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Education as a Means of Mental Production that Develops Class Consciousness

In “Redemption Song,” Bob Marley calls listeners to “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery! None but ourselves can free our minds!” In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (“The Illusion of the Epoch”). Schools are the institutionalized centers of mental production in society, which serve to educate the nation’s youth in the ideas and values of the ruling class: meritocracy, the possibility of social mobility, and the morality of work, among others. The ruling ideas in society, according to Marx, are “nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships...the ideas of [the ruling class’s] dominance” (“The Illusion of the Epoch”). Education under capitalism is necessarily bourgeois education, a socializing process that reproduces the existing class structure through ideological and structural means.

Marx’s theory of estranged labor under capitalism usefully applies to the American education system, in addition to traditional industrial spheres. Marx asserts that only revolutionary change - specifically, the abolition of the class system - will rectify the alienation and estrangement implicit in work under capitalism (*Manifesto of the Communist Party)*. However, when one recognizes teachers and students as workers alienated from the process and product of their labor and constrained by the administrative class, a unique opportunity for collective action arises. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Pablo Freire contrasts alienation with “authentic liberation,” which he defines as “the process of humanization.” Notably, Freire’s conception of liberatory education centers the development of “critical consciousness” and “consciousness as consciousness of

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consciousness" (Freire 79-81). The shared positioning and power of teachers and students as workers make possible a humanizing system of teaching and learning that fosters class consciousness, in place of the present alienating and proselytizing system that denies class struggle. The educational sphere represents an opportunity to return to what Marx's theory of estrangement implies is the original position of work. The imperative transference of authority from school administrators to teachers and students rests on acknowledging students and teachers as the co-creators of learning (a relationship Freire writes about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and as natural allies in the struggle for quality education as a public good.

In "Estranged Labour," Marx illustrates how workers are alienated from the labor process, from the labor product, from their species-being, and from other people ("Estranged Labour"). Students are both consumers of the commodity of education and coerced laborers within the school institution. Freire contrasts "education as the practice of freedom" with "education as the practice of domination," or what he often calls "banking education" with the "goal of deposit-making" (Freire 79-81). In the banking model of education, consciousness is "an empty vessel to be filled" and the cognizable objects of learning are "owned" by the teacher: "The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition" (Freire) To quote Marx, the learning process itself is "active alienation" ("Estranged Labour"). Moreover, educational institutions alienate vulnerable students in a process of stratification: through accelerated tracks, some 'smart' students have a chance at social mobility, while 'less promising' students (a characterization compounded by class power and racism) are condemned to remedial tracks. Still, both privileged and disadvantaged students are estranged from the product of their labor, which acquires value only after being graded by a teacher. Thus, the labor product is commodified. High school and college

degrees are themselves commodified and fetishized, acquiring varying levels of exchange value or social capital and generally estranging the process of schooling from learning ("The Fetishism of Commodities"). Moreover, the unequally distributed commodity of education estranges students from one another by offering a "competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions" (Labaree 42).

While teachers appear to be the owners of the means of production, at least in relation to students, teachers are similarly constrained and alienated from the process and product of their labor by school administrators and the rising influence of the corporate reform movement in education, as illustrated in Diane Ravitch's book *Reign of Error.* Describing federal education policy, Ravitch writes that "many teachers were disheartened by No Child Left Behind, which overemphasized standardized testing. Obama's Race to the Top proved even more discouraging than NCLB because it directly targets teachers as the source of student success or failure" (Ravitch 116). The neoliberal strategy of "test-based performance pay" or "merit pay" for teachers - part of a larger system of carrot-and-stick policies that reward or punish teachers for student test scores - is demoralizing and alienating for teachers, who "see themselves as professionals, not just employees. They don't like the idea that non-educators (and most of the reformers are non-educators or have only taught for a few years) are redesigning the rules of their workplace and profession" (Ravitch 116). Merit pay not only fails to motivate teachers or improve student performance, but results in Marx's fourth type of alienation - alienation from other workers: Ravitch writes that merit pay "typically caused resentment and dissension among teachers who did not get merit pay" (Ravitch 120). She further argues that this strategy results in "bad education, whether it is a narrow curriculum or a school that expends disproportionate

amounts of time testing and preparing for testing" (Ravitch 122). Thus, in the corporate reform movement's emphasis on test scores, one recognizes "the degradation of white-collar work" that Matthew Crawford describes in "Shop Class as Soulcraft": "the cognitive elements of the job are appropriated from professionals, initiated in a system of process, and then handed back to a new class of workers - clerks - who replace the professionals" (Crawford 22). The insidious results of these policies can be understood within the corporate reform movement's strong opposition to teacher's unions and their demands for higher salaries: "skilled workers can be replaced with unskilled workers at a lower rate of pay" (Crawford 19).

In sum, it is the educational reformers - the capitalist ruling class themselves - who advocate for, as Marx writes, "revolutionising the instruments of production" within the public education system (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*): charter schools and vouchers ("school choice"), online schools, standardized testing, and merit pay, among other innovative "reforms," protect ruling class hegemony through the "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions" (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*). When administrators and reformers - most of whom have no experience teaching - blame teachers for the *crisis* of our *failing* public schools, "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned": "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify" (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*).

Thus, neither students nor teachers own the means of mental production within schools. Instead, outside administrative pressures increasingly estrange them from the cognitive elements of their work, giving teachers and students a shared incentive for greater autonomy. Freire proposes a more equal relationship between teacher and student, reconciling their seemingly contradictory

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goals: “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the- teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire 80).

The vital and irreplaceable role of public school teachers becomes glaringly apparent with the suspension of daily life that occurs during teacher strikes and, to a lesser extent in America, during student protests. Notably, Marx writes that, through estranged labor, the worker “creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product” (“Estranged Labour”). If the worker creates the hegemony of the owner, as Marx implies, the worker must have the power to un-create this relationship. For instance, educational reformers have yet to find a widely acceptable alternative for union-organized public school teachers, although not for a lack of trying. Teachers-students and students-teachers can unite to preserve the cognitive aspects of their work by continuing to call not for a revolution but for a relinquishing of autonomy and authority, liberation and esteem from the administrative class to the *true creators* of mental production in schools.

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