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Inequality in education

———— Daniel Wodak

We were all surprised to be asked ‘What are you doing here?’ In retrospect, I’m not sure why. We were an odd assemblage of graduate students and professors from different disciplines, carrying a motley collection of borrowed academic regalia, congregating outside a lonely grocery store and pizzeria on the side of a quiet road in Bordentown, New Jersey. Of course we looked out of place. But none of us had an answer at hand. Matt, a second-year comparative literature student, was about to say ‘Well in 1994 Bill Clinton made prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants and so...’ when the waitress pressed further: ‘Do you want a table?’ ‘Oh! No thanks,’ someone replied. The waitress impatiently bustled back into the pizzeria.

We were there because we teach in the two nearby prisons, Garden State and Albert C Wagner Youth Correctional Facility. We were there because those prisons were having their first ever graduation ceremony – eight of our students were receiving Associates Degrees. We were there because there was nowhere better to meet between Princeton and the prisons.

About ten years ago our program, now called the Prison Teaching Initiative (PTI), was started by Matt Krumholz, then a doctoral student in comparative literature. Since then it’s grown considerably, with 20-something courses spanning the sciences and humanities. The institutional arrangements are complex: Princeton is part of a consortium along with the New Jersey Department of Justice (that allows us to teach), and Mercer County Community College (that accredits our courses) and other institutions like The College of New Jersey (which run their own courses). A handful of professors (like Jill Knapp in Astrophysics) and graduate students (like Ross Lerner in English) have somehow found the time to forge and maintain these arrangements, as well as organise the initiative itself. Recently, the organisational side of things became somewhat simpler, as Princeton hired a part-time staff-member to help run PTI.

This might not sound like a well-oiled machine, but it’s among the best you’ll find in the USA. When Bill Clinton made prisoners ineligible for federal funding for education – ‘Why,’ the rhetoric went, ‘should they get college education?’ – a gaping hole was left. (In July of this year, the Obama administration announced that it would temporarily make Pell grants available to some prisoners in a limited pilot program.) Over time, private institutions stepped up to fill it, providing basic programs that should be run by the state. Few states have anything comparable to the prison education programs available in New Jersey. According to data from the Prison Studies Project, there are no post-secondary programs at all in prisons in almost half of the states in the United States of America. Of course, these data may well be inaccurate. As far as I am aware, no one else has sought to provide a nationwide directory of such programs, which is a fairly good indication of the degree of national concern for prison education in this country.

I started teaching for PTI in my second year of graduate school. I first co-taught an English 101 course. Since then, I’ve taught a few philosophy courses with some friends and my partner, Sukaina. Part of my inspiration for first getting involved was that my mum, Jo McAlpin, worked in corrections education in Sydney, Australia. In Australia there’s no question that ‘they’ should get a university education. The New South Wales state government runs prison education programs with unionised, professional teachers and a set curriculum.

Admittedly, this curriculum doesn’t include anything like college-level philosophy. That’s largely because so many prisoners who enter prisons in New South Wales, as in New Jersey, still need to complete high-school level education. In New South Wales most prisoners are released shortly thereafter. New Jersey has an ample supply of young men whose sentences are long enough to finish high school and college degrees, with plenty of years left over. Even after they graduate with their Associate degrees, many of our students still have years left to serve. For students who have already completed all of the annual ‘core’ courses in English, mathematics and the sciences, a new course is a blessing: it’s their only opportunity to break up the prison routine for that semester.

The most recent course I taught – with Sukaina, Ella Haselswerdt (classics) and Orlando Reade (English) – was on the philosophy of inequality. This was the most exciting and most challenging course I’ve ever taught, at any institution. I wanted to teach this course in part because it connected so closely to the reasons why I teach in prisons. But in the process I had to confront uncomfortable questions about what it means to teach from a position of privilege.

I also wanted to teach this course for a simple reason. Egalitarian concerns have become increasingly pressing, and more widely discussed, in the United States. For all of its many, many faults, the rapidly increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots has prompted waves of books, debates, protests and speeches about whether the concentration of economic resources in the hands of so few – within the US, and across the globe – can be justified. That a 500-page dense, data-driven discussion of inequality and capitalism by a French economist could make the bestseller lists is a mark of the times.

There’s a strong tradition in political philosophy that dismisses these egalitarian concerns as entirely misplaced. In his highly influential *Two Treatises of Government*, published in 1690, John Locke took justice to be centrally concerned with property rights. We have rights over our own persons, our own labour, and (somewhat magically) over the material possessions and land with which our labour is ‘mixed’. There’s no sense in which the 1% own more than their ‘fair share’, because there is no such thing as anyone’s ‘fair share’. What’s theirs is theirs.

This Lockean view dominated Western political philosophy until the publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* three centuries later. Unlike Locke, Rawls took justice to be centrally concerned with the equality of persons, which includes their equal access to basic goods. This inspired a renewed interest in political philosophy in general, and in equality in particular.

Over the next three decades, the philosophical discussion of equality was preoccupied with internecine disputes about which basic goods equality should be concerned with. Material resources? ‘Units’ of wellbeing? Opportunities to acquire resources/wellbeing? All of the above? These disputes belied the degree of underlying agreement among these thinkers, who all shared a largely unarticulated framework for thinking about inequality. In all of these views, inequalities are unjust when they result from brute luck. The guiding thought that animated their egalitarian concerns is (some secular equivalent to) ‘There but for the grace of God go I’: that some have so much and others so few is accidental, undeserved.

To many, this framework is quite intuitive. It is still presupposed in the discussion of inequality in fields like economics. Sometimes this is fairly explicit, as in Branko Milanovic’s *The Haves and the Have-Nots*. Sometimes it is only implicit, as in Joseph Stiglitz’s *The Price of Inequality*. To bring the guiding thought into focus, it is helpful to consider two data points from those texts. My favorite vignette from Milanovic’s fascinating and entertaining book is called ‘How Much of Your Income is Determined at Birth?’ His conclusion: at least 80%. And the most shocking passage I found in Stiglitz’s rich work is when he mentions, almost as an aside, that ‘the six heirs to the Wal-Mart empire command wealth of \$69.7 billion, which is

equivalent to the wealth of the entire bottom 30 percent of U.S. society.’ Birth is a lottery. In fact, it’s worse. To be born into a wealthy nation, a wealthy city, and a wealthy family, is not even a risky choice. It is just something that happens to some, but not others. But it largely determines what we earn, and how our lives fare. Surely earthly justice should correct for this cosmic injustice?

This framework, now called luck egalitarianism, is where our course started. We homed in on concerns about brute luck with a mixture of philosophy, economics and Greek literature – poor Oedipus was also cursed at birth – and considered both small-scale and structural responses to these concerns such as GA Cohen’s wonderfully short and provocative *Why Not Socialism?*

Luck egalitarianism has been beset with two significant problems. The first was fairly obvious to our students: luck determines what we earn and how we fare in ways that go well beyond where and to whom we’re born. One’s character is largely a matter of brute luck. It could be brute luck that some are lazy while others are driven; or that some are greedy or gloomy while others are easily sated and content. Luck egalitarians seemed to think that they could solve these problems by locating the right basic good, but wherever they turned they encountered problems. (Equality of wellbeing may require allocating more resources to the greedy and gloomy; equality of resources may require allocating more resources to the lazy than the driven.)

The second problem is even more serious. Luck egalitarians have said remarkably little about ethically troubling non-economic inequalities. At this point, it’s worth noting that unlike our predominantly black and Latino students at AC Wagner, the philosophers and economists who have assumed and accepted luck egalitarianism are mostly white. This is not an ad hominem attack. (I’m white. Philosophers and economists are generally pretty white.) But it has played a considerable role in determining which inequalities have, and have not, been subject to significant scrutiny by luck egalitarians. Class is central. Race is peripheral.

To appreciate the sheer scale of this silence on matters of race, consider some of the observations made by Charles Mills’ in ‘Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls’. Rawls’ 5,000 pages of published work contain about a half dozen pages’ worth of sentences discussing race, most of which are duplications of the same fairly general points, and mentioned almost as afterthoughts: ‘racism, and racial oppression’, Mills concludes, ‘are marginal to Rawls’s thought.’ Terms like ‘affirmative action’, ‘white supremacy’, and ‘institutional racism’ appear nowhere in his corpus.

This silence is harmful. Many self-described egalitarians, for instance, oppose race-based affirmative action because they take race to be a poor proxy for socio-economic class. There are, after all, poor whites and wealthy blacks. Why should the latter have any preference in college admissions just because they come from a group that is poorer on average?

The problem with such arguments, and the deeper problem with luck egalitarianism generally, is that there are racial inequalities that only peripherally involve access to economic resources.

Some of these inequalities occur in interpersonal interactions. Consider a few of the items in what Peggy McIntosh famously described as ‘the invisible backpack’ of white privilege: ‘I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed’, ‘I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability’, ‘I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race’, ‘I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race’, ‘If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it

has racial overtones’. As a white man I can be sure that I will not be stopped and frisked – or worse – by police. Even wealthy black men like Henry Louis Gates Jr, not to mention black children like Tamir Rice, do not have these privileges.

You could try to capture what’s ethically troubling about these racial inequalities by appealing to luck-based differences in resources or happiness or opportunities; but such concerns seem secondary to the core complaint that individuals are ascribed a lower social status on the basis of their skin colour. Such unequal social relations are unjust in and of themselves, not because of their downstream effects on wealth or well-being.

That was, at least, the view taken by Elizabeth Anderson in her ground-breaking 1999 paper ‘What is the Point of Equality?’ In Anderson’s view, sometimes called ‘relational egalitarianism’, the point of equality is to eliminate oppression, rather than to eliminate brute luck. Perhaps it is a matter of brute luck that some are greedy or gloomy, but they are not thereby oppressed. Interpersonal and institutional racism, by contrast, establish and express unjust social relations regardless of how they affect the distribution of any (other) public goods.

Anderson has developed this view further in relation to institutional barriers to bringing about a community of equals. She makes this case most powerfully in *The Imperative of Integration*, a book-length argument for why and how we must end the racial segregation that stubbornly persists in America’s schools, housing and employment, despite the Supreme Court’s much-lauded 1954 decision *Brown v. The Board of Education*, which found that segregation is ‘inherently unequal’.

The criminal justice system is, of course, a further institution in dire need of reform. As Michelle Alexander famously argued in *The New Jim Crow*, mass incarceration in America entrenches a racial caste system that systematically deprives blacks of their rights to life, liberty and suffrage.

While much of our discussion of inequality centered on institutional reform, we did not want to neglect the more mundane inequalities that pervade interpersonal interactions, like the privileges described by Peggy McIntosh. The two are clearly related as both causes and effects of stereotypes. But such stereotypes aren’t just harmful when someone is shot or locked up on the basis of their skin colour. They take a toll on anyone who experiences them over and over again in day-to-day interactions.

That toll is now much better understood in social psychology, particularly thanks to Claude Steele’s work on stereotypes in general and ‘stereotype threat’ in particular. This well-documented phenomenon occurs when one’s negatively stereotyped group identity is made salient, undermining one’s performance on a related activity. The cause can be subtle. Telling black students that a game of golf is a test of ‘sports intelligence’ is enough to cause them to underperform. So is telling white students that a game of golf is a test of ‘natural athletic ability’.

Steele does an admirable job of explaining this research in accessible terms in *Whistling Vivaldi*. The book’s name comes from an anecdote about a well-educated black man – *New York Times* journalist Brent Staples – who realised that he caused distress and alarm by merely walking near white passersby. To reassure them, he would whistle *Four Seasons*, and thereby use one stereotype (associating classical music and education with status and safety) to combat the harmful effects of another (associating blacks with danger).

This was, roughly, the trajectory of our course. We started with luck egalitarianism and economic inequalities, moved to relational egalitarianism and interpersonal and institutional discrimination, before returning to the challenge from those such as Locke and the libertarians he inspired – most prominently, Robert Nozick, whose *Anarchy, State and Utopia* was a second bible to the Reagan administration – who dismiss these egalitarian concerns as wrong-headed.

One of the main reasons I wanted to teach this material is that it so closely connected

to why I wanted to teach in prisons in the first place. Doing so is obviously valuable: prison education helps puncture the boredom of incarceration, gives students brighter prospects, and has very well-documented effects in reducing recidivism. But I never saw prison teaching as some act of charity for which I should be praised. I thought of it as something I owe to others. I thought about education in the way that others (aside from Locke's disciples) think about taxation. Education is a basic good that is distributed unequally as a matter of brute luck, with measurable flow-on effects for one's future wealth and wellbeing. Education is closely connected to equalities in social standing: that's why whistling Vivaldi was a quick and simple means for Staples to combat negative race-based stereotypes. I have been lucky enough to have access to fantastic educational resources. Others, like my students at Albert C Wagner, have not. Just as the heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune owe it to the poor to share the benefits of their economic resources, I owe it to others to share the privileges that come with higher-level education. Anything less would be selfish, miserly. GA Cohen once wrote an accusatorially tilted book: *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* I have a similar attitude towards the many academics who'll use all their bargaining power to avoid ever stepping inside a classroom: if you're an egalitarian, how come you don't teach?

But these same privileges make teaching in prisons far more complex. Some of these complexities were familiar enough prior to the course. For instance, I knew from experience that our students would most likely have had insufficient formal education to be comfortable with the difficult language used by even the most accessible philosophers. (This, to be clear, is no indictment of the intelligence of our students, though it is in part an indictment of philosophical prose.) But just as it can be hard to guess what terms or idioms will be opaque to others when you are very familiar with their use, it can also be hard to guess what ideas will resonate with an audience when you have been shaped by such different experiences of the world. We expected to find that concerns about brute luck would be fairly intuitive to our students, since they are intuitive enough to us, and were surprised by just how little unfairness our students found even in the plight of poor Oedipus, not to mention how unwilling they were to grant that it was a matter of brute luck that the heirs to the Wal-Mart empire had the same wealth as the bottom 30% of the US combined. Students in this class were more hostile to what I had thought were uncontroversial facts about America than students in a past class had been to Aristotle's highly controversial views about the deficient rationality of 'natural slaves'.

This response forced us to confront something quite uncomfortable. That there are systematic, structural injustices may well be true, and philosophically interesting, and politically important; but it is much less fraught to recognise such injustices when you occupy a position of privilege. There is a significant difference between teaching students at Princeton and in prison about the lack of economic mobility in America. To learn that your privileges are largely unearned is humbling, and can prompt you to make different choices about how to use your resources. To learn that your disadvantages are largely the product of systematic forces beyond your control is disempowering: it denies your own agency, and any hope you might have that your choices have a good chance of helping you or your children escape the poverty that you were born into.

By starting our course with a discussion of luck and economic inequality, we also failed our students in one other regard. How could they be equal participants in a discussion of inequality when we controlled their access to the relevant data? (Our students do not have access to the internet, and their library is rudimentary.) How could they critically engage with Steiglitz? By contrast, once we shifted focus to inequalities in social relations, our students could draw insights from a wealth of experience about racial stereotypes, apply them to stereotypes about other stigmatised social groups (related to gender, sexuality, class), use them to make subtle and sophisticated points about philosophical theories, and participate in

the classroom as equals. We learned as much from them as they learned from us. Probably more, in fact. Because our students are very, very good. And as our course progressed and they became engrossed – some performing spoken word poetry after class that made us laugh and cry, managing to make philosophical points beautifully in a way I had never seen – I felt proud. Proud in ways that I still can't express without sounding like a complete sap.

Of all the reasons I can think of to teach in prison, this is the best: it is a joy, not a chore. I consider myself lucky to have had the opportunity to critically engage with these wonderfully bright students. The philosophical discussions that we have with our students are as deep and insightful as you'll find in any classroom in Princeton. This assessment has been shared by the many eminent professors from Princeton, and in one case the University of Pennsylvania, who have been kind enough to provide guest lectures in our courses.

It was also shared by the Princeton students who – thanks to a great deal of organisational work by Sukaina – were able to come to AC Wagner for a joint seminar in our course. This seminar was on inequality and justice in Plato's *The Republic*, with guest professor Ben Morisson. Here's a representative excerpt from their feedback (which has been made available online¹):

My experience at the prison reminded me why I chose to study philosophy – the combination of debate and collaboration, the excitement of discussion – something many of my other precepts [a.k.a., tutorials] this semester, in which students seemed more eager to impress each other and the teacher than to create a conversation, had caused me to forget. The students at the prison were both incredibly bright and, what is perhaps more remarkable, extremely open to sharing their own ideas and listening to ours – an attitude I treasure and something I have missed. This experience not only shattered my preconceptions about the prison, but also reinvigorated my love for philosophy. As I left, I found myself upset not only because of prevalence of prejudices, such as those I had previously held, against inmates, but also because of how much I wished that I could soon go back to the prison another week and discuss another text, hearing more of the incredible ideas and fascinating discussion.

The most consistent theme from Princeton students' feedback was how refreshingly different the teaching environment in prison was. For a change, everyone was 'fully engaged' with the material, rather than 'commenting to impress the professor' and 'afraid to contribute ideas off the beaten track'. Of course, our students from AC Wagner could not make such comparisons, having never been inside an institution like Princeton. Their feedback instead focused on the similarities between themselves and students from Princeton:

Having the students from Princeton in our classroom was a great experience. Not only did it give me a better understanding of our discussion and a charitable view on other's opinions, but it made me feel like I'm human and as though I have the ability to learn and succeed like anyone else. As though I am equal and not just another statistic behind bars.

This is why we were all so excited on that day in June, to see our students graduating in the green regalia of Mercer County Community College. It was the first time we had seen them in anything other than their beige prison uniform (the tops of which still peeked through their robes' lower necklines). It is hard to describe how proud that felt. Though from looking

¹ 'Course Evals from Prisoners and Princetonians', May 2015, <http://dailynous.com/2015/05/01/course-evals-from-prisoners-and-princetonians/>

around the room at their family members' beaming faces, it was clearly an emotion that others shared, and then some. We all listened, and cried, during the students' speeches, which described how transformative education had been. How they had learned to feel again, to empathise with others, to see themselves as people with ideas and futures and value.

I don't think we were part of this process because we imparted knowledge and wisdom we'd acquired through our oh-so-many years inside universities. I think we were part of this process because we took the time to sit down with our students for twice-weekly two-hour seminars, for 14 weeks at a time, to collaboratively work through interesting philosophical questions. And this is the biggest respect in which I have learned from my students. I still think I have a duty to teach, but as not as some top-down transfer of goods. Unlike with data-driven disciplines, we can and should all enter the classroom as equals. We can have exciting and deep discussions despite where we are. We can't forget that our classroom is in an unusual, unfortunate and deeply upsetting environment – the thick bars on its grimy windows, the corrections officers who frequently describe our students as being more like 'Klingons' than human beings, the students who legitimately fear the prison becoming aware of the mental health issues even though they have no other recourse to treatment, the students who disappear for a third of the semester because they have been placed in solitary confinement. This backdrop cannot be ignored. But it also cannot prevent us all from doing good philosophy.

I was pretty numb when we left the graduation. I thought about my first graduation in 2009. It felt like a chore, so much so that I've skipped all such ceremonies since. I couldn't see the appeal of wearing expensive robes that more befit a cult than an academic institution and sitting through a series of half-hearted speeches full of well-worn remarks about the importance of education. Walking in a faculty procession through a cheaply decorated prison rec room in our motley collection of borrowed regalia didn't change anything. But hearing our students eloquently describe how transformative education had been was hauntingly beautiful. And leaving them at the end of the evening, when we were free to go home and they were not, was just haunting. ●

Minutes of the second meeting of the Emily Davison Lodge

Held at Tate Britain, London 10 March 2014

———— Introduction by Olivia Plender and Hester Reeve

We would like to welcome you all and thank you for coming to this, the second meeting of the Emily Davidson Lodge, the purpose of which is to debate the value of holding an exhibition of Sylvia Pankhurst's artworks at Tate Britain, London.

This is the first solo exhibition of Sylvia Pankhurst's artworks to be held in a public art institution in the UK (or anywhere else for that matter) and as such represents a historic moment. As many of you will already know, Sylvia Pankhurst is well recognised in the British context for her role in winning votes for women. Along with her mother and sisters, she was part of founding the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, which was the militant wing of the early 20th-century campaign for women's suffrage in Britain. However less well known is that she also fought against racism and imperialism. When Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935 she was one of the few figures in the European left to associate this African struggle with the fight against fascism in Europe. She in fact died in Ethiopia, having moved there towards the end of her life at the invitation of Haile Selassie. She also established the East London Federation of Suffragettes in the poorest part of London and was later expelled from the WSPU by her mother Emmeline and sister Cristabel, because of her socialism. In 1918 the East London Federation of Suffragettes became the Workers Socialist Federation, the first communist party in England, briefly affiliated with The Third International.

Sylvia Pankhurst was also an artist, having trained at Manchester School of Art and then the Royal College of Art in London. This exhibition of her artworks at Tate Britain is curated by the Emily Davison Lodge, in collaboration with Tate curator Emma Chambers. It came about as the result of an *Open Letter to Tate Britain*, in which we demanded that the museum address Sylvia Pankhurst and the other neglected female artists that were a part of the suffragette movement. In early 20th-century Britain, art schools and particularly the Slade in London, were amongst the few higher educational institutions that women could gain access to with relative ease. It is because of this fact that art had a large role to play in the WSPU as a movement, through associations such as the Suffrage Atelier and the Artists' League. The WSPU also initiated a sustained campaign of attacks on artworks in museums around the UK as part of their militant actions directed against 'the fetish of private property'. Most famous is Mary Richardson's attack on the Velazquez painting of Venus in the National Gallery with a small axe in 1914, which has entered into art history. Less well known is that this was one of dozens of artworks that the British suffragettes targeted.

The *Open Letter to Tate Britain* was both a set of demands and an artwork. It was initially part of a series of works that we were commissioned to make for an exhibition called 'Out of the Archives', curated by Anna Colin at the Women's Library in London in 2010. Four years after, we posted the letter at a display of Sylvia Pankhurst's artworks opened at Tate Britain.