

Alternative Truths and Untruths: Addressing Polarization in America

Nel Noddings

Americans today are living in an increasingly polarized land. There are many issues on which

Class

There have always been problems of communication and understanding across classes in most societies. Those classes have usually been defined by economic levels. If we watch “Downton Abbey,” for example, we hear stories connected to well-defined economic classes in England during the period before, during, and immediately after World War I. Consistency with class identification in matters of dress, manner of speech, occupation, and living arrangements was not only expected but highly valued as a sign of national/social stability. After the war, that stability was shaken, and the class structure was under pressure to change.

In the United States, perhaps more dramatically, that stability was rejected early on in the form of what has come to be known as “The American Dream”—a belief that all hard-working citizens might rise above the economic/social class into which they were born. In contrast to the earlier British fear that crossing the established class lines might bring about social chaos (think here about Carson, Downton’s butler), Americans came to assess their country’s stability and progress by the number of people who were able to climb the economic ladder. The failure of individuals to do this was often charged to either bad luck or laziness, but the success of a substantial number proved that the “Dream” was alive and well.

The century from 1870 to 1970 saw an astonishing rate of economic growth in America, and this encouraged faith in the American Dream. It really seemed to be true that hard-working young people would surpass their parents in income and living style. Indeed, “The Great Leap Forward of the American level of labor productivity that occurred in the middle decades of the

twentieth century is one of the greatest achievements in all of economic history” (Gordon, 2016, p.535). After 1970, however, “By several measures, including median real wages and real taxable income in the bottom 90 percent of the income distribution, there has been no progress at all” (Gordon, 2016, p.605).

We are now living in a period when the dream seems to be dormant. Many people in the lower and middle levels of income feel themselves falling behind in the long line of aspirants seeking financial success. Because they have been working hard—obeying all the rules associated with the Dream, they are angry—angry at those “cutting into the line” and those (government and business officials) who encourage this cheating. Much anger is directed at big government and its policies. One angry citizen interviewed by Arlie Hochschild in Louisiana gave his reasons for disdain of the government:

It displaced community. It took away individual freedom. It didn't protect the citizenry.... the federal government was taking money from the workers and giving it to the idle. It was taking from the people of good character and giving it to people of bad character. (2016, p. 114)

Although the interviewee quoted did not mention social class, Hochschild wondered: “Did some of the malaise I was seeing derive from a class conflict, appearing where one least expected it (in the realm of government) and between groups (the middle/blue collar class and the poor) that liberals weren't focusing on?” (p.115)

Disapproval of the traditional poor as lazy, dirty, and less than honest has been present in American life from the start. Anger and disgust with the class of traditional poor was especially

The anger described by Hochschild and Isenberg points in two directions—downward at the undeserving poor and upward at the government that encourages their lassitude. Thomas Frank tells us what accounts for this anger:

From the middle of the Great Depression up to 1980, the lower 90 percent of the population, a group we might call “the American people,” took home some 70 percent of the growth in the country’s income. Look at the same numbers beginning in 1997...and you find that this same group, the American people—pocketed *none* of America’s income growth at all. Their share of the good times was zero....The upper ten percent of the population—the country’s financiers, managers, and professionals—ate the whole thing. (2016, p.2)

As a result, Frank says:

Today, the American class divide is starker than at any time in my memory, and yet Congress doesn’t seem to know it. Today, the House of Representatives is dedicated obsessively to the concerns of the rich—to cutting their taxes, to chastising their foes, to holding the tissue box as they cry about the mean names people call them. (p.19)

The anger so induced helps to explain what Hochschild calls the “great paradox”—an anger directed at a government that should be their main helper but is perceived to have forsaken them.

J.D. Vance also describes the growing class differences: “However you want to define these two groups...--rich and poor; educated and uneducated; upper-class and working class—their members increasingly occupy two separate worlds” (2016, p.252).

Robert Putnam prefers “education as our indicator of social class, partly because income measures in most surveys are much ‘noisier’ (error-prone or entirely missing) and because when both are available, education is typically the more powerful predictor of child-related outcomes” (2015, p.44), and these are the outcomes he planned to study. Putnam, then, uses “upper class” to refer to homes in which at least one person has a college education and “lower class” to refer to those in which neither parent has gone beyond high school. This way of defining class guides Putnam in organizing the important differences he reports in parenting residential patterns, enthusiasm for schooling, and support for social programs.

We should remain open, however, to the various ways of naming the class divide. Is it strictly a matter of economics? Is it liberal vs. conservative? Is there a racial element? How do we explain the affiliation of so many poor Blacks with highly educated whites? Why is there such a concentration of liberal thought in our universities? Many thoughtful critics today see several reasons for the growing class divide. One cause, almost certainly, is the enormous proliferation of biased information. Because so much information is readily available, people are naturally inclined to read and listen to that put forth by the group with which they identify. The temptation is to reject both compromise and understanding. The problem is put bluntly by James E. Campbell:

The spectrum of concern is not the left-right spectrum of liberalism and conservatism, but the professional-purist (amateur) spectrum of how conflicting political views are approached. At one end of this spectrum are mature debaters and at the other are infantile fanatics throwing tantrums. To put it bluntly, the pathologies often ascribed

to polarization are not so much the result of too many people being liberals or conservatives, but of too many of these polarized people being a bit too pig-headed, narrow-minded, unrealistic, disrespectful, and ill-informed. (2016, p.241)

But this language is not likely to pull people together. Indeed, it is part of the great divide, and finding a way to avoid this language is one essential task for today's educators. Perhaps we could start by attributing Campbell's derogatory adjectives to the language used by antagonists and not to the people themselves. We must find rational, critical ways to talk with others not simply to win arguments but to achieve understanding. The job of educators is to reduce the likelihood that our schools will produce pig-headed individuals, not to condemn and leave them behind to oink by the conversational wayside.

Class-Breaking

However class is defined, language patterns show up as stable, distinguishing features. Orwell warned us that attempts to improve the lot of our low-income population by making them more like us—"by means of hygiene, fruit-juice, birth-control, poetry, etc."—may be a mistake (1958,

acutely aware of their differences. Sometimes I view members of the elite with an almost primal scorn—recently, an acquaintance used the word “confabulate” in a sentence, and I just wanted to scream. (2016, pp.252-253)

With a foot in both camps, Vance would not give up his status in the well-educated class, but he acknowledges reactions consistent with his early days, and he explains: “To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart” (2016, p.3).

The differences mentioned here are not likely to disappear. Indeed, they may grow, and our schools may be contributing to that growth even as they profess to embrace equality. I will say much more about this in a bit. For the moment, let’s concentrate on the mistakes so often made in trying to communicate across classes.

The most obvious mistake has been described by George Orwell, Paulo Freire, and Michael Walzer among others. Freire (1970) points out again and again that the oppressed must liberate themselves and that “liberators” must find ways to work *with* the oppressed, not simply *for* them. Somehow, genuine liberators must work with both oppressed and oppressors. To accomplish this, he suggests a form of education cast as *problem posing*. The oppressed must be encouraged to ask *why* at the very outset of problem-solving interaction—when a problem is mutually identified. He writes:

No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why? While only a revolutionary society can carry out this education in systematic terms, the revolutionary leaders need not take full power before they can employ the method. ...[The] leaders

both contributed to a group's oppression and, paradoxically, sustained them through the period of oppression. While there are many factors involved in this paradox, one is surely the matter we have been discussing here: a failure to communicate as equals:

The relationship [between liberators and those to be liberated] simultaneously encompasses deep sympathy and deep hostility. Sympathy, because the liberators don't just resent the foreign rulers and hope to replace them, they really want to improve the everyday lives of the men and women with whom they identify...Hostility, because at the same time the liberators hate what they take to be the backwardness, ignorance, passivity, and submissiveness of those same people. (2015, p.68)

People sometimes tend to group together around certain beliefs and allegiances that cause them to resist or even challenge those who might actually help them. Hochschild saw this in the odd Louisiana acceptance of the big oil business that was destroying their natural environment and the distrust of a government trying to preserve that environment. J.D. Vance acknowledges it as he expresses gratitude for personal success and yet clings to his hillbelly identity. Thomas Frank describes in detail how the working class in Kansas has embraced "old-fashioned values" that have undermined the success for which they think they are fighting. Those publicly advertising such values have actually undermined the campaign to support workers:

Over the last three decades they have smashed the welfare state, reduced the tax burden on corporations and the wealthy, and generally facilitated the country's return to a nineteenth-century pattern of wealth distribution. Thus the primary contradiction of the

informed criticism. Demonstrations against the speakers must be allowed. The angry chants of protestors may be audible through the windows of the lecture hall, theatre or art gallery, but inside, the voices of the speakers must be heard, the play or artworks visible. A campus, like the chamber of a democratic parliament, should be distinguished by civilized self-regulation of speech to enable the highest quality of debate. But a university is the last place on earth where the individual, subjective ‘I’m offended veto’, the assassin’s veto or the heckler’s veto should ever be allowed to prevail. (2016, p.157)

There are, of course, some exceptions to this liberal intellectual ruling. In institutions affiliated with a particular religion, for example, both students and professors may rightly be dismissed for flagrant violation of the religious codes and practices of the institution. Even in such places, however, issues often arise over the question of how closely institutional members must adhere to the beliefs and practices to which they have given formal assent.

Teachers at every level must also be aware that words really can hurt. When we urge critical thinking on controversial issues and encourage free discussion on them, we must ensure that the discussions remain civil and that the participants exercise sensitivity to the pain that some of their classmates may experience. In *Happiness and Education*, I warned:

A great worry for critical theorists—one that should receive far more attention than it does at present—is that the efforts of critical pedagogues may induce anger, alienation, and hopelessness instead of wisdom and practical action. “Discussion” can deteriorate into

This attitude, however, might increase the communication gap that we are trying to reduce. Surely, we could invite civil discussion on why some students express a need for trigger

...will require a renewed commitment to truth's complexity and the processes by which one searches for it. As long as we can click on the truths we want, as long as truth is imagined as a desire satisfied in a politically and commercially saturated market, we will have a superabundance of facts people hold as true. Everyone will get what he wants, and the public—and its trust in truth—will fall apart. (2017, B9)

The possibility that the public and its trust in truth may fall apart should certainly worry us. Signs of further divisions and polarization seem to emerge every day. In addition to the usual class divisions—upper and lower economic, educated and uneducated—we now observe a growing city/rural divide (Graham, 2017). These class differences tend to aggravate each other. The growth of economic inequality between cities and rural areas contributes to the ideological/political difference so vividly illustrated in the 2016 election (Rauch, 2017).

How might schools address the growing communication gaps? Are we making things better or worse?

Can Schools Help?

up the stubborn belief that the only way to pursue these aims is through the traditional program of liberal arts—one characterized by the content of specifically defined, carefully separated

become sharply separated and assigned to specific disciplines where they have undergone still more narrow specialization. As a result, they have lost much of their power to connect with the central questions of human life. Connection is vital, and the connection of ideas can promote connection among people. “The sharp separation of the disciplines in secondary and higher education has induced a pervasive loss of meaning for many students. An emphasis on interdisciplinary themes should help to restore that meaning. Education should give increased meaning to every aspect of human life. It should not be thought of merely as preparation for a well-paid occupation” (Noddings, 2015, p.177).

As part of interdisciplinary studies, we might give some attention to heroes of civility—people who have argued powerfully and critically for positions and practices they believed in but refused to use violence either in physical acts or verbal expression. Isaiah Berlin spoke of such heroes: “the small, hesitant, self-critical, not always very brave, band of men who occupy a position somewhere to the left of centre, and are morally repelled both by the hard faces to their right and the hysteria and mindless violence and demagoguery on the left” (1979, p.301). Berlin was, of course, one of those heroes of tolerance and civility. We should identify others and share their stories with our students.

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