

Freire vs. Marx:

The Tension Between Liberating Pedagogy and Student Alienation¹

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I think it is important to say that many teachers in U.S. public schools and some colleges often face antagonism, alienation and resistance, which no pedagogy at this moment can reverse.

—U.S. Freirean educator Ira Shor²

I think first that, all the conditions...like ‘culture of silence’ and ‘culture of sabotage’ [among American students] are really expressions of something larger...Secondly, at least in a general way, I think that the aggressive attitude of American students in the classroom is not easily seen in Brazil.

—Paulo Freire³

I wanted to say in discussing the limits of education that all these kinds of cultural expression...such as silence, alienation, sabotage, aggression, have some very, very concrete material reasons in society. And I wanted to add that it is not just through our democratic witness that we change these conditions, even though our witness is required as one important force in making the change. Only social conditions can explain the reactions of students in the classroom and these conditions need more than our democratic pedagogy to be changed.

—Paulo Freire⁴

Although the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was clearly a Marxist, one of Marx’s principle concepts presents a fundamental challenge to the application of Freire’s pedagogy in the United States. Arguably, one of the main obstacles to liberating education in the U.S. is widespread *student alienation*—a condition that is well captured by Marx’s concept of human alienation. One naturally would think that this condition has the potential to obstruct teaching and learning, be they traditional and oppressive or radical and emancipatory. Consequently, one would imagine that for the Freirean approach to really work in the American classroom, it must be capable of counteracting this problem.

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2. Shor, Ira and Freire, Paulo. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Bergin and Garvey: Westport, 1987.

3. Ibid, 125.

4. Ibid, 133.

Below I will describe the tension between the Freirean concept of pedagogy and the Marxist concept of alienation in the U.S. educational context, with special reference to my own experience teaching at a working class state college in Massachusetts. Subsequently, I will discuss other Marxian ideas that can be useful in theorizing a way out of the alienation trap. Specifically, I will explain how the notion of revolutionary agency set forth by Marx and especially the complex conceptions of revolutionary strategy and popular political consciousness developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci suggest that the alienation pitfall may not be as serious as we might think. Again, I will refer to my teaching experiences to illustrate and corroborate this point.

FREIREAN PEDAGOGY AND THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Paulo Freire is well known for having developed a student-centered teaching approach that assists learners in developing an awareness of their oppression. Very simply put, Freire maintained educators could facilitate revolutionary political consciousness by first engaging students in dialogue about specific problems and issues in their everyday lives and then encouraging them to make connections with broader exploitative social structures and relationships. He presented this approach as an alternative to traditional teaching that stresses teacher monologue about and student regurgitation of facts that are disconnected from, irrelevant to, or even supportive of students' subordination.¹

Because Freire initially developed and employed his pedagogy among Brazilian peasants, it is natural that educators in advanced capitalist countries such as the United States would wonder whether it could be applied effectively among their very different sorts of students in a very different sociopolitical context. I personally recall that this concern was a central issue discussed in my own undergraduate and graduate courses on Freire at Cornell University in the early 1980s. Later, I encountered entire books devoted largely to this matter—including *Pedagogies for the Non-Poor* and *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, the latter of which comprises an extended discussion between Freirean teacher Ira Shor and Freire himself.² A key question posed in the above Freirean reflections was: How is it possible to foster critical consciousness among the many students in the U.S. who seem to be strongly disengaged from academic learning in general—especially those who are part of the subordinate class majority?

EDUCATIONAL ALIENATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

It is common knowledge that the vast majority of American students at various levels are highly alienated from academics and intellectual work. Clearly, those of us who've been through the public school system (especially in working class and inner city schools) don't need a sociologist to tell us this. From our own primary and secondary school experience, we readily can recall the overt hatred, grudging acceptance, and multifaceted resistance characteristic of the great preponderance of students and often clearly evident in the classroom. Those of us who have gone on to teach in public schools or have had school age children know that the problem has persisted and perhaps worsened over the past generation.

Recent surveys illustrate, but in my view significantly underestimate, the hugeness of the problem. For example, in 2002 an annual study of incoming (September 2001) college freshmen by UCLA's Higher Education Institute found that: "A record high 41.1 percent of those surveyed report that they were bored in their high school classes, while only 34.9 percent report studying or working on assignments for more than six hours per week, the lowest figure since the question was first asked in 1987."³

In the fall of 2001 through the present, in the first few years of my first teaching job in a working class college in eastern Massachusetts, I encountered a wide range of indications that alienation is prevalent and deeply imbedded among college students. All of the courses I taught (including Social Theory, Social Class, Political Sociology, and Social Problems) attempted to highlight various social injustices. All placed a heavy emphasis on discussion of students' own relevant ideas and experiences. Nevertheless, I found that most students routinely did not read assignments unless forced to do so by the accompanied assignment of graded reaction statements—regardless of the appeal, degree of difficulty, or length of the reading. (In my first semester at the college, a popular colleague who was nearing retirement bluntly informed me that, "Our students don't read.") Also, I discovered that most students did not attend class

1. See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum: New York, 1970.

2. Evans, Alice Frazier et al. *Pedagogies for the Non-Poor*. Orbis: Maryknoll, 1987. Also see note 1.

3. From the National Education Association's April 2002 *Higher Education* newsletter.

regularly unless they were forced to do so by having attendance count as a major part of the final grade. A large chunk of students refused to participate in discussion unless directly called upon or provoked by extreme or outlandish statements from other students or the professor. Another sizeable portion engaged in commentary entirely uninformed by the reading. Most students rarely asked self-initiated questions about the reading. Sleeping, talking, doing e-mail, and surfing the Internet in class were not uncommon.¹ Any occasion for canceling class, ending class early, or canceling reading assignments was met with unmitigated joy. Massive plagiarism both in its overt and subtle forms was not uncommon. Meanwhile, very few students ever bothered to pick up their final papers—chock full my comments—after the semester was over. Meanwhile, close to 95% of my students, when asked about their reason for attending college mentioned getting a decent job as their sole motivation. Very few pointed to knowledge for its own sake or to self-enrichment as a goal of education. Those students that I would characterize as consistently intellectually engaged, emotionally connected, or serious about their learning experience, constituted a small minority. There were no more than a few of them in classes that typically ranged from fifteen to thirty five students. Articles and letters by other professors in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and conversations with colleagues at other working class institutions suggest that the manifestations of student alienation I've described above are truly widespread in colleges across the country, the clear majority of which serve essentially the same working class demographic group.²

EDUCATIONAL ALIENATION INTERPRETED IN TERMS OF MARXIST CONCEPT OF ALIENATION

In order to fully comprehend the problem above, to perceive its deeper philosophical meaning and psychological implications, it is useful to consider how contemporary student alienation may be viewed through the lens of the Marxist theory.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx analyzed various facets of human “alienation.” Generally, he conceptualized alienation as constituting a profound separation of individuals from their true human nature—their natural experience of and relationships with themselves, their environment, their activities, and others. Mostly in the *Manuscripts* but also elsewhere in his writing, Marx identified the following elements of alienation in capitalist society:

- 1) workers' lack of meaningful connection to their labor (which becomes just a means to economic survival because it is controlled by capitalists);
- 2) workers' loss of their diverse range of talents and skills (due to the specialization required by the division of labor);
- 3) workers' loss of their ability to fulfill certain basic human needs (such as, in the case of the factory worker—clean air, dependable housing, and appropriate exercise);
- 4) workers' exaggeration of their “animal” needs like eating, drinking, and sex (in compensation for the deprivation of the need for spontaneous, self-directed, creative labor);
- 5) workers' adaptation of a wide range of false needs (through manipulation by commodity-hawking capitalists);
- 6) workers' disconnection from other workers (a consequence of the competition for jobs and wages);
- 7) capitalists' disconnection from workers (due to the exploitative relationship);
- 8) capitalists' disconnection from themselves (due to their own dehumanization—the consequence of exploiting workers and being driven by their wealth into laziness and overindulgence).

Marx argued that capitalism naturally produced these many forms of alienation and that only a revolution that abolished classes and private property ultimately could eliminate them.³

We readily can see how different forms of educational alienation closely correspond to the exact varieties of worker alienation just listed. Here, limiting myself to the college setting for the sake of simple illustration, I substitute educational actors for the economic actors just mentioned. In so doing, we find that educational alienation may come in

1. It was simultaneously fascinating and discouraging to see how the new wireless laptop computers were becoming a prime enabler of intellectual avoidance. The college's administration, which had vociferously argued that the technology greatly would enhance learning, recently had made the technology mandatory for incoming freshmen.

2. It is worth noting that, contrary to the popular image, only a small minority of colleges in the U.S. are the “elite” type that primarily draws upper middle and upper class students. Sociologists Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong report that, “The number of elite schools in the United States that confer great advantages on their graduates probably numbers about thirty, or less than 1 percent of all the colleges and universities in the country.” (*New Class Society*. Rose and Littlefield: Lanham, 2003: 224.)

3. See “The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” “Alienation and Social Classes,” and part A.1. of “The German Ideology” in Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Norton: 1978.

the following forms:

- 1) students' lack of meaningful connection to their studies (which become just a means to economic survival because they are controlled by professors and administrators);
- 2) students' loss of their diverse range of talents and skills (due to the specialization required by the division of labor—manifest in the need to “major” and choose a related, financially viable occupation);
- 3) students' loss of their ability to fulfill certain basic human needs (dependable housing, appropriate exercise and sleep, sufficient social contact—all effected by the cost of education, volume of academic work, and the necessity to work many hours at an outside job in order to pay tuition and fees);
- 4) students' exaggeration of their “animal” needs like drinking and sex (in compensation for the deprivation of the need for spontaneous, self-directed, creative labor and study);
- 5) students' adaptation of a wide range of false needs (through the manipulation by commodity-hawking capitalists..., e.g., video games, cell phones, designer clothes, and many other non-essential commodities pitched especially to the young);
- 6) students' disconnection from other students' (a consequence of the competition for grades);
- 7) professors and administrators disconnection from students (due to the oppressive, undemocratic relationship);
- 8) professors and administrators disconnection from themselves (due to their own dehumanization—the consequence of oppressing students).

Following Marx, one would argue that the existing educational system (itself an ideological and occupational apparatus of capitalism) naturally produces these many forms of alienation and that only a revolution that abolishes the inequalities within schools as we know them and the larger economic system of which they are integral parts, can ultimately eliminate them.

LIBERATING PEDAGOGY AND ALIENATION

Depressingly, we might surmise from the statement at the end of the last section that nothing short of a dramatic anti-capitalist revolution can create the context within which liberating education can flourish in the United States. We might well suppose that the kind of pervasive and intense student alienation found at my college would make Freirean pedagogy totally ineffective. How, after all, can one hope to discuss important themes and issues in students' lives and make deeper sociological and political connections if most students resist speaking as well as reading and perhaps even thinking? This is why we might conclude, as does Marx in his more materialist moments, that only an extraordinary change in the social conditions (capitalist relations of production) underlying that form of consciousness (alienation) can lead to its emancipatory transformation.

However, other strands of Marxist thought may lead us to less pessimistic conclusions. To begin with, Marx himself did recognize that there is some important role for human will in the alteration of social conditions. Freire, highlighting the necessity of intervention in the existing society by revolutionary educators, cites a pertinent comment by Marx: “The materialist doctrine that men are the product of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are product of changed other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change the circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating.”¹

More directly germane, early 20th Century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci suggested that schools in capitalist society are precisely one of the major sites in which social struggle from below can be effectively waged. He argued that revolutionaries in the West need to focus not on overthrowing the state (which is too fortified) but on transforming civil society/culture. Having witnessed fascist takeover in his country in the 1930s, he realized that the critical battle in modern capitalism was for the hearts and minds of the general population. Consequently, he maintained that radicals needed to foster anti-systemic ideas through everyday avenues of ideological transmission, including schools. Importantly, Gramsci knew that aspiring consciousness raisers would encounter various reactive, distorted modes of social thought and feeling among the public (shaped by subordination and indoctrination). However, he clearly believed that these sentiments need not fundamentally obstruct people's openness to basic critical interpretations.²

1. From Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum: New York, 2000, p. 53; taken from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*.

2. Forgacs, David (ed.), *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. New York University Press: New York, 2000: 70-72, 222-230, 380-381 and Ch. 6, 10 and 1, and Boggs, Carl. *Gramsci's Marxism*. London: Pluto Press, 1976: Ch. 3.

If Gramsci was right, then contrary to what one would expect, the reactive, distorted state here labeled “alienation” may be able to coexist with a substantial receptivity to conscientization. In other words, alienation may not be as huge an obstacle to conscientization as we might think.

Indeed, this is what I have found in my teaching practice. Despite the severe educational alienation that affects my students (and by extension, me, though I’m reluctant to admit it), I have seen that substantial conscientization does occur anyway. Throughout the semester, many students do comment (especially, but not exclusively when probed) that some aspect of our discussions or the reading has made them a lot more aware of particular political, economic or social injustices. The problems of wealth concentration, poverty, and imperialism are among those that they highlight most often, seemingly due to the relative obviousness of their unfairness or connection to human suffering. At the end of each semester, those final papers that so many students neglect to pick up after they’ve been graded often have revealed a very substantial growth in students’ perception of societal inequalities and inequities. I often am very pleasantly surprised.

CONCLUSION

I began this paper by suggesting that there would appear to be an inherent contradiction between Freirean pedagogy and the type of student alienation common in the United States. I noted that many manifestations of my own students’ alienation would lead one to expect that conscientization among such students is virtually impossible. I implied that this ultimately could reflect a basic incompatibility between the ideas of Freire, a Marxist, and Marx himself. However, I subsequently noted that certain Marxian (particularly Gramscian) ideas do in fact highlight the capacity of the revolutionary intellectual to help raise the political consciousness of ordinary people, even in the face of such troublesome mind states as profound intellectual alienation. I concluded by relating that my own teaching experience, contrary to what one might expect, essentially does validate this more optimistic Marxian views.

There is an encouraging implication of this finding for those of us who are committed to liberating education—not only within schools but also through grassroots political activism. We may make much more of an impact on people whom we seek to educate than some of their behavior suggests. Those who appear to be alienated nonetheless may be affected substantially by our critical pedagogy.