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Unfortunately, White-Collar Is the Default Setting: Boys and Higher Education

JOHN HENRY SCHLEGEL†

At first, the error seemed random. Though not a member of the wedding party, as an out-of-town visitor I had been invited to the rehearsal dinner and had asked the groom what he wanted to do after his college graduation, some six months hence. His response was, “Oh, I’d like to go someplace where I can snowboard in winter and wakeboard in summer.” A “where” answer to a “what” question, but given the occasion, some lack of mental acuity might be excused. Moreover, four of the six groomsmen he was hanging with were high school or college boarding buddies and these guys were showing a certain amount of embarrassed reticence when it came to getting to know the bridesmaids. This was not a time where intellectual prowess was likely to be on display.

One might have thought that these young men’s embarrassment was a matter of coming to a party inappropriately dressed, except that it was the adults over forty of both sexes who were out of place in their suits and fancy dresses. Almost all of the wedding party was dressed, not fashionably scruffy, or dirty, but in cotton pants and wrinkled shirts or tops. And some of the men wore those funny knit hats that young boarders like to wear, variations on the bright Chilean hats with the flaps that dangle like the ears on a basset hound that once were a statement about solidarity with the campesinos. The embarrassment I saw was surely not about an aspect of dress, but rather was

† This essay is for Steve, who has taught me to be interested in things that I never would have seen, but for his help. Thanks for assistance also goes to Alan, Marc, Tom, David, Mark, Rebecca, Stewart, David, John, Alan, Bert, and many of the backbenchers in my classes over the years. Laura tried to keep me from Grievous Error; David’s experience elsewhere and sensible analysis helped clean out some cobwebs. Catherine and Neil provided substantive comments that unfortunately came too late to be included in an accelerated production schedule.
more closely related to the embarrassment of boys at a junior high dance who knew what they were supposed to do, but had not yet decided whether that was what they wanted to do.

However, the next evening when I examined the line of groomsmen arrayed, squadron-like, in the front of the church waiting for the bridesmaids to walk down the aisle, the groom’s error the night before made more sense. Collars were loose and ties even looser; short hair looked remarkably like the ski hats had come off not five minutes before. I doubt that clothes make the man, but it briefly occurred to me that these were not young men who quite soon would be productive citizens out in the world getting and spending and saving for the purchase of a house. Rather, it was as if some wannabe high school boy band had been pulled out of rehearsal, hung with—there was no question of fitted for—tuxedos and pushed into service as emergency substitutes for a planeload of real groomsmen trapped at some far off airport in a dense and unyielding fog. What seemed to me to be the groom’s mistake was anything but. For the young men at this wedding, by birth tolerably affluent members of the middle class, where they lived, and so what they might do for recreation in their supposed free time, was far more important than what they might do to earn a living.

As I tried to make sense of my experience of these young men, I was struck by the fact that the bridesmaids, admittedly all about two years older than the groomsmen, as was the bride than the groom, were all in perfectly ordinary middle-class jobs—teacher, social worker, paraprofessional or cubicle warrior of one sort or another—all entry level pieces of the world of white-collar work. They may have met their “significant others,” as the bride had met the groom, wakeboarding on some lake, or perhaps snowboarding at some resort, but their recreational activities did not anchor their identity. These women were

1. I suppose that some people will be uncomfortable with this and many of the following casual references to, and implicit understandings of, the markers of social class in America. For me to help such readers would require the transformation of this essay into a piece of sociology, not something I am interested in doing. My only defense for this laziness is that I am a bred in the bone mid-western populist and so for me the fine gradations of social class are as real, but ineffable, as colors of white snow to Native Alaskans.
not going to have the problem of figuring out what they were going to do with their lives when a ruptured ACL or some other physical injury made it impossible to snowboard or downhill mountain bike or play basketball.

Later, I was taken with the unexpected resonance of my observations about the lives of these young men and women with the story told in a very recent book about children of a different social class by my friend, Lois Weis. In this book, Weis writes about a group of now young adults from lower-middle/upper-working-class, union labor families whom she had interviewed fifteen years earlier when these officially designated “honors track” students neared the end of high school. She reinterviewed as many of these individuals as she could in order to learn what had happened in their lives after they had confronted the world of full-time employment for up to fifteen years. Class Reunion reports her findings, which provide a disturbing parallel to my experience at the wedding.

The women that Weis had interviewed for a second time had pushed forward with some variety of post-secondary education, not always immediately or linearly, but almost always eventually. They had created for themselves settled lives, sometimes no more comfortable than their parents’, sometimes significantly more comfortable. The men, on the other hand, could be understood to have divided themselves into two groups. The smaller group had done what their female classmates had done, pursued post-secondary education and fashioned settled, generally white-collar, sometimes even professional, lives. However, the larger group had no more than incidentally pursued further education or other career advancement. Instead, they had worked a series of random jobs, were anything but settled and seemed somehow to have gotten stuck doing the same things that had absorbed them in high school. They had drifted down the ladder of social class at least one rung. Yet, like the groom and his groomsmen, they had come to be identified with their leisure-time activities—hanging out with the guys, drinking, working on cars, watching TV, and playing video games.

Now, I do not wish to suggest that the young men I met at this wedding in the rural Northwest are destined to slide down the social ladder a rung or two from the level at which their parents had fashioned a life. I am not so foolish as to believe that I can predict their future, any more than I
believe that Lois Weis’ young men, so hopeful when nearing high school graduation, could never have climbed that ladder, or at least maintained their parents’ tenuous hold on middle-class membership. Nor do I wish to tell another alcohol-drenched story about failed male identity formation—the working-class kid who never moves beyond the thrill of being the high school quarterback, even while building a respectable life as a mechanic or an oil field wrangler, or the upper-class twit who never gets past the success of rowing crew at Harvard, even when working as an investment banker. Rather, what fascinates and troubles me is the disconnect between the educational future that both groups of young men were served up as they left high school and the world of work that they were simultaneously presented with. There seems to be a certain misfit between the academic enterprise that each group was being funneled into and the future that each could imagine, such that, in the end, each would be identified with its leisure-time activities and not with either jobs or educational attainments.

What then accounts for this misfit between higher education and the needs and interests of young men in two disparate social classes? Start with some educational trends that tend to document the misfit. For over one hundred twenty years America’s high schools have graduated more female than male students. Nevertheless, for most of these years, male college graduates far exceeded female. As the lingering effects of generations of educational gender discrimination began to be attenuated, initially as a result of the efforts of participants in the Women’s Movement and later amplified as its goals became written into law, this historic relationship began to shift. In the mid-Seventies, male high school dropouts began to exceed females and there occurred an enormous shift among the recipients of associate’s degrees from more males to more females. By the mid-Eighties this shift had extended to both bachelor’s and master’s degree recipients. To date the disparity between male and female doctorate and professional degree recipients has narrowed—law school enrollment is just shy of being even—but it has not yet turned in favor of females.

The relative decline in male enrollment in higher education occurred at about the same time as significant changes in the structure of the American economy. I doubt that this is a coincidence. Acting on my suspicion, I shall
continue this inquiry first by looking at the history that shaped the economy served up to male high school graduates of two different social classes, then by discussing the system of higher education that each group confronted, and finally by exploring some cultural and educational factors that might complicate the relationship between an economy and higher education. However, before doing so, it is important to offer two caveats. I have no illusions that my ruminations explain the lives of all young males of these social classes, though for convenience I may seem to speak as if that is the case. Nor do I believe that the cognitive preferences or social roles that I choose to examine are shared by all males or are absent in all females. I simply wish to try to make a bit more understandable an anything but hard-edged aspect of our social surround that I find interesting.

Let me then start with the story of change in the American economy since World War II. In the postwar years, the isolation of our economy from what remained of the economies of Europe and Asia allowed us to forge what Verlyn Klinkenborg called, “The Last Fine Time.” We took the industrial manufacturing economy of the pre-war and wartime worlds, an economy built on the idea that large groups of men (and some women) would mass-produce both the inputs of the manufacturing process—coal, copper, grain, steel, timber, and the like—as well as its final products—autos, cereals, machines, and even the products of a nascent consumer economy such as TVs and hi-fi’s. This economy allowed unionized workers in those industries the ability to obtain relatively high wages, supported their desire for a middle-class standard of living with cheap mortgage credit and an expanded road grid, and provided increased educational opportunities for their children. The combination of high wages and high prices allowed urban, white workers, to feel that they had made it. And then “it” fell apart.

2. In so doing I am attempting to avoid comparisons based on differences between males and females, or men and women, lest I be accused of all sorts of essentialism on the one hand, or on the other of failing to recognize the various racial or ethnic variations about which I cannot know or even the separate impact of sexual orientation as a differentiating factor in my story. I soldier on, concentrating on men, and white men at that, because I am perfectly happy with whatever partial understanding I can wrestle out of my limited perspective. After all, that is the position of each of us.
After the European and Japanese economies recovered from the damage that losing a war had inflicted upon them, and became seriously competitive with our own, we attempted to maintain the postwar economy of fullness. Doing so was difficult. First, the development of containerization had significantly cut effective ocean freight rates, bringing downward pressure on the price of goods, as well as on wages. Second, protecting the domestic market from such pressure, would have required abandonment of a commitment to freer trade that was doubly ideological: it separated us from those evil Communist governments, and was also designed to discourage a renewal of European military rivalry by integrating Western European economies. Third, the growth of the interstate highway system lowered the cost of national transport, which made it easier for firms to cut costs by moving to Sunbelt states where wages were lower and union labor was either actively discouraged or barely tolerated. So, in a dance of two steps back, one step forward, we slowly allowed unionized, mass-production jobs to wither.

The nationwide contraction of the mining, primary metals, heavy manufacturing and consumer goods industries—especially electronics, textiles, and garments—occupied the public press for twenty-five or more years, starting in the late-Sixties and early-Seventies. These years saw the destruction of working lives, and so of family aspirations and communities, in many areas of the country, but most concentratedly in the industrial Northeast and Great Lakes. It was in the early, most bewildering part of these years that Lois Weis' interviewees were born and in the later, more dismal aftermath when they were graduated from high school and sought to create adult lives.

Now, of course, the years that Weis' students first experienced vicariously, as children who clearly felt the hurt experienced by their parents, and then more directly, were not only those of destruction. By the mid-Eighties, when these students were graduated from high school, one could see a new economy being created, an Impatient Economy. Leaner staffed and inventoried manufacturing, financial, consumer and business services, health care delivery and products, especially pharmaceuticals, and higher education were all growth industries. But except for lean manufacturing, primarily located in areas of the country where residents had little history of such industrial
employment, all of these growth industries required educational attainments beyond high school—at least an associate’s degree, more often a college diploma, or even a master’s or professional degree. This is the world that was served up to both Weis’ young men and my groomsmen, a world that neither group of males seems particularly attracted to.

One can argue endlessly over whether the educational qualifications established for the expanding world of white-collar jobs were really necessary or only artificial barriers designed to move the cost of training from employers to employees, or to foster racial discrimination, or to restrict entry to the wealthier segments of the populace. Resolution of such debates is both unnecessary for present purposes, as well as rendered complicated by the modest “dumbing down” of the content of a college education that followed a similar change in primary and secondary education. But, for whatever combination of reasons, post-secondary education was required of a larger segment of the populace than ever before and its lack almost guaranteed that enjoyment of a middle-class lifestyle was impossible, at least without creating a two-wage-earner family, and often even for such a family.

This story of a change in economic institutions needs to be matched with that of a change in the role of our institutions of higher education. Eighteenth Century colleges largely prepared upper-class individuals, most often second sons, for the ministry. In the Nineteenth Century, the social class of college students gradually expanded to include members of the upper-middle and even middle class once the growth of public high schools meant that more individuals were prepared for further study. Schools of agriculture, education, engineering, and mines, often founded in the last third of the century with Morrill Act monies, seem to have been designed for the more vocational education that middle-class families were thought to demand. The more general arts and sciences education that centered most campuses seems to have been directed toward the upper-middle and upper-class students, though it should be remembered that even at the end of the century it was not unusual for such students to skip part or all of college, as it offered a curriculum that still had the trappings of the classical education provided for future
At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, earning a high school diploma still was not a common occurrence for American adolescents. Indeed, such an accomplishment was so tied to membership in the middle and upper-middle class that three out of four high school graduates entered college, a percentage never since reached, though only one in four of them, mostly male, completed a degree. However, as compulsory school attendance laws extended mandatory attendance into the early years of high school, graduation rates increased more than college matriculation rates. For many of the students who completed high school, part of the attraction was the existence of serious vocational training—various shop programs for boys and secretarial services for girls.

After World War II, the GI Bill increased college enrollment, though by no means as extensively as memory would have it. Then, the appearance of the Baby Boom generation first increased the size of primary and secondary education in suburban areas, and thereafter in the colleges. Only at this time does the rate of high school graduates seeking post-secondary education begin to increase toward the sixty plus percent that is common today. Simultaneously, the translation of unionized factory workers into something approximating middle-class status reduced the support for vocational education at the same time that the launch of the Russian satellite, Sputnik, and so the birth of the great “missile gap,” led to development of honors tracks that pushed more students toward relatively elite college education. The education of students not “suited” for that track was diluted, both in content, with an increased emphasis on skills for living rather than for work, and in difficulty. As throughput was increased, vocational education migrated into the junior, now called, community, colleges and the for-profit “technical institutes.” Then, rather soon, secretarial jobs disappeared as computers began to reduce clerical and typing burdens, and factory jobs as well, but not the drive of newly middle-class families to see their children go to college, the way that seemed to guarantee continued middle-class status.

College was an odd bargain for the children of unionized factory labor. Indeed, by the Eighties it was an odd bargain for the children of white-collar workers as
well,³ unaccountably considered the traditional occupants of college classes. During the first half of the Twentieth Century, when a majority of college students were either upper or upper-middle class, how one did in college did not matter much. These were the years of the Gentleman's C, at least in places other than City College. Not working very hard was no big deal. Dad's connections would eventually lead to a job. And it was just as well, for the curriculum in the arts and sciences prepared one mostly for participation in upper- or upper-middle-class society. After all, it still covered a list of subjects that had not changed in several generations, except for the addition of a bit of a mostly generalized social science. So, this curriculum was like the study of Greek at Oxford, not very useful, even for a job in the British Civil Service, an entity that, even in the Forties, was serenely devoted to merit described as "where you went to school." Higher education was still a mark of social distinction and important as such.

For middle-class boys, agriculture, engineering, or (eventually) commerce might provide an alternative, just as state normal schools provided an alternative for middle-class girls who wanted to be teachers, but such activities were clearly a déclassé sideline to the main event for upper- and upper-middle-class students—high jinks and acceptable grades. None of these students were called slackers, but the attitude toward education was quite similar. Doing well was fine, but only if one did not have to work very hard to do so.

On the other side of World War II, college became a more serious enterprise. It didn't happen all at once; evidence, if any is needed, is the late-Sixties and early-Seventies in colleges around the country. That was an extended period of high jinks, though admittedly less tied to fraternity life than would have been the case before the War. But by the early-Eighties, the end of the Great Inflation that gripped this country for almost fifteen years,

³. Some readers may find it odd that I make no attempt to differentiate the reaction of postwar students to college by generational labels—Bobby Soxers, Boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials, etc. While for certain purposes such distinctions make sense, when dealing with higher education and the economy they do not. There is only one relevant distinction: whether one came of age before or after the Associationalist Economy started to turn into the Impatient Economy, roughly the mid-Seventies.
the change was clear. Gaining or maintaining middle-class status depended on doing well enough in a college that those employers who offered jobs, as students today say, "with benefits," would look favorably at a resume. The curriculum had not changed much from that offered before World War II. Oh yes, there were new majors—criminal justice, women's studies, various ethnic studies—and some older ones were newly invigorated—communications/journalism is the most obvious example—but the core of the disciplines remained untouched. Fewer students may have cared for what the departments were offering, but protecting one's grade point average became a major occupation for college students in a way that it had not been before. Film titles are instructive. *Animal House,* that great send-up of college in the Sixties, turned into *Reality Bites,* a world of "have a degree and nowhere I'd ever want to go."

In the disagreement, fight is too strong a word, between parents, wanting both a degree and a job for their tuition dollar, and the universities, wanting to be insulated from parental pressure, it would seem that both had a strong argument. Large positive numbers of dollars were being asked from parents for the hope of establishing a child's class status, proportionately larger than even twenty years before, especially at public schools where the state contribution toward tuition has decreased dramatically over the past twenty years. More than a lick and a promise directed toward delivering employment related skills was surely not too much to ask.

At the same time, the universities were not foolish in suggesting that an arts and sciences education was the best possible hedge against the likelihood that any package of skills delivered upon graduation would turn out to be either the wrong one or wildly outmoded within ten years. Indeed, it was not clear that any skills, other than the ability to read and write, together with the ability to dress vaguely appropriately and be polite, were necessary for most entry-level white-collar jobs. And the drive to keep costs low, grade points high and grader discretion at a minimum led to the minimal achievement by college grads in reading and writing that employers constantly complained about.

For any student who understood the positions of both parents and universities, there were many reasons to object to attending a four-year college. Such institutions, even more than comprehensive universities, needed to guarantee
degree completion, but were left with students in the middle of the distribution of the high school class. A rigorous, weed-out-the-weak approach to education was not likely to attract parents' tuition dollars. And in any case, for a two-wage-earner, middle-class family barely hanging on, the simple cost of tuition, not to mention room and board, meant that most students needed part-time employment to make ends meet. In such circumstances, it would have been foolish for schools to believe that they could target a program's difficulty based on the assumption that nominally full-time students were really full-time students. A downshifting in the rigor of the curriculum was inevitable.

The two-year schools faced a similar set of problems. What might be offered? Job training. Remedial reading and writing could be tied to student-financed, on-the-job training in the various branches of health care (humans and other animals), as well as the various clerical jobs. That might take care of a certain amount of assumedly female preferences. But what of the male students, the ones who when I went to high school were euphemistically referred to as "liking to work with their hands?" Well, there were jobs in the building trades, though union pressure, continuous for over a hundred years, kept such programs from expanding. Other available programs were really quite technical, having to do with computer systems, printing and chemical technologies, computer-aided design, and the like. None of them were even vaguely similar to the assembly line work that had once supported the working class. The class work was pretty much like that in high school and even the lab-like work, quite tedious. Why would such education be attractive to the male students, however "bright," who had not found high school to their liking?

Exploration of the range of cultural and educational factors that tend to complicate the relationship between the Impatient Economy and higher education lends itself less to a narrative structure than to a topical one. However, before switching structure, it is important to bring to mind the ways that Weis' young men and my almost college graduates differentially experienced the possibility of post-secondary education. Social class clearly mattered. College worked fine for those of Weis' males for whom it could provide a way out of an existing social class position but seems to have had little impact on my boarders for whom it was but a marker of continued membership in the various
parts of the middle class. And it held faint attraction for those of Weis' males who, though faced with the disappearance of the reasonably well-paying, union labor, factory jobs that their parents had had, experienced the prospect of leaving their social class position as somehow not imaginable or at least for whom leaving that position via further schooling was not psychologically, or educationally possible. Thus, it would seem that the education demanded for success in the Impatient Economy was palatable to a particular sub-set of those male individuals for whom it is claimed to be a benefit as a shift in that economy has changed higher education—outside of the higher vocational school—from being a mark of social class, and so of education for participation in that class, to being a prerequisite for entry into a social class defined, as always, by a combination of income and kind of work.

I wish to start my exploration of the factors that tend to complicate the relationship between higher education and the Impatient Economy with the possibility that the differential attractiveness of higher education might be related to preferences for, and so styles of, cognition. There is something distinctive to the only barely harnessed, seemingly pointless physicality that appears quite young in some boys, such as might be captured by lines written about my son at four or five:

What is it about a slatted wall
That makes you run full-tilt, quick climb,
Jump down and wander away until
Another obstacle catches your eye?

Such behavior might be indicative of a preference for what psychologists call kinesthetic, as opposed to auditory or visual, memory, a preference for learning by doing.

There is no obvious reason that the relationship between physicality and cognition in some boys should persist into late adolescence. And it would be a serious mistake not to italicize "some." Other boys are quite at home with other forms of learning, and so with degrees of abstraction. Clearly, there is a continuum here. A notable intermediate point is occupied by those boys who are more comfortable with school projects that require doing in a more metaphorical sense, not repairing a car but making an argument or producing an industry analysis. An amusing example of this continuum is implied by varying degrees
with which successful male academics of a certain age were willing/able to switch from handwriting and secretarial assistance to keyboarding alone. For some, myself included, handwriting was just so much easier and so the shift was postponed as long as possible. Still, there is reason to believe that a preference for physically-based cognition does persist, that for a large percentage of boys who “like to work with their hands,” such a way of learning is somehow easier.

It would be a mistake to infer a lack of cognitive skills on the part of boys for whom this preference persists. As Mike Rose shows in his wonderful book, *The Mind at Work*, whether the job be that of a carpenter, electrician, hairdresser, plumber, waitress, or welder, significant cognitive skills are essential to the work and an aesthetic sense as well. These cognitive skills are rooted in physicality, in doing. They are Deweyite skills, Montessori even, not the skills of rote memory and abstraction—mathematical, literary, or rhetorical—that are the centerpiece of higher education. This tie of cognition to physical activity may be the foundation of the skills that inspired the late-Nineteenth Century schools of engineering and agriculture, but even there that tie has been lost.

Indeed, to make an inference of cognitive deficiency from a preference for learning by doing would be to repeat a mistake that made for the deadening effect of Taylorite, mass production, industrial labor. Having assumed that the hordes of immigrants entering industry at the end of the Nineteenth Century were stupid because they were poor and could not speak English, and worse, fearing that whenever such folk spoke together in their unintelligibly foreign tongue they were plotting against their betters, a system of manufacturing was developed for the quintessentially stupid human: tighten this bolt and this bolt only, over and over. None of this routine tapped into physically centered cognitive intelligence. Not surprisingly, individuals with such an intellectual base experienced their work as alienating. They still do.4

The preference of some boys for cognition rooted in physicality fits poorly with the content of higher education

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4. Was it not the managers who were stupid, given their inability to learn a foreign language even rudimentarily as their employees were able to do?
today, based as it is on listening to, and reading about, a broad range of theory and the doing of nothing more than an occasional problem set or lab assignment. And so its lack of appeal to such individuals is easily understood. However, it would be a mistake to believe that the content of college education has been designed with the intent to exclude these boys.

Though such exclusion is implicit in college education in America as early as the Seventeenth Century, the exclusion was not significant before the great expansion of education in the Sixties and Seventies. In these years post-secondary education was cheap. A gamble on its value, especially a small gamble on the value of what is now known as an associate’s degree, might have seemed to have been worth it. However, today, the continuing shift away from state financing of such education to tuition-driven, debt-financed education surely has altered that seeming value. So, rather than intending to exclude, higher education simply has not acted to include those boys whose cognition is strongly based in physicality, unfortunately at a time when the alternative of working in industrial manufacturing has become an increasingly implausible alternative. Perhaps it is too much to suggest that institutions of higher education should strive to do otherwise; perhaps not.

While some might assume that a cognitive preference for physically based learning would be closely related to social class, it is important to remember that even at the turn of the century, the more academic parts of college were not particularly attractive to male students of the upper and upper-middle classes. Some of course loved it. They became teachers of one kind or another or, after the office closed, dinner was served, and the kids were put to bed, filled the evening hours with serious reading. For the rest, magazines, hobbies, and community activities filled the hours before bed. Before graduation, it seems that similar distractions filled the hours not absolutely necessary for study and not occupied by the kind of bullshitting with the guys that marriage and a family generally ended. So, the problem that I first perceived among boarders in the Northwest and that Lois Weis identified in the male children of the unionized middle class is not new. It is just worse than ever. For some reason, the arts and sciences
core of a college education has not fit many American males for a long time.\(^5\)

And why should it? It is important to remember that academics are a really strange breed, a breed apart. The bookstores are full of books. Readers abound in our society. But academics disdain most available books. They are trade books, we say, not real books. For almost all people but us, writing is a utilitarian matter, at least if writing for tenure is not seen as a utilitarian venture. Ours is a hierarchy where teaching is a second-class activity, though increasingly, pleasing students is an obligation of tenure and maybe some day—God forbid!—a condition of continuing appointment thereafter. We tell the students what we believe that they should know about a world that we know of mostly by rumor or mathematics. We thus offer a cultural education that is most closely tied to a culture that our students are quite unlikely to experience, while we are disdainful of the culture that they are most likely to experience. We academics do purport to decode mass culture for the benefit of our students. Still, while that culture is not transparent and may need decoding, helping people understand the culture they live in is not the same thing as our efforts in critiquing, much less deconstructing, it.

And yet, in support of the academic enterprise, it needs to be recognized that the diffident attitude of some late adolescent upper-, upper-middle- and now middle-class males toward education, that seems to have been a constant for a long time, also extends across varying academic aspirations. A wise-ass t-shirt that my son has reads, "I'm like a superhero with no powers or motivation," this from a person newly entered into a Ph.D. program in an abstruse field, music history, where he knows he will find out that few, if any, of his teachers care much about opening up the vast world of American music—classical, jazz, pop, and what have you—to college students, his passion. The

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5. Undergraduate faculty who question this observation ought to pay attention to the selection bias in their experience. The students referred to do not attend office hours or come up to ask questions after class. They do not turn up in seminars, unless forced to do so by distribution requirements. And when they choose to attend, they sit sullenly surfing the net on their laptops in the back of the classroom, a location that teachers train themselves to pretend does not exist.
ambivalence here is overwhelming. How could it be otherwise in undertaking an endeavor where he will have to show proficiency in a foreign language, even though his interest is not about music written by people who speak a foreign language (after all we are a cultural hegemon) on the off chance that some European scholar will know enough about this country's culture to have something interesting to say about its music.

So, if an academic brat could be this ambivalent about higher education—and in his ambivalence my son is anything but alone among such brats—seeking the training necessary for employment but dubious of this or any other vocation, any commitment to be his work, then what can Lois Weis' children of the industrial middle-class make of the whole enterprise? As they might see it, higher education has been designed for an unimaginably other social class, filled with students whose very existence, whose choice to ape the working-class world of jeans, t-shirts, and rumpled overshirts with expensive substitutes for the real thing while engaging in sports opportunities that come with fifty dollar lift tickets, and eight hundred dollar boots or multi-thousand dollar powerboats, screams, "These are not my people and I can't possibly catch up, even if I want to." And by offering a curriculum that, on the one hand is unrelated to any work as such students know or can imagine, and on the other trains for jobs that are neither intrinsically interesting to boys—remember that the boy jobs of childhood are policeman, fireman, heavy equipment driver, and garbage man; not salesman or middle-management, cubicle warrior—nor well-paying enough to allow uninterest to be overwhelmed, higher education can hardly be a welcome beacon.

Add to the social distance derived from class, the impediments to college attendance that are more narrowly economic and the resulting combination is singularly unattractive. Post-secondary education can be found for someone whose cognition is largely physically based. Schools specializing in the fine and applied arts and crafts are obvious examples, but there are also programs that emphasize "doing" in a more metaphorical sense—making arguments, preparing reports, writing advertising or other media copy, engaging in outdoor education. However, such schools are not cheap and vaguely middle-class jobs follow only for those who do very well, and often not even for
them. There is also the possibility of succumbing to parental pressure and struggling to finish near the bottom of a college class while enrolled in a program in communication or criminal justice or travel and leisure. Still, it takes a good deal of parental indulgence and significant parental financial resources to undertake either route through higher education. Take away the financial support of the kind that parents routinely provide for children of the upper-middle class and these alternatives become as implausible, as less-fancy alternatives seem to have been for the larger portion of Weis’ boys. Indeed, the amazing thing about her data is that any of her male interviewees earned even an associate’s degree.

Next, set aside cognitive preferences and the intrinsic interest of higher education, as well as their ugly interaction with parental economic resources, and instead consider one of the social roles common to late adolescents. Weis’ young men and my boarders might be called “slackers.” Though some people who use that word see it as meaning “lazy,” the common epithet, “lazy slacker,” suggests that lazy may be only half of it. Slacker denotes someone who is not working up to potential but not necessarily someone who is not working. Slacker also denotes a male human.6 Slacker is also a term of approbation. In some circles it is an achievement to do well enough to more than get by without much effort, even an art form that, like Bartleby’s famous, “I would prefer not,” proclaims both ability and choice. The slacker could do better, but does not wish to.

Consider the three guys in the record shop in the movie High Fidelity. All three—Rob, Dick, and Barry—could be said to be getting by at less than their potential, harboring dreams that they were doing little to move forward, but no one could say that they didn’t know anything. Granted, their knowledge was lightweight and inconsequential, but that knowledge cannot be said to have come from anything but long, probably hard, study. It is not so much that these individuals had taken to heart Timothy Leary’s mantra,

6. How obvious is this? Well, women get better grades in high school, college, and law school. However, they do slightly poorer on their SATs and LSATs. A plausible lesson from this fact is that when it is crunch time, the boys work. Having placed well, they slack off, as is evidenced by their taking longer to complete a degree program.
“Turn on, tune in, and drop out,” though, of course, I suspect there was some of that, rather that they had occupied themselves in ways that seemed to ignore the implicit parental demand, “Make something of yourself!” They were comfortable with the modest income that their knowledge made possible: selling shards of culture to similarly marginal individuals who themselves earned a modest living by trading on their own, different, but equally arcane, knowledge.

It is far too easy to say that all three are boys, lost boys, who like Peter Pan refuse to grow up. Such a diagnosis only poses the question about what it is to be a man. Each was anything but a grownup, as such is conventionally defined. But, in no sense did any of them wish to contest what it was to be a man in their culture. Each had found a place on the road to manhood and stopped. And so the question can better be restated, “Why stop?” Why choose to more than get by, but not to achieve that middle-class, white-collar success that college education promises to deliver?

Here, one might turn to the discourse of alienation. After “Dilbert” and Office Space no one can possibly deny that the cubicle existence that faces many graduates of higher education can be grotesquely dehumanizing. And the jobs of many professionals—lawyers, doctors, even veterinarians—are only better because of the size of the paycheck; for some—teachers and nurses come to mind—there is not even that reward. But, I shall avoid the contemporary discourse of alienation. First, others have gone there before, most recently my colleague, Bert Westbrook, and like he, have done far better with that topic than I could ever do. And second, outside of the narrow Marxist definition of alienation, the concept turns too much on the image of the jolly blacksmith, the hearty baker, and the diligent cobbler in some mythic time past, an image that I have a hard time taking seriously. Labor may always have been alienating for some large portion of the population, even those engaged in subsistence farming, though specific experiences of it probably differ according to conditions at a given time and place.

At the same time, one cannot lay all of the blame on the colleges without asking more directly about the students who might have done better, but chose otherwise, the classic slackers. Understanding such behavior is not easy, but one aspect of the matter seems to be this. For whatever
reason, late- and post-adolescent males seem to have a very long time horizon. For them, the future is deferrable, and deferral seems easy. White-collar jobs, while hardly attractive, are really quite numerous; if one is passed on, another will soon appear. And light-lifting jobs—retail sales or restaurants or warehouses—are even more numerous, though lower paying. But even these lower paying jobs provide enough income for someone of modest tastes and desires to defer the future for quite a while, and instead, enjoy the present.

Such deferral is deep in our culture. Angie’s question, “What are you going to do tonight, Marty?” and the butcher’s answer, “Oh, I don’t know. What are you going to do?” is a working-class litany from the Fifties, not a slacker dialog from the Nineties, though it easily could have been. About twenty years later, it is Tony Manero, a paint store employee in Brooklyn’s Bay Ridge neighborhood, whose life parallels Marty’s. And twenty years after that, comes Will Hunting working as a janitor in a math department that he could intellectually dominate.

Again, I must insist; deferral should not be confused with perpetual Peter Pan—“I won’t grow up!” Peter expressed a certain excitement and joy in his play, an inventiveness too, in his games. Today’s slacker, as well as the Marty or Tony or Rob, Dick, and Barry from varying times before, seem to be anything but joyful. Activities pursued during or after work seem to be dogged, resigned ways of filling time that is being marked, an adulthood that is being deferred.

Curiously, the long horizon that deferral implies is in some tension with the games that today’s boys play, or may eventually play, or always watch. Theirs is a world of win or lose, right now, today! At most there is a long season, implying another chance to recover from a loss. Basketball at twenty, softball at thirty, tennis at forty, golf at fifty, bocce at sixty, all are exercises in competitive outcomes today, followed with camaraderie among the players at a local dive, a sports bar, in the shade, at the club, on a bench. The pattern of more distanced spectator activity—baseball in summer, football in fall, basketball in winter, and NASCAR all year-round—is much the same. This American version of adult memories of “the playing fields of Eton” suggests a rhythmic echo to my young son’s bursts of
energy—the intensity of the game and the horizon of a rather short season.

Clean wins and losses, even over a long season, are not what higher education offers. Its rhythm is more like that of the swimmer or biker or skier or runner, for whom there may be a local race season, but no real match-ups. These are not the sports of American boys. True, in education there may be cumulative winners, but the season is interminably long: twelve years, then four for college, followed by two for an M.B.A., three for a J.D., four for an M.D. plus endless years of further training, or five or six for a Ph.D. plus who knows how many years before tenure is acquired. And then what is the season for a job in the Impatient Economy, a world where there are damn few clean wins, but many possible messy losses, as one’s resume lengthens with experience gained? It is not hard to see that a dislike for the terms of both games, a distaste for their separate enterprises, could combine at any point to slide into extended deferral.7

“Deferred for what?” is, of course, the question. Well, in prototypically male culture for three things, I suppose: Marriage, kids, and a real job, one that provides a bit of dignity. The first two were what Marty was marking time for; after all, the movie known by his name is really a love story. The end of his deferral was a woman, Clara, someone important enough to demand that it stop. For Tony, dancing, both as an activity and a metaphor, on Saturday night led to a girl, Stephanie, and then to the recognition that life with the guys was going nowhere and so to physical escape across the East River to Manhattan.8 Will followed Skylar to the West coast in a beat up car. Rob went back to Laura in an actual and metaphorical downpour and Dick found Annaugh, as awkward a soul as he, at the sales counter. It is all very predictable, except for Barry’s blossoming as a white boy covering an old Motown hit. The

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7. Bert Westbrook, more of an athlete than I ever was, or will be, suggested the observations in this and the previous paragraph.

8. It is important to note that in the years between Marty and Saturday Night Fever it takes a night on the town in which sex turns into a surprisingly graphic rape and high jinks turns into a fatal accident/suicide from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, to get Tony to recognize that the time for deferral has past. For Marty, all it took was the prospect of another empty night with his buddies in the neighborhood watering hole.
story of Troy and Lelania in *Reality Bites* is only a modest variation on this plot structure, appropriate to two college graduates. This time it is Lelania who finds that life as the assistant to a television personality sucks and so is drawn to her housemate Troy, each finding solace in the other, escaping from a world that is alien to the dreams spawned by their differing academic adventures.⁹

Despite the marriage and kids that the love story form implies in the forever after, today there is a real problem with the intersection of these two deferrals and the third—the dignity that a real job provides. One needs to remember that, as one of my male students determinedly brought to my attention, in a very real sense, men aren’t really good for much of anything, at least as a white middle-class variety of male culture could well see it. Find a mate, father children like the male lion that, the zoologists say, copulates a lot to make up for low sperm count, and the job is done. In a two-wage-earner family, it is easy, however wrong-headed, to see working to support those children as a role that is not particularly important. Someone else could do it.

The sense that someone else could do it is reinforced by the jobs that the Impatient Economy serves up these days. For work to be meaningful, it would seem that it needs to be imbued with a certain dignity. The lovely lady who cleans my teeth articulated this need when, near the end of a long day, she commented, “I really do not know why I still do this job, but I tell myself that I help keep people’s teeth healthy and in their head.” In the Nineteenth and early-early-Twentieth Centuries wonderful art celebrated the dignity of work. Most of this art focused on growing or making things, the activities of agricultural or industrial economies. Making an engine, even repairing or tuning one, has a certain dignity; stocking shelves in an auto parts store or working the checkout counter is something else.

⁹. All of these stories are as told by the male protagonist, as implicitly is my wedding story. Laura urged that there is a suppressed question here. The popular feminist culture slogan captures that question when observing, “A woman needs a man, like a fish needs a bicycle.” Just why would these young women put up with these young men? The answer is not obvious, though it is at least possible that they are close enough to the available norm that such is the best that can be done within the social/biological imperative implied by these womens’ search. Beyond this crude hypothesis is a project for someone else.
Sewing garments is a much different, more dignified occupation than folding them just right in order to make an attractive display at The Gap. And what of managing the people who process credit card payments or even write advertising copy, as did Tom Rath, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Lots of jobs in the Impatient Economy, surely a majority, are significantly impaired, dignity-wise and yet a dumbfoundingly large amount that provide a decent income require at least part of a college education.

At this juncture it must again be remembered that higher education is not intrinsically interesting to most humans. One needs some reason to survive its dreariness. Professional jobs provide that something, or at least its illusion—the dignity that is associated with the idea of helping someone, originally by providing comfort during the vicissitudes of life, latterly in ameliorating the unpleasantnesses that make up life in a bureaucratic universe or in a changing body. If acquiring such dignity is not a plausible endpoint of an education, why start it? Once started, why complete it? Once completed, why not measure life by the recreational pursuits that accompany the monetary rewards education makes possible? Life's a bitch; *vamonos a la playa*!

And so in a real sense, my young groom and his friends and the larger part of Weis' children of the white lower-middle/upper-working class, respond in pretty much the same way to the education served up as part of the contemporary Impatient Economy. If college is acceptably easy to undertake, if being a slacker is a plausible version of coolness, then do it, but don’t take the education very seriously as anything other than a means to awesome snow or a bodacious boat. If college is not accessible, well then, hang out with your buds, toss back a few beers, maybe ingest the locally fashionable illegal substances, race some cars, and dream of being the modern version of the cowboy—the interstate trucker, a job that is mostly long hours on a tight schedule eating bad food, but at least has the dignity of getting stuff to people on time, just as being on the trail once had the dignity of getting the cows to market. After all, only men have the luxury of long deferrals and so of being romantics about the future. Raising kids alone, as lionesses do, is just hard work, that and long hours and the occasional, always dog-tired feeling of a job well done.
What then is one to conclude about boys and higher education? My studied use of, and so implicit contrast between, “boys” and “young men” hopefully suggests that it would be wrong both to, and not to, identify boys with a particular type of cognition, seen as somehow limiting formal educational potential, just as it would be wrong both to, and not to, identify “young men” with the settled-out middle-class existence that follows from completion of some form of post-secondary education. College is both a barrier to be surmounted before the attainment of an at least middle-class existence and the entrée into a less than wholly attractive working life. In the words of the movie title, this reality bites. And so, those individuals with a socially “male” perspective on the world find that endless deferral, remaining a “boy” by identifying themselves not with their job, but with their leisure-time activities, is preferable to becoming a “young man.”

At least in movie fantasy, it is marriage and a family that forces making the decision avoided by the choice of deferral—getting a “real” job and so “growing up.” What really occasions this transition from boy to young man probably mirrors the movie fantasy, but also encompasses numerous other things. However, both the shape of the Impatient Economy and the nature of college education are impediments to making any such a transition. Perhaps similar impediments have always been in place. I wouldn’t know, having gone straight from law school into marriage and soon thereafter into a real job, though it took a while to gather the courage to have any kids. But my choice was made in another country: and besides that economy is dead. In the different country that America has become over the past forty years, only a fool would believe that changing either the economy or higher education would be an easy task. Only a heartless fool would not care.
Bibliographic Note

Six books were helpful in writing this piece: THOMAS HINE, THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN TEENAGER (1999); JOSEPH F. KETT, RITES OF PASSAGE: ADOLESCENCE IN AMERICA 1970 TO THE PRESENT (1977); GRACE PALLADINO, TEENAGERS: AN AMERICAN HISTORY (1996); MIKE ROSE, THE MIND AT WORK: VALUING THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE AMERICAN WORKER (2004); CHRISTINE HOFF SOMMERS, THE WAR AGAINST BOYS (2000); and LOIS WEIS, CLASS REUNION (2004). Those interested in my understanding of the American Economy in the Twentieth Century will need to wait for the publication of Law and Economic Change in the Short Twentieth Century, in 3 THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF LAW IN AMERICA (C. Tomlins & M. Grossberg eds., forthcoming 2006). The movies referred to are ANIMAL HOUSE (Universal Pictures 1978); GOOD WILL HUNTING (Miramax Films 1997); HIGH FIDELITY (Touchstone Pictures 2000); THE MAN IN THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. 1956); MARTY (Hecht-Lancaster Productions 1955); OFFICE SPACE (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment 1999); REALITY BITES (Universal Studios, Inc. 1994); and SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER (Paramount Pictures 1977). Scott Adams' Dilbert is a comic strip, available at http://www.dilbert.com. Extra Credit will be given for finding the unacknowledged, mangled quotation from CHRISTOPHER MARLOW, THE JEW OF MALTA (1592).