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Religion, Authoritarianism and the Perpetuation of Capitalism *The Role of Atheism in a Marxist Critical Pedagogy*

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Abstract

Religion, and the sectarianism it inspires, is clearly counterproductive to the emergence of a viable and global socialist alternative to capitalism. This reality, which Marx was clearly aware of in his own time, is just as true today. Religious faith, regardless of its specifics – faith that Jesus will return to save the day, faith that Muslim martyrs go straight to Paradise, faith that Elohim will grant deceased Mormons a personal planet, faith that Tom Cruise is merely a “meat body” for immortal “Thetans” – is simply on the wrong side of an escalating war of ideas. No matter how alien their intentions, these dogmas continue to have a significant impact on the maintenance and progress of the social, political, and economic conditions of our world – by way of their respective narratives and the form of human consciousness they inspire. If we truly envision a world without systemic domination – where the balkanization, vilification, and exploitation of our fellow human beings as well as our planet are not taken-for-granted and unavoidable necessities – then maintaining a consistent position opposing all forms and sources of oppression – both mental and physical – is paramount.



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A central tenant of a Marxist critical pedagogy is a critique of the role education can, and does, play within a superstructure that validates and maintains a capitalistic base. Recognizing the great hegemonic potential of education, such critical pedagogues have long sought to usurp its power – especially in the case of mass, compulsory schooling – and reverse its current; transforming it into a tool of enlightenment and empowerment for those whose exploitation serves as fuel animating the capitalist tyranny. In seeking to manipulate, if not outright commandeer, the role that education plays within the superstructure, we acknowledge that the maintenance of the capitalist base requires the development of a specific human character and, in turn, a specific “form of social conscience” – informed by what Marx and Engels (1932/1996) described as the “ruling ideas” that represent the “ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (p. 61). In short, the supposition that education can be an affective tool of transformation reveals a clear appraisal of the central role of human consciousness to the maintenance of social, political, and economic structures.

As Erich Fromm (1941) indicated, there is a dynamic correlation between the structure of human character within a given society and the economic base of that society. In other words, the maintenance of any particular “way of life” requires a compatible, if not mirrored, version of human consciousness and character. Fromm argued that even intellectuality itself “... aside from the purely logical elements that are involved in the act of thinking, [is] greatly determined by the personality structure of the person who thinks” (p. 305). This, Fromm continued, “holds true for the whole of a doctrine or of a theoretical system, as well as for a single concept, like love, justice, equality, sacrifice” (p. 306). In short, a necessary precursor to fully comprehending the nature of a given society – understanding its socio-cultural norms, political and/or economic structures and resulting hierarchies – is a thorough analysis of the particular types of individual and collective consciousness that generate and validate such social structures while simultaneously being generated and validated by them. It is this development of a compatible form of social conscience that is a key responsibility of the superstructural institutions, especially those focused on the development of individual and collective consciousness and epistemology. This development and validation can be ‘organic’, in the sense that superstructural institutions develop within, or on top of, the logic of base systems – reflecting the unique peculiarities of the base. However, this development can also be ‘inorganic’ and hegemonic, directed by an elite for the purpose of maintaining particular power structures and cultural norms. Education, for example – particularly in the case of mass-compulsory schooling – is one of many institutions that can serve the pernicious goal of providing those in power with an invaluable tool for nurturing and shaping a particular human character, consciousness and epistemology that is tuned to the specific needs of a respective base.

Although such a revelation seems obvious, should one require further convincing, we need look no further than the desperate efforts to control education by some of the most authoritarian regimes in history, from Hitler to Stalin to Kim Jung-un. As Anton Makarenko (1955), architect of Stalin’s educational system, wrote, “It was clear to me that many details of human personality and behavior could be made from dies, simply stamped out *en masse* ... although of course the dies themselves had to be of the finest description, demanding scrupulous care” (pp. 267-268). This perspective is consistent with a report published by the U.N. in 2014, which found that the North Korean education system has “...two basic themes... to instill utmost loyalty and commitment towards the Supreme Leader [and] ...to instill hostility and deep hatred towards Japan, the U.S., and the Republic of Korea” (p. 46). A former North Korean student who was interviewed by the U.N. committee stated that from as early as he could remember he

was only “...interested in becoming a great warrior, to become a killer of the enemies [and] ...dying for the sake of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il” (pp. 46-47). Of course it was Hitler who summed it up most succinctly, when describing the indoctrination of the Hitlerjugend (Hitler’s Youth): “Let me control the textbooks and I will control the state” (Shirer, 2011, p. 254). Unfortunately, the historical evidence of just how powerful and effective such authoritarian educational practices and systems are explains much of why such examples, of which I have named only a few, are so plentiful. Clearly, indoctrination of the young and the crafting of human consciousness – by various methods and with various intents – have always been, and continue to be, powerful tools of domination.

However, what is also clearly recognized by critical pedagogues is that when education is conceived as an act of liberation, illuminating systems of oppression rather than concealing them, it becomes an equally powerful threat to the dominant. For such liberatory education, as Marx (1843) contended, “... our motto must be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but by analysing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself, whether it manifests itself in a religious or a political form” (p. 46). Marx did not seek to merely re-direct the delusional mind to an alternative dogmatic *truth* as defined by its new master. He sought the liberation of the mind from all forms of mysticism and dogmatism. In short, a liberated mind has never been the outcome of dogmatic training – regardless of its source or its *noble* intents.

As Strike (1989) described, Marxism is dominated by a consistent “concern that persons be able to become fully human and to live fully human lives by interacting harmoniously with the full range of human resources and the full human community” (p. 135). As history makes clear, when education has been designed and dictated by the dominant group within a given society – whether political, social, economic, or theological – full development of humanism has rarely, if ever, been a motivating factor. When official education blinds rather than reveals, celebrates submission over freedom, dictates ‘truth’ over the development of reason, and seeks to construct “wheels in the head” rather than providing the wrenches to remove them, it serves only to maintain the logic – or illogic – of the system from which it was generated. To this point, a central mission of a Marxist critical pedagogy is to assist students in developing the criticality necessary to “see” the ways in which official education is employed to justify and maintain base systems of domination.

Given this mission, it stands to reason that this Marxist critique of education should be extended to all “Superstructural” institutions because, as in the case of education, the dominant class – through the manipulation of political, legal and informational structures and processes – seek to shape the superstructure in such a way to best protect the true nature of the base from popular analysis and, therefore, stunt the development of full humanity. That is to say that while it is clear that the nature of the base itself informs and shapes the superstructure, those in power are compelled to continuously monitor, adjust, and even replace superstructural institutions in order to maintain a ‘cultural invisibility’ of the base to those whose interest the base mode of production does not serve; the exploited worker, in the case of capitalism. As Strinati (1995) states:

...dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated

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construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups. (p. 165).

If the superstructure is functioning “properly” for the oppressors, the economic base should be imperceptible to the oppressed that toil within it; it should be as natural – and require as little thought – as the act of breathing. For the capitalist this means developing a human character and social conscience that will embrace, rather than reject, the alienation of labor that is necessitated by the capitalist mode of production. The alienation and exploitation of wage labor must come to be seen as unavoidable, or even “natural”, within the capitalist superstructure and the only hope of relief that is deemed possible exists, not in the destruction of the capitalist system, but in the propagandized potential of the oppressed climbing a meritocratic ladder to become the oppressor.

To this end, a Marxist critical pedagogy, as Strike (1989) contends, “must explain how persons are formed, or malformed, under capitalism, but it must also explain how it is that capitalism maintains its stability and how it produces people who fail to resist capitalist alienation” (p.135). In short, an absence of critical consciousness is a clear predictor of an absence of critical engagement, it fosters the development of what Freire (1974) termed “a culture of silence”. Such deprivation in the development of criticality, in concert with other forms of socio-psychological manipulation, produces a “cultural hegemony” that “manufactures consent”, which Antonio Gramsci (1971) argued is maintained at ...

... two major superstructural ‘levels’: the one that can be called ‘civil society’, that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or ‘the state’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the functions of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of ‘direct domination’ or command exercised through the state and ‘juridical’ government. The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [and] ... the apparatus of state coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline on those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively. (p. 12).

When superstructural institutions fail to inspire such “spontaneous consent”, and the imposed definitions of social, political and economic life come to be viewed as mere social constructions, it is often the superstructure itself, rather than the base, that is first brought into question.

In the 1960s, for example, the political unrest in the U.S. was not due to a rebellion of the working class against bourgeois domination, but an intellectual and youth revolt against “false consciousness” and a “new spirit of the age” where endless consumerism was to define the human experience. From the perspective of the 60’s youth movement, society was to be transformed not by directly attacking the capitalistic base, but by deconstructing the superstructural institutions producing its ideological hegemony. It can be reasonably predicted that had the youth movement been sustained it would have eventually expanded its critique from superstructure to base – and some elements within the broader movement had already begun to do so by the time of the Kent State shootings (Clancy, 2007).

As in the case of many revolutionary movements, the first gasp for freedom demands the critique and destruction, or radical transformation, of the socio-political institutions that malform the collective social conscience, via the planting of ideas and ways of thinking, which maintain the illusion of free choice. It is this transformation of human consciousness that is always at the core of the transformation of social, economic, or political structures. As Godwin contemplated in 1783, “Let the most oppressed people under heaven once change their mode of thinking, and they are free” (Spring, 1999, p. 37). Capitalism, of course, is not the only economic base in history that those in power have sought to maintain, nor is education the only superstructural institution that has been employed to justify and obscure the true nature of a base.

Mental Despotism within Feudalism

The mode of production under feudalism, for example, also generated a superstructure that produced and maintained a form of social conscience that was compatible with the ascension of the few, at the expense of the many. Feudal ideologies emphasized rigid hierarchy, God-given positions in that hierarchy, stability and the divine right of kings to rule and a religious form that bolstered those requirements – in European feudalism this was represented by Catholicism and orthodoxy. For much of the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church and the monarchy participated in the means of production in an identical way; extracting agricultural surplus from peasantry. In exchange for submission to exploitation, the feudal lords promised protection and land for sustenance in this life, while the church promised streets of gold and eternal happiness in the next.

Within feudalism, however, it was clearly the institution of religion that served as the central cultural apparatus in both the justification of power structures and relationships, as well as the construction of human character and consciousness that was best aligned with the feudal base. Religion – Christianity in this case – was employed in varying ways, to explain, justify, and prove that the feudal mode of production was right, proper, unalterable – and above all else – divinely ordained by God. The church as such, interacted with, and dictated to, civil law, family organization, education, the arts, and other superstructural institutions, each contributing to a common culture through which the feudal mode of production was normalized. Religion also played a central role in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

In this context, there is value in examining the ideological tactics employed in capitalist hegemony that have been carried over from feudalistic society, such as religious indoctrination and its emphasis on an uncritical submission to authority. The employment of religious dogma in the development of consciousness is especially instructive, perhaps because it is such an old and recognized form of domination, and has proven particularly difficult to overcome. Even the Brazilian father of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, remained a devout Christian his entire life with close connections to the liberation theology strain of Catholicism. More recently, Peter McLaren, who is one of the most celebrated Marxist critical pedagogues in the world, shared during an interview with Creston Davis (2015), that “Liberation theology became an important part of my formation, especially after converting to Catholicism when I was 25” (para. 9). The point here is that if even stalwarts of Marxist critical pedagogy such as Freire and McLaren support(ed) the sacrificing of logic and reason for the blind faith of religion, the power of these mythologies, and the extreme difficulty in overcoming their allure, are made vividly clear. The struggle against the maintenance of power by way of dogmatic training and the shaping of consciousness is one of the most consistent themes throughout human history. As such, the

central tool for shaping human character and “manufacturing consent” for the feudal lords was simply far too effective to be ignored as the Bourgeoisie claimed their seat on the world throne.

It is not hard to understand the perspective of the rising capitalist class who were motivated by their own self-interest, the expansion of surplus-value (as described below) and thus in need of a reliable form of social control as the growing militancy of the working-class posed a serious threat. Religion had long been a tried and tested form of ideological (and physical) manipulation, and therefore was (and is) relied upon to continue to serve this purpose. As the wealth and thus power of the bourgeoisie continued to grow, this capitalist class eventually began to outpace the old aristocratic landlords. Eventually, the rise of the capitalist would prevail, but their feud with the working class persisted, and will continue to persist until the capitalist mode of production is no more, therefore, the so to does the employment of religion as a tool in shaping human character that is compatible with the capitalist base.

The rise of the bourgeoisie, as suggested above, would create an increasingly exploited working class who would become the intended immigrants to populate and enrich the colonies. These former peasants, the “have nothings,” as Marx (1867/1967) referred to them, with no ability to purchase land, were “chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers” (p. 734). The role of ideological manipulation and the development of magical consciousness in convincing those most damaged by the deteriorating social conditions resulting from the transition from feudalism to capitalism, that their struggles were of their own making, cannot be overstated. The former peasant-proprietors, forced from the soil, criminalized, and demonized, were to look inward for the source of their plight. Religion served to strengthen this internalization by declaring the act of laboring (for the boss) to be the surest way to win gods favor – a tactic the ruling class continues to rely heavily upon.

According to Marx and Engels (1932/1996), it was this new form of Christianity, Protestantism, which served as a critical partner to the production of new economic forces as early capitalism developed. In brief, new economic realities required a new religious superstructure by which the new base could be justified and defended. These “directed evolutions” are on going and ever-present within the relationship between capitalism and religion. That is to say that as capitalism has dug its trench through human history – navigating over and around its self-generated pitfalls and inherent contradictions – religion has been adjusted and re-adjusted in order to best justify, by way of holy decree, the human and ecological degradation left in the wake of the global expansion of capitalism. This unholy partnership is clearly alive and well today. As Connolly (2008) suggested, “The latest incarnation of the capital-Christian complex, finding active expression in the United States, is distinctive and fateful in the dangers that it presents” (p. 9).

Religion and the Bolsheviks

The need for a universal critique of superstructural institutions was certainly not lost on the Bolsheviks of the Russian Revolution, who recognized the tsarist compulsion to employ religion – and specifically the legitimization of the Russian Orthodox Church – in justifying their right to rule and oppress. “The Emperor of all the Russias”, declared within The Fundamental Law of the Russian Empire, “is an autocratic and absolute monarch. His supreme power must be obeyed not only out of fear, but with heart and soul, for this is the command of God himself” (Gabel, 2005, p. 32). To question the justness of the Empire or its leader was, in effect, to

question God; and the hubris necessary to question God was – of course – blasphemous. As Lenin (1905) himself described the Bolshevik perspective on religion:

So far as the party of the socialist proletariat is concerned, religion is not a private affair. Our Party is an association of class-conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation of the working class. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to lack of class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs. We demand complete disestablishment of the Church so as to be able to combat the religious fog with purely ideological and solely ideological weapons, by means of our press and by word of mouth. But we founded our association, the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, precisely for such a struggle against every religious bamboozling of the workers. And to us the ideological struggle is not a private affair, but the affair of the whole Party, of the whole proletariat. (p. 84).

Such atheism, however, was not delivered anew to the Russian people by the Bolsheviks – a pragmatic and anti-clerical “peasant atheism”, as well as a “philosophical atheism” emanating from anarchists, such as Michael Bakunin, pre-dates the October Revolution. As Vissarion Belinsky wrote in an 1847 letter, “Take a close look at the Russian people and you will see that, by nature, they are profoundly atheistic people. Among them there is still much superstition, but not a trace of real religiousness” (Gabel, 2005, p. 64).

Clearly, much of the peasantry of imperial Russia had already come to recognize much of what religion truly represented – a hegemonic tool of coercion and control. In 1866 Bukunin published *A Revolutionary Catechism*, in which he declared human reason and conscience to be the only standard of truth and demanded the “annihilation and dissolution” of the state and its “greatest accomplice”, the church as a “permanent source of pauperism, deception, and enslavement of the peoples” (Carr, 1937, p. 319). Therefore, while the atheism inherent to Marx’s historical materialism was undoubtedly a driving factor behind the Bolsheviks concern about religion, so to was an awareness of the people’s perspective on the church and its connections to the Tsarist autocracy. The Russian peasantry was clearly not in need of philosophy to identify that which they had consistently witnessed with their own eyes. In the production of the ‘God’ commodity, and just “Like the Catholic Church in the West”, wrote Gabel (2005),

... the Orthodox Church as an institution had become bloated with wealth. During the seventeenth century as the tsars and the nobility steadily forced the peasantry into subjugation, serfdom was reaching its peak. The Orthodox Church exploited the economic system by skimming off its share of the spoils. Using biblical justifications, the patriarchate, the bishops, and the monasteries owned one-third of the Russian land ... In addition, to income from land came payments from the faithful for candles, communion loaves, ikons, and pilgrimages to sacred places and relics. (p. 55).

Following the perspectives of Marx and Engels, the Bolsheviks recognized religion’s demand for – and normalization of – alienation, which served as preparation for the alienation of labor within capitalism. For the Bolsheviks, a critique of religion (especially Christianity) therefore, was seen as inseparable from a critique of Bourgeois society as a whole. As Lenin

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(1909) contended, “Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organization, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class” (p. 403). Furthermore, the Bolsheviks, as Engels had argued, believed that through the engagement with a critical education, the worker and peasant alike would eventually, and willingly, cast off the mental despotism maintained by religion and embrace the atheism inherent to a Marxist-humanist worldview.

It is worth noting however, that it is difficult to pose a serious theoretical critique of the prospective and policies that the Bolsheviks maintained in regard to religion as an “opium of the people” because of the overwhelming shadow of the individual acts of violence – many of which were unspeakable and grotesque in nature – perpetrated on the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church by soldiers of the red army, during and after the revolution (Gabel, 2005). Without seeking to ignore or justify those terrible acts, what is often lost to emotional reactionism is that the motivations of those soldiers could have been far less about a rabid, Marxist ideology than about a deep-seated desire for revenge against a severely corrupt church (as mentioned previously) who had partnered with the Tsarist government in the complete domination of the Russian people; mind, body and spirit.

Regardless, the initial logic of the Bolsheviks in regard to religion, when considered on its own merits, was sound and consistent with the tenets of Marxism – and one that should be remembered by critical educators today. One cannot expect an oppressed people to shake free of the mental shackles inherent to the capitalist superstructure by applying a logical and rational critique of capital, while maintaining a dogmatic and authoritarian mindset in regard to a magical man in the sky who guides us towards a pre-determined future. Marx argued that religious ideology, that urged people to obey authority and work hard for salvation in the afterlife, was a way in which superstructure justifies the base, because it generates an acceptance of one’s conditions as they are. However, as Lenin (1905) contended, religion also serves a different purpose within the superstructure – that of justifying the act of exploitation on behalf of the exploiter:

Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labour of others are taught by religion to practise charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven. Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man. (p. 83).

In either case, such absolutist ideologies, which have always been the hallmark of religions great and small, act as “viral memes”, sapping the human mind of its capacity for reason and rationality and ultimately resulting in a de-temporalized, animalistic state of consciousness. As Freire (1974) contended, it is temporality that is the necessary starting point for the development of a critical and fully-human consciousness; it is the capacity for such thought that sets us apart from other organisms on the planet – the awareness that we live, we die, and we are part of a human race, as opposed to an exclusionary, religious cult. Whether it is the evangelical Christian vehemently discarding the value of concern over human-created climate change (because this world is a mere way station [for believers] on the path to heaven) or the Islamic jihadi strapping

on a bomb belt with absolute certainty of seventy-two virgins awaiting him in heaven (upon completion of his Koran-required duty) – the power of religious certitude to pervert human temporality and consciousness is as stunning as it is obvious.

In the name of strategy, there were clearly those within the Bolsheviks that argued for ignoring religion or even partnering with the ROC – the idea was even floated by some of creating a religion out of Marxism, as a strategy to supplant the theology of the ROC, one in which capitalism could be declared by “comrade God” as the greatest of sins. Lenin rejected such calls and “... along with most Russian Marxists, uncompromisingly rejected the trend toward such poetic-mystical “God-building” as being inconsistent with the frank materialism that permeates the Marxist approach“ (LeBlanc, 2006, p. 70). If freedom from domination and the creation of an egalitarian, social-democracy was truly the goal, the Bolsheviks, as Lenin recognized, could not be seen as condemning the oppression of capital while supporting the oppression of religion in the name of strategy or otherwise – an edict some contemporary Marxist-critical educators would be wise to re-consider. However, this dedication to ideological consistency was short-lived as the Bolsheviks, upon taking power, quickly began making deals with religious leaders – especially in the case of Islam – in order to expand and maintain their power. Such compromises and a win-at-all-cost willingness to trade principal for strategy continued to such a degree under Stalin that the Marx that had inspired and animated the Lenin's and Trotsky's became almost completely unrecognizable.

“Viral Memes” and the Development Criticality

This is precisely what we are reminded of in reviewing the Bolshevik commitment to the advancement of atheism – the critical need for consistency within revolutionary movements. After all, as Joseph Proudhon (1851) argued – and as Stalin clearly demonstrated - beneath the varying garb of religion, capital, and state exists a common soul; that of pure authoritarianism:

“Capital“... in the political field is analogous to “government“... The economic idea of capitalism, the politics of government or of authority, and the theological idea of the Church are three identical ideas, linked in various ways. To attack one of them is equivalent to attacking all of them ... What capital does to labour, and the State to liberty, the Church does to the spirit. This trinity of absolutism is as baneful in practice as it is in philosophy. The most effective means for oppressing the people would be simultaneously to enslave its body, its will and its reason. (pp. 43-44).

To oppose one system of domination while supporting – or turning a blind eye to – another, is to engage in intellectual hypocrisy of the highest level. We cannot condemn the corporation who exploits and controls the worker's body, while giving a wink and a nod to the clergy who exploits that same worker's capacity for empathy and perverts and vilifies their capacity for logic and reason. This is especially true when considering the clear historical evidence of religions role in maintaining and justifying capitalism.

Even now, the Catholic Church – while boasting what would seem to be the most class-conscious pope in modern history – maintains billions, if not trillions of dollars that have been pilfered from working men and women for centuries with promises of a better life after death. All so the pope might have gold stitching in his underpants. Such orchestrated distraction is

precisely what Marx (1975) was concerned with in stating, “religion is the impotence of the human mind to deal with occurrences it cannot understand” and it becomes:

... the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. (p. 41).

For Marx, of course, religion was purely necessitated by material conditions, nothing else – he therefore viewed the specifics of the countless religious doctrines as virtually irrelevant. Marx’s perspective was exclusively a functionalist explanation of religion: comprehending religiosity as a mere by-product of particular socio-economic conditions, rather than the contents of its dogmatic *truths* or the potential influence of biological forces.

However, Marx is not to be faulted for his relatively narrow perspective on religion. Much of the study on the biological and neurological basis of religiosity is a relatively modern undertaking. Should Marx have had access to structural magnetic neuroimaging and the wealth of research generated on the evolutionary psychology of religion, he may very well have broadened his analysis and considered the possible influence of universal aspects of the evolved brain-mind. It is also only fair to consider that perhaps Marx’s lack of attention to these other aspects of religiosity stemmed, not from a lack of broad interest, but from his primary concern about religion as a form of alienation – regardless of its origins and motivations. Marx clearly agreed that religious institutions have, as Feuerbach (1841) argued, generated alienated and disconnected human beings who desperately seek to supplant their wavering consciousness with that of a steady, perfect omnipotent being’s. In short, religion generates an “alienation of self” which culminates in the alienation of human beings from their fellow human beings via a strict sense of sectarianism.

As negative as the results of such sectarianism are, perhaps more importantly for critical pedagogues, is the fact that the resulting consciousness does not operate in isolation. The central question as such is: does the development and maintenance of absolutist ideologies in one aspect of a person’s mind “infect” other aspects of a person’s mind? As Winell and Tarico (2014) stated, “... over time some religious beliefs can create habitual thought patterns that actually alter brain function, making it difficult for people to heal or grow” (para. 3). Dawkins (1976) coined the term “meme” to describe these thought patterns on a macro level stating:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (p.192)

On a micro-level, however, such patterns can take on the characteristics of what has been termed a “viral meme”; a concept that is less concerned with an idea spreading from person to person, or generation to generation, than it is about ideas that spread within and throughout the individual mind, infecting every aspect of consciousness. The most dangerous viral memes, as Bencotter (2013) argues, are those that function as “a viral memetic infection”, which are essentially ideas that generate circular logic and loop through the mind, providing a singular and all-encompassing answer to all possible questions.

At their worst, such viral memes foster a form of consciousness where the most absolutist definitions of “us” and “them” can take root and almost any act can be justified in their defense and advancement. Unfortunately, these viral memetic infections do not simply stay partitioned, safely tucked away in the part of a person’s consciousness where she or he convenes with a god. Such viral memes, and the sectarian perspectives they spawn, spread and can have a grave impact on the prospect of developing criticality in other aspects of one’s life. Stated directly, it is not a coincidence that those we encounter in our lives who are the most fundamentalist and rigid in their religiosity tend to be equally as such in their views on politics, power structures, and socio-cultural norms.

As stated previously, few, if any, institutions throughout human history have been more consistent in the production and maintenance of rigid sectarianism than religious institutions. As Dawkins (2003) argued, “My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a “they“ as opposed to a “we“ can be identified at all” (p. 23). While there are undoubtedly many examples of non-religious sectarianism, which I define as ‘a narrow-minded adherence to a particular sect or party or denomination’, religious absolutism has often exasperated non-religious sectarian conflict by declaring a deity’s preference for one side over the other, or by formulating the foundation of absolutist positions that declare the mere consideration of compromise as sacrilegious. In considering the conflict in Northern Ireland, O’Malley (1995), citing McLachlin made this point clear:

The major conflicts in the world ... including ours, all have some kind of religious component ... [which] is usually that the thinking process in the culture has been determined to some degree by the theology that operates in each culture ... [As an example] for Northern Ireland Protestants, heavily influenced by Calvinistic Puritanism, right and wrong are not only morally distinguishable, but *absolutes*, and they bring the same inflexible, no-compromise stance to their attitudes on every issue, and the same distrust of others, especially Catholics, who do not share their rigidity. They mistake their own rigidity for virtue, for standing for principle, for an honesty they are unwilling to impute to others who do not share their unyielding dogmatism. (p. 14).

The binary lens constructed by religion does not merely balkanize the worldview of believers; it creates a god-sanctioned hierarchy. As Weidenbaum (2008) suggested, “At its worst, organized religion has helped to rationalize and even justify natural and moral evils; at its best it has served to waste and sideline the energies required to surmount them” (p. 6). Such a reactionary position is inherently exclusionary and produces a disengagement from humanity and an alienation of self.

Feuerbach and the Alienation of Self

While the concept of alienation is most commonly connected with the work of Marx, the initial consideration of alienation is found in the work of Hegel. Hegel's definition of alienation, however, is different from Marx' definition, which identifies the alienation of the worker from the means of production, from that which is produced, and from their fellow worker. For Hegel, alienation is that remediation of culture, which is required to lift a common person to a higher level of culture. Yet, to this common person, culture itself seems remote and unattainable; it

seems ‘alien’. The common person must therefore alienate his or her true nature in order to fully embrace this remote higher culture (Feuerbach, 1841). This is Hegel’s (1826) separation of the *knower* from the *known* – the separation of *existence* from *essence*. To overcome such alienation, Hegel argued that we engage our world and, in doing so, we discover our “inner being” and rediscover our “own characteristics” (p. 31). Hegel (1826) continues stating, “Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inexorable foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of self. (p. 31).

Bauer (1843), one of Hegel’s students, took his teacher’s ideas about alienation and applied them specifically to religion, contending that religious ideology caused a split in man’s consciousness. The true believer generates a separate persona that they not only see as separate and outside themselves, but they actually become opposed to this consciousness as a separate power; in fact they become opposed and alienated from themselves. Thus religion produces a break in the essence of self-consciousness, since one becomes estranged from one’s true self. Bauer (1841) describes the resulting self-delusion by arguing that it is a “state in which theological law prevails.” This law, Bauer explains, “attains to real power or, to be more exact, absolute power, when through its results, which are identical with those of *opium*, it puts all parts of humanity to sleep. If some occasionally awake they carry out crimes that horrify humanity ... ” (p. 73). As I have stated elsewhere, evidence of the accuracy of this claim litters the landscape of human history:

From the fanatical torture and murder of The Crusades and The Inquisition, to centuries of Islamic Jihad, to the strangulation of millions by India’s Thuggee sect, to the colonial genocide of Native Americans, to the mass exterminations of Jews in Nazi Germany and the murder of millions in the World War that followed ... the most common threads woven into the core of each of these examples, and countless other human atrocities, are the absolutist ideologies and dogmatic beliefs that fuel and justify such lunacy and irrationality. (Elmore, 2012, p. 255)

Feuerbach (1841), also building on the ideas of Hegel, argued that religious believers not only generate a separate consciousness, but also that by attributing the best human qualities, or potential qualities, to this external entity – which is then worshipped on account of these qualities – the individual internalizes their own inferiority. They relinquish the best of who they are (kindness, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, etc.) and end up worshipping what they believe is a god, but in reality such people are unconsciously worshipping themselves. Thus Feuerbach argues that religion is a form of alienation, which prevents people from attaining the realization of their own species-being. Feuerbach suggested “that the very act of attributing human predicates to an external divine being necessarily withdraws these same predicates from the human species to which they properly belong by denying to itself what it attributes to God” (Harvey, 2011, para. 55). This circumstance in itself does not guarantee the development of fanaticized consciousness and the rejection of rationality. However, the result of such anti-dialogical training does open the door for, and increase the possibility of, the development of fanaticized consciousness and the sectarian personality. Again, this is not a judgment of the ideological makeup of the “wheels” being placed, but a judgment of the practice of coming to know one’s world through externally-defined, absolute truths (Stirner, 1963).

Such sectarianism generates symptoms of alienation, one of which is a definition of humanity and human consciousness that is isolated and exclusionary in contrast of an awareness of self as one of many, as part of a linear species. As stated by Feuerbach (1841):

... the idea of deity coincides with the idea of humanity. All divine attributes, all the attributes which make God God, are attributes of the species – attributes which in the individual are limited, but the limits of which are abolished in the essence of the species, and even in its existence, in so far as it has its complete existence only in all men taken together. My knowledge, my will, is limited; but my limit is not the limit of another man, to say nothing of mankind; what is difficult to me is easy to another; what is impossible, inconceivable, to one age, is to the coming age conceivable and possible. My life is bound to a limited time, not so the life of humanity. The history of mankind consists of nothing else than a continuous and progressive conquest of limits, which at a given time pass for the limits of humanity, and therefore for absolute insurmountable limits. But the future always unveils the fact that the alleged limits of the species were only limits of individuals. Thus the species is unlimited; the individual alone limited. (p. 48).

Yet Feuerbach noted, “the sense of limitation is painful” for the individual. So instead of embracing the “unfinishedness”, which provides the foundation for autonomous development, the individual “frees himself from it by the contemplation of the perfect Being”.

Within this contemplation, Feuerbach (1841) argued that the individual “possesses what otherwise is wanting to him ... God is the idea of the species as an individual ... freed from all the limits which exist in the consciousness and feeling of the individual” (p. 49). Left with a sense of insurmountable limitation and inferiority, the believer feels a constant need for connection to the part of consciousness that has now been lost to god. Given that such individuals become convinced that they are defective and lack completeness, the need for connection to their god becomes increasingly imperative. For the true believer, any person or idea that threatens to sever this critical tie by introducing alternative narratives is met with contempt and hostility. This exclusionary position towards others, therefore, is an extension of the alienation of self, which is generated by the creation of god. As Marx (1847) contended, those of such magical consciousness “establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God” (p. 47).

Again, for Marx it is solely economic conditions that generate such religious alienation. However, given the consistent existence of religion across geography and throughout human history, regardless of economic or political systems, it would seem a purely Marxist analysis of religion is incomplete. Although I agree with the Marxist conclusion that social and economic conditions help mightily in driving humanity into the ranks of the religious, and at increased speed, it is clear to me that the power of religious dogma is far more fundamental to the current state of human evolution. What is missing from a Marxist critical account of religion is biology.

The “God Experience”, Egocentrism and Learned Helplessness

Recent advances in neuroimaging and neuroscience are allowing us to consider the biological basis of the religious experience and its impact on consciousness, “and for the first-

time, the ability to ‘see’ thinking occur ‘inside’ the brain, in real-time, using objective measures” (p. 20). Dr. Michael Persinger (1987), a pioneer in the area of “Neurotheology” explained Feuerbach’s alienation in different terms:

God Beliefs maintain a form of conditioned helplessness whereby assumptions are made that certain problems are beyond human solution. They reinforce a schizoid condition in which people use their intelligence to solve technical problems, but, at the same time, kneel in submission to God, who conducts human affairs. (p. 7).

“This helplessness” fosters the drive to submission over self-governance and, as Persinger continues,

... [it] distorts and interferes with the human potential. Unproven assumptions are made that humanity cannot guides its self or that it must obtain guidance from some superior being in order to survive ... only gods or some surrogate of extraterrestrial intelligence must have the answer. (p. 7)

It is these debilitating effects of religious alienation that should be of most concern for Marxist critical pedagogues who imagine education as a foundational antidote to systems of domination. Overcoming systems of domination requires the development of a self-image in which one is, as Freire (1974) contended, an “agent of history” rather than a mere “object of history”. The “conditioned helplessness” generated by religious beliefs, Persinger (1987) argues,

... destroys our versatility. We begin to believe that people cannot possibly solve their personal problems. We begin to expect that certain things are beyond our grasp. So we relinquish our potential, throw away proven methods, close our eyes, and walk blindly within the shadows of religious experience. (p. 7).

When such capacity for agency is ejected, the resulting individual is left with only the perceived capacity of adaptation to a world defined by the dominant – religious, economic, or otherwise. As Dewey (1934) stated, “Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing” (p. 35).

As a result of the epistemology dictated by religious dogma, the subjugated mind not only fails to recognize this loss, but is supremely confident of its gain in having become one of the fortunate who have been bestowed with the ultimate truth. Dialogue with one’s world, therefore, becomes unnecessary, or worse, dangerous. Such a position, Persinger (1987) contends,

... may take the form of the condescending believer who smiles with the wisdom of he who has a true glimpse into the universe, in response to questions about the validity of their God Experience. They cannot and will not challenge its validity; when they do, which is rare, the anxiety is incapacitating, and neurotic “breakdowns” are frequent. Instead, they smile and walk away, knowing that despite all other uncertainties that have ever been proven, only their experiences are true. (p. 114).

When others reject such egocentrism, the “true believer” often develops a vindictive reaction to those who refuse to acknowledge their “truth”. As a result, non-believers are often, and at varying degrees, considered “inhuman” and “lost forever”. Given the requisite certitude of religious beliefs, it therefore becomes justifiable to manipulate – or even subjugate – non-believers for “their own benefit.” As history makes clear, especially in my own country, this expression of egocentrism has dominated the theme of missionary work; “saving” the heathens from themselves. This has been an attitude shared by virtually every major religion at one time or another throughout human history and is a clear byproduct of religious certitude. It is vividly clear that the resulting exclusionary perspectives and practices fostered in religious institutions – much like those of jingoistic statism – have proved counter-productive to global revolutionary movements.

International proletarian movements have always been, and continue to be, hindered deeply by the religious-inspired perspective that a Muslim worker has nothing in common with a Jewish worker, or that the oppression of a worker in some distant land is justified as a result of their incorrect definition of God. As Persinger (1987) states,

Religious dogma encourages egocentrism and feeds on it. Each religion contains the indirect implications that all other religions are somewhat erroneous and that the believer is a little more special. The believer is told that his experiences are real as long as they are interpreted the “right” way. The egocentrism is stroked by phrases, proliferated by every religion (such as “children of god”, “true believers”, “sons of Allah”, “daughters of Christ”). The list seems endless. (p. 116).

The direct and unapologetic challenging of the egocentrism generated by religious dogma is critical if the ultimate goal of a Marxist critical pedagogy is to be realized. It is simply not enough to choose one form of domination and focus our attention solely on its eradication. As Proudhon suggested, the purveyors and benefactors of the authoritarian mind must be contested as the interconnected and co-conspirators that they are, no matter how disconnected, or even opposed, they may seem. Until the institutions that generate and exploit such dehumanized consciousness are exposed, challenged, and eventually destroyed, humanity will never rid itself of their divisive and destructive impact.

A critical education, aimed at the development of full and independent human consciousness, can and must play a critical and concerted role in attacking dogmatic institutions and ideologies. When education is constructed for the purpose of promoting what Freire (1974) termed “critical consciousness”, and the capacities for logic and reason are made paramount, institutions that promote exclusionary, egocentric ideologies will wither and fade from human society. In short, as Persinger (1987) states,

These insights require education, and this is lethal to egocentrism. As a person becomes more educated, particularly in the behavioral sciences, he begins to realize that he is not unique. Education forces the egocentric child in each of us as equal to others in human experience. The sacred and profoundly personal experiences that once were proofs of our individual uniqueness are seen for what they are, predictable and necessary behaviors that allow us to deal with the

existential terror of personal death and the horror of realizing that we are as vulnerable as everyone else. (p. 116).

Although such research has introduced the possibility of understanding a neurological cause of the “god experience”, the sectarian position is not, however, a purely biological inevitability of the human condition, but instead is influenced greatly by reactionary social processes and conditioning (Booth & Persinger, 2009). Freire (1994) explains that by virtue of human temporality, an awareness of our ‘unfinishedness’, individuals have the “capacity to intervene, to compare, to judge, to decide, to choose, to desist” making them “capable of acts of greatness, of dignity, and, at the same time, of the unthinkable in terms of indignity” (p. 53). This delineation is the key difference between the critically conscious mind, synonymous with dialogue, reflection and action, and the sectarian mind, emptied of its capacity for reason and filled with absolutism, control, and antagonisms.

It is the development of critical consciousness that serves as the universal cure for human-created systems of domination and exploitation – whether religious, economic, or statist. As Harris (2003) contended, there appears nowhere in history a case where a civilization destroyed itself through an over-dependence on rationality, logic, and reasonableness. Systems of injustice are maintained, above all else, by way of the hegemonic mis-education of the people who suffer within them.

Freire and The Development of Consciousness

The power and pervasiveness of religious dogmas highlights the ways in which the development of human consciousness is intertwined and universal. Individuals do not simply come to these belief structures spontaneously anymore than political and economic systems spring to life from some neutral space, unmolested by human belief. These institutions, while growing directly out of human feeling, imagination and will, as noted by Feuerbach (1841), simultaneously inform, shape and control them. Along with other superstructural institutions, religion contributes to the development of a type of consciousness detailed by Paulo Freire in his works *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1974) and *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (1985).

Throughout these texts Freire calls attention to the conditioning of the human mind. Yet this conditioning is not the *socialization* that many sociological works use to describe a seemingly natural evolution, free of conscious human direction. For Freire, this conditioning, what he calls *education*, is something that is shaped by social, political and historical contexts yet also *shapes* social, political and historical contexts. It is in this potential for education as a source of reflective agency that Freire’s account of the development of consciousness is grounded.

Freire (1974) argued that human beings move through specific stages in the development of consciousness. We are born into what he termed “intransitive” consciousness, in which we lack the necessary skills and experience to comprehend or dialogue with our world. Over time this intransitivity gives way to the construction of very limited connections within our world, mostly in terms of rudimentary cause and effect, although within such “semi-intransitivity” we still “cannot apprehend problems outside their biological sphere of necessity ... [our] interest center almost totally around survival, and they lack a sense of life on a more historical plane” (p.

14). The semi-intransitive stage of consciousness, Freire (1985) contends, “is a kind of obliteration imposed by objective conditions ... the only data the dominated consciousness grasps are the data that lie within its lived experience”, and individuals in this immobile state of consciousness “lack what we call structural perception, which shapes and reshapes itself from concrete reality in the apprehension of facts and problematical situations” (p. 75). As these rudimentary connections in the semi-intransitive stage expand, and we begin to develop simple schema from which we can enter into dialogue with our world, we develop “Naïve Consciousness”, which Freire (1974) described as “... a very limited consciousness”, in which “men who are still almost part of a mass, in whom the developing capacity for dialogue is still fragile and capable of distortion” (p. 15). As stated by Freire (1974), this naïve stage of consciousness is characterized by:

An oversimplification of problems; by a nostalgia for the past; by underestimation of the common man ... by a lack of interest in investigation, accompanied by an accentuated taste for fanciful explanations; by fragility of argument; by a strongly emotional style; by the practice of polemics rather than dialogue; by magical explanations. (p. 14).

Naïve consciousness ultimately constricts the openness and “permeability” of the individual, which was beginning to develop. Without such openness, human beings will not be historical agents capable of reflective action, and are thus alienated from their own consciousness and humanity. Those of Naïve Consciousness survive on circumscribed conclusions about the world and their place in it; they are dependent on definitions of the world that are not of their own determination. This is neither about the intelligence of the person nor the correctness or incorrectness of the positions such a person might take; the defining circumstance of Naïve Consciousness is in an undeveloped capacity for rational dialogue with their world and a resulting dependency on external definitions.

From this position of naiveté, according to Freire (1974), consciousness can move in two very distinct directions depending upon the educative experiences of the individual. In one case, the “distorted”, incomplete, and inaccurate interpretations of the world go unchallenged or they may even be reinforced. This leads to the development of “magical consciousness” and, as Freire described, as a stunted state of consciousness where,

... the possibility of dialogue diminishes markedly. Men are defeated and dominated, though they do not know it; they fear freedom, though they believe themselves to be free. They follow general prescriptions and formulas as if by their own choice. They are *directed*; they do not direct themselves. (p. 17).

Again, Freire, via the work of Erich Fromm, argued that this is not a matter of intelligence or lack thereof, but simply the recognition that when the opportunity for the development of a consciousness born of dialogue with one’s world is withheld and, instead, replaced by a consciousness born of monologue, the resulting person is deprived of the capacity to ever truly understand their conditions free of the cultural invasion of the dominant. Accurate or inaccurate, the only source of truth that is perceived as reliable becomes one that is generated externally – truth is established “magically”.

As the individual becomes ever more dependent on these magical definitions of their world, the ideas cease to be viewed as separate from, or owned by, the individual – the ideas come to define the individual, they are merged into one. As Stirner (1842/1967) contended the freeman owns his ideas, the educated-man is owned by them:

If one awakens in men the idea of freedom, then the freemen will incessantly go on to free themselves; if, on the contrary, one only educates them, then they will at all times accommodate themselves to circumstances in the most highly educated and elegant manner and degenerate into subservient cringing souls. (p. 23).

When the person can no longer separate themselves from the ideas that have come to define them – which are not of their own creation – they devolve into a state of what Freire (1974) termed “fanaticized consciousness”. The transition to fanaticized consciousness leads the person to “become even more disengaged from reality than in the semi-intransitive state” and the person now “acts more on the basis of emotionality than of reason” (p. 29). In terms of the development of full human consciousness, they devolve.

In the state of fanaticized consciousness, the magical explanations and ideas become so central and necessary to the core of the person’s relationship with the world, they no longer see themselves separate from them. Therefore, an attack on these ideas is, in effect, an attack on the person themselves. They no longer own the ideas ... the ideas own them. They defend them passionately ... often violently. “The idea is my own”, Stirner (1845/1963) contended, “only when I have no misgiving about bringing it in danger of death every moment, when I do not have to fear its loss as a loss for me, a loss of me” (p. 342). Those of fanaticized consciousness are effectively puppets whose strings only await a master – they and the institutions that shape their minds exist as an impediment to individual and collective freedom alike.

Yet, “whatever his state, man is an open being” and, because of this, capable of a continuous rather than predetermined development of consciousness (Freire, 1974, p. 13). In contrast to the progression from naïve to magical and fanatical consciousness, when naïve consciousness is encouraged to continuously question interpretations one can “amplify their power to perceive and respond to suggestions and questions arising in their context, and increase their capacity to enter into dialogue ... they become transitive” (p. 13). The transitive-conscious person is moving beyond merely being “in the world”; they are becoming “of the world” – they are integrating, not adapting and transforming from an “object of history” into a “subject of history”. Leaving the previously stagnant state of semi-intransitivity, individuals of a transitive consciousness begin to seek answers outside of their immediate experience, ultimately opening up the possibility for the joining of agency and a critical structural perception of social, political and historical realities or what Freire termed “critical consciousness.” The critically conscious person Freire (1974) argued, is

... characterized by a depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of ones “findings” and the openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them (p. 29).

This fully humanized state of critical consciousness, however, can only be developed if the individual (and society in general) engages in dialogue-centered educative practice, which, in

essence, is an encounter between individuals “mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (Freire, 1972, p. 88). Without a collective capacity for critical consciousness, the societies inevitably slide into polarized sectarian camps.

There have been, and continue to be, countless sources of inspiration for the development of fanaticized consciousness and the rise of such sectarian exclusions; however, history has proven one in particular to be more consistently potent and prevalent than the rest. Religion has not only proven to be antagonistic to rationality and reasonableness, but outright dangerous to the maintenance and continuation of the human race. Kramer and Alstadt (1993), argue that this special power of religion exists as a result of specific circumstances of the human condition:

Traditional religious worldviews attempt to assuage humanity’s basic fears of the unknown, of chaos, and of death. They all promise some form of continuance after the body dies, with those who do the right thing (as they define it) getting a better deal. Belief in and obedience to religion’s precepts bring the kind of peace that only comes from unwavering certitude. Faith is the coin necessary for certainty, which brings cessation of (at least conscious) doubt and fear. (p. 25).

The price we pay as a species for this religious-inspired “cessation of doubt and fear” is immense – in fact, as noted by Harris (2004), it is quite simply, “our most cherished beliefs about the world ... leading us, inexorably, to kill one another” (p. 12). If human history has proven anything conclusive, it is that through offering pacification of fear, single-minded answers for the ambiguities of life, and a sense of order where the perception of chaos persists, religion fashions a sectarian mind that serves as fertile ground for the weeds of intolerance, hatred, and destruction.

Atheism and a Marxist Critical Pedagogy

Collective critical consciousness is undoubtedly the only clear path to a sustainable, revolutionary movement against capital. A truly critical education can offer key insights regarding not only the internal logic and structure of capitalism but on the transition out of capitalism and into some form of democratic socialism—the ultimate objective of a Marxist critical pedagogy. Such consciousness will require that every social institution that fosters the development of magical and fanatical consciousness be overtly challenged and, where possible, eliminated. As Maher (2009) has stated so succinctly, “religion must die so humanity can live”. As a Marxist critical educator within a public university, I contend that the fight against absolutism, and the institutions that promote it, is a central responsibility of any education that is dedicated to the goal of maintaining and expanding human freedom. As stated previously, it is clearly hypocritical and counterproductive to fight the despotism of economic and political systems impeding human freedom and dignity while ignoring the individual and collective mental despotism produced by religion.

Unfortunately, this gravitation to the hypocritical seems to be increasingly the case for many of my colleagues within critical pedagogy today as they carefully “passage-shop“ the bible or Koran for a few words that appear compatible to their more secularist perspectives on social justice or equality. That is to say that instead of critiquing the institution of religion as a whole and the role it has, and continues to play in perverting social consciousness, dividing the oppressed, and justifying the very structure of capitalism itself – some critical pedagogues seek

to find common ground with religion by simply ignoring any of “gods dictates“ that she or he finds unsavory. Suddenly Jesus becomes a communist, rather than a god calling for the death of non-believers (Luke 27:12), The Koran becomes a “book of peace“, rather than one calling for the removal of heads and fingers from the “Unbelievers“ (Quran 8:12) and the beating of “rebellious wives“ (Quran 4:34). Such selective reading is to be expected from the indoctrinated “true believers“, but not of those “free-thinkers” who claim to fight for the development of a rational, reasonable and humanistic society. Even sadder, for me, personally, is that Paulo Freire – who, as for many of my colleagues, has been hugely influential in my professional life – has become the key example for excusing such hypocrisy.

While I have cited Paulo Freire throughout this essay – and many others – it would be “religion-like“ to ignore his apparent unwillingness to turn his critical consciousness – for which he so vehemently advocated – on his own “magical“ beliefs. I have never taught a class on Freire's theories of the development of consciousness, where students have not immediately connected religion to the production of “magical“ and “fanaticized“ consciousness – it is so obvious that even my most devout students make the connection. Yet, apparently, Freire failed to – or chose not to – make this same connection, or at least I can find no evidence of it. It would appear that with all of Freire's intelligence and amazing capacity to critique systems of domination – economic and otherwise – he also stands as a glaring example of religion's aptitude for partitioning the human mind so to protect the most ludicrous of religious dogmas from even the most critical of eyes. As Martin Luther declared, “Anyone who wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of their reason“. Although I'm sure Freire might have said that his version of Christianity is “different”, a common perception of the faithful believer.

Another, more recent example can be found in the work of Dr. Peter McLaren, a great admirer of Freire, as well as Liberation Theology. In a recent article entitled “Comrade Jesus: An Epistolic Manifesto”, McLaren (2015) seeks to reconcile the perspectives of Marxist humanism with the dogma of Christianity. “Critical pedagogy”, McLaren contends, “is the lucubration of a whole philosophy of praxis that predates Marx and can be found in Biblical texts” (para. 2). And, I have no doubt that the “praxis” of which Dr. McLaren refers *can* be “found” in the bible, because history tells us that almost anything can be “found” and any action justified within the pages of books that claim to be authored by an omnipotent god. Dr. McLaren has dedicated his life to the development of pedagogies that seek to cultivate “radical consciousness”, so we might shed our corporate-constructed blinders and “see” the illogic of capital that limits human freedom and postpones the construction of a more just world. Yet, he claims membership in an organization that has been, and continues to be, a central purveyor of an absolute truth, provided by a god, that justifies the subjugation and domination of women, demonizes homosexuals, and brainwashes children.

Most problematic, given the mission of Dr. McLaren's career, is that religion has proven to be the most prolific generator of unwavering absolutism and antagonism toward logic, reason and science. The type of consciousness Dr. McLaren seeks to eradicate in the name of destroying capitalism is the same type of consciousness he helps to maintain in the name of religion. When McLaren (2015) makes statements like “... we must break completely with the logic of capitalist accumulation and profit, and this is something to which Marx and Jesus would agree”, he places himself among the multitude of believers who have claimed to know the will of a god, in order to advance their argument (para. 2). George Bush claimed to know what Jesus would approve of as well, and so did Adolph Hitler. Having read much of McLaren's work, I have no

doubt that he demands the highest standards for social science research – both of himself and the many sources he cites in his work. Seeing such a champion of Marxism and Critical Pedagogy, and a personal hero, reduce his work to the age old argument of “because the bible says so”, equating himself to likes of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, is beyond disappointing. One is left with the assumption that Dr. McLaren opposes “some” forms of historical oppression, but ignores those that benefit him personally or spiritually.

In a recent review of McLaren’s new testament, it was suggested that any potential critics of his work from the “atheist right” would be reactionary and (as the label of “right” is meant to suggest) fascistic. “McLaren identifies capitalism and imperialism as the problem”, Ford (2016) argues, he rightly focuses on “Systems, not beliefs” (p. 2). Of course, what should be obvious to any social theorist is that “systems” and the core assumptions that buttress their validity and justify their social norms and functions are, in fact, beliefs. Beliefs, as Harris (2004) suggested, are social machinery that guide behavior and map on to very particular representations of the world. Those representations, once labeled, classified and validated by authority, become the foundation upon which social systems are constructed and maintained. Political systems, for example, that limit the political power of women, withholding their right to vote, did not simply spring from a neutral vacuum of an idea-less space. The current legal “systems” in some African countries that legitimize the murder of homosexuals or the mutilation of the genitalia of female babies were also not born free of a socially constructed viewpoint. The general philosophy and functional specifics of such systems were the result of beliefs about women; beliefs about homosexuality; beliefs that had been created (by men), attributed to a deity, taught as absolute truths to children, and cemented into a social-cultural reality. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (God, -6000, Ephesians 6:5). Did this command not help to establish *beliefs* that, in-turn, were used to validate systemic relationships of production?

However, as I have attempted to point out throughout this article, it is not merely the nature of *what* is being taught that is the problem. It is the submission to absolutist truths that is demanded by dogmatic institutions and the type of consciousness that such training fosters that is most problematic to anyone who seeks a more just world. For, as I have stated previously, this way of knowing the world – this baptism by monologue – does not simply define the capacities of the spiritual aspect of the mind; it often spreads. As discussed previously, such “despotism over the mind” validates a worldview that is built upon the most fundamental definition of “us” and “them” and provides a road map to sectarianism in every aspect of society. Even a casual listener today can hear the increasing drumbeat of fascism in the rhetoric of presidential candidates like Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and, in an only slightly more muted tone, Hillary Clinton. The critical concern, on which Adorno (1954) and others have tried to focus our attention, is on the development of the minds that happily give themselves over to such despotic narratives and narrators. The only hope for the development of a *free* world is the existence of people who actually want to be *free*. In direct contrast, religion has a lengthy track record of producing those who actually fear freedom and find security in submission.

Ford (2016) also injects what has become the most domesticated attack line against atheism, especially by religious apologist on the left – the assertion that the so-called “new atheists” represent an equally dogmatic position as that of the religious ideologues whom they condemn. As is typical, Ford’s primary proof for this is found in the late Christopher Hitchens, who most on the left revile for his support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The quickest way to

dismiss atheism in any discussion among leftist is to quote Hitchens, line and verse: “The death toll is not nearly high enough... too many jihadists have escaped.” This, as the logic goes, is ample evidence to declare him (and “new” atheism) every bit as dogmatic and authoritarian as those he labeled “fanatics and lunatics“. Of course, as effective as this script may be in some circles, it wildly misses the point. You may agree or disagree, as I do, with Hitchens’s conclusions on the justification and validity of the Iraq war. You can find his logic flawed, his reasoning corrupt and his moral compass unforgivably faulty. But that is all Hitchens’s was offering – his opinion and his logic and reason for arriving at it – even if delivered, as always, with a dose of his infamous sneer and derision.

When it comes to atheism, those on the left far too often cloak themselves in the garb of liberals – decrying the inevitable and horrific results of absolutism, demanding justice for its victims, and declaring those who carry out its dictates as atypical, false prophets. But, when the sources of absolutism are brought into question and their perverse practice of binary brainwashing young minds is offered for appraisal, many on the left (like liberals) get squeamish. For such people, the tyranny of imperialistic nationalism, the absolutism of *free* market theology, and the fascism of the Ayn Rand-esque Social Darwinism that it fuels, are all fair game – but the oldest and most fundamental form of absolutism, the source of countless atrocities, is simply off-limits. While the political positions taken up by so-called “new atheist”, such as Hitchens, deserve the critiques that leftist like Noam Chomsky have delivered, it should not be missed that at its core, atheism has always been a champion of reason over mysticism, rationality over dogmatism, logic over blind belief, and freedom over domination – which so often begins with “a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body” (Mill, 1859/1951, p. 88). There is nothing “new” about these values and perspectives in atheism.

The reality is that while Hitchens did make his case for the war in Iraq, he did not declare his beliefs as being sourced from an omnipotent being, nor did he suggest that punishment for disregarding his “truth“ was dismemberment or eternal damnation and hell fire. In fact, what Christopher Hitchens argued consistently for throughout his life was our basic right as free human beings to disagree with the opinions of others – especially the opinions of the powerful – and to encourage the ever sharpening of our deductive reasoning so to engage in rational debate. Hitchens (2010) especially promoted this contrarian viewpoint among young people:

And I’d urge you to look at those who tell you, those people who tell you at your age, that you are dead until you believe as they do. What a terrible thing to be telling to children. ...and that you can only live by accepting an absolute authority. Don’t think of that as a gift. Think of it as a poisoned chalice. Push it aside however tempting it is. Take the risk of thinking for yourself. Much more happiness, truth, beauty and wisdom will come to you that way.

In my opinion Mr. Hitchens got the Iraq War wrong. And, I don’t have to get approval to state such an opinion from the “new atheist” party leaders, nor do I have to fear being ostracized by my heretical brethren; I am not a member of a cult. But, I do feel compelled to point out that to equate his flawed reasoning with the absolutist ideologies espoused by religious dogma, where homosexuality is a mortal sin, women are reduced to property, and non-believers are deserving of death – and, of course, where all of the above is systematically tattooed on to the minds of children from birth – is beyond ridiculous. Such arguments are simply red herrings, so clearly laced with an agenda of religious apology that they simply can’t be taken seriously. As Lenin

once wrote, “You either cannot think logically, or you are a liberal hypocrite, wriggling like the devil at mass. May I make one suggestion, as difficult as it may seem: scrape off all this green mold of intellectualist opportunism” (Boer, 2013, p. xi).

In conclusion...

In my estimation, it is a grave mistake for a Marxist critical pedagogy to seek a parlay with the institution of religion, in either the name of political correctness or strategy. As Harris (2008) contended,

Our fear of provoking religious hatred has rendered us unwilling to criticize ideas that are increasingly maladaptive and patently ridiculous. It has also obliged us to lie to ourselves—repeatedly and at the highest level of discourse—about the compatibility between religious faith and scientific rationality. (p. 80).

Religion, and the absolutist sectarianism it inspires, is clearly counterproductive to the emergence of a viable and global socialist alternative to capitalism. This reality, which Marx was clearly aware of in his own time, is just as true today. It seems to become ever clearer each day, as Slavoj Zizek (2006) argued, that “... religion is emerging as the wellspring of murderous violence around the world, assurances that Christian or Muslim or Hindu fundamentalists are only abusing and perverting the noble spiritual messages of their creeds ring increasingly hollow” (para. 1).

If we are to transform our world into the “more fully-human community” that Marx sought, the strategy of ignoring the type of social conscience produced by religion is simply not an option. As Hitchens (2007) decried, in his both brutally direct and elegant style; “Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience” (p. 22). In protecting our own collective conscience, I implore my critical colleagues, in the words of Zizek, to “leave to the devil that which belongs to the devil”.

Religious faith, regardless of its specifics – faith that Jesus will return to save the day, faith that Muslim martyrs go straight to Paradise, faith that Elohim will grant deceased Mormons a personal planet, faith that Tom Cruise is merely a “meat body” for immortal “Thetans” – is simply on the wrong side of an escalating war of ideas. No matter how alien their intentions, these ideas continue to have a significant impact on the maintenance and progress of the social, political, and economic conditions of our world – by way of their respective narratives and the human consciousness they inspire. If we truly envision a world without systemic domination – where the exploitation of our fellow human beings as well as our planet is not a taken-for-granted and unavoidable necessity – then maintaining a consistent position opposing all forms and sources of oppression – both mental and physical – is paramount. If we do not seek to engage in a struggle that merely results in a trade of one system of domination for another, we must consistently hold true to the deeper and universal ideals of human freedom that we espouse.

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