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## In Defense of *Res Publica*: How Elitism undermines American Democracy and what to do about it

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**In Defense of *Res Publica*: How Elitism undermines American Democracy and what to do about it<sup>1</sup>**  
**Bernd Reiter**

(...)

When I look back at my time in New York as someone coming to the United States for the first time to pursue graduate studies, I am well aware that my success was due to a collective support system in a place where such support mattered and could make a difference. For my first semester, I lived in the CUNY Student Residency, on 44<sup>th</sup> Street between 6<sup>th</sup> Ave and Broadway. Later I moved to Central Harlem, which gave me even more a sense that this place was all about hard work, new beginnings, and opportunities.

When I came here, I came from Brazil, where I had spent the past few years working as a social worker, involved in slum urbanization and educational projects for marginalized black youth. I had attended college in Brazil as well, for a year, again at a public university and supported by the German government.

I always perceived education to be the great equalizer. Free, public education was my way out of the village and, to some extent, the ‘idiocy of rural life’ (Communist Manifesto). I learned about topics in school that were never discussed at home. Education was also my path to conquer the world.

I attended a free, public university in Brazil, generously supported by a need-based German government student loan and I was able to attend a PhD program in New York City because the CUNY system allowed me to progress and succeed without having the means and resources to do so. Public education allowed me to enter spheres and positions in life that were not meant for me, it seemed.

Since graduation I only had one academic job. I have been a professor at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, another large public university, since 2005. My experience in this country thus has been one of attending and working in public schools, making progress, advancing through different ranks, and living a good life, even becoming an American citizen, thanks to public education. I owe a great deal to public education and I value it greatly. Public education allowed me to live the American Dream – “making it” without regard of my origins and family background, based on my own efforts, at times working several jobs while pursuing my PhD.

Graduate education, it turns out, makes you more self-aware and I started to learn, and think more about my path, my successes, as well as my failures, connecting them to social science theories and concepts. During my initial years of studies here, I learned that while my own efforts certainly counted and were important, I did have some symbolic capitals I brought with me, easing my way: as a white, German, heterosexual

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is an excerpt of a talk I gave at the CUNY Graduate Center, at the occasion of receiving the distinguished alum award from the Graduate Center’s Political Science Program. I would like to thank Peter Liberman, Alyson Cole, Earl Fleary, Kenneth Erickson, and Lenny Markovitz for honoring me with this award.

male, my initial encounters with professors tended to be very positive. Nobody ever thought that I was lazy, stupid, or undeserving. I always encountered open doors and open arms and many people willing to help and assist me.

After some years, however, I had to learn about and experience the other side of public education in this country – a side I had not been familiar with. In Germany, there are very few private universities to begin with and public universities are not ranked and don't compete with each other. So it does not matter where you get your degree from in Germany. All public universities are perceived as the same, offering the same level of prestige once you graduate.

It took me some years to understand that this is not the same in the United States. I had to learn this lesson gradually and somewhat painfully, whenever I applied for positions at prestigious universities. Every time I applied and was not selected, I realized that the job was given to someone with a degree from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cambridge, or another top private school. At times it seemed that people graduating from programs at private schools that I knew were not as good as mine were still favored over me – even though their publication records and experiences seemed lower than mine. Grant applications seemed to follow a similar pattern.

“What is going on here?” – I had to ask my American wife a few times over the past years, as I kept applying for more and more competitive and highly selective opportunities – and not getting them. My wife is wiser than I am and so are most of my colleagues at the University of South Florida, so by listening to them and her I came to understand little by little what is going on here. Let me share these insights with you and submit them to your thought and critique:

It appears to me that this country is slowly losing its faith in public things: Public schools, public office, and public space, abandoning them and favoring instead private schools, privatized public office holders, and privatized public spaces. It also seems that elitism has crept into the very fabric of American society, culture, and politics, threatening to undermine the very foundations of this country.

Let me explain: I first became suspicious of this trend here at CUNY. I had a professor who kept mentioning his accolades from private universities. Instead of proudly working here, he kept referencing Columbia University or similar others. He made no secret about the fact that his children attended a private, Ivy League, university, mostly making me angry, but also making me question, for the first time, if being here was the right decision.

I then learned that all recent presidents of this country went to the same, private universities.

In an Atlantic article from 2016, written by Alia Wong (8/10/2016), I read that, “Amy, [the daughter of President Carter] became the first child of a sitting U.S. president to attend a public school since 1906. She still is.”

It appears that the rich and powerful in this country spare no effort and money, to send their children to mostly private elite schools and universities, as we have just seen in the still ongoing college admissions scandal. Why?

A colleague at some point explained to me that moving from a university like mine to an Ivy League is next to impossible, because, he said, these universities only hire people who graduated from other Ivy Leagues. And sure enough: over the years, I have seen some of my colleagues who graduated from Ivy Leagues move between jobs at different Ivy Leagues – but I have never seen a graduate from a non Ivy League school get a job there. What my colleague suggested was that there is some sort of unspoken rule, which I had not been aware of, which sets Ivy League schools apart from the rest, not allowing for any cross-overs.

Money seems to be part of the story. If you take the 10 universities with the largest endowments (Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, MIT, U Penn, *Texas A&M*, *U Michigan*, Columbia, and Notre Dame, in that order) and sum up their endowments, you end up with the sum of some 180 Billion Dollars. College endowments have had an average annual return of 6 to 7% percent over the past years, so together these universities generate some \$11 billion in annual revenue from their endowments alone – just over \$1 billion per university per year. Note that only two of them are public; 5 are Ivy Leagues, and all are top ranked.

Compare this to the endowments of the top 10 public universities: UCLA, UC Berkeley, Virginia, Michigan, UC Santa Barbara, Chapel Hill, UC Irvine, Georgia Tech, Florida, William and Mary, and UC Davis (where it is certainly interesting to note that half of them are in California): Total Endowment: \$43 billion – about a quarter of the value of the ones I listed before.

So what can all this money buy? I venture to say: access and opportunity. I learned that some schools have offices that help students and faculty not just identify research grants, but assist them in the writing of their applications. As a result, it appears that some students, attending rich universities don't have to worry at all about funding to conduct their dissertation research. Some universities apparently write application letters for their graduating students to make sure these letters are well composed and contain no mistakes, thus increasing the chances of their graduates to find a job. Even without this extra service, it appears that graduates from Ivy League universities don't have much trouble finding jobs at research universities, while decent jobs for non Ivy-League graduates are harder and harder to come by.

A colleague from Duke University once told me that graduate students there have \$5,000 per semester to invite authors of newly published books so they can discuss it with them – and get to know the author personally thus building up important professional networks. And then I learned that a colleague of mine from a rich, private school charges \$10,000 to give a talk. Needless to say: I couldn't invite him. So it appears that rich,

mostly private, elite universities can buy access and opportunity for their students and faculty.

Money, of course, is not everything. Connections matter. Social capital, if you will, strong and weak ties, networks, or clientelism, if you feel less triumphant about the exceptionalism of the global north. I also had to learn this gradually during my career, maybe first when I applied repeatedly and unsuccessfully to participate in the annual qualitative methods training at the University of Syracuse. At the time I was an active member of the newly founded American Association of Political Science Qualitative Methods section; I had published in their newsletter and I had participated in their training of graduate students during an annual meeting. I felt that I had “paid my dues” and would surely secure a place for me. However, I was unsuccessful every time and none of my graduate students whom I had encouraged to apply were ever selected. I thought that this was just what it was – until I learned from a friend at Duke that her department had 2 places secured for their graduate students – every year, no application required.

Connections matter – and I remember one of my CUNY Graduate Center professors once telling us in a classroom that the main difference between getting a degree from CUNY compared to Columbia was that the parents of our classmates will not be able to offer us any jobs after we graduate.

All of this is probably not news to you – but for me, all of this information came as a series of little shocks. “The life of the uninformed is full of surprises,” a professor once told me. All of these instances, to me, go diametrically against the very promise of this country, the promise I had experienced for myself. Little by little, they have cast a shadow over my belief in the power of public education to study your way out of the idiocy of rural life and poverty. These experiences and little shocks for me relate back to a British system of aristocratic social stratification, where name, rank, status, and money determine the achievements of individuals, not their effort. They somehow seem very un-American to me – even though I also had to learn that America always practiced very un-American things ever since its foundation. But still. After all, as an immigrant relying on my own efforts, even while endowed with some racial and symbolic capitals, these examples undermined my belief in education as the great equalizer, making me think that somehow, the very British belief in aristocracy is making a comeback.

These examples to me suggest a sort of elite cabal, aimed at reserving positions that really matter to the graduates from a small number of schools and universities. It appears that there is a glass ceiling, one I was not aware of before, which basically allows for the existence of all these colleges and universities nation-wide - as long as they do not dispute access to real power with the very few universities that matter. It appears that the over 7,000 colleges and universities of this country were created so that their graduates find jobs – which is OK as long as they do not dispute the privileges of those who were born with them or who are able to buy into them.

Don't get me wrong: I certainly understand why someone wants to earn a degree from a private, elite university and I do not want to blame them for making such a choice, which is, after all, very rational. I even advise applicants who want to come and earn their Ph.D. with me to try getting into an Ivy League or top-ranked school first. I do not want to blame people who have to play by the rules for the way things are – but I do think it is important to question and challenge these rules.

So, to conclude this train of thought about education: What is privatization and elitism doing to higher education? It is hoarding opportunities for the rich and the already privileged, offering access and support to those who already enter the system privileged, with different capitals: financial, social, cultural, racial, and gendered. It appears that a two-tier system was slowly established in this country, with a few, select universities reserved for all of those on a path to join the inner circles of power, get high-ranking government jobs, become presidents, senators, ambassadors – or teach at Ivy League Universities. For all the rest, well – there is the rest, which, in this country, is of course plenty and distractingly so.

The situation of higher education certainly is a reflection of what is going on in broader society in the US and even worldwide. According to French Economist Thomas Piketty, the average family income of a student attending Harvard is \$450,000 / year – almost ten times the national average. We know that since 2016 1% of all people own 50% of all assets on the planet. So not just in terms of higher education, also in terms of the concentration of wealth, it seems that we are going back to aristocratic, maybe even dynastic times.

There are some 980,000 millionaires living in New York. How do all these millionaires affect and change the city? How much space do they occupy? How do they affect and change public life? How much is left for the rest, if the top 1% of a population consumes half of the pie and occupies half of the residential space?

As a graduate from the largest urban public university system in this country, I feel comfortable in saying here that too many of my colleagues have focused their research on the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, and the ethnicized, thus contributing, willingly or not, to making it appear as if they constituted a problem. I want to suggest that it is not the poor or the middle classes, and certainly not the marginalized, who are a problem. It is the rich and privileged. Thus, instead of producing layer upon layer of knowledge about the poor and excluded, I want to encourage you to produce more studies about the rich and the privileged.

Instead of debating minimum wages and minimum standards of living, I think it is high time to start a serious debate about upper limits - upper limits to income and particularly upper limits to wealth and asset holding. I cannot think of a different way to even start conceptualizing sustainment and ecological survival outside of establishing upper limits.

I would like to suggest that we have to rethink democracy and reform it in such a way that average people can regain control over collective, political decision-making by

wrestling power away from elites – elected or not. I have advocated for Legal Duty in my own work, inspired by Jury Duty, meaning: the participation of randomly selected citizens in the crafting, and passing, of laws. My hope here is that if ordinary citizens make their own laws, after having some time for deliberation, we no longer need professional lawmakers, most of whom, I would argue, do not represent us.

I think fairness requires equal opportunity *before* people compete and thus “pre-distribution” (to borrow a term from Jacob Hacker), not redistribution or welfare and I believe that the kind of opportunity hoarding that occurs in rich, private universities is pernicious to fairness and equal opportunity and thus stands in opposition to the very core values that believers in democracy have reason to uphold and defend.

I believe that it is important to take up the debate about reparations so that those who have been excluded from the historical accumulation of all sorts of capitals – financial, residential, social, cultural, and educational, can have a fair chance to compete and at times win in the different competitive markets we all need to enter during our lives.

I believe that those serving the public interest professionally, be it as elected officials or as career administrators, should not be allowed to send their children to private institutions. Period.

I think universities like this one ought to be tuition free and staffed with the very best educators and I believe that those working in universities like this one and my own, back in Florida, ought to be stern and proud defenders of *res publica*: of public affairs, public spaces, public schools, public universities, and public politics.

As you can tell, I am a proud alum of the CUNY Graduate Center and I want to encourage all of you to put more effort into utopian, futuristic thought and research and to analyze not just the problems we currently face, but to investigate the possibilities for a fairer and more sustained future. I know from my own experience that this is the perfect place to do so – right here at the CUNY Graduate Center, with its faculty that is, I believe, more committed to support and actively pursue social justice than any faculty anywhere else you could possibly go to college.

Thank you.