

Small Is the Gate

By Keya Chanda-Rastogi

Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life. The poignant, simple phrase originates from the Bible (Matthew 7:14). It teaches that fulfillment is attained through self-discipline and effort. Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his essay “Acting French,” gives a new interpretation of this quote. He writes, in reference to the systemic racism in the United States, “The citizen is lost in the labyrinth constructed by his country, when in fact straight is the gate and narrow must always be the way” (Coates). Coates argues that the institutions, bureaucracies, and laws of the United States systematically constrain Black Americans in a “labyrinth” that is navigable primarily through access to education. Knowledge, and the pursuit of it, is the straight gate and narrow way. Coates illustrates this through his own struggles with education at Middlebury College, where he studies French. He quickly realizes the structures that once shackled African Americans in the US now oppress them not only overtly, but also through economic, social, and cultural mechanisms. He is unequipped with the resources to thrive in an academic setting and cites the cause as the lack of social and cultural capital held by minorities. Social capital is the resources we derived from our network of relationships, and cultural capital consists of

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inherited skills “that can be translated into . . . value” (Greenwood-Hau 3–4). Coates is forced to live in a system that neither validates nor rewards his social and cultural capital, and consequently he must fight harder to overcome the inequalities he was born into. In “Acting French,” Coates begins to dissect how institutional preference for certain types of social and cultural capital not only creates barriers to opportunity but also robs entire demographics of their humanity by devaluing their norms and upbringing. His narrative therefore raises an important question about the role institutions play in stratifying inequality and gatekeeping full participation in social and civic life. The institutional reinforcement of dominant forms of social and cultural capital ultimately creates a professional and academic environment in which marginalized groups struggle to be recognized not just as competent, but as *human*.

The type, extent, and strength of social and cultural capital tend to differ between different populations as a result of centuries of segregation and ongoing compounding inequality. Coates feels this division sharply at Middlebury. He is alienated by the realization that his more affluent peers have something over him “and that something [is] culture.” It is a culture that, while novel to him, is deeply embedded in the middle and upper class. This is a culture “of scholastic achievement” that has reinforced itself over the nation’s history (Coates). High-achieving parents raise high-achieving children who grow up alongside other high-achieving students and thus keep scholastic culture largely insular. Coates views these networks as “fences” that are patrolled by the white and wealthy, who guard their communities from anyone dissimilar. Coates’ claims are supported by an abundance of scholarly research in the field of sociology and political science. For

instance, Dr. Joe Greenwood-Hau, a lecturer of political science and international studies at the University of Glasgow, asserts that “our stocks of . . . social and cultural capital embody key components of structural privilege” (100). According to Greenwood-Hau, these forms of capital are just as influential as economic capital in determining who has the resources to participate in social and professional contexts. Greenwood-Hau elaborates on Coates’ concept of “fences” as inherent to human communities, stating that social networks are highly homogeneous. He finds that, on average, two-thirds of people’s friends share their gender and religion, and four-fifths share their ethnicity (Greenwood-Hau 112, 114). Therefore, social networks tend to reflect one’s own demographics. The people (and their resources) that individuals rely on for support are often limited to resources that mirror their own experiences and identities. It follows, then, that the white middle and upper class have disproportionately greater social and cultural capital than their lower-income counterparts. If a member of the upper class experiences financial hardship, they are more likely to find adequate amounts of support in their social network. If a student in the upper class is struggling in school, that student is more likely to have family or friends who can teach them. This is how social and cultural capital compounds and inevitably becomes “positively related” to economic capital (Greenwood-Hau 133). Together, Coates and Greenwood-Hau illustrate that social and cultural capital is not only something one *has*, but something one is born with and is often constrained by for their whole life. With this foundation established, the role academic and professional institutions play in perpetuating inequality through race- and class-based preferences can be examined.

The institutional reinforcement of unequal social and cultural capital begins in schooling and follows students

throughout their academic careers. Annette Lareau, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted a twenty-year longitudinal study recording the educational experiences of students across income levels. Lareau found that middle-class students were more familiar with “the rules of the game,” such as “how to drop a class” or “what grades are necessary for admission to medical school” (2). This built-in knowledge, produced by accumulated social and cultural capital, allows middle-class students to earn higher grades and pursue more direct paths to success. Lareau also found that middle-class students exhibit a stronger “sense of entitlement” and are more likely to request tutoring, extensions, and institutional support than working-class students (2). When working-class students do seek assistance, they often “[fail] to gain accommodations” (Lareau 2). Knowledge not only of how academic institutions work, but also how to use them to one’s advantage, is almost esoteric in the way it is reserved for students of higher incomes. Without this knowledge, working-class students achieve less and are deterred from engaging with academic institutions. Instead of attempting to bridge this gap, institutions continue to reward the norms embedded within white, middle-class students’ social and cultural capital. The institutional preference for more affluent forms of social and cultural capital becomes clearer when a distinction between the privileged poor and the doubly disadvantaged is made. Anthony Abraham Jack, a professor of higher education leadership at Boston University, defines the privileged poor as students from low-income backgrounds who attend elite secondary schools. He defines the doubly disadvantaged as students who remain in under-resourced local schools (Jack 1). Jack finds that the privileged poor are much more likely to succeed in academic institutions because they are equipped

with the dominant “cultural competencies” that are preferred by colleges (Jack 2). His findings support the notion that institutions are looking for some “correct” form of social and cultural capital, one that is associated with the white middle and upper class. Jack points to external research that identifies that “teachers respond more positively to middle-class interactional styles” and prioritize students who “adopt” such styles (2). Academic institutions thus not only generate inequity in social and cultural capital but actively reinforce it by rewarding dominant forms. In doing so, they facilitate a compounding cycle that limits social mobility and reproduces inherited disadvantage. Working-class, disadvantaged students, then, are taught that their norms and behaviors are unequal and that the environments in which they were raised failed to provide for them. The foundations of their culture, their community, and their sense of belonging are shaken, and this is exactly how institutional preferences serve not only to minimize opportunity but also to dehumanize marginalized groups.

This cycle is exacerbated in higher education and employment. This is visible even during the college admission process. Students in the top 1% of the income distribution are twice as likely to attend a prestigious university, even when compared to lower-income students with similar test scores (Guzman et al. 202). Laura Guzman, a researcher in social and personality psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, theorizes that admissions officers prioritize applicants who signal high social and cultural capital. Guzman conducts two studies that simulate the admission process and finds that when applicants signal “tastes and preferences . . . that are typical of . . . lower class individuals,” they are viewed as less competent (204). The association between income and

competence blatantly ostracizes the working class and creates purposeful, dehumanizing barriers to opportunity. Guzman also asserts that elite institutions “prioritize cultural fit or social alignment over academic promise” (212). Once again, academic institutions favor indicators of the dominant social and cultural capital, largely because of its association with the white, wealthy class. This preference continues into employment, when social capital “delivers the connections that result in” jobs and cultural capital acts “as a resource that is used to qualify people to participate” in professional settings (Greenwood-Hau 118, 124). The system of hierarchical social and cultural capital gatekeeps marginalized people from elite institutions, essentially serving as the “fences” identified by Coates. It also signals that the cultures not associated with the white, wealthy norms are undeserving and less-than, effectively stripping them of their worth.

Taken collectively, this research clarifies Coates’ metaphor of the labyrinth. When Coates describes the citizen as “lost” and his country as his jailor, he means that the United States has constructed a system of institutions that entraps the working class and marginalized groups. The labyrinth cannot be navigated without the proper knowledge and connections—resources that remain disproportionately accessible to a select few. Coates’ use of the Biblical “straight is the gate and narrow the way” can be taken to mean more than the pursuit of education, then. The straight gate, the narrow way must therefore signify a break from the labyrinth, to give value to the less dominant forms of social and cultural capital, to no longer be shackled by what an oppressive system deems “the correct” culture. Coates cites Black intellectual traditions as a form of alternative capital for himself: “the tradition of Carter G. Woodson, Frederick Douglass, and Malcom X,” a form of social

and cultural capital that “argues for education” not as a way to progress in a system that inherently will not allow progress, but “as a profound act of auto-liberation.” Coates reflects on how this has occurred historically, how figures from Martin Luther King Jr. to Whitney Houston “absorbed, reinterpreted, refined, created” and gave their own meaning to the lessons they learned from America, rather than internalizing the message forced upon them. Coates is insistent that the dominant forms of social and cultural capital must be disregarded, both for the working class and for Black Americans.

Across these scholars’ findings and Coates’ personal narrative, a clear pattern of injustice emerges. Institutions, regardless of whether they are high schools, universities, or formal employment, reward dominant, “correct” forms of social and cultural capital while punishing and devaluing anything associated with lower income. As a result, students are not only barred from equal opportunity and social mobility, but they are stripped of their humanity as they are deemed inadequate regardless of their merit. While Coates’ solution is a complete break from the system, a “dismantl[ing]” of “the master’s . . . house,” other authors, such as Jack, recommend reform from within (Coates). Jack acknowledges the usefulness of “programs that extract students from disadvantaged neighborhoods . . . and place them in private” schools but also warns that these programs elevate “the individual, not the collective.” Jack thus argues for more institutional responsibility towards equality. Either way, the institutional reinforcement of dominant forms of social and cultural capital sustains centuries of oppression in the United States. A country, and its people, cannot survive in a labyrinth. The maze must be made into a straight gate, a narrow way, by forsaking the

judgments that sustain inherited systems of privilege and actively valuing diverse forms of knowledge and culture.

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