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Cultural Capital: Intellectual Traditions and the Liberal Arts

Chris Prendergast
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Pantagraph Teacher of the Year Acceptance Speech
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Thank you. Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge two debts of a highly personal nature. The first is to my wife Susan, who has been my love and inspiration since graduate school days The second is to my first, and still unsurpassed teacher, my mother, Katherine. I would also like to acknowledge the person who will give the benediction later this morning, Jodie Daquilanea. Jodie is doing Honors Research on postmodern ethics under me this semester, and I learned a lot doing it. Thanks, Jodie.

I am truly humbled to receive this award. I have long said that, if teaching excellence could be quantified, I'd be happy to earn a *median rank* on this faculty. If there is any justification for this award beyond seniority and service, it lies in my course, Sociology 290: The History of Social Thought, which earns GNED credit in the category of Intellectual Traditions. I taught The History of Social Thought twice a semester to 20-25 students since the new GNED program went into effect 7 years ago. Veterans of the course should appreciate some of the literary references this morning.

Having listened to these acceptance speeches now for 19 years, I've noted that they typically contain three elements: some biographical information about the speaker, a homily or moral lesson for the honors students who are being recognized today, and some acknowledgement of the larger purposes for which this university stands, its mission. I am going to spend a little longer than usual on the biographical component, partially because, being

shy and quiet, most students and even close friends know relatively little about me, but mainly because my teaching and scholarship dovetail so completely with the homily and mission components. My major purpose this morning is to discuss the contributions that courses in the Intellectual Traditions category make to the *very idea* of a liberal education today. My secondary purpose is to show how courses in theory and intellectual history empower students to become participating citizens in a world increasingly dependent on the discovery of new knowledge and methods of inquiry. In contemporary jargon, they provide students with ‘cultural capital’ that they can apply throughout their professional lives. Hence the title of my talk, “Cultural Capital: Intellectual Traditions and the Liberal Arts.”

Let me start the biographical part with an episode from my early years that made an indelible impression on me. It involves my mother, Katherine. We are sitting in the kitchen in our brownstone at 115 St. Mark’s Avenue, in Brooklyn, NY, a little more than a half a block from where Sixth Avenue terminates at Flatbush Avenue, and perhaps three quarters of a mile from St. Augustine’s Grammar School, in what is known as the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. It might have been the second or third grade, and I’ve just been given the Catechism to memorize. The Catholic Catechism is organized in question and answer form, and you get high marks for reciting the answers just as they are written out. Mom is helping me with this, but she can’t resist the urge to explain to me how three persons comprise one God and the degrees of badness that make some sins venial and others mortal. This wasn’t skeptical questioning, just sense-making. She was doing what we all do along the way of mastering the concepts and propositions of an intellectual tradition—translating them into the familiar concepts and metaphors of the life-world, the common sense reality of everyday life. She was using her native intelligence to assimilate scholasticism into units of practical belief. At age 7 or 8, I noticed the contrast between Mom’s sense-making, which I

duly admired then and even more so now, and the clerical rationalism of the nuns and priests. It says a lot about me that I preferred the rationalist version more.

Second snapshot, 6 or 7 years later, now a Sophomore in high school. Catholic H. S., of course. But fatefully for me, the high school that shared a half-block off Sixth Avenue with my church and grammar school was designated a ‘diocesan high school,’ that is, it admitted boys—and boys alone—from all over Brooklyn. Not only was it highly competitive, it was ‘college prep,’ a distinction that escaped me at the time. Here I had the disturbing experience of feeling out of my league in every endeavor from cross-country track to French pronunciation. Perhaps for this reason, I was indifferent and unmotivated into my second year, and in the process of failing Geometry, which I would have to re-take during summer school. I recall one moment, a turning point of sorts, quite vividly. It occurred in English class, during a discussion of J. F. Powers’ novel, *Morte D’Urban*, which is a story about an ambitious priest who had strayed from the principles of his religious order. I had contributed very little to class discussion until the teacher posed a question about Father Urban’s motivation in the climatic scene in the novel. We had analyzed the novel enough that I suddenly ‘saw’ where that piece fit into an emerging, global interpretation. I remember the teacher seemed surprised to see my hand in the air, and surprised again by my answer. I had done nothing more than my mother had done 6 or 7 years earlier, used a rough-hewed intellect to make sense of a mystery. Everyone in this room has had the same experience. This is the moment, so exquisite in retrospect, when you feel enough confidence in yourself to believe that you might accept a bigger intellectual challenge in the future.

Naturally, I took a few more literature classes—my favorite being a course on James Joyce in college—but it was social theory that provided the intellectual challenge that changed my life. Snapshot

three, Brooklyn College, Spring 1967, 8:00 AM class in sociological theory, Arlene Steinman sitting at the desk at the front of the room, one leg curled under her body, a large coffee and ash tray in front of her, lecturing on Marx's theory of alienation from *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, explaining the differences between externalization, objectification, and reification, citing Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, and looking ahead to Durkheim's concept of anomie and Weber's iron cage of instrumental rationality. Completely enthralled. Best of all, we finished the semester with Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*, then only available in hardback, Arlene being a graduate student of Peter Berger's at the New School for Social Research, where Berger in turn had studied under Alfred Schutz, the philosopher and social theorist who a few years later would become my special field of expertise. The *Social Construction of Reality* is a highly synthetic work, and Arlene showed us how the whole tradition of sociological theory could be subsumed under a simple model of externalization, objectification, and internalization, the three processes through which every social institution is constructed, rationalized, made subjectively meaningful, and finally taken for granted as an objective facticity, as part of the furniture of the universe.

I could continue in this mode for quite a while, but it is time to segue into the topic of intellectual traditions. My three snapshots seem to tell the same basic story three ways. Whether it is the Catechism, the interpretation of *Morte D'Urban*, or the history of social thought, I seem preoccupied with things fitting together into units of meaning and units of meaning into larger systems, particularly those with a synthetic structure. So it will come as no surprise when I tell you that my major preoccupations as a scholar have been with the foundations and unity or unification of knowledge.

I have always been attracted to the great system builders, not only in sociology, but in economics and philosophy as well. I have always wanted to know from whence came the premises of their systems and how they justified those premises epistemologically. That's the problem of foundations. But I also wanted to know how intellectual systems support one another, influence one another, clash with one another, and either disappear or reticulate into new fields and subfields of knowledge. That's the problem of the "unity of knowledge" when taken as an historical inquiry or the problem of the "unification of knowledge" when one promotes a positive program of theoretical, meta-theoretical, or even metaphysical synthesis.

As I just indicated, one can approach these problems in at least two ways—historically or normatively. Most of my scholarship has been historical in nature. Where did the field called 'social impact assessment' come from? Not from the National Environmental Protection Act of 1969, but from Condorcet's canal study of 1775. Where did Émile Durkheim get his concepts of 'social morphology' and 'mechanical solidarity'? Not from his contemporary and rival Herbert Spencer, but from his teacher, Fustel de Coulanges. How did Alfred Schutz come to revise Max Weber's concepts of social action, understanding, and the ideal type in the manner that he did? Not because he derived these solutions from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness, but because he needed both Husserl and Weber to shore up the foundations of the Austrian school of economics. The recurrent use of "not" in the previous sentences indicates one distinctive feature of the historical study of intellectual traditions, its capacity to surprise us by uncovering new contexts of interpretation, thus freeing us from a reigning interpretation that is inadequate in its simplicity.

One can also approach problems of foundations and unification normatively. Here one proceeds as Schutz did with respect to

marginal utility theory, by proposing solutions to problems that the progenitors of the theory may not have recognized even existed. I started along this track two sabbaticals ago with the concepts of ‘social structure’ and ‘structural explanation’ in sociology. Social structure should be understood as a phenomenon of levels, I argue, of which six can be discerned in liberal democratic societies. Moreover, if we adopt the six-level scheme, we can overcome the fruitless opposition between ‘structure’ and ‘action’ that prevailed in contemporary social theory since the 1960s: We can have structural explanations that leave room for choice and action.

<Joke>.

Let me now turn to the connection between the study of intellectual traditions and the liberal arts. I will only have time to rattle off a couple of connections, with inadequate set up and less justification. The most important point I wish to make is this: Liberal education is *itself* an intellectual tradition, which means that we can study its premises historically and normatively. Not only *can* we do so, we *must* do so whenever we go about reforming, say, our general education system. This is precisely how the last general education reform started out ten years ago—with a summer study group that reviewed the great paradigms of liberal education, their contemporary critiques, and the emerging alternatives to them. Seeing liberal education as an intellectual tradition in its own right allows us—make that, *forces* us—to proceed reflectively whenever we think about the premises of general education as they are or should be.

So, in preparation for this talk, I reviewed some founding documents of the intellectual tradition of liberal education, Anglo-American branch. To my great surprise, I found the concept of ‘cultural capital’ centrally embedded in them. The origin of liberal education, of course, goes back to classical Athens, but the modern Anglo-American branch stems from the defense of the educational

ideals and practices of Oxford University. Oxford's educational philosophy came under attack after 1800 by adherents of a rising intellectual movement known as utilitarianism. The critics argued, in the words of one Sydney Smith, that, quote, "the only proper criterion of every branch of education" is, quote, "its utility in future life." The utilitarians aimed to reorganize the educational system of England from top to bottom but, in the Oxford context, they meant to sweep away the study of the classical traditions of Athens and Rome, the study of rhetoric and eloquent speech, and the recitation of literary works. The space thus swept free would be filled in with curricula designed to provide individuals—then all male—with the knowledge they needed to practice law, medicine, architecture, and other specialized subjects. This, of course, is precisely what transpired in the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the development in Germany of the modern research university and its diffusion throughout the world.

The defenders of liberal education began to confront the utilitarian challenge around 1810. One of the early defenders was one John Davison, a theologian and Oxford graduate. Davison put forth two theses that sound remarkably familiar two centuries later. First, quote, "A Liberal Education is something far higher, even in the scale of Utility, than what is commonly called a Useful Education." In other words, a liberal education is *supremely* useful, not in providing immediately consumable information, but in developing what Davison calls 'mental discipline' and 'the cultivated faculties' of the mind, what we would call 'higher-order reasoning' today. And, second, a liberal education, quote, "is necessary ... for the purposes even of that Professional Education which commonly engrosses the title of Useful." As Davison explains, quote:

A man who has been trained to think upon one subject, or for one subject only, will never be a good judge even in that one: whereas the enlargement of his circle gives him both

knowledge and power in a rapidly increasing ratio... ideas act, not as solitary units, but by grouping and combination... Judgment lives as it were by comparison and discrimination. End quote.

Confronting head-on the critics' celebration of the allegedly 'presuppositionless' observation of 'facts' just as they appear to the senses, Davison insisted on, quote, "much varied reading and discipline first, and observation afterwards." One often hears that the 'liberal' in liberal education stems from the Latin word, *liberalis*, meaning 'free.' True enough, but the root of *liberalis* is *liber*, meaning 'book.' Free persons are people of the book. Observation is a great thing, but like judgment, it lives by comparison and discrimination. The observations we value most are those that confirm, advance, split, or vanquish intellectual traditions.

Writing 1811, Davison seemed to foresee the relationship between liberal and professional education as we understand it today. A liberal arts education of quality saturates the environment with knowledge, with intellectual debates, and with alternative perspectives—firstly through the careful reading of texts, and secondly through observation informed by the discipline of a theory or research paradigm. It insists that the learner not specialize prematurely or concentrate too narrowly on information presumably relevant to one's career after college, lest one find oneself lacking the capacity to grow and continue learning as today's information becomes obsolete. A liberal education, moreover, alerts students to the *interconnections* between fields of knowledge—their "grouping and combination," as Davison put it—and to the types of discerning judgment attendant to them. Such alertness to connection fosters creativity, imagination, and discovery.

Finally, such an education empowers the individual. In our time empowering the individual becomes its foremost justification. As Davison put it in 1811, a liberal education, quote,

gives [a person] strength in any subject he chooses to grapple with, and enables him to *seize the strong point* in it... [It] describes the power that every one desires to possess when he comes to act in a profession, or elsewhere; and corresponds with our best idea of a cultivated mind. End quote.

There you have it, the beginnings of our branch of a hallowed intellectual tradition, replete with arguments and contrasts that are still current 200 years later: general vs specialized knowledge, anti-utilitarianism, empowerment of the individual, the value of the book, the cultivation of the ability to compare and discriminate, the emphasis on judgment, the recognition of the ineluctable interdependence between fields of knowledge, the appreciation for serendipitous discovery that comes from reaching out beyond the premises of one field into the premises of another, and an understanding of the university as a place that enlarges one's 'circle' and thus allows "knowledge and power [to grow] in a rapidly increasing ratio."

Well, not quite. Davison's understanding of liberal education was very different from ours. The Oxford education he defended required the student to study Greek and Latin grammar, literature, and oratory for four years along with single required courses in logic, elementary mathematics, ethics, natural philosophy, and metaphysics. By a liberal education today we mean something quite different: a set of courses, hopefully well-selected, that complements the specialized major. Our present GNED system recognizes that the only intellectual tradition that most students truly come to inhabit is the one embedded in their major. Even the small liberal arts college lives in the shadow of the research

university. There is a clear upside to this situation: In order to engage an intellectual tradition, you need to immerse yourself in it. You need to surrender to its premises before you can even begin to see its limitations. Only in the major do you get that kind of exposure. The downside occurs when professional education becomes so prescriptive that students are denied the opportunity to explore intellectual traditions gatekeepers consider ‘extraneous’ to the field. This sells students short, and never more so than today, when fields of study multiply and divide so rapidly. Sociologist of science Diane Crane identified 8530 separate fields of study in a paper published 18 years ago. Who knows how many exist 18 years later or how many justify themselves solely on grounds of utility? But if Davison was right, as I think he was, that, quote, a “[person] who has been trained to think upon one subject, or for one subject only, will never be a good judge even in that one,” then a liberal education has never been so important as it is today.

So, it is time to deliver the goods. What, specifically, *do* courses in the Intellectual Traditions category contribute to a liberal education here at Illinois Wesleyan, given the world we live in today?

A concern for theory and intellectual history is hardly foreign to courses in Natural Science issues, the Analysis of Values, Literature, Cultural and Historical Change, and other categories of GNED. But something special happens when ideas are foregrounded, juxtaposed, contrasted, scrutinized for their intellectual antecedents, and evaluated for their productivity, elegance, or evidential support—We see human reason at work in the construction of systems of knowledge. We see the wondrous capacity of human reason, fallible and faulty as it is, to organize experience into categories, to organize data into inductive and deductive systems of theory, to elevate exemplary achievements in discovery, interpretation, and explanation into paradigms, to organize theories and paradigms into intellectual traditions, and to

find trends, patterns, and epochs in the relationships between the components of intellectual traditions.

To study intellectual traditions at this level is to relive the ancient Greek experience of wonder—wonder at the mysterious, authorizing force of *Logos*. This, I believe, is what Davison and the defenders of Oxford University wanted us to preserve from the original, Athenian model of liberal education. For us today, the apotheosis of Logos is impossible, even in the ceremonial context of Honors Day. Where the study of intellectual traditions should lead you, dear honors students, when you reach this moment of wonder, is right back into such specialized fields of inquiry as cognitive psychology, semiotics, and axiology, the study of the principles of valuation.

With 50 courses listed in the *GNED Handbook* under category of Intellectual Traditions, liberal education is alive and well on this campus. Collectively, these 50 courses comprise a virtual encyclopedia of cultural capital. Even better, they provide students with the methodologies they need to critically evaluate intellectual traditions and their component paradigms, and perhaps even to attempt the partial unification of one or two of them—something made more likely, rather than less, by the growth of interdisciplinary fields of study and the phenomenon of the double major. Nothing, however, would foster our liberal arts mission more than to enhance the portion of our curriculum devoted to Intellectual Traditions. Students can help by taking second or third courses in the IT category as electives. Faculty who teach in the area could consider proposing a minor in Intellectual Traditions, or at least get together to talk about ways to elevate intellectual discourse on campus. All of us could do a better job of remembering that the root of *liberalis* is *liber*, ‘book.’

I should reiterate the points I wished to make this morning, but I am imposing on the time allotted to next year’s teacher of the year.

So, let me close with a brief story that encapsulates most of what I wanted to say. This is part of the homily I promised at the top of my talk.

Alfred Schutz died prematurely in 1959. Seven years later, in a volume of commemorative essays, his good friend Eric Vogoelin recalled their long intellectual dialogue, which ended only with Schutz's death. "But did it end?," Vogoelin asked. "Nearly four decades of shared thinking and mutual criticism do not merely leave traces in one's work—they also leave a habitual inclination, to ask oneself during this ongoing work, what the other would have had to say about it. One of the finest philosophical thinkers of our times is still the silent partner of my thinking."

That, ultimately, is the aim of the courses taught here in the category of Intellectual Traditions—to give you a number of 'silent partners' to take with you when you leave your alma mater. Thank you.