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RESEARCH ARTICLE



From “Authentic” to Actual Marxist Educational Theory: Advancing Revolutionary Pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

Education is central to both the reproduction of capitalism and the revolutionary project of creating a new social order. As revolutionary and leftist activists, organizers, researchers, and academics—along with capitalist and imperialist powers—increasingly turn to educational theory, the pedagogical contents and forms of such theories are of decisive political importance. This article conducts a historical-materialist inquiry into the origins, critiques, and developments of two dominant radical educational theories in imperialist countries—and in much of the world—to advance a revolutionary educational theory adequate to our moment. After establishing the political and strategic significance of the “scholastic apparatus” and its centrality in reproducing and challenging capitalism, this article examines critical pedagogy (the educational spin-off of the Frankfurt School), finding it originated *not* from Paulo Freire’s praxis but as a break from it. This article investigates Marxist responses to critical pedagogy, arguing they’re held back by their lack of orthodoxy, as Marxist orthodoxy adheres to limitless flexibility and creativity based on material conditions. Reclaiming Freire’s orthodox Marxism, this article homes in on a pillar of his praxis: that critical pedagogy and Marxist educational theory avoid: education is only revolutionary within revolutionary organization.

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The relationship between formal schooling and informal education on the one hand and, on the other hand, social, economic, and political transformation is complex, multifaceted, and contingent on innumerable factors. Whatever the relationship is at a particular conjuncture, it is indisputably important to the struggle over what our world and our lives look like. If it wasn’t, imperialist countries wouldn’t deploy education as a form of “soft power,” subtler methods of invasion and occupation (Craven 2011, 65). As an underlying motor of the reproduction of any social formation, education is key and even at times decisive in *transforming* or even *overthrowing* the existing social order, as well as constructing a new one. The role of counter-educational theories and practices deployed for resistance stretches as far back as the history of resistance. Since the early 1980s, however, a range of educational theories grouped under the umbrella of “critical pedagogy” rapidly circulated. Today, it is the most prevalent counter-hegemonic educational theory, research, and practice for scholars and even activists worldwide. This

makes sense as critical pedagogy focuses on education's relationship to social transformation through pedagogical paths that prefigure alternative social arrangements to capitalism and prepare students for engaging in political struggle.

Inherently political, pedagogy and curriculum either reinforce or challenge the social relations dominating any social formation. In the *International Critical Pedagogy Reader's* introduction, editors Antonia Darder, Peter Mayo, and João Paraskeva (2016, 2) admit critical pedagogy has "a decidedly North American ring to it" and even as increasing contributions to the field come from scholars situated in other countries, they tend to be "those ensconced in the intellectual traditions dominated by Western North American scholarship." Despite the oft-repeated association or equation with the praxis of Paulo Freire, a few North American academics founded the field. Critical pedagogy's ties to the leading imperialist power force Darder, Mayo, and Paraskeva to internationalize critical pedagogy by listening for resonances with other critical educational praxes globally. As such, the introduction showcases critical pedagogy's influence across a range of scholars and organizers. Critical pedagogy is not only of concern for educational theorists, as the pedagogical crux of revolutionary scholarship is still of clear interest to those outside the field of educational theory, including organizers and activists.

Given the international capitalist political economy of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption, most critical educational theories radiate from imperialist countries across the globe. Attending to the various conditions—historical and material, objective and subjective—that shape knowledge production in the US is an important concern for Marxist and anti-imperialist scholars and organizers, especially considering education as a linchpin in producing and reproducing social orders. As a result of its global influence and status, critical pedagogy serves as a first recourse for teachers, scholars, and political organizers and theorists. This article examines critical pedagogy's foundations—as well as later Marxist responses to them—situating them relative to the intellectual, political, and temporal situation in which they blossomed.

The first question animating this project is precisely *why* critical pedagogy, rather than other educational theories and practices, has a hold over educational thought in the university and social struggles today. Pursuing this question leads to an inquiry into the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the revolutionary praxis of Paulo Freire. The Frankfurt School's role in the ideological struggle wasn't unique but was one of many manifestations of the broader theoretical terrain of the class struggle. I highlight it because, as shown below and as critical pedagogue Joe Kincheloe (2008, 45) pointed out, it is *the* primary foundation for critical pedagogy. Instead of flowing from Freire, critical pedagogy developed as a *break* from his revolutionary praxis. Next, I study Marxist responses to, critiques of, and developments in, critical pedagogy, highlighting Paula Allman (2001), who coined the term "revolutionary critical pedagogy. This is important because, if the pedagogical problematic is central to yet underarticulated in the Marxist tradition (Lewis 2023). further theorizing Marxist educational theory is necessary for sharpening pedagogical weapons in the class struggle and advancing that struggle overall. My investigation of Marxist educational theory finds its most glaring inadequacy is the overwhelming absence of any reference to Marxist *practice*. As a result, I propose ways to can overcome the gap between theory and practice to help us collectively generate a revolutionary Marxist educational praxis.

The article proceeds in a few phases. The first establishes the political and pragmatic significance of education and the “scholastic apparatus” to enunciate its centrality in reproducing and challenging the capitalist mode of production. The next explores the ways US imperialism and other agents have, over time, worked to produce and disseminate brands of anti-communist Marxist theories acceptable to the university. Given critical pedagogy’s real roots, I relay a historical-materialist analysis of the Frankfurt School’s brand of critical theory before showing how critical pedagogy appeared by *breaking* with Freire’s revolutionary praxis. Here I substantiate recent historical educational research through an early review of Freire’s (1978) groundbreaking text, *Pedagogy in Process*, by Henry Giroux. The next concerns my proximal comrades working to bridge this gap by developing a Marxist educational framework through a critique I hope pushes us all to examine our relationships to past, present, and future actually-existing revolutionary projects. Educational Marxism is ridiculed or dismissed as “orthodox,” although I submit its main defect is a *lack* of orthodoxy, which is characterized in Marxism by flexibility and creativity. After addressing the critiques Marxist education makes but doesn’t substantiate, I conclude by returning to Freire’s revolutionary praxis—his pedagogical strategies and educational and political ideology and philosophy—by tending to one aspect that critical pedagogy and Marxist educational theory avoid at all costs: the requisite organization of the oppressed in the party form.

The Political and Pragmatic Significance of the Scholastic Apparatus

Centering education serves political and pragmatic functions for at least two reasons. First, production is always reproduction, so every mode of production and set of social relations defining a particular social formation are constantly reproduced, a process that is overall educational but that in our conjuncture plays an explicit role. Second, every revolutionary struggle involves overthrowing the existing order and creating a new social formation and mode of production, which is why every revolutionary process—the long duration of struggle beforehand, the actual event of revolution, and the following (unpredictable and inevitably flawed) construction—requires educational theory and practice. The greatest revolutionaries have prioritized education inside the struggle and leadership and amongst the contradictory and diverse masses of people who, through the struggle, experience their capacity to change the world.

One of Louis Althusser’s many interventions in Marxism was his work on the reproduction of capital and the social formations in which it dominates and determines other modes of production, in addition to a whole set of social relations, through what he termed as ideological state apparatuses, distinguished from *the* repressive state apparatus. It is important to note this distinction is primarily conceptual because “force can be productive of ideology” given that ideology is material through and through (Althusser [2018] 2020, 62). The primary difference is that ideological apparatuses “are very sensitive in nature” and “can be highly vulnerable as they are shaken up by the conjuncture” unlike the stable continuity of police and prisons (Althusser [2005] 2014, 114). The reproduction of any social formation includes the reproduction of the totality of its various modes of production and social relations that occur outside capitalist industry and inside educational (and cultural and other) apparatuses. The school, for example, “teaches ‘know-how,’ but in forms that ensure *subjection to the dominant ideology*, or else

the ‘practice’ of it,” a form of what Althusser ([2005] 2014, 52, 143; emphasis original) calls the scholastic apparatus—which includes schools and the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge and education more broadly—and that occupies “the dominant position in mature capitalist formations.” One of Althusser’s ([2005] 2014, 146; emphasis original) most convincing justifications for the dominance of the scholastic apparatus, including universities, is that they are the only ones with “a *captive audience of all the children of the capitalist formation* at its beck and call . . . for as many years as the schools do, eight hours a day, six days out of seven.” What is just as crucial for the class struggle is that the scholastic apparatus’ vulnerability requires a supplementary flexibility; therefore, the apparatus is an important strategic site of intervention.

Further, education is essential in producing the commodity that fuels capitalism: labor-power, the commodity internal to and inseparable from the proletariat and our bodies. When dealing with bourgeois theories of productive and unproductive labor in *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Marx ([1956] 1969, 167) divides “the whole world of ‘commodities’ into two great parts. First, labour-power; second, commodities as distinct from labour-power itself.” Marx factored into the value of labor-power any necessary education and training to produce it by juxtaposing the physiocratic and mercantilist theories of labor. Here, Marx (210) shows how “education produces labour-power” or, rather, that it *can*. When I pay—directly or through taxes—for education, “if I really learn something (which in itself is quite independent of the payment for the service), then these costs of education, just as the costs of my maintenance, belong to the costs of production of my labour-power” (405).¹ The commodity of labor-power is special most dramatically in that 1) it is the only one capable of producing surplus value and, perhaps more promising for the class struggle; and 2) it is the only one that is inseparable from the human being.

As the embodiment of labor-power, the *laborer* is both the source of surplus value and part of its potential abolition. Because nothing is *only* a commodity, reproduction is thoroughly social (just as Marx’s concept of the class struggle is). The university leads the scholastic apparatus, and to the extent that educational research participates in creating future teachers (and human beings), it’s an important site of class struggle. It makes a good deal of sense that there would be so much intention behind the funding and policing of what ideas are allowed to circulate and proliferate to guarantee “freedom of thought” all while ensuring thought remains within the bounds of the established order. Faced with this contradiction, the US state, working with anti-communists and others, continually recreates sophisticated approaches to *delicately*—and sometimes more forcefully—guide this process to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary theory and the collective force necessary for *abolishing* oppression and exploitation.

This doesn’t mean that the universities in the US and elsewhere—let alone the field of education—are *strategically decisive* battlegrounds. By demonstrating the attention given to the scholastic apparatus and educational thought by US imperialism I argue that it is *one* of many important sites of class struggle today. However, insofar as education and pedagogy refer to processes that extend *beyond* the university and the institution of the school, permeating all of society, then I would argue it is a *central* arena of class struggle today insofar as consent for imperialist wars requires a range of legitimations, from openly imperialist logics to “left” logics like “humanitarian interventions” or “human rights.” The US propaganda campaigns waged against China are part of the

US's preparation for the "new cold war." This educational project includes propaganda about China's oppression of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang and "left" theories of "Chinese imperialism" or "neocolonialism in Africa," both of which are unequivocally false (see Hammond 2023; Martinez 2023). Even within formal education, the US has arrested and jailed Chinese academics, denied visas to hundreds of Chinese students attending US universities, and deprived US students access to educational opportunities by shutting down Confucius Institutes (Li and Xue 2023; Martinez 2023).

Theory as Class Struggle in the Realm of Education

Emancipatory struggles in the imperialist age are global and the university is a vital terrain in global movements. As Miao Zhou's (2014, 512) insightful study shows, the US university is "the center of knowledge production" operating globally as "the highest level at which the bourgeoisie exercises cultural leadership," an assertion that is particularly true "in the field of the humanities and social sciences," which includes educational theory. In other words, U.S. universities generate and spread theoretical justifications in the service of U.S. imperialism.

The "soft power" of the university is itself a pedagogical practice insofar as it achieves the aims of imperialism without necessarily or, at least, predominantly or preemptively resorting to outright war, a tactic with a different and more linear pedagogy as it "makes it very clear to the locals who are the rulers and who are the ruled" (Craven 2011, 67). For this reason, US imperialism intervenes in sovereign nations through a variety of educational means, from educational exchanges, foreign language studies, NGOs, think tanks, and experts, the production of textbooks and teaching materials, and the promotion of cultural norms, from television to clothing, to which we might add tourism. These, in turn, justify, reinforce, or naturalize the "hard power" of US imperialism.

As Zhou (2014, 516) shows, one of the rudimentary ways "cultural imperialism infiltrates popular thinking" is by situating "Western humanities, philosophies and social science . . . at the center of theoretical studies." This happens because "not only do the capitalists own and run commercial companies and banks, but they also control state universities, publishing houses, popular magazines, newspapers," and various institutions that set the parameters on the object, finding, and teaching of academic research (Zhou 2014, 513). At this juncture, turning to Gabriel Rockhill's (2021) work on the Frankfurt School not only exemplifies the processes Craven (2011) and Zhou (2014) describe but provides an entry-point into the terrain of critical pedagogy.

The initial directive of the Frankfurt School, Rockhill (2021, 121) shows, was for the Institute "to be Marxist and adhere to Marxism as a scientific methodology," and he asks why and how these origins were airbrushed out of history. When Max Horkheimer took the reins, it pivoted to academic research divorced from radical politics and even, as Herbert Marcuse later admitted, forbade its members from engaging in political struggles and mandated their articles omit mention of Marxism or revolution (Rockhill 2021, 123). This wasn't only the subjective decision of any one person or group but the combination of various objective political and economic forces, including the need to maintain the leaders' salaries during the Great Depression and World War II by reducing wages and relying on US government funding and corporate sponsorships. Rockhill delineates the material incentives and other mechanisms like how the Institute under

Horkheimer “had numerous military, intelligence, and propaganda contracts, including with the CIA, and government money made up over 75 percent of its annual budget,” and several main figures worked for the CIA’s predecessor (Rockhill 2021, 124–125).

The Frankfurt School’s prominence in academia was and is not only related to, but the result of, preventing radical scholars and organizers from the pursuit of revolutionary projects, maintaining many of us within the “consensus that a world beyond capitalism and pseudo-democracy is not only impossible, but undesirable” (Rockhill 2021, 118). Georg Lukács, who participated in an earlier predecessor of the Institute, criticized its ideological and material alignment with US imperialism. Lukács’s ([1920] 1971, 21–22) preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, describes the “German intelligentsia” as engaging in a “form of topicality open to a conformism disguised as non-conformism” with figures like “Adorno” living “in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’” or a void between comfort and revolutionary praxis. Rejecting Marxism wholesale, the Frankfurt School’s theories that formed the basis of critical pedagogy keep critique within the bourgeois university’s boundaries and away from struggle. This was not some “conspiracy” between academics and imperialists, but the result of myriad historical and material conditions forces. It is important to note, for example, that the Frankfurt School moved to the US because the German fascists were hunting down Marxists, union leaders, and other left revolutionaries, many of whom were Jewish.²

The class struggle is a battle for hearts and minds, and the remarkable progress of the Soviet Union under the most severe conditions was easily winning the ideological struggle such that by 1950, Michael Josselson acquired covert funding from the Central Intelligence Agency to bring 150 intellectuals together in Berlin to establish the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). From its conceptual state to its initial event and later spread of influence through journals and magazines, the CCF was intended “to solidify and maintain an anti-communist consensus among the Western intelligentsia” (Heller 2016, 34). While many founding members were former communists or socialists, including the CCF’s central organizer, US sociologist Daniel Bell, and several members of the Frankfurt School, others opposed communism from a different angle, like Friedrich von Hayek.³ Perhaps these were surface-level disagreements at the time, different shades of the anti-communism on which their unity was based. The CCF was one of numerous efforts—many privately financed by the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation—to facilitate the reproduction of the US social formation by incorporating or absorbing radicals into capital’s circuits.

The ideological intervention by the imperialist class spread across universities. The revolutionary theories and revolts that produced new radical programs—like Black Studies programs in the US—were absorbed into capital and the state by the promotion of professors who divorced their object of inquiry from material, historical, political-economic, and other structural conditions. In one of her many meticulous studies of this broader ideological battle, Charisse Burden-Stelly (2017, 237) documents how certain strata of Black intellectuals “willfully (if not pragmatically) marginalized Black radical thought to the detriment of labor, internationalism, and antisystemic articulations of freedom.” In a conjuncture defined by worldwide revolution, the US state’s primary educational tactic involved producing “critical” scholars which, in turn, generated the political theories and pedagogies necessary for tactfully producing the “special commodity” of labor power and the totality of capitalist social formations, including habits of mind,

knowledges, skills, social relations, and avenues to critique, accommodate, and even promote rebellion—just never *revolution*.

Critical Pedagogy: Breaking from Revolution and Freire's Praxis

As a discipline, education didn't have the same prior ties to Marxist and other radical critiques of political economy as others, which nurtured the soil for capital's ideological offensive that, again, was not a conspiracy but a contingent historical fact. I argue this takes the form of critical pedagogy and continues to limit the possibilities of Marxist educational theory, an assertion that requires ascertaining the origins of critical pedagogy beyond its dominant narrative. Critical pedagogy's history generally begins with Paulo Freire's revolutionary praxis, which US academics took up and combined with the Frankfurt School's critical theory in response to the alleged "economic determinism" in Marxist educational analysis, mainly Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) and Althusser's theory of ideological reproduction, both of which were misread as theories depriving subjects of agency.⁴ This *a priori* rejection of Marxism baked into the terrain of critical pedagogy influenced generations of teachers and leading Marxist educational theorists, including one of the best revolutionary educational organizers and theorists today. Wayne Au (2018, 78), a student of founding critical educational theorist Michael Apple, recently wrote how this critique of Marxism misshaped his understanding: Upon re-reading the source material, he was perplexed at how anyone "erroneously confused functionalist economic determinism with Marxism." Given this dogmatism, identifying critical pedagogy's roots in the Frankfurt School and the Marxist tradition of Paulo Freire is contradictory. Historian of education Isaac Gottesman's (2016, 74) research challenges "the common origin narrative tying critical pedagogy to Freire, which is frequently retold by leading critical scholars, including by the term's most prolific user, Henry Giroux." As an early 1980s North American project, Freire's contribution to "critical pedagogy" was, at most, his relationships with Giroux, Apple, and others, as Freire generously wrote forewords to numerous texts. Yet the political and pedagogical projects of Freire and his friends were entirely different, so different that it is more accurate to say critical pedagogy emerged as a *break* from Freire's revolutionary praxis. This is evidenced by the antagonism between the two axioms guiding its founders, especially Giroux and Apple, and those guiding Freire.

First, whereas Freire practiced and theorized education from, in, and to building social movements and constructing revolutionary societies, critical pedagogy confined itself to the potential for schools to operate as public spaces for "radical social reform in Western nation-states" by exposing the hidden mechanisms of domination and, second, whereas Freire was a revolutionary Marxist, critical pedagogy "embraced liberal conceptions of the public sphere, citizenship, and the nation-state" (Gottesman 2016, 75). A historian of education proposes a third distinction encapsulating and sharpening the above. The field surfaced, as Curry Malott (2017, 6) finds, as part of an anti-communist divergence from revolutionary projects worldwide, as critical pedagogy equated socialism with fascism openly denounced socialist projects, which justified "critical pedagogy's focus on . . . the best aspects of American democracy." Just as the Frankfurt School's critical theory, critical pedagogy was primarily critical of *existing* revolutionary processes. Again, because neither Gottesman, Malott, nor myself blame any individual or subjective

intentions for their role in the overall ideological struggle, we focus on the structural determinants and historical conjuncture instead.

Giroux's review of Freire's *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, substantiates the accuracy of Malott and Gottesman's assessments and expresses the break between Freire's revolutionary educational *praxis* and critical pedagogy's radical *critique*. The newly liberated state invited Freire and his team from the Institute for Cultural Action of the World Council of Churches to contribute to their adult education projects. Freire (1978, 65) accepted the offer with the caveat that "we go to Guinea-Bissau as comrades, as militants, curiously and humbly, and not as foreign technicians with a mission." Later, he further articulated what joining as a militant meant: subordinating his writing to the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) for approval. He agreed to "offer up to the party the original manuscripts before publishing them, so that they could read them and then summon me to debate with me the points the party did not agree with" (Freire 2020, 162). No disagreement occurred, and Freire further ensured the party had ownership rights over the text. Composed of a series of letters to the Republic's Commissioner of State for Education and Culture, Mario Cabral, and bookended by Freire's reflections, the book exemplifies revolutionary praxis. It's a real-time engagement with the educational and political project that successfully overthrew Portuguese colonialism and, more specifically, a comradely reflection on the guiding role of the PAIGC and Amílcar Cabral in that revolution. For Peter Mayo (2004), a preeminent Freirean scholar, *Pedagogy in Process* is a turning point in Freire's theoretical development, as Freire's writing always emerged from actually-existing material conditions and the struggles over them. This was also, as I show, the turning point at which Giroux parted ways with Freire, starting his own project by distancing himself from Freire's revolutionary praxis.

In his review, Giroux (1979) merely mentions in passing that the anti-colonial revolutionaries and new government actively sought out Freire, a structure allowing Giroux to avoid any discussion of revolution, let alone of struggle or forms of organization required to wage and win radical social transformation. From this void, Giroux articulates his most revealing (and absurd) pedagogical and political stance. Defending Freire's conception of ideological reproduction as non-mechanistic, Giroux (1979, 264; emphasis added) writes, "there are contradictions that help the oppressed see through the transparent claims and norms of the given social order, *particularly in Third World nations*." Freire's Marxist analysis is a "strong, rhetorical indictment" that might be "justifiable for Third World radicals who need spend little time documenting and exposing the objective conditions of domination for the oppressed" but not in North America or the imperialist core where the domination of the oppressed is "much less obvious" (267). Freire never thought anything could be transplanted from one context to another, but Giroux's claim is different.

For Giroux, oppression was transparent in colonized countries but hidden in oppressor and colonizing countries, thereby justifying the need for endless critiques by an intellectual and critical master to "unveil" the "truth" to the ignorant masses. Attempting to tie his analysis to Freire, Giroux (1979) references a comment Freire made to journalist John Egerton during Freire's first visit to the US in 1973. However, this comment actually *discredits* Giroux's (1979 267; emphasis added) justification, as Freire told Egerton the US "is one of the most alienated of all countries. People *know* they are exploited and

dominated, but they feel incapable of breaking down the dehumanized wall.” Reality also discredits the assertion we need enlightened public intellectuals to tell us of our own oppression, as if then or now the masses of working and oppressed people are somehow unaware of our exploitation and suffering. Finally, in the US critical pedagogy is still littered with endless critiques that, I hold, further *produce* feelings of disempowerment through apocalyptic narratives divorced from people’s struggles (Ford 2019). Education is defined by the act of *teaching*, which is why Freire never renounced the authority of the teacher or even the lecturer. Giroux, on the other hand, positions the masses in need of a *master* who *uncovers* reality for the masses, rather than a guide or leader who both leads and collaborates with others to produce a new reality, another public intellectual speaking truth to power from the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (Lukács [1920] 1971).

A Preface: Clarifying and Returning to Marxist Orthodoxy

I now address the work of my political colleagues and comrades in Marxist educational theory, which in the US and elsewhere emerged partly to account for the liberalism and abstraction of critical pedagogy. This is meant as a comradely critique, the same spirit that critiques of my work helped correct and advance my (and our) praxis. My primary finding is that Marxist educational theory is still founded on a similar anti-communist dogmatism as critical pedagogy. This isn’t the fault of any particular theorist given the anti-communist training in Marxist and communist history and theory we’re indoctrinated with from the first days we can read and understand language through Ph.D. programs and beyond; it’s the result of a protracted, coordinated, highly successful, and currently victorious ideological battle fought by those like the Frankfurt School and CCF. The result is a Marxist variant lacking the flexibility central to the Marxist tradition. Before examining the two most prolific figures in this tradition, one of whom founded the term “revolutionary critical pedagogy,” however, I want to explain the general problem with Marxist educational theory: its sweeping and *a priori* dismissals and rejections of *real-life* socialist and revolutionary projects.

Marxist educational theory rejects actually-existing socialism *a priori* and without any historical-materialist analysis. Because the remarkable revolutionary processes of the 20th century and earlier didn’t correspond to academic readings of Marx or their ideal utopian visions, they were or are never *socialist*. As socialist revolutions occurred not in North America or Western Europe, academic critiques read as if only the formerly colonized and enslaved world would listen to the enlightened public intellectual, they could develop “real socialism” without any “authoritarianism” or “Stalinism,” repression, or even centralized planning. This is unverifiable as it evaluates “an ideal against an imperfect reality,” which explains their “support every revolution except the ones that succeed” (Parenti 1997, 51). The obstacle holding back Marxist educational theory is precisely its lack of *orthodoxy*. As Georg Lukács ([1968] 1972, 1; emphasis original) tells us, even if we accepted Marx’s theses as disproven, even then “every serious ‘orthodox’ Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx’s theses *in toto*—without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment.” Orthodox Marxism, the basic ethos expressed in Marx’s writings after the initial conception of historical materialism, is inherently *flexible* because it is historical through and through. Marx never abstracted theory from reality or rendered it

static, universal, or transcendental. There are no *laws* of Marxism or unending political positions, only an endless realm of possibilities to be tested *out in practice*, something Althusser ([2014] 2017) reiterates when rejecting the idea there are “dialectical laws” but only “dialectical theses” to be tested in and through all forms of class struggle, including the theoretical and the political. Our contemporary struggle to overcome the orthodoxy of imperialist or pure Marxists in education and elsewhere necessitates confronting both in theory, history, the present, and our future praxis.

If Marxist orthodoxy is dogmatic, it is only in its rigid dedication to endless flexibility, a point emphasized in innumerable points but most forcefully in Kim Il Sung’s formal articulation of *Juche* because of the complex circumstances of its formulation in a 1955 address to the Workers’ Party of Korea’s cultural workers (see Ford and Malott 2022). This was just two years after their defeat of US imperialism, which bombed their country for years, and during a tense moment in the communist movement as polemics between the parties in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, both of which shared a border with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, degenerated into political and state-to-state confrontation. In the speech, Kim ([1955] 2022, 38–39) emphasized that “Marxism-Leninism is not a dogma; it is a guide to action and a creative theory” that “can display its indestructible vitality only when it is applied creatively to suit the specific conditions of each country.” Given the life-or-death stakes of the conjuncture, his reiteration of *creativity* twice in the same formulation is not accidental, which is perhaps why Kim ([1985] 1991, 161) attributed the concept of *Juche* not to himself but to Marxism in practice—the dynamic revolutionary tradition prioritizing historicity, contingency, and adaptability—and therefore as “a revolutionary idea which was evolved by the Korean communists” during the struggle for liberation and socialism.

From Pure or “Authentic” to Actually-Existing Marxist Educational Theory

Not to discount the strides made in the field, the dogma of anti-communism plagues Marxist educational theory today. This phenomenon is easily understood when reading the foundational texts of Paula Allman (2001, 149) who coined the phrase “revolutionary critical education/praxis/pedagogy” to distinguish it as a Marxist variant of critical education oriented toward “the eventual abolition of capitalism.” One of the most widely cited and respected Marxists in educational theory in the imperialist West, Allman at the same time used her formulation “revolutionary critical pedagogy” to distance it from actual Marxism. Allman (2001, 149, 24, 150) formulates what she calls an “authentic socialism” that “basically adheres to Marx’s and Engel’s [sic] concept of socialism” and, as such, “differs considerably from anything we witnessed in the twentieth century.”

Unironically and unintentionally translating Parenti’s (1997) “pure socialism” into “authentic socialism,” Allman (2001, 150) argues the latter is “a society engaged in revolutionary socialist transformation . . . advocated by Karl Marx.” In Allman’s (1999, 11) first book examining Marx, Freire, and Gramsci, she states, “the concept of socialism I discuss here is taken entirely from the writings of Karl Marx.” The world outlook guiding *Revolutionary Social Transformation*—her first book incidentally published in Giroux’s series—was “based on the meaning of socialism/communism which can be culled from the writings of Karl Marx” and, after reading this outlook, Allman (1999, 8) has no doubt we will grasp that authentic socialism “has had very little reflection in the

most well-known and publicized experiences of twentieth-century ‘actually existing socialism.’” It is as if we should be surprised that Marx’s abstract and scant references to communism weren’t materialized as a mirror in the actual projects of building socialism under radically diverse circumstances and across time, space, and society. Allman (2001, 140) even blames the inability to think or see a post-capitalist future on “the mistaken equation of our experience of extant socialism with Marx’s idea of socialism.” Allman (2007, 55) goes so far as to equate, just as the ultra-right does today and the founders of critical pedagogy did in the 1980s, Bolshevism and Nazism, citing the Bolshevik Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union as one “purportedly based on Marxism” but “which under Stalin’s leadership soon developed into a totalitarian monstrosity that was followed not many years later by Hitler’s fascist totalitarian equivalent.” After attributing the idea that “the industrial proletariat is the revolutionary subject,” Allman (2001, 131–132) writes it must become conscious of its historical mission “under the guidance of the revolutionary vanguard.” In a footnote, she (2001, 147n2) concedes that while the party-form could be adequate for his historical moment, she suspects “whether he or any other dialectical thinker would suggest that it be adopted unthinkingly in other circumstances.” While I haven’t witnessed a socialist revolution aspire to or claim to carbon-copy another, Allman’s Marxist educational theory aspires to carbon-copy Marx and Engels’s writings from the mid-19th century and mechanically transport them to today.

Mike Cole (2008, 2011), a prolific Marxist educational theorist from Britain, only views the ongoing Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela as an example of Allman’s “authentic” socialism. This is a consistent line throughout his works. In his book on the socialist alternative to race and racism in education, for example, he (2011, 1) proclaims that today “critics rightly cite what became of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as being bad examples of Marxism.” His first book, *Marxism and Educational Theory* (2008) reviews the evolution of Marx’s thought to conclude that Marx’s conception of the communist future is radically distinct from the Soviet Bloc’s Eastern countries. Importantly, he notes some positive—and, for citizens of these countries, radically beneficial improvements—only parenthetically to reinforce his overall disdain for them. “In reality (despite the fact that many had a number of positive features—full employment, housing for all, free public and social services, safety for women to walk the streets at night and so on),” Cole (2008, 26) writes, these countries “were undemocratic dictatorships with special privileges for an elite and drudgery for the many.” The same dismissal of the Soviet Union as “state capitalist” holds because, except for the first few years, he writes, it increasingly became totalitarian. At least Cole (2011, 185n4), in a footnote, defines Stalinism as *any* “political systems that have the characteristics of the Soviet Union from 1928 when Joseph Stalin became leader” that involves “a repressive and oppressive form of government” from “purging and exile or death of opponents, mass use of propaganda, and the creation of a personality cult around the leader.”

While acknowledging the constraints the USSR faced, he frivolously argues that a “genuinely democratic socialism, where elected leaders are permanently subject to recall by those who have elected them, is the best way to safeguard against totalitarianism” (Cole 2008, 131). The “atrocities committed in the name of, but not in the spirit of socialism” attributed to “Stalinism” aren’t inevitable (Cole 2008, 133). Finally, Cole (2009, 117) alleges we learned the lesson of authentic socialism through “Stalinist totalitarianism”

partly due to the reality “that socialism was attempted in one country, whereas Marx and a number of Marxists in the early-mid 20th century (notably Trotsky) believed that, for it to work, it must be international.” This is presented as a purely theoretical debate because there is no contextualization of its conjuncture, which is why those involved in the mass debates frame it as political.

Harry Haywood was a Black US communist in the USSR during the 1922–1927 Stalin-Trotsky debates. Trotsky’s defeat stemmed from the content and spirit of his theory of permanent revolution and not state suppression. The state distributed Trotsky’s writings throughout schools and they served as material for class and workplace discussions. As the matter concerned “the destiny of socialism in the Soviet Union,” Haywood (1978, 176) observes, these “questions were not only theoretical ones, but were issues of life and death.” Trotsky’s theory was “thoroughly defeatist,” Haywood (1978, 178) writes, partly due to his “view that the peasantry would be hostile to socialism.” Isaac Deutscher (1978, 283), a long-time Trotskyist, confirms Trotsky lost in the court of mass opinion to Stalin’s “clear and positive proposition: we are able to stand on our own feet.” Without a revolution in Western Europe, what would come of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky rhetorically asked in 1906? He answered with the same line he repeated two decades later: Russia “would then either succumb to a conservative Europe or become corroded in its economically and culturally primitive Russian environment” (Deutscher 1978, 283). Confronted with the reasonable question of what to do without proletarian revolutions in Europe, Stalin’s theory of socialism in one country had an answer premised on a belief in the Soviet people and their self-determination. Behind Stalin’s esoteric language and sometimes contradictory reasoning, his message was based on revolutionary optimism without renouncing the need for a European revolution. Yes, we need revolutions on an international scale, and we should do everything possible to help revolutions in Europe, but our revolutionary project isn’t dependent on Europe.

Reality quickly proved Stalin correct. After seizing power, defending the revolution from the immediate intervention of 14 imperialist powers (including the US) for years who “armed, funded and provided rear bases for the ‘White Army’ forces serving Russia’s capitalists, landlords and other reactionaries,” which was particularly difficult insofar as the Bolsheviks only had “workers’ militias but no real army” while “the vast majority of the population, after years of war, simply wanted peace” (Becker 2015, 61). It was evident early on just how much of a threat the world’s first successful socialist revolution posed to the global imperialist order, and they knew this wasn’t the “end” of class struggle. The sacrifices and errors committed also allowed the revolution to withstand a years-long siege on Stalingrad, crush the Nazi menace, liberate most of the death camps, and defeat 80–90 percent of Hitler’s battalions (Deutscher 1978). The tremendous cost paid by the Soviets, including the more than 26 million Soviet people killed in the fight for a fascist-free world, won the war (Prashad 2019).⁵

Democratic participation under the Soviet Union was uneven but, in many ways, was superior to that in the US. Just because the final phase of the election finds candidates winning with 99 or 100 percent of the vote doesn’t explain anything because there are previous and more local election processes that are not “rubber stamped” and the public elections “serve mostly to express solidarity and energize people” (Szymanski 1979, 81). Soviet publications featured much wider viewpoints than we read in the US, with different public matters from the military, the party, women’s status, and more regular

features. The press was a mechanism for government accountability and response. “All the mass media have letter departments which keep letters received on file and forward them to the appropriate government agency” that is legally required to directly respond to them within 15 days as Albert Szymanski (1979, 85) details, with one, *Pravda* receiving an average of over 350,000 annually. The Soviets moved drastically toward an egalitarian society with minuscule wage differences between manual workers and party bureaucrats all while providing economic, political, and military support as the colonized overthrew their colonizers, regardless of their adherence to the Soviet’s political orientation.

Marxist educational theory has, with few exceptions, refused to engage in any historical-materialist inquiry into the accusations leveled against actually-existing socialism. Where is the historical-materialist analysis of the development of socialism in one country? Where is the proof of the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union? What about the extent of worker democracy throughout? These are precisely the questions Paulo Freire would ask and to which he would refuse to settle for a single answer but would relentlessly investigate, understand, and adapt his actions and political stances accordingly, as he did with his transformative encounters with the revolutionaries in Guinea Bissau. *Pedagogy in Process*, as Mayo writes (2004, 65), indicates “how Freire’s approach can be taken up to suit a specific country’s needs.” Revolutionary processes are riddled with contradictions, astonishing accomplishments, and devastating errors, awe-inspiring revolutions in fundamental social relations manifest in the largest structures and the smallest gestures and tragic phases of stagnation or regimentation. This is the conjuncture into which critical pedagogy entered: an era passing from global revolution to counterrevolution.

Education between Global Revolution and Counterrevolution

From Iran and Afghanistan to Iraq and Egypt, the Soviets provided crucial aid and military assistance. Szymanski’s analysis finds that “arming the more progressive-non-socialist countries of the Third World, as well as Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam” was critical to their successful liberation struggles (Szymanski 1979, 165). They did more than provide military training and weaponry, the Soviets fought in liberation struggles despite their own increasingly dire economic situation, right until the USSR’s undemocratic dissolution. The impact of the Soviet Union on the liberation of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa was even more critical “because it was often provided at the time when or in the areas and where other countries were unable or unwilling to help” (Shubin 2007, 260). Such support was perhaps the deciding element in liberation struggles from Egypt, Afghanistan, and Algeria to Somalia, Guinea, and Ethiopia. The Soviets funneled military aid, weapons, and other materials through the Organization of African Unity to the PAIGC revolution.

At the height of the global revolutionary era, our class successfully overthrew colonialism and capitalism and nearly one-half of the world’s people were living in countries governed by socialist, pro-socialist, or independent anti-colonial *indigenous* governments. In each instance, Marxist or Marxist-influenced parties and organizations provided vehicles for overthrowing their oppressors and taking power into their hands. More pertinent to this article than military aid is the key role Soviet educational assistance played in the anti-colonial and socialist revolutions in the era of global revolution.

Since its inception, the USSR provided educational resources and grants that allowed revolutionaries to study and visit the land of socialism to contribute to the spread of revolutionary ideology and build solidarity, including numerous Black US revolutionaries. The first educational relationship with Africa was in 1957 when Egypt and the USSR agreed to send students to the Soviet Union and its professors to Egypt. Beginning in 1960, this expanded with what was eventually named the “Patrice Lumumba Peoples’ Friendship University” dedicated to facilitating the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to study for free in the Soviet Union. Rooted in the commitment to the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, there were of course other political interests at play. Nonetheless, the collaboration started at the urging of revolutionary African leaders who, beginning in the 1960s, placed educational training high on their agendas in their pursuit of ideological and economic self-determination (Katsakioris 2017, 259). The Soviets responded to this demand immediately and numerous educational relationships were established across Africa.

Even with US imperialism funding and constraining academic research domestically and launching their educational *response* to Soviet educational assistance, it couldn’t hold back the power of the global revolutionary tide that lasted from roughly 1945–1979. This was the setting of the radical US movements of the 1960s–1970s and the context in which many situated themselves. They were not unique but were expressions of this global phenomenon. What appeared as struggles between different state actors were, in reality, struggles between the oppressors and the oppressed. As local manifestations of broader struggles, the university was a link in a chain of resistance that was on the offensive and, to many, must have seemed close to victory. The ruling class fought back through repressive and ideological means in the streets and on the campuses to foreclose the openings produced via student insurrections. Police became permanent features in US universities, and the imperialists confined the borders of “freedom of thought” and redrew the boundaries within which that freedom could be exercised, just like they did decades prior. The ruling class pumped money into liberal groups, foundations, academic organizations, and theories that used left phraseology devoid of any political challenge to oppression or exploitation and that often equated socialism with fascism, an ideological line we saw Allman deploy above. This was part of a global counteroffensive against the world-historic revolutionary processes playing out on the international stage. The US stepped up military pressure against the Soviet Union while fostering a rising capitalist class within the Russian Federation and amplifying soft power interventions such as funding right-wing intellectual outlets and hard power interventions that in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and across Eastern Europe, resulted in devastating counterrevolutions or “color revolutions.” With an economically weakened Soviet Union, the US engineered the reversal of revolutionary progress throughout the Third World through the International Monetary Fund and other mechanisms and engaged in a range of military occupations and regime-change operations, some of which continue to this day.

In the US, the global counterrevolutionary surge took the form of a sweeping attack on working and oppressed people through privatizations, union busting, and other mechanisms grouped under the term “neoliberalism.” This was a difficult period for progressive forces worldwide, and it undoubtedly confined the avenues through which intellectuals could construct critical pedagogy. To be crystal clear, my argument is not that critical pedagogy or any other theory willingly participated in this process, but rather that

material conditions shaped the consciousness and actions of the agents constructing critical pedagogy and Marxist educational theory that I want to transform.

Returning to Freire's Marxist Orthodoxy

What powerfully represents Freire's revolutionary convictions is his refusal to renounce or tame his praxis and commitments during this time. If anything, he strengthened his convictions, including his insistence on the revolutionary party. Within the mass of critical scholarship on Freire, finding even a mention of the revolutionary party, let alone how it frames Freire's project, is rare. The same is true of Marxist educational theory, such as Allman's "synthesis" of Marx, Freire, and Gramsci, all of whom theorized in and for the revolutionary party. Of the four chapters constituting *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire [1970] 2011), the last situates Freire's pedagogy in the setting of the party. Despite acknowledging that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was "also about revolutionary strategy," Allman (1999, 101) highlights Freire's critiques of distorted revolutionary leadership without naming these or acknowledging the traditions Freire developed, namely, Leninism. It was Tyson E. Lewis (2023, 154) who first, or at least for me, explicitly stated "how the question of pedagogy evolved from within a debate concerning revolutionary leadership."

Dialogical pedagogy is not inherently political, so we can't separate Freire's pedagogical practices and his political vision or project, which is often the case. For example, in Kapil Dev Regmi's (2016, 201) otherwise excellent argument for popular education's capacity to undermine capitalist common sense, he acknowledges the myriad origins and manifestations of popular education but—correctly, in my opinion—writes that among these, those aimed at "breaking the hegemony of capitalism, are influenced by Paulo Freire." Still, Regmi separates Freire's theory and political commitments because of the still-circulating widespread misconception that appears when Euzébios Filho (2018, 212) suggests Freire "developed the method of 'pedagogy of the oppressed' as a way of educating activists." Freire ([1970] 2011, 125–126; emphasis original) constructed a pedagogical philosophy as a weapon used in the class struggle through the party, starting the last chapter by translating Lenin's famous dictum about the need for revolutionary theory and practice into pedagogical language to assert revolutions are achieved neither by *verbalism* nor by *activism* "but rather with praxis, that is, with *reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be transformed." The form of the revolution and its leadership isn't abstract or "pure"; it can be more horizontal, vertical, and triangular, depending on the circumstances. The historical circumstances of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution compelled a revolt before building a mass base, which could only be done after seizing state power.

Conclusion: In Struggle, We Are All Intellectuals

Freire's revolutionary praxis was consistently theorized through the framework of the party as the vehicle by which the oppressed and exploited take power into our hands, a framework consistent with the Leninist-type party while embracing standard pedagogical strategies like the lecture. Reflection and action are not divisions of labor between revolutionary leaders and the people, whereby the leaders think and direct and the people

are only able to act on their orders. “Revolutionary leaders,” for Freire ([1970] 2011, 126), “do bear the responsibility for coordination and, at times, direction—but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis.” Both the people and revolutionary leaders act together, building and acting in unity before, during, and after the revolution. The prerequisite for such leadership is to reject the idea that the masses are ignorant and incompetent. The act of dialogue unites lived experience with revolutionary theory. We must be open with the people, trusting them “and, as Lenin pointed out, the more a revolution requires theory, the more its leaders must be with the people in order to stand against the power of oppression” (Freire [1970] 2011, 138). That doesn’t mean we’re naïve but believe in the actuality of revolution (Ford 2023). Freire’s pedagogy of teaching adheres to this principle while critical pedagogy adheres to the detached leader informing the masses from above.

Lenin formulated the combination of spontaneity and organization; Freire did the same. The party creates a particular group of theoreticians: *anyone and everyone* organizing for revolution (see Ford 2016). Party membership must first be composed of those “who make revolutionary activity their profession,” and *due to* “this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation” he continues, “all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both cases, must be effaced” (Lenin [1902] 1960, 452). The first imperative is that the “professional revolutionary” isn’t a paid staff position, but an additional sacrifice made by everyday people, and the second is that the party is open to anyone and everyone who desires and can center the party and revolution in their lives. In the party and the struggle more broadly, we are all intellectuals. The party is a vanguard because it is, as an *organization*, advanced relative to the mass struggle through dialogue and interaction through the mass line, which means teaching to and learning from and with. Freire (2020, 166; emphasis original) argues “it is fundamental to me that for a radical democratic revolutionary leadership the leadership *speaks to* the ones led.” The leadership leads, after all. Yet they must also, Freire (2020, 166; emphasis original) upholds, “speak with them as well. It is only through *speaking with* that one can be legitimized at certain necessary moments when one might run the risk of falling into spontaneity; it is only by *speaking with* that one can, at certain times, legitimize one’s right to *speak to*.” Because Giroux and critical pedagogy uphold the belief in our ignorance of our oppression, Giroux’s first book, “which only offers passing mention of Freire,” called for more ideological critique (Gottesman 2016, 79). This presumed ignorance carved a new space in intellectual knowledge production safely protected from the actual struggles of the people.

Educational theories are pillars supporting revolutionary projects. No theory is forever protected from co-optation nor does a final educational theory for revolution exist. All the same, *at least one* lineage of praxes has proven itself through decades of struggle and sacrifice, victories and defeats. My claim is not that Marxism is “all we need” or even all we need, nor do I want to position critical pedagogy as a primary battleground for struggle. Rather, my claim is that, as a theory and an action guide, it needs serious attention if we are to wage class struggle in the realm of knowledge production and advance anti-imperialist and socialist struggles. If Marxist educational theory can return to Marxist orthodoxy, it can contribute to this project, a contribution that will only be verified in struggle and endless creativity as we test out new theses as each factor in the conjuncture shifts or materializes.

Notes

1. Incidentally, we can quickly and easily clear the muddled waters of debates over productive versus unproductive labor here, where Marx ([1956] 1969, 157) says Adam Smith “hit the nail on the head” in generating “one of his greatest scientific merits” by showing productive labor is defined “from the standpoint of capitalist production.”
2. Thanks to Eli J. Pine for helping with such nuances.
3. In his foreword to the 20th-anniversary edition of *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Bell (1978, 4) still said “I am a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture.”
4. See David I. Backer’s (2022) extensive research into this matter that conclusively demonstrates that the very resistance-reproduction dichotomy is without any grounds whatsoever.
5. Instead of highlighting this, Cole and other Marxist educational theorists slander “Stalinism” because of prisons—or “gulags”—based purely on US Cold War propaganda that has been debunked since the opening of the Soviet archives. Official documentation proves “there was no systematic extermination of inmates” and that “the great majority of gulag inmates survived and eventually returned to society when granted amnesty or when their terms were finished. In any given year, 20 to 40 percent of the inmates were released” (Parenti 1997, 79). Most inmates at the time were not there for political reasons but for violations of the law like “murder, assault, theft, banditry, smuggling,” and so on (Parenti 1997, 80). Given the circumstances, it’s not unreasonable such purges would be violent and private rather than more literary and public as under prior leadership.

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