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The Sledgehammer and the Scalpel

The burgeoning stress of success and the tools to achieve greatness, or more specifically the gaps between the affluent and the "would like to be", have graced literature for countless centuries. The problem? The debate eventually devolves into a "chicken and the egg" scenario. Was it the chicken whom laid the rotten egg for the 1%, where "all the growth in recent decades – and more – has gone to those at the top" (Joseph Stiglitz, *Of the 1%, for the 1%, by the 1%,* 746). Perhaps it was the egg that hatched a pestilent chicken, poisoning the Anti-Intellectualists who "seem enamored with wealth at the expense of intellectualism" (Grant Penrod, *Anti-Intellectualism: Why We Hate the Smart Kids*, 756).

From Stiglitz putting the microscope to the elitism of the upper echelons to Penrod shining a light upon the vilification of intellectuals, the methods and means of two codependent messages are brought forth in parallel manners. However, their respective tones and audiences could not be more dissimilar. Stiglitz, named one of the hundred most influential people in the world by *Time,* used Vanity Fair as his medium for communication, and wrote a high toned (academic) piece aimed at the affluent (or at least for those who identify as). On the other hand, Penrod penned his work initially as an essay for a first-year composition course – thus an intended audience of two: himself and his professor, wrote in a lower toned (colloquial) manner and pace.

Stiglitz academic tone is highlighted by what can initially be interpreted as a compliment about American Society:

> Alexis de Tocqueville once described what he saw as a chief part of the peculiar genius of American society – something he called "self-interest properly understood." The last two words were the key. Everyone possesses self-interest in a narrow sense: I want what's good for me right now! Self-interest "properly understood" is different. It means appreciating that paying attention to everyone else's self-interest – in other words, the common welfare – is in fact a precondition for one's own ultimate well being. (752)

This passage accents Stiglitz repeated attempts to figuratively dump the bucket of cold water on those who would be satisfied with the status quo. However, would anyone outside of a Political Science or History background even know who de Tocqueville is? Not only does he repeatedly attempt to give a reality check to those whom have distanced themselves so far away from the rest of American society, Stiglitz repeatedly toes the line of professionalism in his repeated admonishments of the upper class and politically affluent. He is not just arguing against the national disparity; he is both emotionally and intellectually passionate about the ever-widening divide.

Across that divide, Penrod, a mere freshman in college and thus a stranger to the land of the political or economic affluent, argues to an empty room that the societal end game of Be Rich and Happy is a self-defeating pursuit. While using but half the length of Stiglitz's piece, Penrod draws from both pop culture and the world-wide web to underline his argument. Strikingly, all of Penrod's sources are drawn directly from the internet – the fact that Stiglitz literally is a (almost "the") recognized authority in his field can be no greater contrast to Penrod's source material. Drawing from individual user-made homepages on Angelfire.com and the web based forum of

Chilax.com, Penrod literally takes the words of his online peers and uses them as how the leeches were once placed by chirurgeons.

> The idea of the "geek" or "nerd" of the class is a familiar one to most students, and it is not a pleasant one. One online venter, Dan6erous, describes the image well: "A+ this and . . . got a 1600 on my SAT and got all AP class[es] next year whohoo. That's all these people care about don't they have lives damn nerds." In this respect, the trend to dislike intellectuals stems at least in part from an inescapable perception that concern for grades and test scores excludes the coexistence of normal social activities. Sadly, this becomes somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Penrod 755)

Penrod does not speak as an authority in neither social dynamics nor psychology, he speaks as one whom has experienced firsthand the vileness of young ignorant minds. Yet, akin to Stiglitz, a theme of advisement and warning permeates Penrod's argument: "For the sake of the smart kids, we all need to 'lay off' a little." (757) Stiglitz, who does speak as an authority, skips subtlety completely and goes straight for the literary jugular, evoking images of mobs with pitchforks and torches: "Throughout history, this is something that the top 1 percent eventually do learn. Too late." (753)

An interesting parallel between the two pieces is how both authors achieve a dynamic build of scope and universality. Penrod begins with what very well may be his hometown high school in Arizona, Mountain View High School. His local start completed, he then builds towards recognizable pop culture icons from sports and music, a more national scope of influence. From there, he then uses the capstone example of the (then) President of the United States of America, George W. Bush – the pinnacle of (an) American Identity. Universality achieved.

Stiglitz, instead of locality, uses history itself as his building tool. Within the first five sentences (the same amount of space Penrod uses to punctuate the anticlimactic successes of his high school's academic clubs) Stiglitz is already comparing the near present to how things were twenty-five years ago. From there, his historical skipping stone touches on familiar household names such as John D. Rockefeller and Bill Gates, to land neatly in the present – describing numerous global revolutions and protests. Completing the circle, Stiglitz then asks "When will it come to America? In important ways, our own country has become like one of these distant, troubled places" (752). Again, universality achieved, yet via a different approach.

Each of these pieces exhibit an undertone of passion regarding their topics, yet what is more interesting is how each respective author's personal and perceptual bias seeps up through their dialog. Penrod, as mentioned, using the words of his online peers, shares the vitriol experienced by intellectuals: "As an illustration, a commentator under the screen name ArCaNe posted the following quote on *TalkingCock.com*, an online discussion board: 'Man how I hate nerds . . . if I ever had a tommygun with me . . . I would most probably blow each one their . . . heads off." (754) Had the word "nerd" been replaced by a religious or ethnic group, in today's courts this post would have been a criminal and illegal act, since hate speech containing criminal threats is not protected by the First Amendment. One does not pull up source material such as this to just idly imply that some people do not like "nerds", this passage was picked specifically to be that emotional sucker punch – to show how caustic the environment can be for those with intellectual leanings.

Contrary to Penrod's swinging of an emotional sledgehammer, Stiglitz himself wielded the surgeon's scalpel of intellectual steel. Scattered throughout his argument, and camouflaged in academic prose, Stiglitz makes some very scathing comments directed at his very audience. One

gem is his repeated striking out at the Republican political party. “Lax enforcement of anti-trust laws, especially during Republican administrations, has been a godsend to the top 1 percent.” (749) At first glance, the above reads like an economic editorial stating “X administration achieved more than Y administration by Z amount”. However, contemplate the fact that he later adds “Trickle-down economics may be a chimera, but trickle-down behaviorism is very real.” (750) His scathing slice at the once prized Republican idiom of Reganomics, now combined with the first passage, exhibits not just bias – it radiates contempt.

Finally, an overlapping display and dismay of ignorant elitism permeates both works. Penrod laments that “these budding young anti-intellectuals carry the sentiments of education-bashing on into their adult lives as well” (756) while Stiglitz highlights the catch-22 that “the top 1 percent may complain about the kind of government we have in America, but in truth they like it just fine: too gridlocked to re-distribute, too divided to do anything but lower [their own] taxes.” (748) Dire statements, indeed. Yet instead of Penrod and Stiglitz being resigned to a defeatist attitude and future, each choose to hold the lantern high and shed illumination upon ignorance. Via emotional sledgehammer and intellectual scalpel, both authors have managed to achieve the same goals: to warn said elitists about the dangers of their current path, to debunk common misconception, and to break free of their respective “chicken and the egg” paradoxes.

Works Cited

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