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MOOCS AND MODERN DEMOCRACIES

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ABSTRACT. A discussion of the imposition of the interests of the few on the collective through a subtle but effective manner: the eventual, complete development of Massive Open Online Courses. It is this article's premise that this development together with current marketing efficacy and the present economic goals of modern democracies, is probable to result in a shrinkage of the market place of ideas and, paradoxically, likely to result in a diminution of democracy in the world.

Keywords: MOOCs, Massive Open Online Classes, Democracy, Tyranny of the Majority, Marketing, Conformity

1. Introduction: Society's Desire for Independence

The preservation of the individual's unalienable rights and the supply of the security usurped by the mighty of a state of nature (hereinafter referred to as 'Private Status'), are the primary objectives of a benign power arrangement. The active and perpetual balancing of these two goals is the pursuit of a just state. The people of democratic states established such aims when they voluntarily conferred their sovereignty to the institutions of government (hereinafter referred to as 'Public Status'). Such transfer of power was and remains a manifestation of the people's desire to progress towards a virtuous state.

As reflected by the U.S. Constitution, this grand movement is taken with extreme prudence. First and foremost, the people wish to be secure from an eventual degenerate form of their very own creation. After all, the interests of those in power at the time of this progress are historically imposed upon the collective. Consequently, power is transferred to Public Status with the stipulation that the individual's natural rights be infringed

only by adequate necessity. But, while the people's pursuit of happiness *begins* with protection of the people's natural rights from their very own institutions, the *raison d'être* of Public Status is to provide a framework within which civil rights, political rights and social rights may be ordained so to allow the pursuit. Private Status and the imposition of its interests upon the collective, then, remains the true antagonist of the aforementioned progress.

However, in many matters of modern society the democratization of the state of nature has been left to the same underpinnings on which Private Status rested in a state of nature, the workings of a *laissez fair* based system. Ironically, the institutionalization and legitimization of such 'workings' by Public Status has, in fact, created an unprecedented framework of economic opportunity. Like in a state of nature, however, such opportunities are rarely relevant to or exploitable by anyone other than Private Status.

Current levels of disparity of exploitability have, ostensibly, reached intolerable levels for an organic society. In the movement from a state of nature to a state of virtue, Public Status has left scarcely attended the governance of several key economic and social issues. Orphans of legislation, most citizens have been left with general dissatisfaction and a desire for retribution.

More specific to this paper is a discussion of the continuation of the imposition of the interests of Private Status on the collective by a subtler but effective manner: The eventual, complete development of Massive Open Online Courses ('MOOCs'). It is this article's premise that this development, together with current marketing efficacy and the present economic goals of Public Status, is, paradoxically, likely to result in a diminution of democracy in the world.

2. What Are MOOCs?

MOOCs¹ are an extremely sophisticated form of distance learning (generally, at the undergraduate and graduate levels of education) (Fini 2009). High quality video and audio stream to computer equipped students, simultaneously, artificial intelligence tools allow for instructor to student and student to student interaction, virtual laboratories and the submission and analysis of exam material (Daniel 2012). Institutions, including those generally considered to be elite, have requested their best professors to teach such courses.

MOOCs are offered gratuitously or at heavily discounted prices. Regardless of the gratuity element, generally, the fixed costs of production remain the same whether the classes are offered to one student or to ten

million students. Consequently, the student cost of such courses (or degrees) is considerably less than conventional courses (or degrees); a seemingly good thing (Onink 2013).² Simultaneously, the economies of scale make the proposition of MOOCs very lucrative to the institutions, another ostensibly good thing. In fact, it may be argued that the recent advent and importance placed on MOOCs stems from the need of institutions to raise funds (Vardi 2012).³

Regardless of the reasons for their recent popularity, MOOCs are expected to grow (Lohr 2013) rapidly and lead to the education of millions of students around the world (Cohan 2012). The American Council on Education has moved quickly to certify some of the courses as credit-worthy. Many other colleges are considering plans to award credit for MOOCs (Jaschik 2013).

Coursera, the current leader in the new, online education industry, “has grown at warp speed to emerge as striving to support its business by creating revenue streams through licensing, certification fees and recruitment data provided to employers, among other efforts” (Lewin 2013). Four months after Coursera became operative; its free college courses had drawn in a million users “a faster launching than either Facebook or Twitter” (Lewin 2013). The co-founders of Coursera, computer science professors at Stanford University, witnessed enrollment pass two million, with 70,000 new students a week signing up for over 200 courses ...taught by faculty members at the company’s partners, 33 elite universities. In less than a year, Coursera has attracted \$22 million in venture capital. Universities nationwide are increasing their online offerings, hoping to attract students around the world. Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have each provided \$30 million to create edX (Lewin 2013). Another Stanford spinoff, Udacity, has attracted more than a million students to its menu of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, along with \$15 million in financing (Lewin 2013).

3. The Inherent Dangers of MOOCs

Given the massive potential for institutional profitability and the simultaneous benefit of lower costs to the student, the MOOCs movement is, ostensibly, inexorable. Inevitably, market forces are likely to continue to lead the elite institutions to be frontrunners in this market and to eventually offer students degrees at heavily discounted prices (Cusumano 2013). At a glance, these outcomes are irrefutable benefits which ought to and currently seem to be welcomed by both the student and the institution.

A long-run assessment, however, sheds light on a problematic, prospective consequence. If the presently praised economies of scale allow

a student to attend an elite university at an extremely reduced cost, who will attend a lesser institution? Arguably, *ceteris paribus*, if the cost is similar, students are less likely to choose a less reputable institution over a more prestigious one; a construct applicable to millions of students seeking what seems to be the better education. Accordingly, considering that (1) the elite institutions are very few, (2) the number of the 'best and brightest' of each institutions is extremely limited, and (3) the potential world-wide students is in the millions, the paradigm become perilous: unintended, self-imposed, standardized higher education at a world-wide level. It is not unreasonably foreseeable that the popularity of MOOCs will increase to a point where a great majority of students (world-wide) will enroll in at least one transferable course or graduate from one of very few Ivy League universities offering MOOCs based degrees; leaving on the sidelines the less recognized institutions (Cusumano 2013). Either way, the result leaves few, elite educators to formulate and proliferate judgments for and to the masses (regarding a topic or a whole degree).

Accordingly, in the near future a great majority of the workforce will have graduated from a handful of universities; having read the same texts, performed on the same exams, heeded to the same professor(s), learned the same substance, and even perceived the same eccentricities of those few professor(s). While, arguably, at the micro level, the single student may receive a good education, the macro outlook suggests a disconcerting result: physicians, journalists, lawyers, political animals, all with the same thoughts, i.e., tyranny of the majority to a greater degree than historically contemplated. In light of this universal conformity, even Plato's philosopher-kings would generate a mob of citizens which would make the aforementioned democratic progress halt.

When one sees millions of people thinking the same thoughts and reading the same books, and perceives that as the multitude grows, its influence becomes always stronger, it is hard to imagine how new points of repulsion and contrast are to arise, new diversities of sentiment and doctrine to be developed (Bryce 1995).

Such level of control (Rampini 2013) on the collective is the antithesis of democratic thought. In fact, even if the handful of professors were to preach freedom of thought, without an opposing argument, the prayer will be stale and moot.⁴ And, of course, the perils escalate if the philosopher-kings degenerate into demagogues and actually espouse views contrary to freedom of thought.

Although MOOCs is not state action,⁵ the underpinnings of the rationale for freedom of speech rights apply to the present discussion. To borrow from doctrines of U.S. constitutional law, freedom of speech is intended to create a market place of ideas: '[W]hen men have realized that

time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas-that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That at any rate is the theory of our Constitution” (Abrams 1919). Simply put, generally, speech is protected only if any potential harms which may flow from it can be prevented (rebutted) by other speech (and not by force); “[i]t is not acceptable to uphold the right to use speech as a sword where no exchange of views is involved” (Tribe 1942).

A competing idea must exist to test the validity of a premise. MOOCs will eliminate the counter positioning which allows for freedom of speech protection; they will turn the market economy of ideas into a planned economy of ideas.

The constitutional right of free expression is...designed and intended to remove governmental restraints from the arena of public discussion, putting the decision as to what views shall be voiced largely into the hands of each of us, in the hope that use of such freedom will ultimately produce a more capable citizenry and more perfect polity and in the belief that no other approach would comport with the premise of individual dignity and choice upon which our political system rests (Cohen 1971).

The margin of utility of the millionth class of the same lecture is not an “essential part of any exposition of ideas, and [will be] of such slight social value as a step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality” (Chaplinsky 1942).

The conformity created by MOOCs will percolate into the governance of democracies; what fosters democracy if not dialogue between *competing* sides? In the end, it is grossly paradoxical that the apparent democratization of education will adversely impact the democratic progress mentioned in the introduction; “[t]o be afraid of ideas... is to be unfit for self-government” (Meiklejohn 1948).

‘[T]he First Amendment... has a *structural role* to play in securing and fostering our republican system of self-government ... Implicit in this structural role is not only the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open,’ ... but also the antecedent assumption that valuable public debate-as well as other civic behavior-must be informed. The structural model links the First Amendment to that process of communication necessary for a democracy to survive, and thus entails solicitude not only for communication itself, but for the indispensable conditions of meaningful communication (Richmond 1980).

De Tocqueville observed how the tyranny of the majority inhibits the freedom of thought, “[the] invisible and subtle power that mocks all the efforts of tyranny.” (De Tocqueville 1956) Almost two-hundred years later, MOOCs render his proposition regarding such tyranny much more likely (even though, ironically, originating at the other end of the spectrum, a tyranny of the oligarchy). The ‘invisible and subtle power’ is greatly curtailed by MOOCs, leaving the opening for the tyranny.

The marketplace of ideas is what provides the democratic government the pool of information necessary to choose policy. If MOOCs grow as predicted, what antitrust guardians will protect the consumers of ideas in absence of opposing ideas? What legislation can prevent the restraint on freedom of ideas if only one idea exists? In absence of a market of ideas, that which is preached from a very small group of persons will seldom be questioned.

A democratic curriculum emphasizes access to a wide range of information and the right of those of varied opinion to have their viewpoints heard. Educators in a democratic society have an obligation to help young people seek out a range of ideas and to voice their own. Unfortunately, many schools persistently shirk this obligation in several ways. First, they narrow the range of school-sponsored knowledge to what we might call ‘official’ or high-status knowledge that is produced or endorsed by the dominant culture. Second, they silence the voices of those outside the dominant culture (Apple and Beane 1995).

4. Intensifying the Inherent Dangers of MOOCs: The Goals of Public Status

The apparent objective of Public Status is no longer the pursuit of a just state, as described in the introduction. In extrapolating the causality of current government policy, we find that modern Public Status is concerned primarily with aggregate productivity rather than the virtuous citizen.⁶

“The science of politics...seeks an accurate description and classification of political institutions and a precise determination of the forces which create and control them” (Gettell 1945). However, presently, comprehension of these ‘forces’ has become a purely economic matter. Political authority has come to define ‘general welfare’ solely as an economic term; accordingly, today’s state allocates much of its efforts to attaining economic goals: full employment, price stability, growth and income distribution.

While political economics is a relatively young discipline (“economics is certainly not much more than two-hundred years old and as a profession about 150 years old” [Uphoff and Warren 1972] the national expression has

become little more than an economic figure. Public Status has left governance to what periodically appears to generate the greatest numbers in the economic metric mentioned above, that is, Private Status. Thus, the macro-economic perspective has become the full time agenda of today's political authority.

Currently, the disconnect between the original objective of Public Status (i.e., the virtuous citizen) and modern economic objectives is epitomized by the divide between the voter and the technocratic governments. That is, the personal sovereignty offered by a democratic power structure is at odds with purely 'economic leaders.' For example, arguably, the frustration of the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement is its inability to understand the nomenclature and workings of present Public Status and its Private Status support structure (e.g., what is a derivative? How did it lead to a recession?). If these concepts constitute the clay of modern society, leaders cannot be elected by virtuous citizens, instead technocrats must be appointed. Such a nebulous movement (and similar ones, e.g., No-Global) is a reflection of the citizen's loss of reference in light of incomprehensible government goals. Consequently, this general will is leaderless and inarticulate. Seemingly, its goal is to merely create a presence rather than to propose solutions (it cannot know what to propose). In the end, the citizen's sovereignty and voice in government has slowly been usurped by the technicality of the economy, and more increasingly replaced with the purchasing election of a consumer.

Given the nature of these macroeconomic goals (in a Constantine like manner) it is in Public Status' interest to support and promote the development of MOOCs as its new religion. MOOCs, as stated above, are likely to wither away the dialogue, diversity and dissent, and replace the discontent with somnambulist disciples. A curtailment of the disgruntled makes governing more linear, consequently, facilitating the attainment of the aforementioned economic goals of the modern state. Nietzsche makes the following observation: "The governments of the great States have two instruments for keeping the people dependent, in fear and obedience: a coarser, the army, and a more refined, the school" (Levy 1974).

This environment, as created by modern Public Status goals, increases the likelihood of the survival of only a few, elite institutions in the aftermath of the predicted growth of MOOCs, in turn, increasing the likelihood of a handful of professor instructing the millions.

5. Intensifying the Inherent Dangers of MOOCs: Marketing and the Demand of the Modern Individual

As suggested above, the citizen's political sovereignty is being replaced with the consumer's economic autonomy. While this economic freedom is desirable, consumer demand comes from an innate motivation for self-preservation, which is perpetually in need of satisfaction. This acquisitive nature leaves the consumer forever wanting. Accordingly, as the consumer ventures out to fulfill his unattainable goals he becomes the easy prey of marketing efforts. In part, marketing is the art of deluding the consumer into trusting that unattainable goals are, in fact, achievable.⁷ Ownership and consumption hence become illusionary ends; products and services become substitutes used to mislead consumers into trusting that these were, in fact, their original objectives. Coupled with the quest for equality embedded in democracies, marketing instills in present-day consumers the misconceived pursuit to own or be anything.

As democracy postulates equality, it puts everyone in a race towards the same. Undoubtedly, ownership and the market pricing system are an extension of one's freedom (Locke 1689) but can the individual consumer (who votes for production of goods) see the whole truth?⁸ That is, does the consumer have the ability to see through the guile of marketing and discern what to buy and what to be?

Marketing's ability to amplify humans' innate acquisitive nature and render all aspirations seemingly attainable creates a tyranny of the majority unimagined by De Tocqueville; everyone is salivating to belong to the next group or to purchase the new, new, new thing. Without digressing too much into concepts of the dictatorship of marketing, it seems that while art used to be a reflection of society, today, society is a reflection of marketing. The marketing of MOOCs to the millions will be the epitome of this irrational condition.

MOOCs' entry into this marketing and economic logic⁹ is nonsensical and dangerous. Inevitably, in the hands of marketing oracles, the few elite institutions will impress upon potential students that (like the latest generation cell phone), if they desire an elite education, they should have it. MOOCs entry into the market represents a collision between the materialistic world and the world of reason; Plato's philosopher kings moving into the sphere of appetite, and vice versa. All with the help of marketing telling millions of potential students that which is contrary to nature: that they can all see the light.

This logic increases the likelihood that in the aftermath of the predicted growth of MOOCs, few elite institutions will be left standing, therefore increasing the likelihood of a handful of professor instructing the millions.

6. Conclusion

Democratic institutions are a manifestation of the people's desire to progress towards a state where the ideas of the few are not imposed on the whole. The survival of democratic institutions relies on an open flow of diverse ideas and the critical analysis of the same. Critical thinking at its elemental level requires validation and refinement of a premise by the scrutiny of competing ideas.

In absence of this conversation, that which is spewed from an elite group of persons will seldom be prodded and probed. Such control of the few over the collective is the antithesis of democratic thought. Presently, it can only be found in one place, religious dogma. Are Gods presently among men? If not, the imposition of the interests of the few (including Public Status) on the collective is assured by the intoxicating combination of (1) the economic interests of Public Status, (2) consumer's insatiable and irrational appetite for everything, (3) the marketing of the untrue idea that we can and should, in fact, have/be anything and (4) MOOCs.

In the end, the foregoing arguments are self-substantiating, an attestation of the very perils they preach against; that is, in absence of dissenting opinions, they may be, *disturbingly*, left to stand.

NOTES

1. While the term MOOCs typically refers to single courses, in this article, the term is used to refer to single course offerings, multiple course offerings, and full degree offerings.

2. "Right now, for the unbeatable price of \$0, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Anant Agarwal is teaching a class on circuits and electronics to thousands of people online – no MIT application required. Harvard, Princeton, Michigan, and other top schools have also started open courses for everyone" (Clark 2013).

3. "The Great recession reduced the private institution's endowments, reduced state support of public institutions and, most importantly, given the job market, made students question the value of higher education. Arguably, 'the enormous buzz about MOOCs is not due to the technology's intrinsic educational value, but due to the seductive possibilities of lower costs'" (Vardi 2012).

4. A topical example of the might of the intellectuals and their uncontrolled reputation is offered by the recently disproved economic theories of Harvard professors, Reinhart and Rogoff. Leaders of several countries predicated their policies on these economists' findings (Gods among men?), which were eventually disproven by a student, Thomas Herndon, from a non-ivy league university. Arguably, a Thomas Herndon is less likely to exist in a MOOCs infested world, where a handful of professors hold the reign to knowledge (Krugman 2013).

5. But is it coming? (Gardner and Young 2013).

6. The Karl Marx's 'base' and 'superstructure' argument?

7. This note is no manner hoping to suggest that the discipline of marketing is exclusively devoted to this end. Naturally, this discipline has brought society innumerable benefits, which are beyond of the scope of this note.

8. Arguably, however, recently society and marketing are in better unison (Arvidsson and Giordano 2013).

9. "It is not for the economist [or marketer], but the moralist and the philosopher to decide what kind of society we should deem desirable. An industrial society has one thing in abundance, and that is material welfare more than is good for it. If to uphold justice and freedom to restore meaning and unity in life, we should ever be called upon to sacrifice some efficiency in production, economy in consumption, or rationality of administration, an industrial civilization can afford it. The economic historians' message to philosophers today should be: we can afford to be both just and free" (Polanyi 2013).

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