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MARK C. BAILDON

A CASE FOR ENGAGED INTELLECTUAL WORK

In their drive to insulate themselves against risk and contingency—against the unpredictable hazards that afflict human life—the thinking classes have seceded not just from the common world around them but from reality itself. —Christopher Lasch¹

What we need to do instead is encourage groups of all kinds and all ages to participate in creating a vision of the future that will enlarge the humanity of all of us, and then, in devising concrete programs on which they can work together, if only in a small way, to move toward their vision. —Grace Lee Boggs²

Introduction

Many radical intellectuals working in the universities have become increasingly insulated and isolated from the main currents of American society. In particular, radical intellectuals in higher education have often been content to remain aloof from fundamental problems facing society and education and have failed to offer social criticism that adequately addresses the sources of these problems or offer possible solutions within a broader vision of radical democracy. In this paper i make the case for a committed, engaged, and participatory radicalism that isn't only about producing new theory and knowledge that is useful for others, but a radicalism that creates theory and knowledge in and through meaningful participation and action with others. This argument echoes the late historian Christopher Lasch's call for social criticism that addresses the real issue in education today, the educational system's "assimilation into the corporate order and the emergence of a knowledge class whose 'subversive' activities do not seriously threaten any vested interest."³ It extends Lasch's argument by making a case for engagement in concrete practical struggles to build broad alliances that challenge corporate capital's hegemony and offers analyses and models of engaged radicalism for further consideration.

1.2 The recent myriad of interventions in education reflects, and is in response to, the increasing fragmentation and social incoherence accompanying socioeconomic developments and crises of contemporary capitalism. These postmodern developments have served to splinter identities, render mass resistance inconceivable, and make widespread collective action for radical change increasingly difficult. As Best and Kellner have noted, "The response is often despair and pessimism, panic and hyperbolic discourse, and desperate searches for solutions to the apparent crisis."⁴ To most people working in educational settings, this despair, pessimism, panic, hyperbole, and desperation for solutions is all too familiar. The landscape is littered with multiple reform agendas desiring educational improvements through assorted policy initiatives, tougher standards and consequences for schools, teachers, and students, and the movement toward ideological hegemony by reconstituting traditional values and

curricula. Both radical and conservative critics have offered extensive commentary on the problems facing education, yet remain hopeful that schools can analyze problems faced by society and that “out of such analyses students will develop a sense of understanding and mutual respect that will in some way influence the wider society.”⁵ However, as Henry Giroux has noted, “schools do more than influence society; they are also shaped by it. That is, schools are inextricably linked to a larger set of political and cultural processes and not only reflect the antagonisms embodied in such processes but also embody and reproduce them.”⁶ Education is a highly contested site where various agendas and desires are promoted and through which power circulates to produce and legitimate certain kinds of knowledge, experience, and ways of knowing. To understand these broader processes and their specific implications, both micro- and macro-level theoretical frameworks for critique, resistance, and struggle are needed.

1.3 As in other areas of social theory, postmodernist theorizing has shaped contemporary educational discourse and generated new perspectives and understandings of schooling and academic work. However, these discourses and perspectives have failed to significantly challenge existing power relations or broader social processes, such as the interests of capital, which seem to increasingly require “a stupefied population, resigned to work that is trivial and shoddily performed, predisposed to seek its satisfaction in the time set aside for leisure.”⁷ Thus, larger political and cultural processes produce and reproduce tendencies that seem to militate against educational work that significantly challenges these broader processes. Henry Giroux addresses the ideological content of these processes when he notes that, “Neoliberalism has become the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment. Not only does it assault all things public, sabotage the basic contradiction between democratic values and market fundamentalism, it also weakens any viable notion of political agency by offering no language capable of connecting private considerations to public issues...As democratic values give way to commercial values, intellectual ambitions are often reduced to an instrument of the entrepreneurial self, and social visions are dismissed as hopelessly out of date.”⁸ Radical intellectuals working in education face seemingly overwhelming ideological, political, and cultural forces that make resistance and work for widespread change increasingly difficult. While the multiplicity of perspectives serves to enhance understandings of our postmodernist plight, social struggles that might disrupt or disturb social and ideological hegemonies seem to lack any real possibilities for adequately challenging the logic of advanced capitalism and its tendencies. This proliferation of “language games” would seem to be “but a refurbished liberal reformism that fails to break with the logic of bourgeois individualism and subverts attempts to construct bold visions of a new reality to be shaped by a radical alliance politics.”⁹

1.4 Nevertheless, radical educational intellectuals seem to remain hopeful of the redemptive possibilities of education. While educational sites are seen as offering possibilities for radical democratic projects, as a result of historical trends (briefly alluded to above) the development of common interests and struggles among education workers across schools, colleges, and universities has become increasingly difficult. Work and institutional life is corporatized, commodified, and fragmented in ways that co-opt, diminish, and deflect resistance and collective action. The failure of the two party political system, educational and political reform, and neoliberalism to effectively address educational or social issues, bring about fundamental change, and significantly reform education or capitalism has resulted in a number of interventions that only serve to further splinter those working for change in educational settings. Such a project of educational and political praxis, one that unites education workers in multiple contexts, requires recognition of common interests, articulation of a collective political agenda, and forms of struggle that unite heterogeneous identities, agendas, and social movements. Besides offering analytical frameworks that might aid in understanding these complex processes, I also hope to address the question of what might serve to mobilize seemingly disparate groups and identities across educational contexts to bring about collective agency and radical educational and social change. I do so by addressing the particular context of academic work in universities, a context in which I work.

The Need for Mediatory Concepts

2.1 First, critical educators must work within and across a range of contexts to develop an analytical framework for understanding that gives coherence and direction to the range of efforts on behalf of social justice, equality, and freedom. Frederic Jameson calls for a “mediatory concept” that can articulate and describe a whole series of cultural phenomena and contribute to a politics of alliance in which diverse groups of people might form larger movements of resistance and change.¹⁰ In this paper I hope to make a case for several mediatory concepts. I will argue that the role of educational workers is to solve educational and social problems, both intellectually and practically. To do so, requires dialogue and collaboration within and across many educational contexts. Educators in the university workplace must directly engage with students, colleagues, and communities to identify and address these problems. The role of education workers must be to promote dialogue, collaboration, and action with others to attack privilege, power, and injustice, especially in the immediate, concrete locations people find themselves situated. Accordingly, the greatest value of educational work, scholarship, activism, and pedagogy is its contribution to understanding experience and bringing about change. While many educators and researchers in universities would claim to be engaged in such work, a trickle-down theory of university work seems to be the norm, as professors are content to generate theory, write for each other, and remain safely ensconced in the ivory tower. As David Damrosch has suggested, we might begin to question the usefulness of the vast accumulation of scholarship that is mostly produced for other scholars instead of broader audiences.¹¹ Much of it is, in fact, alienating to many educators working outside of the university and does little to promote relationships across various contexts. Instead, radical intellectuals might seek broader audiences and alliances and strive to find ways to make their work more accessible and relevant to those working in K-12 schools, for example. It is necessary to break down hierarchical arrangements and boundaries that exist between university workers and other educational workers to develop alliances across contexts. Dialogic relationships must be initiated and forged in ways that are supportive of the kinds of work radical educators envision. It is out of such relationships that new theory can emerge. Such work suggests that academics in the university workplace acknowledge and address their own privilege and power, critique the hierarchical and institutional practices that inhibit broader alliances with other workers in education, and strive to transform their own thinking and work through more dialogic educational engagements.

2.2 Due to the fragmented nature of contemporary social life and the myriad of problems confronting educators, mediatory concepts must be further developed that identify linkages and solidarities across time, spaces, and identities. These mediatory concepts must unite diverse types of resistance and social activism without denying or diminishing these struggles and help people develop a common purpose and vision for social change. A postmodern-Marxian critique of capitalism and political economy can serve as an important mediatory framework to situate and guide analyses and action at local levels, in specific educational contexts by linking these analyses to broader processes. Identity politics, cultural nationalisms, grassroots populisms, and educational reform efforts have not resulted in the reorientation of major institutions or challenged concentrations of wealth and power. While they have addressed important issues in the ongoing struggle against many forms of oppression, the cultural politics and identity politics of postmodern resistances have not effectively challenged capitalist hegemony or provided the impetus for widespread educational or systemic change. They have not been agents of social transformation and point to the failure of recent American radicalism, in general. However, according to Terry Eagleton, capitalism “is bound to ensnare itself in its own strength, since the more it proliferates, the more fronts it breeds on which it can become vulnerable.”¹² These seemingly disparate fronts, represented by the myriad of interventions in education and diverse forms of resistance and activism, expose contradictions and vulnerabilities that must be articulated within an overarching analytical framework that might also serve to unite groups working in behalf of resistance and change. A radical perspective that can provide a more ecological perspective and an overarching framework for multiple issues and diverse forms of resistance must be developed to challenge oppression and injustice across multiple contexts. A reconceptualized Marxism that offers an ideological counter-perspective to neoliberalism can serve as a useful analytic

framework that is applicable across multiple contexts. While an ongoing critique of all forms of power, authority, and injustice within specific contexts is necessary, Marxian categories offer conceptual tools for understanding broader processes of global capitalism that affect all aspects of experience.

2.3 Despite the need for an overarching framework, conceptual tools and strategies must be flexible, and it is perhaps in the interstices of various theoretical systems that new understandings might emerge. Recognizing that postmodernist theory often “fuses itself, however ironically, to the consumer culture it periodically tries to escape,”¹³ a Marxian framework can bolster other critical frameworks that have been recently developed. As Peter McLaren has noted, many forms of struggle are necessary, but radical praxis and social transformation can perhaps be best organized around “the revolutionary pivot points of anti-capitalist struggle” and “coalitionary agency” in ways that don’t privilege economic determinism or postmodern theory.¹⁴ Best and Kellner also make the case for a reconstruction of critical social theory that utilizes Marxian categories to analyze social phenomena focused on by postmodern social theory.¹⁵ As Best and Kellner argue, there is a need for new social maps and historical narratives that can contextualize the present age and move from specific situations to ever expanding analyses.¹⁶ Marxist theory can provide these new social maps and analyses through its emphasis on the historical and dialectical character of various forms of oppression and theory and through its methodological efforts to “view the interplay of subject and structure in terms of dynamic social practices during a particular time and in a specific space. The aim of Marxist theory is to view each historical moment as a multidimensional transaction among subjects shaped by antecedent structures and traditions and prevailing structures and traditions transformed by struggling subjects.”¹⁷ The implications for educators of such a mediatory framework undoubtedly requires further exploration.

Moving Beyond “Academic Pseudo-Radicalism”

3.1 Secondly, critical education workers in university settings must move beyond “academic pseudo-radicalism”¹⁸ to engage in concrete, practical activity with others seeking change to produce new knowledge and theory that is created through local engagements with broader social issues. While there is a need for struggle on many levels, a more systemic analysis and catalyst for social change is necessary to build alliances and solidarity among others struggling along various fronts. While the academic workplace is one such site for struggle, struggles in the academic workplace must be articulated and connected to local, community struggles for radical democracy and broader alliances across communities. New and broader patterns of resistance must be articulated from local practices and in relation to larger social and historical tendencies. The engaged educational radical serves this mediatory function by working with others to understand how many forms of oppression and resistance are interconnected and striving with diverse groups to articulate a democratic vision of an alternative future. New theory emerges from such engagements, from grounding knowing in doing, theory in practice, and analyses in practical activity.

3.2 Such educational work means that intellectuals in the academic workplace must engage with the everyday concerns of citizens. Education is obviously one of those concerns and it connects with many other day-to-day issues that are important to people. But it also means engaging in public debates, struggling with people trying to bring about change, and participating and learning with others through those struggles. It means that radical intellectuals resist and overcome the isolation and insularity of the university to participate with students and teachers engaged in struggle along many fronts. For Cornel West, to be engaged with others in a “new cultural politics of difference is to be a Critical Organic Catalyst.”¹⁹ By this, West argues that a radical cultural worker should be attuned to the best of what various communities, groups, organizations, institutions, subcultures, and networks have to offer, being tolerant of and affirming others’ individual and cultural expressions and ways of knowing, and having improvisational and flexible sensibilities.²⁰ However, it also requires relentless criticism and intellectual rigor, along with these particular stances. It would seem to suggest being aligned with and engaged with

groups involved in various types of resistance, and open to learning in and through such engagements and struggles.

3.3 As educational workers, however, such work means not only ongoing critical analyses of the current state of affairs but rigorous self critique, since educational work operates within the vortices of broader and specific power relations and networks. It means recognizing and addressing how power circulates through educational processes and their reproductive and oppressive tendencies. Such relentless self-criticism means acknowledging one's own power and privileged position in the university and working to dismantle that privilege. Part of this critique entails an examination of power and privilege and the increasing isolation and insularity of educational workers working in universities. For example, in *The Last Intellectuals*, Russell Jacoby argues that intellectual life has been affected by several broader social trends that have shifted the work of academics. Jacoby outlines trends toward commercialization, professionalization and specialization and argues that today's academic writes for career advancement rather than to bring about social change, as earlier intellectuals had done. By becoming more specialized in their work they are largely inaccessible to larger publics.²¹ Summarizing these trends, Edward Said notes that, "All we have now...is a missing generation which has been replaced by buttoned-up, impossible to understand classroom technicians, hired by committee, anxious to please various patrons and agencies, bristling with academic credentials and a social authority that does not promote debate but establishes reputations and intimidates nonexperts."²² Both critics argue that university professors have made a noticeable retreat from explicit political phenomena and engagement, in favor of abstract theorizing. Jacoby also suggests that poststructuralism's emphasis on signs, texts, and signifiers "encourages endless spirals of commentary" and "meta-interpretations" that represent a form of professionalization and specialization in advanced capitalism. According to Jacoby, "the theory of fetishism, which Marx set forth, turns into its opposite, the fetishism of theory."²³ The withdrawal and isolation of radical intellectuals reflects the cultural fragmentation that has accompanied advanced capitalism and great efforts must be made to overcome these tendencies.

3.4 Also, given the increasing commercialization of education, "entrepreneurs and hucksters have replaced disinterested scholars and researchers...'The entrepreneurial spirit' spreads throughout the university, corrupting everything and everyone."²⁴ Academics put in the position of constantly seeking grants from government and foundations to support their work are no longer as independently minded as earlier intellectuals. Academic intellectuals more interested in securing certain privileges, gaining tenure, and indulging in theory rather than social criticism and activism do not seriously challenge commercial interests in academia. And, as Christopher Lasch has rightly noted in response to conservative critics of academic radicalism: "...their (radicals') activities do not seriously threaten corporate control of the universities, and it is corporate control, not academic radicalism, that has 'corrupted our higher education.' It is corporate control that has diverted social resources from the humanities into military and technological research, fostered an obsession with quantification that has destroyed the social sciences, replaced the English language with bureaucratic jargon, and created a top-heavy administrative apparatus whose educational vision begins and ends with the bottom line."²⁵ Such an indictment suggests a lack of critical reflexivity on the part of academic intellectuals. Not only should university intellectuals critique the broader contexts and processes that have contributed to these tendencies in university work, they should also engage in critiquing how these tendencies are manifested in their own work and experience. Such an examination can benefit from both a Marxian critical framework that can provide more systemic and macro-political analyses as well as analytical perspectives that can address more specific and local contextual issues and forms of power and oppression. As suggested earlier, new theoretical articulations and strategies that draw upon Marxism, critical theory, and postmodern theory need to be formulated and can be developed through critical interrogations of the work and social relations of production within university settings.

A Micro-politics of Educational Practice

4.1 Micro-theoretical and political frameworks are necessary, as well, for personal and social transformation. Specific critiques and strategies for resistance and change must be developed within local sites. Such analyses must investigate the ways academics in the university workplace are enmeshed in and complicit with the broader processes and structures that are understood through macro-theoretical investigations. Self-reflection and collaborative inquiries that attempt to understand lived experience in specific, immediate locations requires an iterative, moving back and forth between macro and micro lenses. Such a dialectical process provides opportunities for testing and building theory. For example, Foucauldian analyses critiquing the ways power circulates and shapes subjectivities can be drawn upon to challenge discursive practices and develop “strategic knowledge” that might alter practices of power and privilege. Foucault’s concepts of subjectivity and authority offer an analytic framework for educators hoping to make explicit power relations in their own educational practices. In the essay, “The Subject and Power,” Foucault argues that the subject is constituted in relations of power and that struggles “against the submission of subjectivity” may have transformative potentialities.²⁶ Since power is relational and permeates everyday practices, power must be analyzed, critiqued, and resisted in everyday pedagogical practices, for example. The classroom, then, is a site for the analysis and critique of techniques of power that are manifested in and through certain practices. Foucault offers insights into the power relations and struggles that seem to characterize educational work, and it is through his framework of “anti-authority struggles”²⁷ that I hope to elaborate on some of these struggles. These struggles can serve as sites for transformative work for both teachers and students and become focal points for dialogic educational activity in specific sites.

4.2 In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault cites six common features of “anti-authority struggles” and these six features can be used to analyze educational workplaces as sites where techniques of power are exercised and resisted. For example, since these struggles are “transversal” and carried on across contexts, critique and theory developed within particular sites may be applicable in other contexts, with the understanding that power relations are multiple and always present, requiring continual criticism and resistance. As Foucault has noted, “everything is dangerous” and with the recognition that all pedagogical and institutional practices are power-laden, students and teachers can join in anti-authority struggles against existing power relations that operate within the classroom and university by critiquing practices that seem to limit freedom and the imagining of possibilities. Such a dialogic engagement means that teachers acknowledge their complicity with authority while recognizing that it can be redefined through certain practices. Engaging in and modeling rigorous self-reflexivity within the specific context of the university workplace is a practice many university academics seem to preach yet often fail to perform.

4.3 Pedagogical practices that govern and regulate individuals and serve to limit possibilities can be analyzed and resisted. In the university, students often resist institutional power relations that normalize certain ways of thinking, talking, and writing. Certain standards and modes of expression are invoked as necessary, faculty and students are socialized to construct arguments in certain ways, and linearity, rationality, and logos are privileged over other forms of thought and expression. Possibilities are closed off as requirements are enforced and ways of being sanctioned by the institution. Certain questions and topics of discussion are deemed off limits and steered into more acceptable avenues and topics. For example, in college of education courses film, art, and music as media of expression are typically considered less legitimate than expository forms of writing. Issues of spirituality seem taboo. As Mary Douglas has noted, “Institutions systematically direct individual memory and channel our perceptions into forms compatible with the relations they authorize.”²⁸ How institutional authority is exercised through the practices of university educators and its effects must be critically examined within specific contexts. Around such analyses and struggles, solidarities can be fashioned to resist and transform the power relations that shape subjectivities.

4.4 However, anti-authority struggles are “immediate” in the sense that power is experienced concretely in specific ways and may be resisted in ways that are anarchistic and unarticulated, rather than theoretically explained or critiqued. As noted above, struggle is often directed at strategic relations and practices that have been stabilized through the institution. For example, professors profess, knowledge is transmitted, and students are expected to submit to certain institutional norms. The teacher-student relationship represents an asymmetrical power relation that students experience daily in multiple practices in the classroom. Struggle may be directed at reducing this asymmetry as it is directly experienced or legitimizing certain ways of knowing. A more reciprocal teacher-student relationship may be an unarticulated desire. This area of anti-authority struggle may potentially offer a form of praxis that is dialogic, open-ended, and emergent. Such a dialogic practice would require that the teacher and students create opportunities to explore and articulate these felt needs and experiences in meaningful ways.

4.5 Foucault also states that anti-authority struggles “question the status of the individual...they attack everything that separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way...they are struggles against the ‘government of individualization.’”²⁹ As faculty and students are socialized into the academy, many experience and struggle against the alienation and isolation that seems to be demanded of the scholar. The practices of self-discipline, solitude, and individualistic academic production prohibit more collegial and community-oriented practices. Students are classified by professors and other students according to their political and philosophic stances and differentiated from one another. Life in the university seems to demand withdrawal from possible larger communities and emphasizes reading, writing, and talking as forms of social action. However, many faculty and students struggle against these notions of academic life and may come to think that most of what is discussed or written has little bearing on larger communities, such as K-12 students and teachers. Much academic work appears to be produced solely for other scholars. More collaborative, caring, and collegial relationships may be desired rather than the competitive, confrontational, and individualistic norms of institutional scholarly life. Developing collective subject positions within the university may help develop solidarities across educational contexts.

4.6 Anti-authority struggles are also “an opposition to the effects of power linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification—struggles against the privileges of knowledge...What is questioned is the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short, the regime of knowledge.”³⁰ The “regime of knowledge” and the discursive practices that circulate and function in the university to marginalize, exclude, or reduce other possibilities might be more rigorously questioned. As Popkewitz and others have noted, “Knowledge provides the principles through which options are made available, problems defined, and solutions considered as acceptable and effective.”³¹ Students and teachers might view education as an opening up of possibilities and struggle against the boundaries established by power and knowledge. Paternalistic attitudes and practices within the university create tendencies to identify with certain discourses, but can undermine originality and creativity while encouraging dependence. The reproductive nature of university discourses can be resisted. For example, in doctoral courses it is seldom satisfactory to express one’s own original, creative ideas, and creative modes of expression such as art, poetry, and music are marginalized in the scholarly community. Arguments that are original are dismissed if they don’t cite recognized authors and scholars. For example, while one student may be making his own case for a metaphysics of spirituality in education, another who makes a similar case citing Buber, Wexler, Fromm, and Foucault will stand a greater chance of their work being accepted and rewarded. An example of power circulating is that when a student writes about a topic, such as subjectivity, the topic is treated as separate from one’s own subjectivity. Knowledge as disciplinary power is a knowledge disembodied, alienated from self, and seen as something “out there” to be obtained. The engaged radical must strive to create knowledge and theory that emerges out of specific contexts and power relations.

4.5 Lastly, Foucault notes that these struggles revolve around questions of identity, and the refusal of abstractions that deny individuality. Power is located in social relationships and it is through interaction that power is exercised. Since the human subject is a product of social relations and history, and thus power, the self is a site of domination and resistance. Subjectivity is a function of practices and relationships of power, inscribed by power in a multiplicity of social relations. As Lynn Fendler has noted, “technologies of pedagogy move institutional norms directly into the subjective space of the individual.”³² Conflict between institutional norms and discourses of the self give rise to resistance and struggle. As Chantal Mouffe argues, “An antagonism can emerge when a collective subject...that has been constructed in a specific way, to certain existing discourses, finds its subjectivity negated by other discourses or practices.”³³ She describes this negation as a result of certain rights being denied by some practices or discourses and notes that, “People struggle for equality not because of some ontological postulate but because they have been constructed as subjects in a democratic tradition that puts those values at the center of social life...All positions that have been constructed as relations of domination/subordination will be deconstructed because of the subversive character of democratic discourse.”³⁴ Democratic discourse, then, might suggest deconstructions of binaries within educational spaces, in which social relations and discourses are challenged, critiqued, and reconstituted.

4.6 Such micro-analyses can examine how power is exercised in specific sites and in specific relationships to clarify how power circulates and how certain ideas and ways of thinking are marginalized while others are privileged and normalized. The main thing is to not only understand power, but to resist it, to subvert it, and to struggle against it, so that its effects are less oppressive. Such a stance requires continual and rigorous self critique. As Kevin Kumashiro notes, “the process of learning about the dynamics of oppression also involves learning about oneself” since we are often (unknowingly) complicit in the processes of oppression.³⁵ Becoming more aware of and addressing our complicities with oppression in university settings are important tasks, since these complicities are likely to exist in other educational settings. Using these theoretical perspectives to analyze and struggle against oppression might be “construed as a form of academic consciousness-raising that can lead to a more accurate self-understanding of the ambiguity of our position as 'engaged intellectuals' (Rachjman, 1985) concerned with using our knowledge and engagement in potent ways.”³⁶ Such approaches address central issues of contemporary intellectual work: “Recently, the problem has been to figure out how intellectual work can effect political critique and at the same time eschew intellectual vanguardism. This issue here is what is the political role of critical work that does not validate itself on the basis of normalized principles, which does not foreclose possibilities for radical breaks in the future, which does not presume authority over subjectivity, and which does not usurp responsibility for explaining and predicting history and social relations?”³⁷ Such critical work is ongoing and requires constant vigilance and a self reflexivity that moves back and forth between macro-level critiques of broader contexts and processes and micro-level critiques that consider specific concrete practices. It must engage in critique and action that challenges specific and local relations of power, while developing understandings of their relationship to broader social and historical processes.

Models of Engaged Radicalism

5.1 Several models for an engaged educational radicalism might be considered. Gramsci’s vision of the organic intellectual, Foucault’s concept of the specific intellectual, and Giroux’s conception of teachers as transformative intellectuals will be briefly considered, along with Edward Said’s ideas about the role of the intellectual in contemporary society. Feminist scholarship, along with Paolo Freire’s stress on the importance of love and dialogue, will be drawn upon to develop a model of an engaged educational radicalism that is compassionate, relational, holistic, participatory, and experimental. It views experience, democracy, and education as emergent, co-created, and developed through processes of being and becoming. It calls for educational work that is situated and reflexive, drawing on diverse ways of knowing

and being, and working toward educational projects constructed through deep engagement and relationship with others.

5.2 Paula Allman has written about the ideas of Gramsci and Freire regarding the role of educational workers. She notes that both outlined ideas about cultural action for social transformation and that both believed critical praxis involved struggling with people to change society. According to Allman, Gramsci believed that intellectuals needed to engage with people to problematize ways of thinking and “common sense” so that they might become philosophers of lived experience and praxis. Organic intellectuals “form a dialectical unity (non-antagonistic) with the people”³⁸ to create new social relations, knowledge, and possibilities. The organic intellectual “begins with people’s concrete perceptions of the world (their limited praxis) and helps them to come to a critical, scientific, or, in other words, dialectical conceptualization.”³⁹ Both Gramsci and Freire believed that critical praxis required active and reciprocal relationships between teachers and students. According to Allman, this dialogic relationship necessitates a changed relationship to knowledge and knowing. Gramsci noted the importance of forming alliances in creating new knowledge and that “a counter-hegemonic project, based on small-scale projects...offer the experience of transformed relations.”⁴⁰ It is through such projects and alliances or relationships that new knowledge can be created. The organic intellectual works in organic unity with the people, identifies common interests, and realizes that “it is only within the experience of struggling to transform relations and the experience of the transformations that our critical consciousness can fully develop.”⁴¹ In other words, “*being or relating differently is inextricably bound up with knowing differently.*”⁴² Knowing, dialogic engagement in practical activity, and coming to know differently are reiterative and dialectical processes. Such a changed relationship to knowledge required a continual questioning of our own practices, knowledge, and ways of knowing and a receptivity to others’ ideas and strategies. This conception of the intellectual is different from many other conceptions that view the intellectual as a detached critic of society. Instead, the organic intellectual creates new knowledge in alliance and activity with the marginalized, the oppressed, and others striving for greater empowerment, justice, and democracy. He or she is engaged, yet detached in ways that allow for ongoing self-critique. It is a dialectical process that moves back and forth between engagement and detachment, deductive and inductive processes, macro and micro-levels of analyses and action, and between analysis and synthesis. As Freire notes, a pedagogy of the oppressed “must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its cause’s objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation.”⁴³

5.3 Such work would presumably mean that radical educators would need to problematize their own thinking and “common sense,” since they, too, operate within the same contexts and relations of power as others. Foucault offers insights into the kind of intellectual work this necessitates. According to Foucault, being a “specific intellectual” means:

to alter not only others’ thoughts, but also one’s own. This work of altering one’s own thought and that of others seems to me to be the intellectual’s *raison d’être*...I would like it to be an elaboration of self by self, a studious transformation, a slow, arduous process of change, guided by a constant concern for truth...The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they have to do...The work of an intellectual is not to shape others’ political will; it is, through the analyses that he carries out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people’s mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this re-problematization (in which he carries out his specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role as citizen to play).⁴⁴

Foucault differentiated between the “specific” and “universal” intellectual. He believed the “specific” intellectual is actually drawn closer to the proletariat because they are more likely to be engaged in “real, material, everyday struggles”⁴⁵ and because they share a common adversary, “namely, the multinational corporations, the judicial and police apparatuses, the property speculators, and so on.”⁴⁶ The educational system provides “privileged points of intersection” and serves to multiply and reinforce “power effects as centers in a polymorphous ensemble of intellectuals who virtually pass through and relate themselves to the academic system.”⁴⁷ Foucault also noted the obstacles faced by specific intellectuals: they can be manipulated by political parties, lack a more global strategy, and are isolated from forces that might allow their work to grow. He calls for reconsideration of the work of the specific intellectual, since such workers occupy a specific position to the apparatuses of truth in society. According to Foucault, “the essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people’s consciousness--or what’s in their heads--but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.”⁴⁸ Such an intellectual project would seem to require a re-casting of intellectual work in which struggle is directed at the “very status of truth and the vast institutional mechanisms that account for this status...and the disrupting and dismantling of prevailing ‘regimes of truth.’”⁴⁹ The university is one vast network where truth is produced and where intellectual work can serve to disrupt and dismantle the production of truth.

5.4 Henry Giroux has also noted the importance of the concept of authority in transformative educational work. He argues that it is important for educators to develop a dialectical view of authority, since they have a particular relationship to authority and are caught in the nexus of authority as it circulates through the discourses and practices of schooling. According to Giroux, the notion of authority is central to conceptualizing teaching as an intellectual practice, and it is the concept of emancipatory authority that “suggests that teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community.”⁵⁰ The concept of emancipatory authority allows teachers to link their practices to practices in behalf of empowerment and social transformation so that teaching and learning takes place within struggles and relations of power. Giroux argues that “acting as a transformative intellectual means helping students acquire critical knowledge about basic societal structures, such as the economy, the state, the work place, and mass culture, so that such institutions can be open to potential transformation.”⁵¹ According to Giroux, this means making explicit authority and power relations within classrooms and committing to solidarity with those that are marginal and exploited. It means engaging with groups struggling for liberation, freedom, and justice. Giroux cites Martin Carnoy in noting that: “Democracy has been developed by social movements, and those intellectuals and educators who were able to implement democratic reforms in education did so in part through appeals to such movements.”⁵² Building alliances and solidarity with those struggling against oppression, injustice, and exploitation is central to the ideal of the transformative intellectual and necessitates linking teaching and learning to broader social movements.

5.5 Edward Said has also addressed the role of intellectuals in questioning privilege based on race, class, gender, and challenging social authority. He argues that the intellectual must work in behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. According to Said, to be an intellectual “is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.”⁵³ The radical intellectual goes beyond immediate concrete experience to develop understanding and this is largely a task of universalizing crisis, to connect the suffering of people with the sufferings of others and to show how they are connected or related. “An intellectual is fundamentally about knowledge and freedom...not as abstractions...but as experiences actually lived through.”⁵⁴ Deep engagement with those that are underrepresented and disadvantaged would seem to be a requirement of such work, as well as working to

link the specific experiences of people with the experiences of others and broader social and historical processes.

5.6 Each of these models of intellectual work suggest an educational worker who seeks to engage with others, inside and outside of the university, to develop shared understandings, create meaning, and bring about personal and social transformation. Such work requires a stance of openness, receptivity, relationship, dialogue, and experimentation. It assumes that “in our action is our knowing”⁵⁵ and is committed to keeping things in process. It “puts a premium on educating and being educated by struggling peoples, organizing and being organized by resisting groups,”⁵⁶ and recognizes that consciousness is created in and through relationship and struggle with diverse peoples. The engaged intellectual also recognizes the need for critical self-reflexivity and continually works to transform one’s own subjectivity by fostering relationships with others. Such intellectual work acknowledges and accepts the risks, uncertainties, and contingencies that are inherent in deep engagement with others. It is infused with love: True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis.”⁵⁷

The Work of Grace Lee Boggs

6.1 As an example of an engaged radical intellectual, this paper concludes by examining the work and life of Grace Lee Boggs. Boggs, a Chinese American, has been involved in numerous social movements, especially the ongoing movement to rebuild and redefine Detroit’s communities. As she notes in her autobiography, *Living for Change*, her earliest understandings of revolutionary struggle came from reading books, and it was through her involvement in social action that she came to view doing and social action as having greater priority than abstract theorizing. After receiving an M.A. at Bryn Mawr, Boggs became involved with community organizations, such as Chicago’s South Side Tenants Organization, a Trotskyist group, the March on Washington movement, the Workers Party, and the antiwar movement. As Boggs notes, she moved from a life of contemplation to one of action, and saw knowing as directly linked to social engagement with others in struggles to improve their lives and society. Her work eventually brought her into contact with Jimmy Boggs, C.L.R. James and other radicals and activists, and various working class and African American struggles--all of which inform her life-long commitment to personal and social transformation.

6.2 In *Living for Change*, Boggs raises several important questions about the struggle to create a revolutionary consciousness and movement in an era of global capitalism in which commodification and capitalist social relations increasingly extend into all realms of personal and social life. She offers concrete and specific strategies to go beyond reformist politics and rebellion to challenge capitalist hegemony and makes a case for a “post-modern mode of organizing”⁵⁸ to mobilize communities of resistance in which it may become possible to imagine alternative futures. To conclude, I will explore her ideas about the interconnected nature of social and self transformation and raise the question of how local struggles, especially among diverse educators working for change, might develop into a broader alliance of social movements to challenge larger systems of domination and oppression.

6.3 As Boggs notes in her concluding chapter, “All over the world today we are obviously living in that in-between period of historical time when great numbers of people are aware that they cannot continue in the same old way but are immobilized because they cannot imagine an alternative.”⁵⁹ She envisions possibilities for new forms of radical politics in which new identities can be created in the process of struggle and action at the grassroots level. She believes that “the struggle to rebuild and control our communities is the wave of the future,”⁶⁰ and argues that revolution is possible by developing local strategies that will transform human consciousness and people’s sense of political and social responsibility. Thus, in order to transform the world we must transform ourselves. As she notes, “To make a revolution, people must not only struggle against existing institutions. They must make a

philosophical/spiritual leap and become more *human* human beings.”⁶¹ According to Boggs, such a leap is possible through active participation in ongoing movements and struggles to bring about change.

6.4 However, it seems necessary to consider concrete ways in which people might develop the critical capacities and will to struggle in order to bring about self and social transformation. How might it be possible to develop the historical consciousness and critical sensibilities that might motivate and empower people to engage in change processes at the local level? For people to be transformed through local struggles they must willingly engage in those struggles. They must be willing to make the leap. Many intellectuals in the university workplace may be unwilling to take this leap or fail to critically interrogate ways of thinking and being in the world that prevent them from such engagements. There tends to be fierce resistance to any knowledges or practices that might disrupt conventional academic ways of thinking and participating. With the erosion of community, scholars tend to become socially isolated and lose the capacity to engage in community-building activities, feeling rootless and alienated amidst a sea of rapid social change and uncertainty. Abstract theorizing becomes a safe haven for those working in the universities.

6.5 The moral and political will and capacity to struggle and bring about change must be developed. For Boggs, this requires a broad educational project and a willingness to imagine alternatives. Perhaps Fred Ho best describes the type of political education that community organizers must promote: “It is both the organization and the individual cadre’s responsibility to promote and to develop with each person critical and analytic thinking, creativity, passion and compassion, resourcefulness and expertise (both specialized and general). The ultimate goal of a revolutionary movement is to create new, revolutionary human beings who do not replicate the hierarchical and oppressive behaviors and practices of capitalist society, but who personify and embody liberating relations and conduct.”⁶² Indeed, no small task. It means to desire change, to constantly become, and to develop and practice new visions of who we might become. As Boggs notes in her introduction, the will to struggle requires “the realization that there is no final struggle,”⁶³ that the process of change will be continual and on-going. Chantal Mouffe offers insights that support Boggs’ arguments by noting that a radical democratic citizenship and the construction of a common political identity may be possible only by transforming existing subject positions. Such a transformation might be possible by linking or articulating the ensemble of subject positions in ways that acknowledge the multiplicity of social relations in which struggle is visualized in “specific and differential forms.”⁶⁴ Mouffe also notes the necessity of on-going struggle toward a “social imaginary” by suggesting that “a radical democratic approach views the common good as a ‘vanishing point,’ something to which we must constantly refer when we are acting as citizens, but that can never be reached.”⁶⁵ It is through such struggle as a social practice that we can strive to create community and develop new knowledge and conceptions of the academic intellectual that are ultimately more rewarding and satisfying. Struggle is thus a creative process in which one becomes an active member. The willingness and courage to engage in radical experimentation becomes absolutely necessary to invent new modes of relationship, new modes of being, and to create new social practices and a new culture.

6.6 For Boggs, the site of revolutionary praxis and self and social transformation is in one’s community. Although communities might take many different forms, she seems to be specifically referring to communities that exist within neighborhoods, like those she describes in Detroit, and that require face-to-face interaction among members. Struggles must be conducted locally, at the grassroots level, and emerge from the hopes and dreams of the participating members of the community. Boggs argues that, “...in order to create a movement, people of widely differing views and backgrounds need to come together around a vision.”⁶⁶ This vision must emerge from the ground up, from the insights and wisdom of people within communities. Boggs advocates efforts at “holistic organizing” around the principles of “Environmental Justice” since all of the issues affecting local people (health, safety, housing, economic development, education) are tied together by the principles of “Environmental Justice.”⁶⁷ For Boggs, developing and

enacting community visions can build resistance to the global economy by producing for the needs of the community, building collective hope, and empowering people.

What to Do?

7.1 But can it? While distinctions she makes between rebellion and revolution are useful, it is hard to see how such grassroots movements can lead to a broad-based revolutionary movement that has the potential to transform the whole system. What is to ensure that local political struggles will be more than local rebellions and transform only isolated aspects of the capitalist system? It seems that grassroots projects need something that brings them together, identifies them as acts of a larger movement of resistance, helps them relate to one another, and develops widespread alternatives that might actually challenge the system. Will “holistic organizing” around “Principles of Environmental Justice” create a broad-based movement that will have revolutionary potential? What might unite diverse and seemingly disparate struggles? Karin Aguilar-San Juan also notes the necessity of building alliances across race and warns against “reducing race to a matter of identity, rather than expanding our experience of racism into a critique of US society.”⁶⁸ Aguilar-San Juan calls for an analysis of the roots of racism and class oppression and a critique of capitalism rather than putting identity issues at the center of the debate. Like identity politics, grassroots movements pose the risk of obscuring common interests and issues and may fail to articulate a larger agenda. Jameson’s “mediatory concepts” might serve to articulate and describe a whole series of cultural phenomena and contribute to a politics of alliance in which solidarities among diverse groups of people might be built to provide larger movements of resistance and change. There is a need for struggle on many fronts and a hope for new, unfortold, and broader patterns of resistance that might emerge from local practices and be articulated in ways that offer compelling visions for people engaged in diverse struggles. Emergent activisms serve as examples of micropolitics that offer the potential for new histories and subjectivities to be constructed. From these multiple, localized struggles fresh patterns of resistance and change might emerge--new, informal global networks that will create new normativities and possibilities for transformations of existing institutions. For Boggs, local spaces are sites to confront global issues as they manifest themselves in local contexts. Thus, community action on localized issues may hold possibilities for networks of local actions on global issues. Presumably, these networks would articulate similarities and relationships among diverse struggles and citizenships. Through such networks of resistance and change a radical plural democratic movement may emerge that recognizes the plurality of struggles yet acknowledges a “social imaginary,” or a common good as a “vanishing point,” to which these diverse movements might refer. Not only would it help reveal how many forms of oppression and resistance are interconnected, but it would make possible the articulation of a democratic vision of an alternative future.

7.2 Boggs argues that revolution is possible by developing local strategies that will transform human consciousness and people’s sense of political and social responsibility. In order to transform the world we must transform ourselves and our relationships with others. According to Boggs, such a leap is possible through active participation in ongoing movements and struggles to bring about change and it is in such forms of participation that educators might be engaged. For me, as someone who works in a university setting, it means that I must resist the ways I’ve been socialized to think and be, come out of the ivory tower and engage in struggles with those who have been marginalized and oppressed, and who seek more just and democratic futures. We have much to learn from each other, but more importantly, I have much to learn with others and from those struggling for social change. The university worker must envision intellectual work that is engaged and self reflexive rather than detached from the realities of those struggling against oppression. It also means connecting with others in ways that might build dialogic relationships within specific contexts while seeking solidarity with others across various contexts to explore how various forms of oppression are interconnected. Such a stance has the potential to shift our own ways of thinking and relationship with others in ways that may have transformative possibilities for ourselves and society.

¹ Lasch, C. *The revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy*. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, p. 20.

² Boggs, G. *Living for change: An autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 255.

³ Lasch, C. *The revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy*. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995.

⁴ Best, S. and Kellner, D. *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. New York: The Guildord Press, 1991, p. viii.

⁵ Giroux, H. *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture, and schooling*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997, p. 130.

⁶ Ibid, p. 130.

⁷ Lasch, C. *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979, p. 224.

⁸ Giroux, H. "The Corporate War Against Higher Education" in *Workplace: A journal for academic labor*, 2002, <http://www.cust.educ.ubc.ca/workplace/issue5p1/giroux.html>

⁹ Best and Kellner, 1991, p. 272.

¹⁰ Best and Kellner, 1991.

¹¹ Damrosch, D. *We scholars: Changing the culture of the university*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

¹² Eagleton, 1999, cited in McLaren, P. and Farahmandpur, R. (2000). "Reconsidering Marx in Post-Marxist Times: A Requiem for Postmodernism?" in *Educational Researcher*, April, 2000, p. 25.

¹³ Wexler, P. *Holy sparks: Social theory, education, and religion*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996, p. 78.

¹⁴ McLaren, P. "Revolutionary Praxis: Toward a Pedagogy of Resistance and Transformation," in *Educational Researcher*, August-September, 1997, p. 26.

¹⁵ Best, S. and Kellner, D. *Postmodern theory: Critical interrogations*. New York: The Guildord Press, 1991.

¹⁶ Best, S. and Kellner, D. *The postmodern adventure: Science, technology, and cultural studies at the third millennium*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2001.

¹⁷ West, C. "Race and Social Theory," in *The Cornel West reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999, p. 237.

¹⁸ Lasch, 1997.

¹⁹ West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," 1999, p. 136.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jacoby, R. *The Last Intellectuals: American culture in the age of academe*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1987.

²² Said, E. *Representations of the intellectual: The 1993 Reith lectures*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, p. 72.

²³ Ibid., p. 173.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 197.

²⁵ Lasch, 1995, p. 192-193.

²⁶ Foucault, M. *Power*. Volume 3, Edited by James D. Faubion. New York: The New Press, 1994,, p. 332.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 329.

²⁸ Douglas, M., 1986, p. 92, cited in Damrosch, D. (1995). *We scholars: Changing the culture of the university*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 6.

²⁹ Foucault, 1994, p. 330.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 330-331.

³¹ Popkewitz, T., Pereyra, M and Franklin, B. "History, the Problem of Knowledge, and the New Cultural History," in Popkewitz, Franklin, and Pereyra, eds. *Cultural history and education: Critical essays on knowledge and schooling*, 2001, p. 29.

³² Fendler, L. "Making trouble: Prediction, agency, critical empowerment," in *Critical theories in education: Changing terrains of knowledge and politics*, Popkewitz, T. & Fendler, L., eds. New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 169-188, p. 167.

³³ Mouffe, C. "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics." *Feminists theorize the political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 368-384, p. 382.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 383-384.

³⁵ Kumashiro, K. "Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education," in *Review of Educational Research*, Spring 2000, Vol. 70, No. 1, p. 25-53, p. 37.

³⁶ Lather, P. *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 39.

³⁷ Fendler, p. 183.

³⁸ Allman, P. *Revolutionary social transformation: Democratic hopes, political possibilities and critical education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999, p. 114..

³⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁴² Ibid., p. 97.

⁴³ Freire, P. *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Foucault, M. "The Concern for Truth," in Kritzman, L. *Michel Foucault: Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984*. New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 263-265.

⁴⁵ Foucault, M. "Truth and Power," in *Power*, 1994, p. 126-127.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 127.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁹ West, C. "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," in West, 1999, p. 311-312.

⁵⁰ Giroux, 1997, p. 103.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 104.

⁵² Carnoy, 1983, in Giroux, 1997, p. 112.

⁵³ Said, E. *Representations of the intellectual: The 1993 Reith lectures*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁵ Lather, 1991, p. xv.

⁵⁶ West, C. "On Prophetic Pragmatism," in West, 1999, p. 171.

⁵⁷ Freire, 1970, p. 32.

⁵⁸ "Beyond Protest Politics," in Michigan Citizen, Aug. 26-Sept. 1, 2001; <http://www.boggscenter.org/propol.htm>

⁵⁹ Boggs, G. *Living for change: An autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 254.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 255.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 153

⁶² Ho, F. Ed. *Legacy to liberation: Politics and culture of revolutionary Asian Pacific America*. San Francisco: AK Press, 2000, p. 182.

⁶³ Boggs, 1998, p. xvi.

⁶⁴ Mouffe, C. "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics." *Feminists theorize the political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 368-384, p. 373.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁶⁶ Boggs, 1998, p. 251.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁶⁸ Aguilar-San Juan, K. "Linking the Issues: From Identity to Activism." *The State of Asian America: Activism and resistance in the 1990's*. Ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan. Boston: South End, 1994, 1-15, p. 8.