students of the working class. To link more clearly schooling, social class, and their influences on self-direction and autonomy, I draw upon one currently popular way of conceiving the self — as a narrator. I use the metaphor of narrator to discuss how the “commodification of the ideal of the educated person” helps students develop relatively coherent self-conceptions associated with their social class positions. Such commodification influences the narrative material available for self-conception as well as the experiential conditions that call students to express themselves performatively as working-class agents.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY COHERENCE AND THE NARRATIVE SELF

Marina Oshana observes that the “concept of autonomy requires a ground, parameters that give the notion of self-directed choice and action plausibility and coherence.”¹ We find this stress on identity coherence driving the theories of autonomy in the works of philosophers like Charles Taylor and Harry Frankfurt, for example.² Frankfurt’s well-known efforts to equate autonomy with what we “wholeheartedly” care about develop a plausible claim: one must have some sort of relatively unified sense of identity upon which to base one’s reflective action. Its absence robs us of what Taylor describes as the necessary “background of intelligibility” that supports reflective choice.³ That “background of intelligibility” represents “to the person whose self it is, and to others, the character traits, values, moral feelings, desires, and commitments that are considered to define the self.”⁴ A self divided amongst its core conceptions and beliefs inhibits autonomy because one lacks a stable set evaluative of evaluative criteria necessary to make reasoned choices. Furthermore, as David Joplin argues, one’s self-conception influences autonomy because it both enables and constrains the limits about what is possible for the self to believe and choose: “This means that self-concepts preguide more explicit forms of inquiry into the self, by allowing as legitimate starting points, certain avenues of self-questioning, and by excluding others.”⁵

How one comes to understand one’s self identity as relatively coherent within school settings is influenced by one’s social class. To illuminate this, I turn to a currently popular way of describing the person at the center of autonomy: that of a narrative self. Both Daniel Dennett and David Velleman describe the guiding self as a fictional narrator who spins a self-told tale to unify the discontinuities of self across disparate social spaces and times. Unlike postmodern theories that reject any sort of

identity coherence, the narrating metaphor recognizes the multiplicity of “selves” in different social contexts while retaining the notion of relative coherence by locating it within the narrative voice that provides one’s life with relative unity. Thus, rather than positing one “self” as being *the* essence of one’s identity, it is the narrative construct that we experience as foundational. Velleman explains:

Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is...telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others — and ourselves — about who we are...These strings or streams of narrative issue forth *as if* from a single source — not just in the obvious physical sense of flowing from just one mouth, or one pencil or pen, but in a more subtle sense: their effect on any audience is to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a *center of narrative gravity*.⁶

Dennett’s narrating self, then, is a fundamentally relational being. Part of what provides the narrative self unity is the process of interacting with external interlocutors who then help the individual posit a relatively stable core self-conception. We see this also in Velleman’s work. He likens such narrative acts to those of an improvisational actor:

The self-narrator is an ingenuous improviser, inventing a role that expresses his actual motives in response to real events. He can improvise his actual role in these events because his motives take shape and produce behavior under the influence of his self-descriptions, which are therefore underdetermined by antecedent facts, so that he partly invents what he enacts.⁷

The metaphor of the self as narrator is a useful tool to describe a complex phenomenon, but as a tool, it necessarily simplifies. Velleman acknowledges the metaphor’s limitations, pointing out that “we tell many, disconnected stories about ourselves — short episodes that do not get incorporated into our life stories.”⁸ Thus, the narrating self spins a self-story that arises in response to a variety of internal and external stimuli to weave certain aspects of one’s many-faceted story parts into a relatively coherent single narrative.

Conceiving of the self that provides identity coherence as a narrator helps us conceptualize how autonomy is fundamentally relational for two reasons. First, one draws upon context-dependent material to fashion one’s narrative. Second, it emphasizes what Joel Anderson characterizes as an essential feature of autonomy: we construct such narrations in ways that not only make sense to us, but to either real or imaginary interlocutors — or to continue with the metaphor — “readers” of our narratives.⁹

It is here that we see one feature of the powerful influence of schooling upon student autonomy. Rather than help students explore the world and its rich possibilities, schools limit students’ possible self-narrations by constraining the narrative material available for self-understanding. Furthermore, schools offer certain types of social experiences that thereby influence the contexts in which certain types of narrative constructs are more likely to be relevant or expected. The process I am describing is best captured by Karl Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism. In what follows, I define that concept and then explore its relationship to the narrating self and conceptions of autonomy.

COMMODITY FETISHISM

Marx's concept of commodity fetishism points to two important features associated with commodification and its impact upon identity. First, within specific social contexts, some commodities accumulate symbolic power beyond what their simple functions might superficially reveal, and through ownership, agents come to embody the associated symbolic attributes that they (or others) ascribe to such goods. As G.A Cohen observes, when social groups fetishize religious objects, for example, they come to view the objects themselves as being invested with powers that they ascribe to them. The key to our analysis here is, as Cohen emphasizes: "What is mistakenly attributed to it is experienced as inhering in it. The fetish then manifests itself as endowed with a power which in truth it lacks."¹⁰ To draw upon a secular example, when people purchase name-brand designer clothing, they may do so to acquire disparate cultural values associated with the goods. Name-brand logos signify that the wearer belongs to a certain social set and, presumably, has the attributes associated with that group. Rather than merely being a utilitarian object, it becomes something more. As Marx observes, such a commodity "changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness."¹¹

Marx also emphasizes that the process of commodity fetishism camouflages the connection between the commodity and its production. He describes the ideological discourse needed to hide the many social processes required to produce goods a "mystifying process." As a result, the good no longer represents something connected to the laborer, the labor expended to produce it, nor the host of social processes required for it to appear as an object for consumption. (For example, the emergence of "cheap" goods on Wal-Mart shelves hides the exploitative work policies both Wal-Mart and many manufacturers use to keep costs low.) When we fail to perceive how a commodity's existence depends upon its relationship to a variety of social processes and actions taken by others, we ignore and mystify the complex mechanisms that produce the good and its symbolic value. The commodity seems to exist independent of human labor and effort.

SCHOOL EXAMPLES

These two features of commodity fetishism help us focus our analysis on the ways that schooling commodifies and fetishizes the very definition of the educated person, and we can find a plethora of examples within contemporary schooling. To begin with a most obvious category, that of physical appearance, we find that being a "good" or "educated" student involves looking and acting in ways that match the dominant class and racial norms of a given school context. For example, Julie Bettie's recent research explores the myriad ways that white, middle-class girls become those considered the "good" students while those of other classes and ethnic categories are marginalized and considered to be less intelligent and less interested in learning.¹² In her study, one of the most obvious signs of belonging to the academic set is conforming to group-defined appearance norms. The most academically successful students are white, middle-class girls who wear relatively conservative clothing and cosmetics and who project the image of youthfulness and innocence. In contrast, other students who do not identify as middle-class and/or white

consciously adopt oppositional physical styles such as dark shades of cosmetics and “big” hair.¹³

The particulars of student appearance here are important because they aptly demonstrate the process of commodity fetishism. Schools transform white, middle-class physical appearance and comportment styles into commodities that come to represent more than mere style differences; they represent fundamental attributes associated with intelligence and academic motivation. Marx’s insightful remark about how the commodity form is mystified in the process emphasizes that there are a variety of complex mechanisms that produce our ideal of being educated from qualities associated with those of white, middle-class students. Such “good” students appear to have emerged as the result of their own independent efforts, not as a result of a complex set of parental, community, and teacher supports that help some students appear more intelligent and deserving of academic success than others. Of course, these assumptions influence how teachers and academic counselors impact students’ lives in important ways. For example, because of the biases that are in part fueled by students’ physical appearances, working-class and nonwhite students are regularly shunted into vocational programs and lower academic tracks.¹⁴

We can find evidence of commodity fetishism in other less obvious and equally powerful ways. When students communicate with their teachers and their peers they draw upon socially-mediated communication norms. Aligning oneself (either consciously or unconsciously) with particular social class and ethnicity-related sociolinguistic practices has profound implications for individual student self-conceptions and how others perceive them. For example, teachers reward students who draw upon the “correct” sets of sociolinguistic norms for being intelligent, properly motivated, and deserving of academic success.¹⁵ Conversely, those minority or working-class students who draw upon differently valued “communication sets” are considered to be less intelligent, less interested in things academic, and deserving of lesser academic accolades. Biases about what sociolinguistic norms are “normal” or “correct” also infiltrate the ways teachers interpret “normal” student growth. Terms like “normal” and “age appropriate” or “on grade” all obfuscate the implied idealized student based upon dominant class practices. Kathryn Anderson-Levitt rightly argues that the model of developmental reading stages in contemporary U.S. schools privileges affluent children: “Age and ‘maturity’ matter because schools are built around the expectation that children move through predefined stages of learning according to a predictable schedule.”¹⁶

Anderson-Levitt argues that the problem with this language of chronological development and maturity is that it contributes to what Stephen Jay Gould refers to as the “fallacy of ranking,” in which we artificially create a rank order for something without admitting its inherently variable nature. Learning to read is a complex process that cannot be reduced to a neat chronological table, and doing so simplifies the complex variation in individual students’ differing developmental processes. Furthermore, the language of individual chronological development hides social class influences. The language of maturity/immaturity obscures the fact that the very

definitions of development are predicated upon specific sociocultural practices most closely aligned with the dominant class, helping dominant-class students appear in classrooms as “advanced” readers and ultimately “mature” students. “The ideology rationalizes the success of children whose families have given them the ‘cultural capital’ they call on to demonstrate ‘decoding’ or other presumed stages of learning ‘ahead of schedule.’ It locates their success inside the children, defining them as ‘naturally’ precocious.”¹⁷ Schools thus transform the judgment of early literacy “skills” into a more pervasive judgment about intelligence, ability, and aptitude.

The previous two examples describe the ways that schools provide students with certain types of narrative materials to help them construct their self-conceptions. In the final example, I turn to a more focused case of the way that the fetishized norms of the middle and upper classes find their way into working-class students’ explanations about themselves. I draw on Diane Reay’s exploration of the intersection between social class and assessment tools in schooling, specifically in British sixth-grade students’ experiences of taking Stage 2 Standard Achievement Tests. When interviewed, Tracey, a white, working-class girl, expresses her anxieties about the upcoming tests. A score of four is normal, and Tracey hopes to earn a five or six, because as teachers have helped students understand, anything lower means that you are a “nothing.” Tracey obtains a three. Reay tells us:

When later in the year I interviewed Tracey, now in year 7 of an inner city predominantly working class comprehensive she told me, unsolicited, that she was a 3, 3, 3. When I asked her how she felt about that, she replied that it was better than being a nothing, but still “rubbish.”¹⁸

Tracey’s remark speaks powerfully of the influence of educational practices upon student self-conceptions. The exam helps Tracey *understand herself* through what is clearly a focused example of commodity fetishism. She considers herself to be a “3, 3, 3...rubbish.” Furthermore, another young girl in the interview draws upon social class and academic ideologies that equate lack of academic success with moral corruption. She considers a low test score as predicting a life of crime and immorality. She tells us: “I might not have a good life in front of me and I might grow up and do something naughty or something like that.”¹⁹

IDENTITY COHERENCE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE EDUCATED PERSON

As these brief but powerful examples illustrate, commodity fetishism captures the process through which the school helps students forge relatively coherent narrative self-understandings. The conception of the narrative self emphasizes that one’s self-understanding is influenced here in two ways. First, and at the most obvious of levels, schools provide the basic material out of which students develop their self-conceptions. Second, the social context of the school creates specific sorts of opportunities for students to tell their stories (to themselves and to others). Thus, it is not just that schools provide the material for self-conceptions based upon social class differences; they also then provide the experiential opportunities through which students enact their self-narrations. Lower-tracked working-class students are not only helped to understand themselves as being less intelligent and less interested in schooling than dominant-class students. The experiential conditions of tracking and the sorts of curricular requirements associated with lower track

placements provide students with certain types of opportunities that preselect or favor certain sorts of responses. We hear this in the multiple accounts of how working-class students define themselves — accounts that draw upon the stereotypes offered to them by teachers who with all good intention describe working-class kids as “students who won’t behave” or as “students who are good at working with their hands.”²⁰ They may then help working-class kids understand themselves as having essentialized identities that we can trace to biases about working-class kids.

My point here is not to set the stage for an argument about the need for additive literacy programs for the “culturally deprived” working class, nor do I want to invoke the traditional accusation of “false consciousness.” Both are traps I wish to avoid. Instead, I want to emphasize that schools mediate a transformational process that involves both sociocultural practices and individual identity. The school mediates the process in which the practices of the dominant class are transformed into the very criteria for judging the innate identities of students, thus an appropriate response entails multiple responses, including our examination of and potential rethinking about the very assumptions driving our conceptions of what being educated entails. That of course is a topic too large for this essay, so for now I argue that we must help students understand themselves in the midst of commodity fetishism. That is the goal of autonomy.

Before continuing, I must acknowledge that students have multiple social experiences, including ones that present them with counternarrative materials. I do not mean to imply that students experience unconflicted and “simple” unitary selves as a result of commodity fetishism. Working-class students commonly express their feelings of being different people at home and at school, and their home self-conceptions might be more positive than their school-based ones. But I argue that one cannot easily isolate one’s academic self from other parts of one’s life, so the influence of schooling on one’s self-conception is most likely to be quite pervasive. Students spend much time in schools, and I argue that the performative nature of those experiences is powerful. That is, students are engaged in exploring the world and their own academic and social skills in ways that they most likely cannot at home. At school, then, they receive repeated feedback and judgment about their developing skills in a variety of domains. Like the instance of the standardized test cited above, they provide them with “officially sanctioned” judgments about their skills and identities. Schools thus provide students with a constant source of important information about themselves in ways that are not replicated at home (nor perhaps even contradicted because of the lack of official “tests” and other judgments by state-sanctioned “experts”).

It is here that I argue that commodity fetishism influences students’ relatively stable self-conceptions. The school narrative may conflict with the home narrative, but the school self-conception will be a powerful one. Student self-conceptions — powerfully influenced by the process of commodity fetishism — impact autonomy because they define the borders about what it is possible to think and imagine for the self, thus creating a “background of intelligibility” based upon social class norms and practices. Working-class kids draw upon the stereotypes about being working

class to fashion their narrative self-conceptions and, by extension, the possible sets of options from which they can choose. As such, “self direction” or autonomy entails pre-delimited options — which must be better described as heteronomy.

The usefulness of considering the self as a narrator reveals itself beyond understanding how commodity fetishism influences autonomy in a pejorative fashion. It also provides direction for a response. I want to suggest that we equate autonomy with a critical narrator at the center of the autonomy project. What I have in mind is similar to the sort of self-understanding that Maria Lugones describes in her discussion of “world traveling.” For example, as a Latina, lesbian, feminist academic raised in a position of privilege in her native Cuba, Lugones discusses “traveling” between a variety of worlds in which she perceives herself and is perceived differently depending on the social context. She notices that she has access to different ways of being in each of the worlds, and that she has difficulty resolving the different selves she observes:

Those of us who are “world”-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different “worlds” and of having the capacity to remember other “worlds” and ourselves in them. We can say “That is me there, and I am happy in that ‘world.’” So, the experience is of being a different person in different “worlds” and yet of having memory of oneself as different without quite having the sense of there being any underlying “I.” When I can say “that is me there and I am so playful in that ‘world,’” I am saying “That is *me in that ‘world’*” not because I recognize myself in that person; rather, the first person statement is noninferential. I may well recognize that that person has abilities I do not have and yet the having or not having of the abilities is always an “I have...” and “I do not have...” (i.e., it is always experienced in the first person.).²¹

Lugones skillfully captures the sort of reflective self-awareness about the ways that different social contexts give rise to differing narrative resources for expressing and understanding oneself. Lugones helps clarify the difference between the influence of commodity fetishism on one’s narrative self-construct and one inspired by a critical analysis, that is, one focused on power relationships. The former sort of self-narrator is relatively heteronomous because she draws upon the resources of a given social context to understand herself uncritically. In contrast, the world-traveling critical narrator has developed enough detachment to conceptualize that the self she envisions as the “I” has different resources with which to construct itself in alternative contexts.

The creative playfulness Lugones mentions is also important because it describes an additional feature of the “critical narrator”: harmonizing across social contexts. Lugones differentiates between an agonistic playfulness grounded in competition and a loving playfulness grounded in the sort of harmonizing spirit necessary for critical autonomy. She explains:

The attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude, turns the activity into play. Our activity has no rules, though it is certainly intentional activity and we both understand what we are doing. The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the “world” to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction. We may not have rules, and when we do have them, there are not rules that are to us sacred. We are not worried

about competence. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular “world.” *We are there creatively.* We are not passive.²²

In a footnote to the previous passage Lugones makes a connection to oppression that particularly addresses the challenges associated with the current project:

One can understand why this sense of playfulness is one that we may exercise in resistance to oppression when resistance is not reducible to reaction. Nonreactive resistance is creative; it exceeds that which is being resisted. The creation of new meaning lies outside of rules, particularly the rules of the “world” being resisted.²³

Lugones’s discussion of a playful, creative nonreactive world traveling is quite different than the self-narration influenced by commodity fetishism. I argue that rather than being destructive of the self, we should embrace a notion of critical autonomy marked by what Parker Palmer describes as a healthy way to “live the contradictions.”²⁴ Thus, while working-class students may have access to different types of self-conceptions in different social contexts, the goal of critical autonomy drawing upon the trope of the critical narrator is to help students harmonize across social contexts that they perceive as being agonistic. Such a task has obvious implications for teachers and schools. We can help increase student capacity for autonomy by encouraging their analysis of selves across social contexts, while also helping minimize the “gulfs” between their various “worlds.”

What I am describing covers ground similar to that explored by theorists associated with critical pedagogy. While that literature engages with the topic of resistance, it does not discuss the importance of attending to how students think about themselves as agents within social contexts — the focus of theories of autonomy. The account I offer here pushes us beyond students’ analyses of power relationships in their social worlds — much of the focus of critical pedagogy. I argue that we should also focus on students’ thinking about themselves and the influence of this self-understanding on their reactions to our pedagogical work. Such a focus will require us to rethink our curricular efforts as well.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the process of commodity fetishism describes the way that schools influence student autonomy along social class-specific lines. They transform a variety of dominant class practices and norms into identity traits associated with academic success. Students come to understand themselves and to be understood as being intelligent and motivated *because of their social class memberships*, and these explanations become woven into the narratives students use to explain themselves, their interests, and their talents to themselves and others. Thus, social class and schooling intersect to inhibit student autonomy by limiting the range of realistic sets of decisions to those associated with students’ social class memberships. In response, I have suggested that we consider developing a notion of “critical autonomy” that helps students understand themselves and their “self narrations” across social contexts. The argument also suggests that we need to rethink our collective conceptions of what being educated means, helping to minimize the distances our working-class students need to cross in their efforts to “travel” between their homes and the world of the school.

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