The American Socialization Process

Describe the socialization process in our country and explain whether you think it helps our system of politics, or undermines it. In answering this question, be sure to state clearly and precisely just what is the goal of our form of government. Is it to encourage critical thinking, informed citizens? Or not? Explain why in either case.

As with myths and ideological orthodoxy, socialization in America often serves the purposes of maintaining the status quo and keeping stability for the empowered minority class who control the government. Through methods of reward and punishment, socialization trains future generations in accepting an anti-democratic capitalist system. To explain how social indoctrination serves the goals of this specifically designed plutocratic system of government, I will discuss the three windows for which socialization takes place: family, schools, and the workplace. To understand how the American socialization process reflects a system of plutocracy, we must first understand the system itself.

As Michael Parenti shows in Democracy for the Few, the American system is not based on a democracy, but rather a plutocratic system of rule, by and for the rich. In order for the owning class to maintain their positions of power, they need the masses to be obedient and accepting of the status quo. Parenti states, "Political power in America is that almost all "our" cultural institutions are under plutocratic control [...] ruled by non-elected, self-perpetuating groups [...] we the people have no vote, no portion of the ownership, and no legal decision-making power" (28). With such a small percent of corporate individuals running institutions, it creates a "fish-in-water" type of scenario where citizens are taught to believe in, but more importantly, accept the current state of affairs while also being unknowledgeable of alternative views.

Although the American people often view themselves as democratic, socialization "permeates the plutocratic culture, masquerading as 'pluralism, [and] democracy.'" (31). Socialization reflects the goals of the American system in that it keeps the rich in power by maintaining the status quo and breeds a nation of obedient, compliant citizens who are more than happy to conform while chastising critical thinking.

Although some believe socialization begins when a child reaches his/her first step in school, it actually starts much earlier, basically from birth. The family structure permeates a strong role of obedient and conformant behavior towards authority, which eventually bleeds into conventional society. An example of this, stemming from in-class discussion, shows the strong effects of socialized obedient behavior. During a discussion, Professor Hart ordered a student to stand up for no apparent reason, then made her sit down again. He repeated the order many times, and each time, the student obeyed. He then turned to another student (who already had witnessed the routine) and ordered him to stand. The student refused. Professor Hart then questioned the first student as to why she did not just say no, but instead kept standing and sitting as his request. The point made was that the students[w]s was trained to respond with obedience to whoever is in power. Through the relationship between child and parent, one learns to accept subordinate behavior towards authority without question; hence, serving the goals of a plutocratic system designed to maintain stability for those in power.
To reinforce this role of subordination, parents use a system of reward and punishment. Conformity and obedience is rewarded to no end. Whether it is money, a pat on the back, or a brand new car, parents strongly emphasize obedience by acting favorably towards the child when they conform. Through this relationship, the child is also taught that power is inherited and cannot be altered; in other words, "a person has power just because." The child has little practice on how to be democratic, but instead is trained to accept the status quo and be compliant with authority. If a child does seek to explore different sets of beliefs from that of the parent, or from that of those in power, they will often endure some form of punishment.

This reflects the American political system because, as Parenti states, "American capitalism is more than just an economic system; it is an entire cultural and social order, a plutocracy, a system of rule that is mostly by and for the rich" (28). In order to maintain their positions, the "owning class" relies on stability, and in order for stability to be maintained, the masses cannot and should not question those in power. This pattern of preparing children to be obedient in a plutocratic system continues throughout school.

Within a school setting, socialization takes place in two forms: formally and informally. Teachers educate students on the ideals of democracy in direct terms, but unconsciously, they teach students to further obey authority and conform to what is expected from those in power. Parenti states that "teachers tend to concentrate on the formal aspects of representative government and accord scant attention to the influences that wealthy, powerful groups exercise over political life" (30). Educators teach distant and abstract ideals of democracy, but students do not get any practical training on how to behave in a true democratic setting.

Schools further indoctrinate the youth to obey and conform while punishing any disobedience. Parenti noted that "politically outspoken faculty and even students have suffered negative evaluations and loss of stipends, grants, and jobs" (32). Individualism and critical thinking are punished, and conformity is rewarded. For example, in another class discussion, Professor Hart told a story of a young child in elementary school. The child's teacher told the class to draw a picture of a tree, to which she drew an ordinary, plain-looking tree on the chalk board as an example. When the teacher observed the child's picture, which was full of imagination and creativity, the teacher took the drawing and held it up to the class in an attempt to humiliate the child and shun creativity. The teacher's purpose in behaving in this manner was to promote conformity and "control" creative, critical thinking and aim it in a direction she felt "acceptable." Parenti states that individualism is a capitalist, plutocratic society means, "people are expected to operate individually but in more or less similar directions" (31).

Although teachers help the process of socialization, they are not in any way evil creatures who set out to brainwash the youth. Instead, they too are products of a plutocratic system. Parenti states, "Instructors who wish to introduce critiques of the U.S. politico-economic institutions do so often at the risk of their careers" (30). They too must conform to what is expected or suffer the consequences. And that leads into socialization in the workplace.

Within a capitalist society, ownership and power belongs to a small percent of people, and this creates an atmosphere of competition among workers, breeding conformity and obedience. For anyone to be "rewarded" in any way, they must conform to what is expected. Parenti states, "Capitalist culture is [...] one that minimizes cooperative efforts and human interdependence and keeps us busily competing as workers and consumers" (32). Individualism is also punished and looked down upon. To question authority could possibly mean to lose a job. Individualism in capitalist terms refers to the expectations of workers to "operate individually but in more or less in similar direction" (31). Like family and schools, the systems of reward and punishment are also used to socialize and maintain the status quo, keeping things stable for owners.

Indoctrination in all three areas of society reflects the goals of a plutocratic system of government. For a plutocratic system to exist, people in power rely on conformity and acceptance of the status quo. In the family structure, a child learns the relationship of power and how they do not possess it. Obedience is greatly rewarded, and power cannot be questioned. During school years, creativity and critical thinking are limited to particular "acceptable" beliefs, and conformity is further reinforced. The student is prepared to operate in an authoritative society, which wears a democratic jacket. These same patterns exist in the workplace. Power is unquestionable, and absolute conformity is expected. Socialization reflects the goals of this designed system and
creates non-informed, obedient citizens.

Work Cited