

Diploma Mills: How For-Profit Colleges Stuffed Students, Taxpayers, and the American Dream, by A.J. Angulo. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 224 pp., \$29.95 hardbound.

Miseducation: A History of Ignorance-Making in America and Beyond, edited by A.J. Angulo. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 384 pp., \$69.95 hardbound, \$32.95 paperback.

Studied Ignorance

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The key connection between A.J. Angulo's two recent books, *Diploma Mills: How For-Profit Colleges Stuffed Students, Taxpayers, and the American Dream* and *Miseducation: A History of Ignorance-Making in America and Beyond*, comes at the end of *Diploma Mills*. Angulo, Elizabeth Singleton Endowed Professor of Education and professor of history (courtesy) at Winthrop University, wraps up his indictment of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) with a mention of their reliance on advertising, "or as researchers in the field of agnotology might put it,

'ignorance production.'"¹ The burgeoning field of agnotology, "the systematic study of ignorance," is the topic of *Miseducation*, the anthology Angulo edited and for which he wrote the preface and conclusion.² While both books contribute significantly to our understanding of school and society, both come with agnotological blinders of their own.

Diploma Mills details an FPCU history "that could help us put recent events within their broader context" (*DM*, xi). That "long view" shows FPCUs regularly acting as shady, cruel profiteers. In 1880, *Scientific American* described the main purpose of FPCUs as "lining the pockets of the proprietors" (*DM*, 8). J.H. Goodwin, author of *Improved Book-Keeping and Business Manual* (1882), wrote: "The young man who spends from six to sixteen months and from sixty to six hundred dollars to learn book-keeping in a business college is—to put it mildly—throwing away both time and money" (*DM*, 13).

In the nineteenth century, nonprofit colleges and universities kept clear of commercial studies. In 1895, "over

¹A.J. Angulo, *Diploma Mills: How For-Profit Colleges Stuffed Students, Taxpayers, and the American Dream* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 148. (Hereafter cited in text as *DM*.)

²A.J. Angulo, ed., *Miseducation: A History of Ignorance-Making in America and Beyond*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 5. (Hereafter cited in text as *M*.)

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96,000 students enrolled in for-profit commercial schools. That same year, nonprofit colleges and universities reported a total enrollment of 97 students in business-related courses of study” (*DM*, 18). Soon, though, reacting to large-scale forces such as industrialization, bureaucratization, and feminism, nonprofit colleges and universities began introducing vocational training, undergraduate business majors, and MBA programs. Two-year public colleges in particular would prove a threat, but FPCUs never lost their foothold.

Following World War II, FPCU “stiffing” of veterans warranted lawsuits and congressional hearings. In the aftermath, the industry learned a vital lesson: Being a repository for federal grants and student loans guaranteed huge profits, irrespective of the quality of instruction and placement services; lawsuits and bad publicity were operating costs easily borne. Today, the “massive revenues and lobbying power backing the \$35 billion FPCU industry steamroll past the fines, penalties, and settlements” (*DM*, 131). Recent FPCU history depicts a boom driven by financial sector investment, as “for-profits had become the darlings of Wall Street,” making profits in the range of 33 to 37 percent (*DM*, 113, 116).

All this, Angulo argues, points to the need for strict oversight and regulation of FPCUs—standard progressive fare. At book’s end, though, Angulo moves

past calls for regulation to a call “to end public subsidies in all forms to for-profit colleges and universities” (*DM*, 146). He holds that, since they are without financial incentive, nonprofit colleges and universities conduct research, teaching, and community service on qualitatively higher planes than FPCUs are capable of doing.

Here *Diploma Mills* seems ripe for agnotological criticism. Pounding home his theme of “money corrupts,” Angulo almost totally ignores instances of FPCU students getting their money’s worth. For example, two of my nieces attended FPCUs, one for phlebotomy and one for hairstyling; both had valid reasons for choosing for-profit training over college certification, and both remain convinced they made the right choice. *Diploma Mills* has no conceptual room for the possibility of success stories explaining FPCU enrollment far better than sleazy advertisement.

Angulo also gives nonprofit higher education far too much credit. Nonprofits have different “incentives to water down academic standards” (*DM*, 140), they are less crassly bottom-line, but the professional incentives are still there and the watering down shameful. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011) surveyed a Grand Canyon-scale gap between rhetoric and reality in U.S. higher education. Though he is correct to attack

for-profits for calling themselves “colleges” and “universities” without justification, Angulo fails to apply this challenge to nonprofits offering *more* but not *higher* education.

Appreciate, then, the apples-to-oranges character of this key comparison:

[T]raditional institutions of higher education have long operated on the ideal of the advancement and diffusion of knowledge. For-profits, by contrast, have...organized around the advancement and diffusion of advertising...to secure profits. (*DM*, 148)

Angulo breezily contrasts lofty platitudes trotted out at convocation exercises with the bare-knuckled exigencies of staying afloat. Hasn't he seen recruitment materials from traditional colleges saying nothing about studying but tons about swimming pools and gluten-free desserts? Hasn't he noticed college teaching turned increasingly over to cheap, transient labor? And does he suppose Harvard and Stanford came to their huge endowments *by accident*?

Angulo's ire against FPCUs, then, is not misplaced, but selective and partisan. Concerning FPCU executive salaries, he writes:

A critical misstep occurs, for instance, when companies provide compensation packages

to FPCU executives bearing no resemblance to those given to leaders of nonprofit colleges and universities. It distorts the core mission of all higher education. (*DM*, 144)

Again the contrast is skewed, the conclusion facile. Traditional universities pay presidents far less than what for-profit CEOs are paid, but how much more do they pay their battalions of bureaucrats making cushy careers of make-work? How much goes to useless-and-worse senior faculty coasting on tenure? As for a “critical misstep” that “distorts the core mission of all higher education,” bloated executive salaries barely inch toward the obscenity of making college football and basketball coaches the highest paid public employees in state after state.³

Angulo's critique of FPCUs requires no such overstating of the health of traditional nonprofits. Both sectors of postsecondary education radically underperform their potential and shirk responsibility to students, society, and the cause of higher learning. Using one to trash the other just prettifies the ugly truth.

Agnotological analysis introduced in *Diploma Mills* is broadened and deepened in *Miseducation*. Some

³Cory Gaines, “The Highest-Paid Public Employee in 39 US States Is Either a Football or Men's Basketball Coach,” *Sports, Business Insider*, September 22, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-states-highest-paid-public-employee-college-coach-2016-9>.

ignorance, Angulo and his fourteen contributors show, derives innocently from present limits on the world's empirical knowledge. Other ignorance is malign, they argue, willfully manufactured by political and military leaders, educators, business moguls, ideologues, and public relations hacks, among others. Ignorance of this sort is constructed to hoodwink the masses, keeping some principles and some people in power. Organized into three sections, "Legalizing Ignorance," "Mythologizing Ignorance," and "Nationalizing and Globalizing Ignorance," the essays in *Miseducation* seek to convince readers that studying ignorance promotion can reveal important but hidden features of the social order.

For example, in "Slavery," Notre Dame de Namur professor of education Kim Tolley deftly uncovers the fear that propelled the South's anti-literacy laws: "[T]he authorities suppressed literacy not only to extinguish the communication of insurrection plans among southern slaves but also to prevent the communication of abolitionist ideas between southern slaves and free black outsiders" (*M*, 27). Likewise, in "Sex," Jennifer Burek Pierce, University of Iowa associate professor of library and information science, and Matt Pierce, a lecturer in telecommunications at the University of Indiana–Bloomington, show how the motion picture industry's self-censorship of 1930s radio

broadcasts on syphilis restricted "the access to contemporary, scientific health education" (*M*, 46). Readers can easily detect the value of agnotological analysis in these situations.

But that value has limits—one being *Miseducation's* belaboring the obvious. The fancy, distancing word "agnotology" is new and different. Past that, no surprise: Clans, tribes, and nations make *their* way seem *the* way; education socializes youth toward dominant norms; religions and ideologies slight each other; marketing distorts, exaggerates, and occludes. The effect here is to make *Miseducation* a hodgepodge of essays saying basically the same thing. An editor can organize them by topic, technique, time, place, and ideological direction, but nothing is cumulative or higher-order in the learning they engender. Agnotology remains a pastiche of case studies, interesting one by one, but no more so collectively.

It becomes a serious problem, then, that Angulo has solicited and collected articles of a particular political slant. In *Miseducation*, agnotology reads as a cudgel with which the academic Left can bash its usual suspects: economic inequality, cultural conservatism, religious fundamentalism, government not rooted in direct democracy, etc. The book offers an evisceration of Israeli propaganda but not a peep on Arab propaganda; an attack on

anti-science dogma among the Christian Right but not within radical feminism; a denunciation of the chilling effects of heterosexism but not of political correctness. Choosing its battles on a partisan basis, *Miseducation* inevitably leaves complex epistemological situations under-conceived and under-researched. Two essays in the “Mythologizing Ignorance” section best exemplify this.

In “Religion,” Adam Laats, an associate professor in the graduate school of education at Binghamton University, State University of New York, opens with a falsehood told by Michele Bachmann, a Republican U.S. House of Representatives member from Minnesota from 2007 to 2015. During her bid for the Republican nomination in the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Bachmann insisted the Founding Fathers had “worked tirelessly” to end slavery in the United States, but this “was simply not true” (*M*, 161). Bachman’s error drew on

a vibrant and politically powerful counterknowledge...[that] has blocked mainstream historical knowledge...[and] encouraged widespread, systematic non-knowledge about US history. As this chapter explores, this contending tradition of counterknowledge has also been developed and disseminated by

an influential group of Christian textbook publishers. (*M*, 161)

Readers of these textbooks “are not simply unaware of mainstream academic history; they are reading a history that explicitly disputes the facts and methods of mainstream academic history” (*M*, 162).

Predictably, Laats goes on to mock Christian schools’ reworking of history “as an unfolding of divine will across time and space” (*M*, 166). Students will get “a Christian view of the world” that will “emphasize the providential circumstance of [America’s] founding and associate its prosperity with obedience to God” (*M*, 167, 171). Laats considers this ignorance-producing educational practice to be qualitatively *below* what public school students learn in secular classes.

The key here is Laats’s shortcut of stipulating “mainstream academic history” as the standard of verity and accuracy. Rhetorically, this may work with readers who already disdain Christian fundamentalism and schools dedicated to its tenets. Everyone else will see that Laats has simply begged the question. Christian school educators *know* their teachings deviate from mainstream secular viewpoints but construe the deviation as valid. Offering no argument, Laats merely *defines* such deviation as ignorant.

Imagine the howling if a conservative similarly wrote off Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*

(2005) or Noam Chomsky's *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (1999). To Zinn, Chomsky, and likeminded readers, mainstream academic history is written to keep students ignorant, brainwashing them toward a smug, morally unfounded patriotism. We can take mainstream academic history, then, as unquestioned truth, heretical secularism, or capitalist-chauvinist indoctrination. How to decide which? Laats's essay and *Miseducation* writ large offer no relief.

In "Identity," Eileen H. Tamura, professor of history of education and chair of the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Hawai'i, sets out to debunk the myth of "Asian Americans" as a model minority. Like Laats, however, Tamura builds her case on no surer a footing than ideological sympathy.

Tamura's most valid criticism is that the category "Asian American" subsumes too much cultural diversity to be useful. "At least twenty-four ethnic groups" have been so designated, Tamura notes, and "the class background of Asian immigrants has varied considerably as well.... Highly educated Asians constituted one group. The other was made up of unskilled or semiskilled workers with little schooling, such as Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodians, and Laotians who arrived after the Vietnam War" (M, 146). While Japanese and Chinese Americans earned about as

much as whites, Southeast Asian immigrants "were at the bottom of the economic pyramid" (M, 148).

Disappointingly, Tamura's sharp critique of "Asian American" does not lead her to abjure similarly crude clumpings such as "white" and "Latino." Past that, it is self-contradictory for Tamura to take well-educated, successful Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans to task for "reject[ing] those Asian Americans who exhibited behaviors deemed unacceptable" (M, 156). Why should they accept unacceptable behavior from people *ignorantly* linked to them as fellow Asian Americans?

Tamura cites an influential 1966 *New York Times* essay, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," in which William Petersen anticipated the model minority meme.⁴ Even while praising the character traits, cultural values, and accomplishments of Japanese Americans, however, Petersen insisted their success came from maintaining "meaningful links to an alien culture" (M, 143). Tamura claims, without evidence, that this insulting "European American view of Asian Americans as 'perpetual foreigners' has continued up to the present" (M, 143). When Peterson then uses Asian American success "as a tool to disparage African Americans" (M,

⁴William Petersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *New York Times*, January 9, 1966, http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/modelminority.pdf.

144), Tamura has found her rhetorical purpose: to encourage educated, upwardly mobile Asian Americans not to identify with Euro-American dominant culture but rather develop “a kinship with other subordinated nonwhites—African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans” (*M*, 145).

Past empirical overstatement, then, what really bothers Tamura about the model minority meme is that it encourages success rather than militant opposition. As happens so often, the key period in dispute here is the late 1960s, a time when radical Asian American activists rejected assimilation, identified with Black Power and Latino Power, and aimed revolutionary challenge at the racist, classist ruling order. Tamura’s essay is suffused with longing to relive those days.

Again, agnotological analysis hastily cuts off debate. Asian Americans hot after school honors and financial prosperity are not ignorant just because Tamura damns those aspirations as politically incorrect. Nor has she shown Asian American success in school and society to be “mythical.” It is no phantasm that in 2015 Asian Americans averaged 1654 on the SATs, whites 1576, Mexican Americans 1343, and blacks 1277.⁵ While not all immigrants from Asia thrive, Tamura

herself shows that very many do. Faced with data showing Asian American households having higher incomes on average than white households, Tamura denies any “model minority” implications by noting the Asian American households “typically had more workers than whites” (*M*, 148). But that could be seen in general as just another admirable “model minority” trait: emphasizing the dignity of work, Asian American culture encourages participation in the labor force more than other cultures do.

In his “Reflections,” Angulo is full of ambitious plans for agnotology:

Looking ahead, research on agnotology—in terms of substance and methods—will likely keep scholars busy thinking about this vital part of the human experience for many years to come....(*M*, 343)

The intersection of gender, education, and agnotology, for instance, demands its own separate study....Extending, elaborating, and complicating the case studies included in this volume is a project worthy of a generation of scholars. (*M*, 343)

What we need are university courses on agnotology, programs dedicated to the social construction of ignorance, and perhaps new interdisciplinary fields such as

⁵Scott Jaschik, “SAT Scores Drop,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 3, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/03/sat-scores-drop-and-racial-gaps-remain-large>.

“fraud studies” with agnotology at their core. (*M*, 346)

All this is premature, and unseemly in its frantic turf-grabbing. However

much potential agnotology may have, *Diploma Mills* and *Miseducation* show it to be a fledgling, tentative discipline, unready for such dramatic expansion as Angulo proposes.