

Book Reviews

Brint, Steven, and Jerome Karabel. *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900–1985.* New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1989. 312p., acid-free, \$24.95 (ISBN 0-1950-4815-6). LC 89-2891.

The American community college is one of the success stories of modern higher education. From their start in the early twentieth century, community colleges now number more than 900 and enroll more than 50 percent of all first-time entering freshmen—more than four million students per year. Most of the literature on the history of the movement has been from those sympathetic to the colleges, highlighting their virtues and glossing over their faults. The authors of this volume are self-acknowledged critics of the community college and swing the pendulum in the opposite direction. Although their bias is evident throughout the text, particularly concerning the vocational-technical mission of community colleges, their work is well researched and important. Calling into question more than just the present institutional mission of the community college, they portray the American educational system itself as designed to limit opportunities for much of the population. The egalitarian system of higher education in the United States is presented as a sham; in fact, say the authors, it perpetuates the “transmission of inequality from generation to generation.”

The book is based on the premise that higher education has been, for millions of Americans without social standing or wealth, the gateway to the American dream. Because the best jobs are increasingly available only to those with higher education, access to college education has become an essential key to upward mobility. When community colleges began, their primary purpose was to prepare their stu-

dents for transfer to a four-year college. The authors argue that community-college leaders began a “vocalization project” to establish a distinctive market niche in higher education, a field dominated by colleges and universities. The success of that strategy since the late 1960s, the authors claim, has produced students who are motivated to seek only the mid-level career path of vocational-technical jobs and are not given the encouragement or the opportunity to matriculate for a bachelor’s degree, the “most visible mark of a college education.” The impact of this outcome is not only effectively to deny students upward mobility, but to deprive the nation of “an active and informed citizenry that is the *sine qua non* of a truly democratic society.”

According to the authors, the American educational system ostensibly offers unlimited opportunity for individual self-improvement, but builds in class socialization through “management of ambition” and “cooling-out periods.” Community colleges are viewed as important in enforcing these control factors on populations that otherwise would be clamoring for entrance to four-year institutions of higher education and for the limited number of “professional and managerial occupations to which these institutions have historically provided access.”

The authors admit that success in the educational system is partly due to personal qualities; furthermore, community colleges have played a critical role in granting “workers, immigrants, minorities, and women” access to education. Yet, as the authors look through their “prism” of vocalization, they succumb to a logical fallacy in generalizing from the specific (vocational-technical program success) to the universe of an American educational

system that systematically and intentionally denies equality of access to the American dream. To suspect that a grand conspiracy is denying millions of Americans the opportunity for a baccalaureate degree is far-fetched. In fact, vocational-technical programs, while far from perfect, are often overenrolled and in great demand by students. True, some colleges do not include enough "democratic citizenry" courses in their curricula, but this is a recognized problem and is being addressed.

Unfortunately, students often drop out of the degree program after learning a skill and becoming employed. The fact that this happens is more a societal problem, rooted in the profit motives of American culture, than a problem of higher education. Furthermore, the claim that transfer programs have suffered is true of only some institutions. Evidence shows that students who attend the first two years at a community college make higher grades and have a higher completion rate in baccalaureate programs than students who begin their college career at a four-year school.

The value of the work is in its unique viewpoint on the development of the community college movement and its analysis of how that development brings to light weaknesses in the higher educational system in general. The text demands the reader's attention for its consideration of the larger issues of class, society, and equality in American culture. However, the book ends its analysis with 1985, and many of its sources are at least ten years old. No reader should use this volume to determine the current state of community colleges.—*W. Lee Hisle, Austin Community College, Austin, Texas.*

Poster, Mark. *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context.* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1990. 179p., alk. paper, \$16.95 (ISBN 0-226-67596-3 pbk.). LC 90-34770.

The "mode of information" is the phrase Mark Poster has coined to designate the massive cultural changes that he sees occurring in postindustrial societies

under the impact of electronically mediated communications. Technologies like digital recording, television, databases, and computer writing do more, he argues, than merely facilitate our ability to produce, store, manipulate, and transmit data. These tools also drastically alter our relation to language and thereby transform the ways in which we constitute ourselves and connect with others. This vision of the human universe revolutionized by electronic media recalls Marshall McLuhan's 1960's prophecy of a postprint "global village," but Poster's "mode of information" is different—distinguished both by its focus on language as the crucial site of change and by his emphatic politicization of the process.

Four basic premises organize Poster's book. First, electronic communications radically destabilize the traditional bond between linguistic signs and their referents. Second, this disruption of language's representational logic subverts the self as a rational, autonomous subject capable of knowing and controlling the objective world. Third, this rational self, regarded historically, was the dominant form of consciousness during the West's capitalist, imperialist past and can unambiguously be equated with "the adult, white, male subject" and its "associated forms of patriarchy and ethnocentrism." And finally, poststructuralist theory, specifically the thought of its leading French exponents, offers a uniquely appropriate vocabulary for describing both the linguistic changes caused by electronic communications and their political impact on the ties "between the state and the individual, between the individual and the community, between authority and law, between family members, between consumer and retailer."

Poster's opening chapters promote his poststructuralist methodology by attacking the failure of modern political theory—both liberal and Marxist—to recognize "the qualitative transformation of social relations" that stems from the electronic media's assault on linguistic representation. Poster ascribes this failure to the inability of social scientists to free themselves from the totalizing logic of ref-