

Reflections on Theory in Action

Using Critical Theory to Teach Public Administration Students About Social Class Inequalities

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ABSTRACT

Various publications have shown that academic public administration mostly ignores questions involving socioeconomic disparities. This is especially true for how inherited cultural, social, and financial advantages affect interclass mobility, significant life outcomes, and, therefore, a citizen's relationship to government. Even public administration's social equity movement generally ignores class inequalities. Critical social theorists argue that socioeconomic issues must be a central focus of public administration. This article addresses the field's disregard of class matters by proposing ten instructional tools public administration professors can use to introduce students to major concerns about the relationship between socioeconomic disparities and government operations. By encouraging students to understand classism, public administration faculty can help fulfill their discipline's self-professed commitment to fairness, justice, and equity, and being a cutting-edge enterprise.

This process is not unlike the process revealed through critical theory—that of deconstructing the received “truths” about our social, political, and economic worlds. Our work requires us to do both—to take apart the reifications of our social, economic, and political worlds *and* to take apart those things we believe in to be “true” about ourselves.

—Cheryl S. King and Lisa Zanetti,
*Transformational Public Service:
Portraits of Theory in Practice*

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Critical theorists insist that we continuously question the values and assumptions underlying all government programs and measures. Whether acting as practitioners or scholars, or both, critical theorists view policy analysis and implementation as normative endeavors because all government programs derive from the culture in which they develop and operate. Critical theorists such as Box (2005, 2008) argue that because elites disproportionately influence public perceptions and government operations, this sometimes leads to policies and activities that contradict democratic principles and citizen self-interest. To wit, residents of poorer communities are more likely to suffer health problems caused by environmental degradation, while rampant consumerism has led many borrowers to accept subprime loans they could not afford. Because public and private elites, by definition, exercise disproportionate power through the media and other value-forming outlets, they can, in turn, limit the range of policy options available for consideration, meaning the average American may receive limited or no information about alternative ways to address problems or even what qualifies as a problem. By creating what King and Zanetti (2005, p. 53) call the “dominant discourse,” these elites significantly influence public perceptions of what questions should be considered and how to resolve them.

One way of appreciating this point is to contemplate the seemingly endless pharmaceutical advertisements shown on commercial television versus the minuscule instruction viewers receive about preventing health problems. There are countless ads for hamburgers, steaks, and other artery-clogging foods, but few spots about the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables and daily exercise. A consequence of this lopsided flow of opinions is that the average person becomes overly dependent on elite interpretations of issues and events, as if this small group’s views and actions are the best and only way to organize and operate society. According to King and Zanetti (2005, p. 126), elite values commonly become the country’s unexamined *truths*, ideas that get an automatic pass or that the average citizen seldom questions. This may explain why our field has yet to consider socioeconomic issues at the two levels King and Zanetti mentioned in the quote, namely, studying America’s received truths about social class and considering how mainstream public administration, King and Zanetti’s “ourselves” for present purposes, has refused to challenge these commonly accepted views, especially the fairness of unearned socioeconomic advantages.

Besides their direct influence over public and private concerns, elites exercise power by keeping questions off the agenda. This may involve trivializing their critics’ commentaries, as if to say, “That point is too silly to even consider,” which can discourage or postpone further investigation of possible alternative problem-solving approaches. Likewise, elites can use “containment” (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 22–38) to push rival viewpoints out of bounds.

Too often, this narrowing of public discourse induces self-censorship owing to fear of unpopularity or retaliation.

Critical theory emphasizes the need for greater equity in the distribution of wealth. This egalitarian impulse is noteworthy given the significant upward redistribution of wealth that has occurred over the past few decades (see, e.g., Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2000; Keister, 2000; Krugman, 2002; Mantsios, 2004; Phillips, 2002; Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004).

The limiting effects of not viewing social class inequalities critically are perhaps most evident when considering inheritances. Being born into a higher social class generally means having parents who possess an undergraduate degree or higher, earn incomes comfortably above the median level, and hold high-status occupations, such as a lawyer, physician, accountant, or professor. Besides the obvious benefits of having substantial incomes, those in the higher classes give their children countless qualitative advantages that lower-class offspring rarely, if ever, receive. One benefit is knowing influential individuals, both inside and outside the family, who can, in turn, help these parents obtain for their children rewards that people beyond these inner circles seldom gain. In the vernacular, these mothers and fathers “have friends in high places.” Moreover, higher-class parents have the knowledge and financial wherewithal to offer their children experiences that greatly enhance their academic skills, as demonstrated by their Scholastic Achievement Test and American College Test results. (See fairest.org for details about the strong relationship between social class origins and scores on standardized exams.) Bourdieu (1986) groups these overall advantages into three categories: social capital (personal contacts), financial capital (monetary wealth), and cultural capital (learning to read at a young age; exposure to art, plays, and similar refinements; traveling widely; and so forth.) (See especially Coles, 1977, for details about the lives of children he calls the “privileged ones.”)

Researchers have long bemoaned the ossifying effects of unearned (by the recipient) advantages. Not surprisingly, recent studies have shown that the upward redistribution of wealth and related factors have significantly reduced one’s chances of becoming another Horatio Alger (see, e.g., Phillips, 2002, citing Krueger; Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004; Wysong, Perrucci, & Wright, 2002).¹ The evidence reveals that the social status one is born into substantially affects, for good or ill, a person’s eventual class standing.

Our discipline has yet to direct a concerted effort toward understanding how unearned advantages affect bureaucratic operations, such as how: (1) the definition of “merit” can subtly reward the higher classes far more than the remaining population, (2) classism limits management’s ability to devise effective and efficient administrative strategies and tactics, and (3) classism affects the data that public agencies collect and thus policy-making and

evaluation. As long as our field disregards these socioeconomic issues, we can never achieve the equity goals we claim to support. In short, without deep knowledge of social class matters, we can never attain the fairer division of opportunities and resources that critical theorists deem integral to meaningful democracy. Likewise, it is important to note that while class prejudice and unearned advantages share certain commonalities with racism and sexism, as this article will show, the former have particular attributes warranting distinct forms of awareness, analysis, and redress.

PRESENT STUDY

According to Box (2008, p. 46), most American public administration students enter graduate school with little awareness of how our existing government structures derive from an animated and never-ending dispute over class, power, privilege, and the spirit of equality. Unfortunately, once enrolled, these students are rarely challenged to consider the political consequences of social class, classism, and the public policy effects of a maldistribution of wealth. Various studies show that not only is class a taboo subject among most Americans, it is rarely addressed in academic circles (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007), especially public administration (Johnson, 2004; Oldfield, 2003; Oldfield & Johnson, 2008; Oldfield, Candler, & Johnson, 2006; Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2008). In response, Box argues that “public administration teachers can show their students, who are or soon will be practitioners or academicians, alternatives to the current reality that embody progressive values” (2008, p. 25). In turn, he hopes these students will later apply this information in their professional lives to effect a more equitable distribution of assets and opportunities.

Writing about the purpose of “Reflections on Theory in Action” for *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, Kensen says the journal welcomes “contributions that reflect on theory in action, either in the classroom or in organizations and communities” (2008, p. 140). Elsewhere, she notes that this section must encourage discussions about “teach[ing] critical theoretical views” (p. 141). While critical theorists are concerned with telling students about America’s maldistribution of resources, or what Box calls the nation’s “almost unimaginable inequalities in wealth and power” (2005, p. 21), critical theorists have not detailed how to provide this instruction, especially lessons about unearned advantages inherited by birth. This study addresses that oversight by showing how public administration professors can foster a social class-consciousness in their students that thereby enables them to recognize the profound importance of socioeconomic status and unearned social, cultural, and financial capital for determining who will most influence government operations. This article shows how faculty can help students deconstruct the *official narrative* used to justify certain undeserved inequalities (King & Zanetti, 2005, p. 53) and then

use these newly acquired insights to propose ways to remedy these disparities. Thus, this article addresses social class inequalities at King and Zanetti's two levels of analysis and then extends the effort to include theorizing about ways to equalize resources and opportunities. It achieves these ends by proposing ten assignments public administration faculty can use to help their students recognize how our discipline marginalizes questions about social class inequities. Admittedly, space limits the number of topics one can cover in a journal article, but still, and ideally, the following materials will inspire others to offer their own thoughts, didactic and otherwise, about this matter.

The ten instructional units are presented in outline form so individual instructors can apply their preferred teaching techniques when interpreting them, including illustrating the interconnectedness among the exercises. This configuration enables faculty to fine-tune their presentations to match the level of understanding each student cohort brings to a course. Moreover, this approach allows individual professors to integrate their personal insights into how social class and socioeconomic inequalities affect the form and degree of government services that citizens receive and the context in which these are offered. Finally, the outline method of presentation permits public administration faculty wide latitude in demonstrating the importance of social class inequities for projecting the career paths of government officials, public opinion leaders, and others who significantly influence policy concerns.

The ten exercises appear as follows: *Assignment 1* orients students to the questions and context associated with the remaining exercises, above all how unearned advantages contradict many of the country's self-proclaimed ideals. *Assignment 2* asks students to apply their own experiential knowledge to the questions and consequences of inherited assets. *Assignment 3* turns American folklore on its head by challenging students to invert our nation's Horatio Alger myth by weighing the odds that someone of meager beginnings will ever become, for example, a major opinion leader, mythmaker, or key government figure. *Assignment 4* prompts students to recognize how unearned advantages affect personnel decisions in a familiar setting; that is, higher education. This exercise shows how seemingly objective criteria often mask social class biases. *Assignment 5* challenges students to recognize how certain management theories, while seemingly wise in the abstract, in practice, are infused with classist assumptions. *Assignment 6* demonstrates the politics inherent in policy analysis by showing how classism limits the questions that researchers might study and evaluate. *Assignment 7* encourages students to consider how academic credentialism, classism, and elitism influence who decides whether government officials are respecting the nation's constitutional principles. *Assignment 8* prompts students to apply what they have learned from the first seven assignments by proposing policies intended to counteract classism. This exercise is in response to Box's challenge that we "use critical theory as a guide for taking action to create social change" (2005, p. 21). *Assignment 9*

describes how faculty can use take-home essay tests to gauge their students' learning outcomes for the first eight assignments. This section outlines the types of questions faculty might include in these exams. *Assignment 10* details why public administration faculty must offer stand-alone courses that allow students to study in detail how social class affects bureaucratic operations, public policy development, and the distribution of resources (both quantitative and qualitative) in America.

TEN INSTRUCTIONAL UNITS

Assignment 1: Understanding Unearned Cultural, Financial, and Social Capital

As background to this assignment, present students with a brief summary of Bourdieu's (1986) essay on social, financial, and cultural capital. Next, present a synopsis of Hart and Risley's (1995) findings about how socioeconomic origins dramatically affect a youngster's vocabulary, self-image, and therefore chances of future academic and professional success. With this background in mind, allow students time to discuss how growing up lower, middle, or upper class can influence the trajectory of a child's life. Possible discussion topics include (1) whether and where families go on vacation, (2) whether and where people attend college, (3) how youngsters perform on standardized college entrance tests, (4) the availability of substantive reading materials in the home, (5) whether youngsters attend public or private primary and secondary schools, and (6) childhood obesity, to name only a few. For the next class, have students construct a list of 10 other significant effects of social class origins using information they have gathered and summarized. This exercise will help them appreciate King and Zanetti's comment about "the social and political processes of power and powerlessness" (2005, p. 55). (For more on the effects of class origins on educational opportunities, see, among others: Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Bracey, 2003; Kahlenberg, 1996; Sacks, 2007.)

Assignment 2: Realistic Monopoly

The economist Harold Wachtel (1984) uses a clever and effective analogy that conveniently shows how financial bequests affect social mobility and, by implication, what government programs individuals will likely encounter during their lifetimes. Wachtel asks readers to consider playing a series of Monopoly games where the winner of the first and every subsequent game starts with his or her winnings intact, while the other players must begin with the money allotment the rules require. It is easy to predict who usually wins most if not every game after the first one.

Begin this exercise by asking students for their reactions to this comment from Mantsios: “People do not choose to be poor or working class; instead, they are limited and confined by the opportunities afforded or denied them by a social and economic system. . . . In America, [c]lass standing, and consequently life chances, are largely determined at birth” (2004, p. 203). Summarize Wachtel’s thought experiment for your students and get their reactions to this Monopoly exercise.

Wachtel’s idea will prove especially effective for helping the uninitiated understand the real-world effects of inheritances, particularly how bequests, or a lack thereof, shape, for example, one’s chance of achieving the American Dream by, say, attending a prestigious university (see Golden, 2006, on this point) and then getting a high-status government job. Have students discuss what public programs the losers of these Monopoly games will likely encounter.

Have students consider other forms of class prejudice, such as the assumption that welfare payments kill the will to work because the recipient does not “earn” the money or benefits, versus applying the same standard to large financial inheritances that some parents pass to their children or grandchildren. Why are these bequests not held to the same standard as welfare payments based on the idea that inheritances are unearned by the recipients and therefore threaten the offsprings’ work ethic? End this exercise by again asking students to comment on Mantsios’s remarks.

Assignment 3: Honoring Americans Who Have Struggled All the Way Up from the Top

This exercise inverts the myth about America being the land of endless possibilities for upward mobility. The structure of this assignment speaks to King and Zanetti’s observation that “critical theory opens the doors to new possibilities for theory and practice by exploring unexamined assumptions and comparing these with the resonance of lived experience” (2005, p. 50). Distribute copies of the summary below. After your students have finished reading the handout, offer a Socratic-style discussion about what this exercise says concerning national mythmaking and our understanding of social class mobility in America, including how social class origins affect the likelihood someone will get a Master of Public Administration or some other advanced degree (Oldfield, 2007a, 2008).

The Alger Horatio Museum

Congress has just authorized construction of the Alger Horatio Museum (AHM).² It will be located in Washington, DC. By telling visitors about Americans who had a significant head start in life because they were born to

higher social class families, the AHM will help counterbalance the message behind the fabled American Dream. The AHM will show artifacts and give accounts of those who, by accident of birth, had a significant lead in achieving the American Dream. The proposed facility induces sightseers to appreciate the accomplishments of those who inherited sizable advantages and parlayed these into successful careers; unlike many of our mythical heroes, these people “struggled all the way up from the top” (Oldfield & Johnson, 2009).

The number of individual AHM exhibits included in the proposed facility will depend on its size, which Congress will determine based on how much it appropriates for the project. When choosing AHM inductees, the museum’s future curators will chronicle stories of those whose parents recognized the value of and were willing lavishly to finance their kids’ formal educations. It was during these years, in their prep school and college days, that many of these future inductees capped their head starts by gaining the connections and credentials necessary to achieve the American Dream.

The First Honorees

The first AHM curator has already chosen four persons, Eliot Spitzer, Condoleezza Rice, Maya Lin, and Ben Bernanke, to include among the initial class of inductees. The exhibit for each honoree will contain a short biography of the honoree and important artifacts reflecting his or her life of privilege, such as prep school grade cards, photographs of the person playing polo, postcards sent home from international travels, and pictures of their parents’ second and third homes and private planes, etc. Here is an example of a biographical sketch for one of these first inductees:

Condoleezza Rice, America’s former Secretary of State: Rice was born into a third-generation-college-educated family that included teachers, preachers, and attorneys (Felix, 2004). Her father, John Rice, was a high school guidance counselor, a college dean, and professor. Rice’s mother, Angelena, was a science and music teacher. Condoleezza’s uncle, John’s brother, was a leading black educationist. Her aunt, Genoa Ray McPhatter, was a school principal.

Angelena began home schooling her daughter almost from the child’s birth, teaching “Condi” to read by age five. Starting at age six, her mother enrolled her in several schools to “expand her horizons” by “exposing her to a variety of social and educational experiences” (Felix, 2004). As a youngster, aspiring to be a concert-performer, Condi began taking piano lessons. She also took instruction in French, the flute, ballet, violin, and skating. Her mother introduced her to athletics and the great books of Western culture. During summers, her parents took her to visit different college campuses.

At age 15, Condoleezza entered the University of Denver (tuition \$173,920),³ a private school where her father taught and was an administrator. Later, she earned a master's degree in political science from another private institution, the University of Notre Dame (tuition \$88,688). Condoleezza returned to the University of Denver (tuition \$86,790) for her Ph.D. in International Studies. Her mother took "Condoleezza" from the Italian musical notation "con dolcezza," meaning "with sweetness." (Felix, 2004)

The curator will choose more inductees to include in this first class, as well as decide the final wording of the respective biographies and what physical items to feature in each exhibit. The size of this first class of honorees will depend on the space available. To keep the AHM fresh and attractive, every few months the exhibits will be replaced, which will encourage repeat business, particularly among nearby residents.

Observation

King and Zanetti claim that "education involves learning to integrate opposing ideas and energies," which "can be both emotionally and physically uncomfortable, even painful" (2005, p. 127). By asking students to invert a popular mythology, this exercise reinforces the idea of what it means to study public administration from a critical perspective, to look at a situation through the other end of the telescope, to "think strange." Such questioning is a conspicuous manifestation of the earlier cited comment on the subject of "deconstructing the received 'truths' about our social, political, and economic worlds" (p. 147). Because this exercise involves real public figures, one or more of whom may be among your students' heroes, the ensuing discussion can prove especially discomfiting. However, with this caveat in mind and your gentle treatment of the subject, this exercise can be another highly effective means of pushing students toward critically viewing socioeconomic inequalities.

Be sure your students understand this is not an *ad hominem* assignment directed against the honorees. Instead, it demonstrates the role of mythology in making certain otherwise valid questions seem *silly*. To reinforce this point, ask students to contemplate how our field spends considerable time researching the *underprivileged* and the *poverty problem*, but pays little attention to the *overprivileged*, the *rich problem*, or the *greed problem*. Verify this idea by asking whether the so-called poverty problem is a logical result of a small percent of the population taking a disproportionate share of the available wealth. Consider the consequences of this distinction in light of a letter "Deserted in Tennessee" sent to Dear Abby (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 2010, paras. 1–3). Deserted complained that when she or one of her fellow office

workers brought cakes, cookies, and other goodies to work for all to share, Delores always went through the line first taking her own portion, but then gathering still more to carry home to her family. By definition, when Delores took more than her fair share, this left, in turn, that much less for the other office workers. Abby sided with “Deserted,” proposing certain steps to ensure that thereafter the deserts would be divided more equally. Ask your students to consider Deserted’s letter and Dear Abby’s advice in terms of this silly question: If our discipline really believes in social equity, why are studies of the overprivileged, the rich problem, and the greed problem not commonplace (Oldfield, 2003)? How do these ideological limitations restrict our thoughts and actions?

For the next class session, assign each student the name of a well-known government official or public opinion leader born of privileged circumstances. To ensure that all these people grew up in comfortable circumstances, do some preliminary Web searches when preparing your list of subjects. Explain that the assigned individuals are nominees for AHM membership. Have students prepare a biographical sketch of their allotted persons, and at the next session allow them briefly to summarize their findings in class. Have students vote on which, say, three of these candidates to induct into the AHM.

Assignment 4: The Political Consequences of Merit

Ask students to comment on this thought problem: Two people have applied for a tenured faculty position in your public administration program. Although both candidates hold Ph.D.s with a specialty in public administration, they are from very different social class backgrounds. The first candidate, Angela, is one of three children raised by a single mother who quit school in the tenth grade and has been a short-order cook all her life. She never had health or dental insurance. Angela took all three of her degrees from public universities in the Midwest. She worked part-time throughout college. The other candidate, Sandy, is the only child of two college professors who had employer-provided family health and dental insurance while she was growing up and during her college years. Sandy attended private schools for all her degrees, including earning a B.A. and M.A. at Yale and a Ph.D. at Harvard. She never worked at a paying job while in school. Both applicants are African American and about the same age. Angela achieved a slightly higher grade point average in her undergraduate and graduate studies.

Ask each student to say which candidate is more meritorious and why. After gathering all the explanations and counting the votes, encourage your class to weigh the difference between viewing merit statically—judging candidates by their credentials—versus fluidly—evaluating candidates based on how far they have traveled to qualify for consideration. Help students see that interpreting merit statically benefits Sandy while interpreting it fluidly favors Angela. Explain

how merit is usually judged statically, meaning that despite having traveled a vast distance along the social class spectrum, this part of Angela's accomplishments is unlikely to warrant special consideration in the selection process. Mention that this omission is particularly revealing given the growing movement to induce greater socioeconomic-based student diversity in higher learning (see Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003; Kahlenberg, 1996; Oldfield, 2008), but not among faculty (Oldfield, 2007b; Oldfield & Conant, 2001; Oldfield & Johnson, 2008, 2009).

Ask students to speculate how the two candidates' circumstances growing up and going through college might affect how each appears and acts during the interview process. What tacit class markers might be influencing the committee's eventual choice? Conclude this discussion by asking students to evaluate how this exercise speaks to Box's observation that "predefining certain issues as inappropriate for public discussion preserves inequities built into the status quo" (2005, p. 101, summarizing Frazer & Lacey, 1993).

Assignment 5: The Team-Building College President

Present the following narrative to your students. After they have read it, discuss their reactions.

The Newly Appointed College President Builds a Team

The just-appointed president of a small public college believes strongly in team building and managing with information. He considers the second point very important because he assumes that by gathering more facts and opinions (as his public administration professors said he should), he will make better decisions. He explained his management philosophy to the university community during the school's annual fall Welcome Back to Campus speech. The next day he followed on his promise by asking his secretary to schedule a daily lunch hour meeting in his office with one faculty member or one administrator. The name of each day's luncheon guest will be drawn randomly. Unless there is a scheduling conflict, the president will hold these sessions each workday. After he has met with every faculty member and administrator once, he will repeat the process. As new faculty and administrators are hired, he will include them on his daily calendar. The meal is free to each luncheon guest, and only he or she and the president will attend the scheduled session.

Have students evaluate the new president's management philosophy. Do they agree with his means of managing with more information? After students have finished discussing their reactions to the president's administrative philosophy, ask how they would respond if the president only held

lunch sessions with Caucasian professors and administrators, who comprise roughly 80 percent of the academic staff. Obviously, most if not all students will insist the president's management strategy is racist. If the president is interested in managing with information, why is he not also meeting with the college's janitors, secretaries, groundskeepers, cafeteria workers, and so forth? Is he prejudiced based on social class if he only seeks opinions from faculty and administrators to improve college operations? Given that janitors, cooks, and other frontline employees have ideas that can help enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of campus operations, why does the president not include these workers on his lunchtime list? Finally, ask students to weigh the lessons of this exercise against King and Zanetti's observation that we need "to structure . . . work differently" (2005, p. 39) by "[d]emocratizing expertise" (p. 128). In particular, distribute the following comments as a handout and ask for your students' reactions.

- Belief in the authority of expertise subordinates common sense and in so doing subordinates common people (2005, p. 130).
- Public administration and public service have become caught up in this culture of expertise, with detrimental effects. Public administration has become captivated by managerialism. Administrators trained only in instrumental approaches and interpretations do not know how to question the effects of their actions on the lives of subordinate groups or to give weight to knowledge gained from lived experience (2005, p. 130).

Assignment 6: Administration by Omission

This exercise encourages students to consider the social class-related policy effects of administrative data-gathering requirements. Begin this assignment by explaining that bureaucracies collect demographic facts for policy-making, including redistributing resources and opportunities (Yanow, 2003). Universities, for example, maintain statistics on the race, age, and gender of their students and faculty. The availability of these figures enables interested parties to monitor administrative outcomes, such as gauging for diversity purposes what percentage of the students are, say, female. It is equally important that students recognize the policy implications of *not* gathering certain data. For instance, when a university does not assemble information about the social class origins of its students and faculty, it is harder to determine whether the composition of the student body or professoriate fairly reflects the general population. It is difficult to establish, for example, whether a school enrolls a representative number of those whose parents never attended college and held blue- or pink-collar jobs. While individuals could gather and maintain these statistics, this would require considerable effort and expense, versus having the Human Resources Department (HR) marshal the figures. Students must

understand that the data an institution collects (or does not collect) reflects its values, meaning what it deems important for policy-making. If a university gathers facts about the socioeconomic backgrounds of its students and faculty and the results show a significant underrepresentation of people with blue-/pink-collar, first-generation-college backgrounds, complaints about this discrepancy will have more credibility because the school, by its actions, legitimized the data used to justify the criticism.

In preparation for this assignment, consult Yanow's (2003) *Constructing "Race" and "Ethnicity" in America*. This text provides a richly detailed analysis of how the government-authorized categories of "race" and "ethnicity" have influenced data collection and analysis and therefore public policy development, implementation, and review over the years. Yanow's writings are remarkably insightful regarding government's power to legitimate the abstract (ideas such as race and ethnicity) by placing (or withholding) its imprimatur on a category. As King and Zanetti explain, "Naming bestows recognition. Recognition, in turn, often generates legitimacy" (2005, p. xi). For present purposes, the relevant point for students to understand is that in the minds of many as long as institutions refuse to acknowledge socioeconomic influences, class can never receive the attention it deserves (see also Isaacs & Schroeder, 2004, and Jonas, 1999, on this point).

Assignment 7: Questioning Elitist Assumptions

Offer a brief summary of where the nine members of the current U.S. Supreme Court attended college and provide a short description of their social class origins. Ask students to consider whether the Court's membership ought to be more representative of the U.S. population and why over the years there have been so few graduates of lesser-known law schools appointed as Justices, including programs such as the University of Wyoming or the University of Akron. Do students know there is no constitutional requisite that Justices hold a law degree, or any formal educational credential, for that matter? Once people have acquired the Juris Doctor (assuming that degree remains an informal requirement to sit on the Court) and passed the bar examination, by definition, they are licensed to practice law or, in this case, decide whether government officials are following the Constitution. Likewise, students ought to consider why some groups insist that the president appoint a female or racial minority to the Court, while, to date, there has been no similar outcry that the chief executive choose someone of poverty or working-class origins. For diversity purposes, the University of Michigan weighs an applicant's socioeconomic origins when deciding admissions to its prestigious law school (Michigan Law School, n.d.). Why not apply the same standard to those nominated to the nation's highest court, above all if they graduated from a lesser-known university? Obviously, students can raise these same questions about leadership posts in all American bureaucracies, especially federal cabinet positions

and other high public stations. After students have fully immersed themselves in the questions you have raised about leadership selection and the importance of social class origins for determining the odds of various individuals achieving these high placements, ask students whether they agree with this statement: “Sham meritocracy equals sham democracy.”

Assignment 8: Proposing Remedies

The preceding exercises focus on the *problem* of social class inequalities. After successfully grounding students in alternative ways of viewing socioeconomic relationships, the next step is to have them propose ways to reduce specific “social imbalances” (Box, 2008, p. 78). This assignment is consistent with West’s (1991) observation that progress requires, first, showing why reform is necessary and then offering solutions to a problem. In this case, you want students to first identify a particular socioeconomic inequality and then devise policies to “level the playing field.” For starters, students might consider these research possibilities: (1) study the socioeconomic origins of faculty at their university; (2) study the socioeconomic origins of students at their university; (3) compare the socioeconomic origins of the janitors, cooks, and other frontline workers at their university against those of the faculty; (4) if your university has a law or medical school, compare the socioeconomic origins of these students against those of the janitors, cooks, and other frontline workers employed on your campus; (5) compare the college-going habits of your university faculty’s children against the offspring of janitors, cooks, and other frontline workers employed on your campus; (6) survey your university’s faculty by asking questions about their support for expanding university affirmative action plans to include enrolling more students of humble origins or hiring more faculty of poverty and working-class backgrounds; (7) study the socioeconomic origins of the last several U.S. ambassadors to selected countries and decide whether these individuals are representative of the American population; (8) study differences in health outcomes based on social class variables; (9) study differences in obesity based on social class variables; and (10) suggest new ways the government agencies they work for can act to remedy socioeconomic inequalities. While this assignment allows students considerable latitude in developing a theory of change, it can be a daunting challenge, at least at first. Students are more accustomed to identifying and discussing problems versus solving them. Still, with a little assistance and guidance on your part, they will successfully complete this assignment.

Assignment 9: Evaluating Student Views About Social Class Inequalities

Tell the students you will be giving them one week to complete a graded, take-home assignment. Explain that you want them to detail their reactions

to the previous eight exercises. There can be considerable variation in handling this assignment, that is, individual professors will decide the format of this exercise based on personal preferences. Nevertheless, faculty ought to give students an outline listing potential subjects of interest. Here are some possible topics.

1. How have your opinions about socioeconomic inequalities changed in response to the eight exercises we have covered? (Be specific.) If your views have remained mostly unchanged, explain why you still think as you did before we began reviewing these materials. (Be specific.)
2. Was there one particularly important lesson you learned from our discussions of social class inequalities? (Explain with details.)
3. Why do you think most Americans are reluctant to discuss social class inequalities and unearned advantages? (Be specific.)
4. What other examples of social class inequalities have you witnessed while we were covering the eight exercises? (Explain with details.)
5. What hidden values and unquestioned assumptions about public administration in particular and government operations in general did these exercises help you identify? (Be specific.)
6. Discuss your overall reaction to the eight assignments. What, if anything, have they taught you about the relationship between government and society?

Faculty can lift quotations from various critical social theorists and ask students to respond to these comments based on lessons derived from the eight exercises. The following quotation exemplifies this point:

Understanding the social world involves recognizing the extent to which our lives are constructed, affected, and punctuated by official narratives (which are also sometimes referred to as dominant discourses, *hegemony*, or grand narratives). Liberation occurs when individuals learn to identify these narratives, compare them with their lived experiences, and begin to construct counternarratives that highlight how certain groups have been marginalized, silenced, subjugated, or forgotten in the dominant discourse. (King & Zanetti, 2005, p. 53)

This assignment allows students to register their reactions, pro or con, to the eight assignments and the charges critical theorists have leveled against mainstream public administration's disregard of social class inequalities. These criticisms also include, of course, the official narrative that supposedly justifies existing disparities. Make a special effort to encourage students to offer candid reactions to the eight units, promising that you will treat their essays confidentially and that they will not be graded by their pro or con opinions, but by the strength of their supporting arguments.

Besides a grading tool, faculty can use this writing assignment to gauge

whether their students understand—irrespective of whether they accept or reject any or all of what critical theorists have been saying about the discipline—the role of social class inequalities and inheritances in structuring how public administration operates in our society. Faculty can use the insights and information derived from reading this assignment to refine how they teach these materials.

Assignment 10: Social Class and Public Administration (PA-660)

As your repertoire of class-based questions and assignments develops, consider packaging them as a formal course. Few public administration programs offer stand-alone courses on social class (Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2008), notably ones that critically weigh the effects of financial, social, and cultural inheritances. The proposed course would allow students more time to understand how social class affects bureaucratic operations, public policy development, and the distribution of resources and opportunities among Americans. Likewise, those enrolled in this class could explore particular issues in considerable depth by writing research papers and presenting their findings to other students.

Design this course, at least in part, to show how socioeconomic factors play out on your campus. (See *Assignment 8* for suggestions.) Exposure to these more intimate effects of socioeconomic influences may prove particularly enlightening to some students, especially those who are first-generation college students of poverty or working-class origins and are experiencing their first glimmerings of class-consciousness and pride. Some students may later expand their PA-660 research projects into theses or dissertations. Perhaps this course will inspire more faculty to conduct their own studies of how socioeconomic inequalities shape various aspects of the discipline, including empirically testing the effectiveness of these and other instructional assignments for increasing their students' social class consciousness. Ideally, the fruits of PA-660 will support Box's assertion that "the field of public administration holds considerable potential to have a long-term effect on social change, and the classrooms and published work of scholars can be socially significant rather than trivial" (2008, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

Box (2008, p. 108) says that professors must induce students to understand the social context in which public institutions function, meaning the values and assumptions (official and unofficial) that guide government operations. In the same spirit, King and Zanetti insist, "The very logic of critical theory demands that one learn to excavate assumptions and reveal contradictions" (2005, p. 50). Public administration faculty can help students identify whose interests are served by viewing the world from different perspectives, including how seem-

ingly objective standards often shelter biases. Public administration students have to understand that much of politics involves class warfare, in one form or another (see, e.g., Frederickson, 2005). Through its various policies and actions, our government constantly affects wealth (quantitative and qualitative) distribution. In the 1930s, class warfare entailed armed conflicts, as evidenced by our government's reaction to the American labor movement. Generally, however, class warfare means peaceful policy-making, and the results, when applied, change the distribution of resources and opportunities in some way. Lately, as noted, these efforts have mostly favored the well heeled.

Although George Bernard Shaw may not be the first name that comes to mind when discussing critical theorists, in the early part of the last century, he (1928) insightfully observed how it benefits particular groups to have some issue deemed "a closed question." He meant that a large portion of the population believes there is no need for further discussion about a matter because the status quo is the only way things can and should be. A main point of critical theory is to challenge taken-for-granted notions about social class questions, something mainstream public administration rarely does. Perhaps President Wilson's (1887) view of the politics/administration dichotomy haunts our field more than we want to admit, at least concerning social class inequalities. His idea that public administrators nonpolitically execute the dictates of the other branches (and the elite interests that disproportionately influence their thoughts and actions) must be weighed against the academy's responsibility to consider the bureaucracy as just another participant in the endless battle over the distribution of assets. Our field seldom teaches students to question an ideology that justifies unearned socioeconomic advantages. Our corner of higher education has fallen under the spell of an "internalized powerlessness [that] creates quiescence—a socialized compliance and reluctance to question the 'official' way of things" (King & Zanetti, 2005, p. 57). Ideally, these 10 assignments will push the discipline toward fulfilling Rorty's ideal conception of higher education, which is to say, "help[ing] . . . students see that the national narrative around which their socialization has centered is . . . open-ended . . . [and] [w]ith luck the best of them will succeed in altering the conventional wisdom, so that the next generation is socialized in a somewhat different way than they themselves were socialized" (Rorty, 1999, p. 124). Our field must begin devoting more effort toward researching, writing, and teaching about ways to equalize resources and opportunities. For too long we have ignored the structural nepotism that largely determines *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Lasswell, 1958). If our commitment to critical social theory and social equity is as deep as we say, we will begin writing and acting in ways that contradict the United States' vast and growing class inequalities. (For weekly updates on class disparities and related concerns in the United States, see <http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5725/t/8798/signup.jsp?key=1638/> for free e-mail subscriptions to *Too Much*.)

As instructors, professors can influence the influencers, as many of our students are or soon will be working in government. As Box asserts, "Because public employees are influential in the processes of creating and implementing public policy, it seems important to also systematically explore" with them "theories about society and the roles of public administration in social change" (2005, p. 31).

Our field has progressed in recognizing the disadvantages women and minorities have faced and are facing based on physical characteristics, their attributes by birth. Neither group chose the outward traits that allow others to identify them and withhold resources and opportunities based on these external qualities. Recognizing this problem and the inequalities flowing from sexism and racism, National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) accreditation standards (NASPAA, 2007) require that applicants register the number of women and minority faculty and students either enrolled or employed there. Programs also have to describe their outreach efforts directed at recruiting more women and minorities to their respective campuses. Consistent with Yanow's (2003) reasoning about the power of classifications, NASPAA has officially recognized race and gender as legitimate categories for policy-making purposes. Meanwhile, NASPAA gathers no information about the socioeconomic origins of each program's faculty or students. There is no formal attempt to recruit more public administration students who are first-generation college and whose parents held blue- or pink-collar jobs while their offspring were youngsters. This is an especially revealing omission given what H. George Frederickson, perhaps the field's most influential thinker and former American Society for Public Administration president, says about this matter:

It is everywhere evident that a child's early conditions and circumstances, to a considerable extent, determine that child's chances in life. We do not start the race of life evenly. So long as income and wealth disparities are increasing, growing percentages of American children face the prospects of diminished life prospects. If we are asked to implement the policies that systematically advantage a few at the expense of the many, do we not have social equity responsibilities? (2005, p. 186)

In other words, as it is with women and minorities, those of humble origins did not choose their "early conditions and circumstances" (p. 186).

Critical theorists must help students through the difficult process of deconstructing a lifetime of political socialization to see how the classism inherent in a system allows a few to inherit considerable cultural, financial, and social capital while so many others are born into meager circumstances. These 10 teaching exercises encourage students to study how our field mostly overlooks government's role in effecting a maldistribution of resources and opportunities based on classism. With this new consciousness, students can

better recognize the undemocratic biases intrinsic to a social-sorting system that determines who will most likely become our decision makers and opinion leaders, notwithstanding what much of our formal learning and popular culture say about the endless possibilities for advancement our country affords all its citizens. Given the right teaching tools, our field can foster a class consciousness equivalent to the sensitivity we have developed toward sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination. Perhaps an early and significant indicator of our campaign's success will be when NASPAA begins requiring aspiring public administration programs to gather data about their faculty and students' social class origins for accreditation and diversity purposes. What could be more critical theory in practice than that?

Ultimately, every effort to democratize social relations is normative (King & Zanetti, 2005, pp. 51, 56, & 93), whether the issue is civil rights, women's suffrage, unionization, or . . . you name it. Reformers always appeal to our sense of fairness, to what is right and wrong. Likewise, teaching is normative. If they choose, professors can challenge students to open closed questions about how wealth, in its many forms, is and ought to be distributed. Not asking students to explore social class inequalities and their consequences is the ethical equivalent of Bachrach and Baratz's (1963) "nondecision," meaning excluding an item from consideration, or, as King and Zanetti say, treating it as a "nonissue" (2005, p. 129).

We cannot claim, on the one hand, that our field supports "fairness," "justice," and "equity" (NAPA, n.d.) and being "cutting edge" (ASPA, n.d., p. 1) and, on the other hand, graduate students lacking a fundamental understanding of social class in general and inherited (unearned) advantages in particular. In the end, if we really believe in our principles, we will risk unpopularity by teaching students how social class profoundly affects just about everything public administration did, does, or will ever do.

NOTES

1. For more on this fictional character, see www.horatioalger.com.

2. When starting to discuss this assignment, confirm that your students understand that Congress has not really established an Alger Horatio Museum. Instead, explain that this is a fantasy device meant to help them critically examine another component of the nation's "official narrative" (King & Zanetti, 2005, p. 53), in this case the importance of unearned advantages for determining success in America.

3. These parenthetical dollar quotes reflect the most recently available information about the tuition/fees and room and board costs associated with completing degrees at the referenced education institutions. For Rice and the other inductees, the various totals will be calculated assuming students take four years to finish an undergraduate degree, two years to complete a master's degree, four years to earn a Ph.D., and three years for a law degree. Thus, if a student's tuition/fees and

room and board costs for attending law school were \$45,000 per academic year at some institution, the eventual cost of achieving that degree would be \$135,000. These parenthetical totals will not account for numerous other expenses commonly associated with formal learning, e.g., entertainment, traveling to and from campus, automobile upkeep, health insurance, clothing, personal items, books and supplies, and so on. Likewise, the listed charges will not weigh whether someone received tuition or fee breaks due to assistantships, fellowships, or other waivers, or whether he or she lived with relatives while attending school, as well as other possible cost savings. Nevertheless, the listed figures will proffer a rough approximation of the basic charges associated with going to the higher education institutions the honorees attended, and, consequently, these amounts will provide museum goers with a feeling for the cultural, social, and financial ambiance the inductees represented as well as experienced during college. Finally, because the honorees will be of diverse ages, the listed costs of attending the various schools, as just noted, will represent the latest available figures. It is probably fair to say that the parenthetical amounts will reasonably accommodate the effects of inflation and thereby provide the uninitiated with a better, if not exact, appreciation for the comparative costs of attending the respective, often elite, colleges where the inductees took their degrees.

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