

Book Review

Excellence vs. Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?

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Excellence vs. Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?

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In *Excellence vs. Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?* Dr. Ornstein elaborates on his philosophical, social and economic views represented in *Class Counts* and *Wealth Vs Work: How 1% Victimize 99%*. Ornstein, Educator | Researcher explores how in a technology driven, global economy, opportunity is being diverted into financial oligarchism, to create an underclass; denying economic equality and threatening democracy. The author proposes that, “a pro-capitalist, anti-labor attitude is filtering through political and corporate systems” (p. 24), which limits mobility and fosters social injustice. In addressing the essential question, Ornstein proposes that there must be a floor and ceiling in income and wealth. He recommends this be achieved through some form of redistribution or rationing. Dr. Ornstein urges that India and other democratic nations, including the United States must try to reduce the gap. Noting that, capitalistic societies have larger gaps in inequality than socialist societies, he suggests that the floor and ceiling be achieved through political compromise. But, the challenge democratic nations face is that when a compromise has been reached the political powers change resulting in a changing gap or change in the floor and ceiling. Central to Ornstein’s thesis is the assumption that a wide gap rewards special talent and innovation while a narrow gap protects ordinary workers and the middle class. Since the election of Mr. Modi’s pro-market government and policies to cut red tape and welcome foreign investment, India has become the world’s fastest-growing major economy. The critical issue Dr. Ornstein raises for the continued success of India’s democracy is the need for political compromise on wealth redistribution or taxation.

The demise of democracy, Ornstein argues, can be largely attributed to both globalization and technology. In the global economy, jobs and services are more mobile. A multinational corporation’s goal is global profitability; therefore, a national policy to regulate business or labor can be seen as a conflict of interest. To maximize return on capital and reduce labor costs, Ornstein points out, “IBM

announced in 2005 that it would shift 114,000 high-paying, high-tech jobs to India at salaries about one fifth of those in the U.S.” (p. 107). By 2010, Cisco, Intel, and Microsoft followed suit resulting in growing labor inequality. He notes, “salaries and benefits for new American factory workers are about half the pre 1990 scale” (p. 107). Indeed, in the global economic system, powerful capitalists defend the IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustments that make some people rich in companies like Nike and Coca-Cola, while people in India and other democratic nations struggle to define their national economic aims. Indian Author and political activist, Arundhati Roy, in an article published by *The Hindu* (2004) writes, “the Indian government is at the whim of powerful corporations” On a moral basis, Ornstein highlights how multinational corporations can weaken democracy.

Globalization and technology are redefining work and emphasizing STEM skills. Ornstein notes, “Half of the U.S. economic growth since 2000 can be attributed to the information and technology sector founded by foreigners living in the U.S.” (p. 23). On a global scale, according to *Fortune Magazine*, “more than 90 percent of the world’s data has been created since 2010” (p. 23). Furthermore, investment groups seek new tech companies with a limited number of jobs. Ornstein writes, “Facebook paid \$19 billion in 2014 for WhatsApp with a total of 55 employees” (p. 34). As the evidence indicates, technology is replacing both unskilled and skilled workers. Ornstein infers, “Capital trumps labor with the rise of globalization and technology” (p. 112).

Dr. Ornstein considers that we maybe creating class struggles at the expense of the ordinary people, “by mechanizing and computerizing ourselves into obsolescence” (p. 90). He suggests that, “tension is growing between STEM workers and local citizens, between those committed to individual performance against proponents of egalitarianism” (p. 21). Clearly, only the wealthy, those who invest capital, not labor, are benefiting, if profit (often gained by hiring illegal immigrants or outsourcing jobs) is not shared with the workers.

In a competitive society, social immobility can cause structural poverty among the working poor, lacking privilege birth status. Taxing labor at a higher rate than capital further restricts mobility. As Dr. Ornstein illustrates, little mobility occurs across class lines due to limited opportunity and economic inequality. While globalization draws us together, capitalism characterized by economic disparity threatens our humane co-existence. David Brooks of the *New York Times* suggests, “The advantage group ‘ruthlessly’ exploits its position to ensure the dominance of its class.” Ornstein notes, “When one third to one half of the world live in absolute poverty, instability flourishes and everyone is at risk” (p. 15).

That the West has peaked is well documented in the book. Informed by the *Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), and supported with evidence from the Global Power City Index (GPCI) Ornstein denotes the rise of Asia. He highlights that, “Since 2015 Asia has become home to more Fortune 500 global companies than North America” (p. 124). He reports, “the number of engineers annually being produced by India (350,000) and China (600,000) outnumbers the U.S. (70,000) by 5 to 8.5 times (p. 127). India is the largest Democracy in the world. In 2010, India’s 14-year-old or younger population was 31 percent of its total. As India’s workforce and consumer base expands, inevitably, STEM workers will set-up companies like Google, Facebook, etc. Ornstein makes an indisputable argument that, “India with its 1.3 billion people, and capitalistic spirit represents great competition for America’s future human capital” (p. 124).

To prosper, people must care. There must be a feeling of “we” and a sense of coexistence in our national and global communities. Extreme inequality violates moral principles, hinders economics and limits the pursuit of excellence. To revolt is too narrow a reaction. We need a revolution as a broader solution. In democratic life, as Ornstein suggests, this will require social cooperation and commitment to policies for the common good, that are lawfully enforced, make full use of human resources and support human rights. Ornstein provides extensive and convincing research to inform political debate. He recommends a floor and a ceiling in determining income and wealth to curtail greed and achieve compassion. He advocates for citizen interest in, and engagement with, mobility;

where no point on the economic curve is too wide to be overcome by education and/or hard work. Given that the founders of Google, Yahoo, eBay, etc. were immigrants, he highlights the need to revise immigration policies and visa rules to attract innovative and technological talent. Appreciating that education is no longer the great equalizer, but that education policies can have political implications to affect society at large, Ornstein proposes, social programs within the framework of what is rational, just and moral, for the less-educated segments of society who otherwise, he notes “will have difficulty functioning in this digitally connected world, comprised of online activity, social networks and data flow” (p. 31). Clearly, if the toxic stress of economic injustice is not mitigated, high levels of emotional intensity will continue to disrupt our vulnerable groups’ social competence and ability to succeed.

The foundation of democracy is based on sufficient, food, shelter, security and belief that all citizens have opportunities to succeed. Lack of opportunity, with economic success for some at the expense of others, inhibits our instinctive feelings of connectedness and is undemocratic. Being human does not mean being better than others. Often, it means being at or below average. Yet, the emerging culture in the global economy stresses individual achievement and success. In our human weakness, we feel blame, shame, and insignificant. Sabrina Tavernise, an American journalist, in an article published by the New York Times (2016) reports, “U.S. Suicide rates have surged to the highest levels in nearly 30 years.” We - the people are suffering. There is an emotional intensity, our pain, deserves attention, understanding and care.

Tobin & Powietrynska (2016) provide extensive qualitative data on the importance of Mindfulness for everyday life. Ultimately, being self-compassionate with a deep understanding of both our national and global interdependence, we can see ourselves, and be seen by others for who we are and realize our human potential. Instead of being seen as a unit of cost, or a problem to be fixed, compassion allows us to be valued as human beings. With equanimity, a balanced self | other awareness, we can appropriately respond to painful experiences. Instead of merely identifying with our own individual life experience or over-identifying with a group experience, we can shift our reference to a sense of shared humanity, fundamental to our wellness. Similarly, multinational corporations through their policies and procedures must adopt characteristics of mindful, global citizens for universal wellbeing.

Ultimately, being compassionate can provide the “discriminating wisdom” (Neff, 2015) to engage in the revolution Ornstein advocates. He proposes, to build a society that limits inherited wealth and privilege, to vote for political leaders who legislate a floor and ceiling for economic equality, to support employers who pay people based on how their performance (or job) influences the common good - and not as a profit vs. cost factor. These policies which Ornstein champions can support equal opportunity through self | other awareness in a more even playing field. They can contribute toward a shared vision of economic and social justice and the possibility of educating citizens for everyday life by valuing humanistic reforms that go beyond tolerance and equality to freedom. Dr. Ornstein reminds us that if we believe in justice, we cannot quit until the last word is ‘spoken,’ and ‘heard,’ and that collective acts of compassion among the oppressed and the oppressors move us to ‘see’ the human value in each other.

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Linda Noble has been an educator for twenty-two years. Currently, she is an Adjunct Assistant Professor teaching pre-service and in-service teachers in the School of Education at Brooklyn College, New York (N.Y). She also teaches social studies at Brooklyn College Academy, an Early College N.Y. Public High School. Linda is a certified Irish post-primary business studies teacher. Dr. Noble is a recipient of the 2016 Butler-Cooley Excellence in Teaching Award. Long Island University N.Y. awarded Dr. Noble Teacher of the Year Award in 2013, for her enriched classroom environment where social engagement is rooted in mindfulness, empathy and appreciation of multiple perspectives. Dr. Noble's conference presentations at the National Network for Educational Renewal, Middle College National Consortium, Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, and Google; as well as her participation in peer review for the American Educational Research Association are testimony to her passion for lifelong learning and education. Linda has a bachelor of business studies degree from the University of Limerick, Ireland, a master's degree from New York University (NYU), and a second master's degree from Brooklyn College. She earned her doctorate of philosophy in education from NYU. Dr Noble's current research and publication focus on mindfulness in education, as well as the effective integration of technology in instructional design.