

“ATTENTION EDUCATIONAL PROFESSORIATE, ET AL.: PHILOSOPHY FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION”

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Introduction

The following is representative of the Program Notes (hand-outs) provided New York State Foundations Of Education Association (NYSFEA) members, et al. who attended the conference at Cortland and who heard my keynote address. This comparatively brief paper has been drawn from a much longer work that was prepared for presentation at the American Educational Research Association meeting held in 2000. The purpose of this longer work was to familiarize colleagues in teacher education with some of the main arguments; points of view scholarly references; as well as historical, sociological, economic, political, and cultural contexts to be found within my book: *Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000). This book (henceforth referred to as *PSCCDE*) manifests my views on what I consider to be some of the most important knowledge, arguments, and pedagogies for teaching philosophy of education - within the social foundations of education. The making of this book has occurred over my career as a teacher, which began in 1962. The debt owed to my mentor, Professor G. Max Wingo, is evident throughout *PSCCDE*. The longer paper that was prepared for AERA will be sent to the interested requester. My addresses are: rabrosio@yahoo.com and N64 W30949 Cindy Court, Hartland, WI 53029.

Section I: chapters 1 & 2

Philosophy and philosophy of education are too important to be discourses for professionals alone. There are many reasons for this: the first one being epistemological, namely, the absence of certainty

and the futility of the quest for it. Second, the broad inclusion in discourse and related political action are morally binding if one assumes that intelligence is widespread throughout various populations. The necessary attempts to find middle ground between the historical quests for certainty (all failures thus far) and the dangerous retreat into radical relativism must be joined by everyone who seeks to construct criteria allowing us to decide among various better(s) and worse(s). The middle ground, which I support, makes possible personal and collective action even if *warranted assertibility* is the best claim for doing one thing instead of another. The unsuccessful quests for certainty and the resulting retreat to relativism and cynicism have both conspired to delude all too many people into thinking that progressive, democratic, inclusive educational and political projects aimed at securing more social justice are neither conceivable nor possible.

The classical Greeks can be credited with inventing Western philosophy because they had a need to - and confidence in - being able to construct explanatory models allowing comparative understanding and mastery of the mysterious and problematic. This project has helped make possible historical struggles to achieve various “dignities,” for example, religious, philosophical, political, socioeconomic, psychological, etc. The original elite claims to rationality, morality, educability, and political voice/power have been joined by many of those who were originally and too long excluded.

Despite their limitations, the Greek philosophers’ achievements provide a starting point for my “Blueprint, Philosophical Scaffolding, and Main Construction” in the first chapter of *PSCCDE*. They attempted to understand things holistically; insisted that concepts of the common good (as well as pluribus) could be developed; believed it was possible to grasp patterns underlying seemingly random occurrences; acknowledged tensions between volition and confining structures; etc. These accomplishments are central to my overall project aimed at education for **more**: participatory democracy, social justice, and respect for diversity.

The second chapter is called “The Unsuccessful Quest For Certainty: From Classical Greece to Postmodernist World (dis)Order.” I argue that, in spite of the necessary /understandable historical insistence on having effective and reliable knowledge about the world and ourselves, this insistence has served authoritarians all too well - especially when effective and reliable are confused with certainty. Furthermore, the meanings of effective, reliable and, certain must be democratically decided upon within the daylight of public spaces. This chapter also includes discussion of the dominant school-education tradition in the US; namely, educational essentialism that is backed by philosophical idealism (realism and neo-realism), and political conservatism. I champion those who have struggled against this triumvirate: democratic Marxist, progressive-pragmatist-liberal, Freirean, Liberationist, socialist feminist, African American, and some postmodernist thinkers-activists. These comrades have labored to construct “rational,” secular, publicly accountable systems of human knowledge and ethical criteria that are open-ended, fallible, and based upon radical democratization of the epistemic subject’s inclusion and participation.

Section II: chapters 3 & 4

Democratic Marxist thought is part of Western philosophy that places **us** at the center of its analysis and concern. Chapter 3 is called “Various Reds: Historical Materialism, Critical Theory, and the Openness of History.” Marx’s historical materialism situates us in the concrete materiality of everyday life. Furthermore, he argues that there are dialectical relations between our ideas and our complex relations with material/economic, social, political conditions, and the “natural” environment. Historical materialism holds that we make our own histories: however, neither under conditions of our own choosing nor just as we like. History is open to human effort, although there are no guarantees.

Marx believed that many times we experience our world as alien and unjust because it has been constructed mainly by oppressors and

their agents - all too often assisted by our unenlightened selves. He saw the capitalist system as the most powerful secular force on earth. The historical task to be accomplished by those who had only their labor to offer the market was to learn that capitalism is neither good for them nor inevitable/unchangeable! Although Marx wrote little about schooling, he belongs to the company of “subversive” educators who seek to call things by their “correct” names.

Gramsci elaborated further on the worker-intellectual education required for collective liberation and the construction of a new democratic civil society, government, and moral economy. Both he and Marx realized that we could change that which we study and in the process change ourselves. These Reds knew that the working classes must ultimately free **ourselves**.

Gramsci grasped the little realized fact that all persons are educable. This makes him especially relevant to contemporary educational problems and possibilities. He was convinced that everyone has a culture and is potentially an “intellectual,” in the sense that we operate in contexts composed of ideas/representations of how things are, how they came to be, and how/why they could be changed. Antonio Gramsci’s belief that ordinary people have abilities leads logically to his insistence that good education’s main goal must be self-governance. For him, democracy means that every citizen can govern and that society must place us in the general conditions - via schooling and education in the broader sense - to achieve the knowledge, dispositions and tools to do just that! Gramsci was a transitional figure between Marx and the Frankfurt School, in part because he and they dealt with the workers’ failure to make a revolution, due in large part to the brute realities of fascism.

Central to Herbert Marcuse’s work is a depiction of what he called a one-dimensional person and society. This was caused by monopoly capitalism’s (backed by the class State) power to control production, distribution, and the formulation of desire itself via the “hidden persuaders” of advertising. Marcuse referred to the propa-

ganda of integration as a totality that characterizes a one-dimensional society - but one that is (or once was) formally democratic. This class society is both “democratic” and not free. Market “choices” become substitutes for authentic participatory democracy. Marcuse became an important civic educator by raising questions about how we could understand our conditions as well as the possibilities and difficulties involved in liberatory, collective action.

Marcuse and his colleagues wrestled with the difficulties caused by fear that “reason” was a frail reed upon which to depend. They attempted to fashion an improved version of reason within concrete historical situations, while at the same time arguing that it was necessary/possible to get beyond mere description. Contemporary teachers should continue to think about how we can move beyond the givens and “descriptive is” of schools and society. The Frankfurt theorists encouraged us to compare and criticize the “descriptive is” in the name of the humanly constructed “normative ought.”

The discourse favored by Critical Theorists, including Jurgen Habermas, is based on a historical community of discussants who use our intelligences to practice non-specialized versions of the scientific method. This is compatible with Dewey’s work. Habermas’s goal was a form of intersubjective agreements about reason, justice, and the common good(s). Educators can learn from his work, especially his presentation of non-coercive discourse within which we learn to consider others as contributors rather than opponents. Such discourse is necessary within schools and societies that are highly diverse in terms of class, race, ethnic, gender and other “identity” factors.

Chapter 4, “Saved By A Method: Science, Dewey, The Progressive Protest - And A Whiff of Reconstruction,” may be more familiar to educators than what precedes it. Therefore the text before you on this chapter will be comparatively brief. I stress the fact that Deweyan inquiry is based on pragmatist philosophy’s (albeit imperfect) attempt to anticipate consequences of personal and collective

actions. Although uncertainty cannot be overcome we can establish and rely on certain “facts” as well as “locate necessary and effective resources with which to decide intelligently.” The temporary attainment of “warranted assertibility” is a significant achievement. Dewey’s “complete act of thought” is useful to my radical, secular, democratic project because it helps us distinguish better from worse. It can assist us in figuring out differences between what is desired and what **should** be desired. Various Reds call it the “education of desire.” Dewey’s famous denunciation of the quest for certainty places him within the historical project characterized by broad, democratic, epistemological input as we seek to construct meanings within the thickness of everyday life. Deweyan education belongs in PSCCDE because it consists of relentless efforts to achieve comparative/transitory mastery over what is initially problematic. For Dewey and his best followers, democracy is all of one piece: the alternative is immoral authoritarianism. Professor Salvatore D’Urso has argued that Dewey’s educational philosophy and suggested practices could provide a non-deterministic Marxism with the educational ingredients it lacks.

Section III: chapters 5, 6, & 7

Chapter 5 is called “Existential Contingency, We May Just Be On Our Own - And Camus’s Solidarity.” Existentialists go beyond Marx and Dewey with regard to places on the continuum consisting of certainty and the lack thereof. Existentialists argue that although both Marx and Dewey correctly place us within the material social order, they do not address the deepest human experiences - where fear and trembling begin. Both philosophers are accused of relying on certain foundational structures, historical laws, and the scientific method to replace the alleged certainties of the older intellectual/philosophical regimes. Existentialists face up bravely to the stark openness of history.

In spite of our being condemned to be free and the inability to achieve clear-cut distinctions between good and evil - or even better

or worse - I maintain that Camus helps us understand there are ideas and actions that are warranted in their assertibility. The connections between ideas and actions are dependent upon intellectually aware, brave, and solidaristic actors. Camus asserts that our ameliorative efforts can only “diminish arithmetically” the suffering of this world, **but** this constitutes betterment of great significance!

Camus writes of real people who act altruistically and in solidarity at many important times of our lives. We do so in the absence of transcendental or earthly guarantees. He understood well that we help one another against various plagues and celebrate our small, fragile victories. Albert Camus saw history as the stories of struggles against those who would humiliate us. He and other “existentialists” have not been afraid to employ fiction, aesthetics, the emotive, and expanded concepts of reason in order to move beyond and underneath the cardboard figures that characterize some so-called liberatory movements.

Existentialist educators seek to help students become more aware of themselves as choosers and shapers of their own (and some others’) lives. This awareness constitutes a supremely human zone wherein knowledge, understanding, and value creation move beyond teachers and texts - as well as far beyond high-stakes, standardized tests! Existentialist educators present the world and ourselves as “under construction.” There are significant differences and incompatibilities among Marxist, Deweyan, and existentialist thought and projects. However, I maintain that there are also syncretic and synergistic possibilities and realities among them

Chapter 6, “Liberationists: Freire And Various Spiritualists,” presents thinkers who, and ideas that, are supportive of what has already been presented in PSCCDE. Looking beyond chapter 6, we shall encounter socialist-feminists, African-American philosophers, ecological Greens, and some postmodernists who may be seen as supportive of the cast of characters presented in the earlier chapters.

Freire's radical contributions to PSCCDE are based on his conviction that everyone deserves to have "voice" and the necessary educational, political, and economic means to translate naming and critique into progressive structural and institutional changes. His insistence on the democratization of voice and political efficacy is scaffolded by his belief (like Gramsci's) that intelligence is widespread. Paulo Freire's educational project, like Dewey's, denounced the essentialist practice of trying to fill students' allegedly empty minds with "essential-official knowledge" by teachers. Similar to Marx and other radical democrats, Freire argued that people/learners must free **ourselves**. However, he realized the necessary roles of teacher-leaders. Like Habermas, Freire valued dialogue as necessary for understanding and collective action (praxis). Freire, Gramsci, and Marx did not deny that education is "political." In agreement with Camus, Freire saw people as firmly grounded within existentially rich lives and struggles. This view is very different from some postmodernist portrayals of free-floating, atomistic, sometimes aimless, and decidedly weak epistemic subjects who are said to swim in seas of ever-changing signifiers and meanings.

Freire's language of hope, utopian vision, and decisive action is characteristic also of the prophetic church of Latin America. The Liberation Church does not seek to escape into the realm of dreams; instead it demands knowledge and action within the world. Neither Freire nor his liberationist-spiritualist comrades think it is possible to see a clear light from amidst the thickets and darkness of everyday life. Liberation theologians and philosophers argue that the poor and oppressed are the principal historical agents of progressive historical change. This assertion broadens and changes Marx's earlier championing of the European and North American working classes. Freire, liberationists, and some spiritualists note the failure of Western philosophy and theology to extend demands for freedom and justice to the "immense world of the excluded" beyond the Northern Hemisphere.

Secularists are justified in their wariness about organized reli-

gions' alliances with various oppressive regimes. I am suspicious of historical and present tendencies by all too many religionists to be dependent on mysticism, obscurantism, and authoritarianism, all of which are based on putative certainties. However, secular, radical democrats must not be insensitive to what may lie beyond overly restrictive/reductive definitions of rationality and factualness. Various spiritualists and religionists are to be welcomed into progressive school and societal alliances. The price of admission is that all must refrain from pushing special and "inerrant" claims on the rest of us.

Chapter 7, "The Politics of Identity: The Struggle For Human Dignity Is Expanded," presents intellectual and political projects by and for women and African Americans as they sought to be included in - but change significantly - the best of Western philosophical, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and educational rights/benefits. I argue in concert with Nancy Fraser that whereas class politics demand resource redistribution, identity politics are aimed at gaining recognition. However, once this separation is considered seriously it is possible to view struggles for redistribution and recognition as related.

I maintain that it has been within the inevitable relationships to the political economy as workers and to the polity as citizens (or non-citizens) that gendered and raced actors have their greatest opportunities to recognize and combat effectively various forms of oppression. The necessary intellectual analysis allowing us to understand the advantages of being workers and citizens has been done mainly by those whose class position has allowed them the time and space to do it

Women, African Americans, et al. have all too often been misrepresented or not recognized in the Western philosophical canon. Western philosophers defined the possession of reason as the *sine qua non* of humanness and being able to make moral decisions. The exclusion of so many people from "gold metal" membership had to be fought on philosophical (religious), educational, economic, and

political grounds. The philosophy and politics of materialist-socialist feminists are grounded in political economy and the concreteness of everyday life. They have pointed out that in the regime of capital, labor in the household is **not** completely separate from labor in paid sites. In fact, labor is a seamless web within patriarchal and racist capitalism.

The African-American philosopher Lucius Outlaw was drawn to his field of study because of his inability to “make sense” out of Jim Crow Mississippi. He studied philosophy not only to understand the world but to help change it. Outlaw drew strength from the civil rights, “Black Power,” and anti-war movements. Because the canon excluded people from Black Africa, Outlaw, et al. attempted to alter and broaden what reason means in order to do justice to the many and varied ways knowing. The so-called “universals” would now have to be derived from the boisterous conversations among a vastly greater number of actors - including philosophers, philosophers of education, and other educators. The consequences for schooling and education seem obvious.

I argue throughout chapter 7 that Western philosophy and politics have been seriously flawed; however, historical struggles from below have and are being waged in order to remedy significantly some of these injustices. I am aware that the forces of reaction are implacable, fierce, and sometimes murderous. History is open - there are no guarantees. Kathleen Weiler’s work in *Women Teaching For Change: Gender, Class & Power* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1988) provides the conclusion to chapter 7. Her suggested strategies are similar in many ways to what can be logically inferred from Critical Theory, Dewey, and Freire.

Section IV: Chapter 8

The eighth and final chapter is called “Back To Postmodernism: Problems and Possibilities - With a Touch Of Green.” The seemingly contradictory statement: “Back To Postmodernism” is used for two reasons. The first is that comments on postmodernist thought appear

throughout the first seven chapters. The second refers to tendencies by many postmodernist thinkers to disparage the historical attempt by Western philosophers, theorists, scientists, teachers, activists, et al. to understand social and physical phenomena profoundly and holistically. Postmodernists are justified in their refusal to quest for certainty; however, the abandonment of the historical and necessary attempts to discern what is better - if not best, warranted - if not true, contributes to our sliding down the slippery slope to dangerous forms of subjectivity, relativism, cynicism, solipsism, and nihilism!

Postmodernists criticize the Enlightenment and Marxist projects for being harmfully erroneous because of the latter adherents' belief that we can both understand our world and selves - as well as change them both for the better. I argue that this critique makes all too many postmodernist thinkers witting or unwitting allies of totalistic, undemocratic, global capitalism. The capitalists and their agents are busily reorganizing the world and its people as some postmodernists assume their diffident postures! Postmodernist thought has helped us understand better the complexities, nuances, and differences among us. Ultimately - along with Fredric Jameson - I am convinced that much of postmodernist thought is, in fact, representative of the "cultural outer husk" of contemporary capitalism.

The philosophical, educational, and political projects championed in PSCCDE lead logically to the need for greater ecological awareness. "Greens" have forced us to realize how fragile our planet's life systems are and that they, as well as human "capital," are being exploited for short-term profit. Christine Shea's educational project calls for the development of "ecological intelligence." (See - Christine M. Shea "Critical and Constructive Postmodernism: The Transformative Power of Holistic Education," in *Critical Social Issues in American Education: Transformation in a Postmodernist World*, 2nd ed. David Purpel and Svi Shapiro, eds, (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998), 337-354). "Green" education and politics, at their best, confront the capitalist attempt to commodify the entire world and all of its people. Perhaps various progressives

and democrats can rally around a banner depicting the “Big Blue Marble” - with a touch of green and even red?!

The afterword includes the following: I hope that some readers will benefit from critically appropriating ideas presented in PSCCDE. As you, the reader, imagine and theorize about the kinds of education that may be better than what exists, think about why they are not already common practice. Finally, you are invited to consider **what can be done** intramurally and societally to make what is desired more descriptive of our schools.

Section V: Suggested Tasks

The “Suggested Tasks” serve as pedagogical and heuristic tools that are placed strategically throughout the text. They can be used as a form of study guides and/or possible assessment designs. These “Tasks” are intended to elicit responses from among a variety of readers - ones that they construct from their own careful interpretations of the philosophical discourses found in PSCCDE and elsewhere. The text is fortified by rich reference/end notes sections after each chapter. Although the “Tasks” are open-ended rather than “correct answer” oriented, the interpretive responses are expected to demonstrate some knowledge of what has been presented in the text and discussed in class. The wording and placement of the “Tasks” are meant to replicate the “conversational” interchanges that are possible among students and teachers as we work together through the course of study in the classroom and elsewhere. Obviously the persons who use PSCCDE can and will construct their own “Tasks.”

Examples of “Suggested Tasks.”

1. Explore the possibilities for different kinds of schooling in the US and elsewhere if “minority,” “underclass,” and/or “under-achieving” students were seen as part of an oppressed group. Can arguments be made to successfully reconfigure many student failures as part of socioeconomic, political, and school oppression - albeit, not intended by the overwhelming majority of educators? (From

chapter 6).

2. Construct a convincing argument that connects the mind-body dichotomy of Western philosophy to the school dichotomy that is called the head-hand divide. Do class, gender, racial, and ethnic biases play roles in deciding who is selected for the low status body and hand sides of the dichotomies? (From chapter 7)

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SOME DATA SOURCES

The total number of endnotes in this 8 chapter work is 445. What follows is representative of those sources. William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study In Existential Philosophy* (1958); Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (1995); Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932); Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (1986); Richard A. Brosio, *A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education* (1994); Richard A. Brosio, *The Relationship of Dewey's Pedagogy To His Concept of Community* (1972); John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929); John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (1908); Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation* (1974); Ernst Fischer, *How To Read Marx* (1996); John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet: A Short Economic History of the Environment* (1994); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970); Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988); Pauline, Johnson, *Feminism As Radical Humanism* (1994); Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought: Augustine to Ockham* (1958); Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards, *The Dewey School* (1936); C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (1962); Van Cleve Morris, *Existentialism in Education* (1966); Susan Roberts and Darroll Bussler, eds., *Introducing Educational Reconstruction: The Philosophy and Practice of Transforming Society Through Education* (1997); Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945); Calvin Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodernist Challenge* (1992); Joel Spring, *Wheels in the Head: Educational Philosophies of Authority, Freedom, and Culture from Socrates to Freire* (1994); Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (1997);

Nancy Tuana, *Women and the History of Philosophy* (1992) ; G. Max Wingo, *Philosophies of Education: An Introduction* (1974); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (1995).