

BOOK REVIEW

The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead, by David Callahan (2004), Orlando, FL: Harcourt Press

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In this treatise on cheating in American society, the author traces the cultural and ideological roots of current problems with cheating: in classrooms, in corporate boardrooms, and in political corruption. Character educators would do well to read this fine piece of scholarship. While character education focuses on the development of character, or the interaction of individual character and the group dynamics of school culture, the values and concepts espoused in other areas of American culture such as popular media and entertainment, financial, and political domains also impact the children for whom you are concerned. Callahan connects instances of cheating in diverse areas of American society through an explication of what he sees as a shared culture of cheating. While the descriptions of business and political corruption in American society are sobering, and the author critiques popular American public culture for making matters worse, he does so from a place

of hope and personal purpose. *The Cheating Culture* provides readers with history, analysis, and ideas to understand the confluence of materialism, unfettered competition, the concentration of power into the hands of a few, and the wholesale corruption of both political and business institutions through the expansion and institutionalization of the cheating culture. Understanding its influence on citizens of all ages follows from understanding the underlying assumptions of the culture itself, which this work of social criticism lays out clearly.

Callahan begins by acknowledging that cheating is not a new problem. The Olympics in ancient Greece were “rife with cheating” (p. 15) and in ancient China there were severe penalties for cheating on civil service exams. Callahan argues that we need to understand something of the history of cheating in our society in order to contextualize the cheating that is bemoaned today. Cheating has a very

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public pedigree in American society. While at first blush we might say that cheating is profoundly un-American, Callahan presents evidence to suggest that cheating is an almost inevitable outgrowth of the blend of ideological commitments that have historically characterized the American cultural landscape.

The United States, for all its moral preoccupations, distinguished itself early on as a natural home to the cheating impulse. Suspicion of authority was part of the fabric and fable of American life from the Republic's earliest days. A search for personal liberty is what brought many to the New World after all, and the frontier culture and Jeffersonian suspicions of centralized power nurtured this mind-set. Later, America embraced the rawest form of industrial capitalism in the world. Amid rough-and-tumble business competition and lax regulation, a certain level of lawlessness became part of economic life. (p. 15)

Callahan quotes the sociologist Robert Merton as articulating this paradox of Americanism: "A cardinal American virtue, 'ambition,' promotes a cardinal American vice, 'deviant behavior'" (p. 15). Later, the "Gilded Age," in the late 1800s, otherwise known as the age of the "robber barons" was another period notable for its cheating, exploitation, illegality, and inhumanity.

The political and cultural milieu of the Gilded Age was permissive of the abuses by the new capitalist overclass. Staggering inequalities of wealth separated America's industrial elite from average Americans. Money dominated a corrupt political system, while laissez-faire notions of individualism were widely embraced. Many respectable civic leaders and intellectuals openly espoused the notion that some classes of people should dominate others. (p. 16)

Later still, the 1920s became famous for its own forms of excess and illegality. This period was brought to an abrupt close with the stock market crash of 1929. The following 3 decades (1930–1960) have come to be seen as the

"good old days," when most people obeyed the law, most people lived in stable communities, the working class and rising middle class improved their lot through hard work and often through collective bargaining, home ownership grew, and especially in the post World War II era, America became a beacon of hope, equality, justice, and prosperity. Comparing the relative moral innocence of the 1940s and 1950s with the rapidly changing cultural environment thereafter, Callahan suggests that a complex dynamic of social factors headed us down a different and more callous path.

That [moral] tone began to change in the 1970s. The individualism of the '60s turned toxic as it was stripped of its initial liberating purposes and as positive '60s values like social responsibility—which had counterbalanced the new individualism—lost traction in popular culture. Young people became more cynical and materialistic. The nation drifted without a strong sense of natural purpose—stuck, it seemed, in an intractable malaise. Meanwhile, the economic upheavals of the decade—inflation, currency instability, oil shocks, rising foreign competition—mobilized the business community to get leaner and meaner, and to begin a far-reaching assault on government regulation and labor unions. By the end of the '70s the stage was set for a new era of extreme capitalism. (p. 17)

Since that time business interests have increasingly come to dominate other interests in American society, such as the public interest, and the interest of the poor and disempowered. The 1980s became known for a shift in public discourse that touted the sole legitimacy of the market and market economics. Callahan quotes one observer as saying "By the end of 2000 the market as the dominant cultural force has so infiltrated society that it is increasingly difficult to remember any other reality" (p. 18). Three processes associated with this cultural shift are elucidated with regard to fostering cheating. First, an almost exclusive emphasis on money and "the bottom line" has spread to many areas of society that previously did not operate in terms of market principles

(such as nonprofit hospitals and not-for-profit insurance plans going *for-profit* and education being evaluated on a business model). This connects the cultural shift to the environments in which people live. Second, “when profits and performance are the only measure of success, old-fashion ideas about fairness go out the window” (p. 18). This connects the cultural shift to the individual’s values and behavior, which are themselves heavily influenced by perceived social norms of what’s acceptable and what’s required (“you gotta do what you gotta do”). The third process has to do with weakening the regulatory systems that helped limit the harm that competitiveness, greed, and extreme self-interest characteristic of the market can inflict on our society and people.

A third consequence of the market’s ascendancy is that government’s ability to enforce norms of fair play, serving as a “referee” of competition, has been hobbled. Government watchdogs in many areas were disarmed in the ’80s and ’90s in the name of privatization and deregulation. Extreme laissez-faire thinking has held, foolishly, that the business world can police itself—that the “hidden hand” of market competition will enforce moral behavior and fair outcomes. (p. 19)

The market has not adequately policed itself and business scandals come to light with disturbing frequency. Public confidence in politicians and corporate leaders is low, and feelings that “the game is rigged” are high. The public’s perceptions of this culture of cheating has a “trickle-down” effect, making people feel that they are a “chump” if they don’t “play the game,” cheating in ways they believe others are cheating. Callahan asks what happens when people think the system is “stacked against people like them” and they stop believing that the rules are fair? His answer is that rules lose their legitimacy, and their motivating power, and everyone feels pressured to cut corners to succeed, accommodating themselves to what they perceive to be the prevailing cultural expectations. The book addresses the question of how ordinary people justify

doing wrong. Sometimes it is through a perception that they are owed more than they are getting, so they help themselves to the difference to rectify matters. Often people will point to the unfairness around them and justify cheating as the only way to break even, let alone get ahead in a corrupt system. A cheating culture then builds on itself, as more people cheat it really does become more difficult to get a fair shake, encouraging yet more cheating.

Callahan argues that the current ideology of all-against-all (so-called) free market capitalism has changed the character of Americans. Traditional qualities such as individualism and self-reliance have morphed into selfishness and self-absorption. Aspiration has been replaced by envy, and desire for the good life is now discussed in terms of a grotesque materialism. Other traditional American values have been sidelined: “belief in community, social responsibility, compassion for the less able or the less fortunate” for example (p. 20).

Widespread cheating is undermining some of the most important ideals of American society. The principle of equal opportunity is subverted when those who play by the rules are beaten out by cheaters, as happens every day in academics, sports, business, and other arenas. The belief that hard work is the key to success is mocked when people see, constantly, that success comes faster to those who cut corners. The ideal of equal justice under the law is violated when corporate crooks steal tens of millions of dollars and get slapped on the wrist, while small-time criminals serve long mandatory sentences. (p. 25)

While Callahan is most intent on spelling out the systemic nature of the cheating culture in its many personifications, he does offer suggestions on how to remain true to traditional values that oppose the cheating culture. Additionally, he assures the reader that no era lasts forever, and that there is already growing organized resistance to different aspects of the cheating culture. Other social dynamics also suggest a building correction to this extremity of current culture:

There are already signs that a new big idea may be on the rise—a concept of “life balance,” or what Karabell calls “connectedness.” A drive toward balancing work and acquisition with stronger community and greater personal well-being is emerging amid growing public dissatisfaction with our consumerist, work-obsessed society. Signs of such a trend can be seen in the “downshifting” movement, the fight against sprawl, rising interest in eco-tourism, and much else. However, exactly when—or whether—these disparate trends will metastasize into a full-blown cultural shift remains to be seen. (p. 292)

“What kind of public culture are we allowing?” is as vital a question as what kind of school culture we are allowing, and for the same reason. Humans are a porous life-form, we take in the environment around us, and it becomes us as we adapt and respond to it. In the national media, no less than through in-school communication mediums, we need to be careful what kind of messages we are sending. Norms are powerful currents, and we

will be more successful to the extent we can shape those norms to reflect what we know about healthy human development. In some ways cheating is a slippery slope, beginning with polite lies and honest mistakes that don’t get corrected and working up to corruption and crimes on a grand scale. If “forewarned is forearmed,” then the insightful synthesis at the heart of *The Cheating Culture* will prepare readers to more aptly read the social and cultural dynamics at play and consider how to defend our body politic. Callahan articulately argues that we need a major cultural shift away from cheating, corruption, and privilege and indicates what he sees as the dysfunctional elements of the current culture. Character educators who are used to thinking in terms of the development of traits in individuals may find this discussion of the traits of organizations and cultures a fascinating addition to your understanding of the sociocultural dynamics shaping people’s character development.