

Marxist-Humanism and Critical Pedagogy

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I have tried to develop revolutionary critical pedagogy as an anti-capitalist, pro-socialist pedagogy. In this pedagogy I have tried to draw attention to class struggle as the engine of social transformation.

In my work, I don't like to use the word classism or socio-economic status. Because, for one thing, socioeconomic status is a term that naturalizes the division of labor-- we tend to accept that, for normal reasons, some classes are more advantaged in our society, and others are less so, and perhaps this is just a result of human nature or individual merit, or biological advantages and so on; furthermore, class is not, and cannot, be an 'ism.' Class exploitation is constitutive of our society; it just "is" and therefore is not an "ism." Capitalism relies on the exploitation of human labor. It relies on formally free labor that in reality is unfree labor (a case clearly made in Marx's *Capital*, volume one). Capital is a social relation and constitutes the ground of exploitation in capitalist society. While exploitation and oppression are often racialized, and viciously so, for example, that does not mean racism can be reduced to class exploitation but the two are very much inextricably related.

The relationship between capital and labor, I believe, represents the most fundamental antagonism in capitalist societies. Racism helps keep capitalism's reproductive juggernaut advancing in its various heinous modalities and vampire-like incarnations of power, because of labor market competition which sees capitalists--or, more accurately, the transnational capitalist elite -- consciously and unconsciously pit different ethnic groups against each other in order to create racial divisions. White workers fall into the racist trap of feeling they belong to a superior race, and this blinds them to their real interests, which should be working-class solidarity. Racism often keeps white workers from recognizing that it is in their interests to unite with their black and brown brothers and sisters and fight their capitalist bosses.

Eric Williams has written that slavery was not a result of racism, but racism was a result of slavery, that is, it resulted from one of the most monstrous crimes of capitalism: the systemic slavery of Africans within the plantocracies of North America and the West Indies. The idea that Africans were naturally inferior to Europeans, justified denying them the rights of Englishmen and systematically enslaving them. Racist ideology became a weapon of class wealth. Capitalism needed a justification for slavery because capitalism relied, at least on the surface, on free wage labor, formally free that is (but not in reality). So in order for capitalism to exploit slave labor, it required racist ideology to justify its use of unfree wage labor. Of course the plantocracy would have loved to enslave English indentured servants, too, but the enslavement of already arrived immigrants would have created a context that would have prevented future immigration to the so-called New World and it would have provoked widespread armed conflict, at a time when issues of legal equality and the rights of men were being debated (the rights of men, not women, and those of white, European men). The landowners had limited power over the indentured white servants, but that did not prevent them from loathing them just the same.

The racist ideology that survived abolition could be seen in the brutal colonization of Latin America and Africa, for instance, by a handful of European and Western powers. Today racist ideology persists in the corporate media, in popular culture, in the social sciences, and in the very languages and theories of knowledge that we take for granted, contributing to epistemologies of empire, epistemologies of ignorance and forms of epistemological genocide or epistemicide, where, as a result of the coloniality of power, indigenous knowledges continue to be thrown into

the dustbin of history. In tandem with participating in class struggle, we need to begin a systematic delinking from epistemologies of empire. We need to decolonize our pedagogies, our schools, our universities, beginning with the very vocabularies of liberation that we use to fight domination and exploitation.

I agree with Paulo Freire that education is a necessary but not sufficient instrument in history's arsenal of transformation. Education can help us achieve the kind of class consciousness necessary for a powerful social transformation. This is accomplished through what Raya Dunayevskaya, following her understanding of Marx and Hegel (paying particular attention to Hegel's self-referential negation in which negation frees itself from its dependency on an external object), referred to as "absolute negativity" as the seed of social transformation.

Summarizing some insights made by Anne Fairchild Pomeroy in her review of Raya's work [<http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/books/power-of-negativity/#tab-3>], the first negation occurs when we negate our status as objects of history, when we refuse to be commodities in the service of neoliberal capital, when we shout a resounding "no" to serving as wage labor for capital. I am NOT wage labor. Here, the emphasis is on the NOT. When we become self-conscious of our act of negating our role as wage labor for capital, that is, when we become more educated and self-reflective about it, then we then are participating in a second negation, and this is greatly facilitated by the kind of self-reflexivity taught by critical educators.

Education can help individuals HEAR their denial of their status as capitalist labor, they can help individuals see the positive content of their original act of negation, and thus help them recognize their own act of self-determination. I AM not capital. Here the emphasis is on the AM. Individuals in this second negation become more self-conscious about their power to become subjects of history. In Pomeroy's terms, individuals recognize themselves as the ones with the power to say no, as the very source of the negation, and thus they become through this recognition the subject of the movement of history itself. I think a critical education should help students recognize themselves as the source of the valorization of capital, but also as the source of capital's undoing and that individuals have the capacity to alter what it is about their world that they no longer want to be—slaves to capital. They begin take charge of their own creative capacities and realize it is possible to build a future outside of capital's value form, outside of the social universe of capital and value production itself. When individuals realize the power of their acts of negation but simultaneously understand this negativity as their positivity, then they realize that it is through their great refusal than ideas a produced anew. Students begin to realize that mere acts of negation are inadequate to changing the world. All movement is the negation of what is.

As Pomeroy notes, what is, might not be, and what is not yet, might be. But acts of negation that move beyond mere acts of negation are those that negate the negation itself, and this occurs when we recognize the positivity of acts of negation as negativity. We are all beings of negativity. We are dialectical beings and our self-determination is our absolute right. The negation of the negation is the return of human beings to themselves, as we recognize that capitalism is that which enslaves the negative, it requires the subservience of this critical self-consciousness, of the I AM not wage labor. Here we find the freedom to create organizational forms that will enable us to live outside of capital's value form, here we find the freedom in our particular acts of struggle that we also recognize is absolute freedom, because negation is the source of all movement. We recognize that there is no freedom that does not simultaneously will the freedom of the other, and that as Pomeroy notes, our form of being becomes the Absolute Idea (in Hegel's terms), that is, our simultaneous individual and universal realization that I am the movement of the real, that my own self-consciousness takes on the burden of freedom, of responsibility of sociality.