

Commentary:

Pedagogy and Praxis in the International Sphere¹

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What is common to all the presentations on this panel is that they encourage attention to the particularities of diverse sociocultural and political spaces and caution against hasty and unexamined applications of compelling theories and practices that have proved their usefulness and value in specific contexts. For instance, Freirean and Marxist pedagogy and Habermasian notions of civil society—while inspirational and potentially transformative—and grand narratives of modernism versus anti-modernism—while offering a convenient method of cataloging the complexities of diverse cultures—may come into conflict with the specific structural realities of the locations charted by the panelists. These locations include Japan in the 1920s and 1930s; post-independence India (newly liberated from British Rule); Quincy, MA, where recently arrived immigrants to the United States attempt to become culturally adept so as to leverage their chances for economic success; Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde in the colonial period under Portuguese rule;² and Islamic societies in the Middle East and Asia in the current historical period. These essays require that we look closely at the realities on the ground before we succumb to the seduction of generalized liberatory praxes or world-explaining theories.

Rika Yonemura introduces a caveat in the theory of liberation. She reminds us that Marxist pedagogy envisions writing as the site and medium to awaken the consciousness of children and initiate the transformation of their oppressive environment. Such a pedagogy was enlisted in the service of spiritually reforming the rural life of farmworkers in 1920s and 1930s Japan. However, while facilitating the emergence of a fully conscious subjectivity among rural farmworkers, Marxist pedagogy paradoxically became the instrument of the State, because the State controlled the shape of the objective reality within which farmworkers actualized their subjectivity. Thus, while Marxist pedagogy led to the creation of an autonomous subject, this autonomous subject could then be appealed to by the State to become a willing and voluntary participant in the State's agenda of development and allegiance to the Emperor. The State created an autonomous peasant subject only to turn around and then mobilize this subject into the State's machinery for wartime ends. A liberatory pedagogy gave rise, as Yonemura says, to the "'new' farmer who is proud of his/her agrarian mission as a producer of staples, who is diligent and actively participates in community building and whose significance is measured ... by his/her contribution to the nation state." Her essay enjoins us to attend to "the subtle form of state power and mobilization" in the deployment of the theory of liberation.

Leor Alcalay offers us the fascinating situation of Quincy College, where he reexamines the fundamental injunction against a banking concept of education in light of his immigrant students' desire for rapid socialization into the cultural landscape of the United States. Alcalay reminds us that "Freire himself cautioned us against the dangers of extrapolating from pedagogies developed within the developing world to contexts, institutions, and populations now in the developed countries." His essay shows us how he draws on Freirean philosophy, yet modifies it to enable his

1. ©Copyright 2004, by Rajini Srikanth. Presented to the 1st Annual Conference-Workshop of the Social Theory Forum, UMass Boston, April 7, 2004 (Panel: "Pedagogy and Praxis in the International Sphere"). **Contact information: rajini.srikanth@umb.edu**

2. [Editors' Note: Saucier's paper was not subsequently submitted for inclusion in this journal.]

adult immigrant students (many of who come with sophisticated cultural competencies rooted in their home cultures and well developed academic literacies in their native languages) to expedite their familiarity with the English language and Western cultural skills. He observes that the task at hand for him is not the “inculcation of basic literacy; rather it is the transfer of literacy skills from one set of realities and educational approaches to another.” Thus, Alcalay complicates the taboo against “banking” education by outlining the very specific parameters of his situation: as the teacher, in this institution with these students and their clearly articulated objectives, he is in fact the “the repository of vital cultural knowledge of which the students are only vaguely ... aware.”

Yonemura and Alcalay focus on pedagogical praxes and their particular applications in specific sociocultural and cultural contexts. Kelli Joseph and Paul Saucier turn our attention to practices of political empowerment and the development of the public sphere of civil society in developing nations—India, in the case of Joseph, and Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde in the case of Saucier.

Joseph examines the theories of Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, and Jurgens Habermas as they apply to the realm of the public and the creation of a civic self to see whether and how these theories can be fully realized in the case of colonial and postcolonial India. Typically, Joseph observes, “civil society is the space where community develops in dialogue with the state ... ; [it] is made up ideally of private individuals acting publicly.” Within this public sphere, Joseph states, “ideas about identity and public life are created, shaped and debated.” However, in colonial India, the public sphere and civic identity developed not in dialogue with the state but in opposition to it, because the state was the colonizing British Empire. And this oppositional mode of development of the civic self had important consequences for individual and national identity in post-independence India. In both colonial and postcolonial India, there was not and is not one homogeneous public sphere but several public spheres that are organized communally, regionally, and linguistically. Within these separate and particularized public spheres, there is a strong resistance to Western influence on culture and spirituality. Thus, while the developing nation may adopt a Western sense of nationhood in the economic sphere, Indian national identity, according to Partha Chatterjee (whom Joseph quotes), developed “within the spiritual and cultural domains ... in marked opposition to Western ideas of individuality and rationality embraced within the political and economic domains.” Thus, Joseph underscores the necessity of engaging the emergence of civil society through a close analysis of the specific sociocultural context of its birth.

Similarly, Paul Saucier’s focus on Amilcar Cabral as a leading figure of anticolonial liberatory struggles is marked by a call to attend to the particularities of the historical and cultural realities of Guinea and Cape Verde. Though inspired by Marxist ideology, Cabral was always conscious of how class struggle would play out in Guinea and Cape Verde. Allegiances and resistances could not be predicted on the basis of abstract Marxist theories but had to be grounded in a solid understanding of the interactional dynamics among peasants, landowners, and the middle class in Guinea and Cape Verde. The role of the bourgeoisie was, in particular, influenced by local circumstances. Whether they would ally with the landowner or the peasant class would depend on the realities on the ground not just economic realities, but cultural ones as well. These cultural realities were also likely to influence the postcolonial condition, Cabral realized. He was especially attuned to the forces of neocolonialism and advocated vigilance against their emergence once the colonizer had departed. It was not enough for Cabral, Saucier reminds us, to overthrow the colonizer of the West if he was simply to be replaced by a domestic oppressor. Saucier’s reading of Cabral as a Marxist liberator keenly aware of his particular landscape of struggle reinforces this panel’s theme of complicating “universal” theories and praxes. No ideology can be transported unaltered into disparate locations.

Khalid Samman’s sharp critique of the West’s narrative of Islamic cultural deficiency and anti-modernism uncovers the hollowness of essentialist readings of peoples and places. In his rejection of Samuel Huntington’s and Bernard Lewis’ reductive polarizations of modern West and pre-modern Islam, Samman echoes Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who finds nothing profitable in this dichotomized vision of the world because it merely feeds the positions of extremists. Samman deplors the division created by global historical forces between Jews and Arabs. “[W]here once there were symbioses[,] there are now enemies. Samman lays the blame for Islamic extremism on “the systemic inequality of modernity, *on a global scale*.” Commentators and historians who fail to see the interdependence among nations, who attribute to innate qualities of a people the source of certain behaviors, will never be able to envision the unequal power relations that give rise to antagonisms, he claims. The disempowerment of the Palestinian people occupies a central position in Samman’s analysis of the misapplication of power, and he cautions against culture-based explanations for the anti-Western stance of Islamic peoples. It is urgent that we reject such essentialist conceptions of groups of people, says Samman. He calls on educators to teach a nuanced narrative of Islam to counteract the pernicious and divisive one promulgated by the likes of Huntington and Lewis. He argues, “We conceptualize the Islamic world as if it were a separate, clearly identifiable civilization that we can teach on its own without a systematic analysis of the larger world that surrounds it.” His parting words to educators are, “While essentialists teach students to think in binaries, teach your students to think in relational terms. Teach them that societies, far from having separate histories, are intertwined and that we must acquire a contrapuntal imagination to capture such a reality.”

Ultimately, what is immensely valuable about all the presentations on this panel is that they point to the dangers of simplified polarities—East/West, developing/developed, oppressive/liberatory, individual/collective—and to the folly of transporting approaches developed in one context into other contexts without considering necessary refinements and modifications.