



Maerhofer, J. (2018). Lukács, Mariátegui, and the Dialectical Roots Of Edu-Activism.
Workplace, 30, 176-190.

JOHN MAERHOFER

LUKÁCS, MARIÁTEGUI,
AND THE DIALECTICAL ROOTS OF EDU-ACTIVISM

In the March 2015 edition of *PMLA*, a select number of scholars venture into the question of the public intellectual in today's age of mass multi-media, and the fluctuating ground of academic freedom in the contemporary university. Responding to the case against Steven Salaita, whose job offer by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was rescinded because of his criticism of Israel's recent murderous military campaign in Gaza, writers in this collection intended to address the overlap between scholarly activity and the engaging with an external public sphere. The editors coin the term *semipublic intellectual* "to encapsulate this principally twenty-first century situation and give a name to an identifiable, if constantly shifting relation, between the scholars and the academy."¹ For Sharon Marcus "semipublic" work for today's intellectual is necessary in an age where scholars need to be "both attuned to the academy and to those outside it who are interested in scholarly ideas and work." "Semipublic writing," argues Marcus, "constitutes an opportunity to rip ourselves off with some of the brio, pithiness, and user-friendliness that we deploy, of necessity, in the classroom."² Hua Hsu also argues that in the wake of the "by-gone golden age of thought, expression, and influence" that defined the interventionist role of the committed, "We continue to chase an ideal of public intellectual work even as these operative terms shift beneath our feet." Hsu leaves the reader with the uninviting inquiries: "Where is the public? Perhaps more pressing for those already in the profession: what qualifies as work?"³

For those of us in the academy dedicated to radical pedagogy and the struggle against the corporatization of the university, the category of the semipublic intellectual symbolizes nothing more than a retreat from the necessity to challenge the social order of things and probe systemic forces taken as "natural." While for many the Salaita case signals an opportunity to recognize the systemic problems with the university system, especially as it relates to issues of academic freedom, the super-exploitation of contingent labor-power, and the inequalities intrinsic to the regime of "neoliberal" higher education, the stance of the semipublic intellectual only justifies the hierarchy of knowledge-privilege upon which capitalist pedagogy is founded. The semipublic category seeks an interstitial space that can evade the controversial positioning of the engaged intellectual whose role it is to critique power. As Edward Said warned us, the widening process of professionalization and the subsuming of critical consciousness of the intellectual is part of what he cites as the accommodation of knowledge, particularly in the pervasive climate of market reductionism and neoliberal individuation.⁴ Stephen Salaita also points out in a recent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that "Making trouble is precisely the

function of the intellectual” whose position both as educator and public figure is “to identify and understand the disguises of power.”⁵ In a time of ubiquitous anti-intellectualism perpetuated by the political right, whose rhetoric against the so-called “radical” ivory tower gets replayed *ad nauseam* in the corporate media, the ambiguous stance of the semipublic intellectual does little to undo the propagation of an uninformed, critical community upon which the dominant ethos of capitalist exploitation, imperialist war, and police militarization maintains its power.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that issues of critical pedagogy are wiped clean from the *PMLA* dialogue, as if to sanctify a discursive break between intellectual production and classroom space. Indeed, from the point of view of radical pedagogical praxis, the semipublic intellectual represents nothing more than an exercise in self-reflexive alienation which stands in stark contrast to the public intellectual who often challenges the state of things *as-is*, and whose role is more than ever becoming mediated by capitalist pedagogical praxis and ideological orthodoxy. In order to undo what Paulo Freire calls the “education-as-domination paradigm,” radical teachers and activists must work to transcend the authority of capitalist ideology by building a critical consciousness which can refashion the world beyond the dictates of oppression. If education is reduced to a secondary activity, a mere reflection of the ostensible “real” world of intellectual action, it ignores the possibility of pedagogical praxis as a form of political struggle waged in the name of widening what Marx terms “emancipatory knowledge” and in building edifices of social justice that can challenge the oppressors. The semipublic intellectual, thus, represents the Gramscian bourgeois intellectual *par excellence*: in the current era of inter-imperialist war, the division of the globe into extremes of wealth and poverty, and varying strains of ascendant neo-fascism, the category of the semipublic intellectual offers a comfortable space within the dysfunctionality of capitalist social relations, as a means of totally evading the much needed antagonism that critical pedagogy brings with it. Furthermore, the misrecognition on the part of those who argue for the semipublic intellectual is a symptom of the extent to which the model of the corporatized university has become systematically normalized.

Commenting on the current climate of operative miseducation, Henry Giroux argues that “Under such circumstances, education becomes... part of a formative culture in which thoughtlessness prevails providing the foundations for the curse of totalitarianism.” Giroux continues by scrutinizing the critical responsibility of the public intellectual/educator in the period of monotonous cultural deprivation and consensus-based instruction that is integral to capitalist globalization: “In opposition to this model, with its claims to political neutrality... teachers and academics should combine the mutually interdependent roles of critical educator and active citizen. This requires finding ways to connect the practice of classroom teaching with issues that bear down on their lives and the larger society and to provide the conditions for students to view themselves as critical agents capable of making those who exercise authority and power answerable for their actions. The role of critical education is not to train students solely for jobs, but to educate them to question critically the institutions, policies, and values that shape their lives, relationships to others, and their myriad of connections to the larger world.”⁶ Building upon Paulo Freire’s concept of “education as the practice of freedom” in which intellectual discovery moves from simple reflection to activism, Giroux calls for an “insurrectional pedagogy that “registers...compassion, care for the other, the radical imagination, a democratic vision, and a passion for justice.”⁷

Alimentation among the masses is result of the commodification of knowledge reproduction, a process which as Sarah Knopp points out both reinforces and normalizes the everyday reality of capitalist inequality, while also stripping us of what makes us human in the first place: our access to and participation in the organization of the world.⁸ Knopp calls on “transformative intellectuals” “to sketch out an alternative way of thinking about knowledge and learning, and to describe the way that the economic system we live in shapes the schools in which we work and learn.”⁹ Knopp’s exciting categorization reflects my own concern with the materialist understanding of intellectual labor and the revolutionary role we have to play in the dialectical reconstruction of knowledge as a means to critique and liberate, beginning—though not ending—with our students, and what I term in this article *edu-activism*. That is, in order to undo the “education-as-domination” paradigm, radical teachers and activists must decode the authority of capitalist historiography while they build upon a critical consciousness which can refashion the world beyond the dictates of oppression. This process begins in our classrooms with a confrontational stance towards the category of reified knowledge that are part and parcel of the capitalist drive to refine levels of alienated labor on a global scale in order to undermine the alienation fostered by capitalist education and its rendering of all human capacity under the rubric of exchange-value rationality. Edu-activism, thus, becomes the basis for thinking through active participation in the process of social change by working with our students to locate the conditions for oppression in the everyday reality of capitalist miseducation in order to root out them out, not as a pedagogical end in itself, but to build models of change that target ruling-class hegemony.¹⁰

As a way of addressing some of these questions, my intention in this paper is to interrogate the “origins” of Freire’s methodology by focusing on the works of José Carlos Mariátegui and Georg Lukács, both of whom wrote extensively on the question of Marxist dialectics and the dynamism of revolutionary engagement. My intention here is twofold: (1) to examine Lukács and Mariátegui as a framework for grasping in concrete terms the complexities of Freire’s radical pedagogical methodology and (2) to probe further what Lukács argues is the “necessary bond between consciousness and action” that underlies the essence of what this essay terms “edu-activism,” or the consequential outcome of Freire’s *conscientization* paradigm. As such, while Freire’s methodology has become indispensable to those of us dedicated to radical teaching, I point towards some fundamental questions as it relates to pedagogic engagement: First, what are the historical and conceptual origins of Freire’s *conscientization* and what are the implications for understanding such dialectical roots of radical educational praxis? Second, is there an intrinsic relationship between the de-reification/de-mythicization process and the compulsion of liberation that the proletariat unaffectedly bears, according to the Marxian orientation of revolutionary praxis? More importantly, how can radical educators mediate Freire’s dialectical schema in order to concretize such revolutionary commonalties beyond merely “intellectual” consciousness as activism outside the classroom walls? My essay will culminate in a pedagogical reading of Takiji Kobayashi’s proletarian novel *Kani Kosen* (*The Crab Cannery Ship*) as a way to reconcile the dialectical functionality of edu-activism and the methodological possibilities for the undoing of capitalist education-as-domination in the current era of spiraling crises.

Symptoms of Mass Ignorance: Lukács and the Dialectic of Knowledge

One of the central themes that runs through the courses I teach at the City University of New York (CUNY) is the dialectic between knowledge-reproduction and power. I ask students to consider several questions that we explore throughout the semester in readings and discussions: for example, why has knowledge become so specialized? Who has access to which forms of knowledge and what implications does that have on issues of inequality? How does the specialization of knowledge-production in a system like capitalism reproduce systemic inequality in terms of race, class and gender? And finally, how can dialectical thinking be utilized for the purposes of liberation and to grasp the totality of capitalist reproduction from the inside, i.e., from the point of view of the working class?

Despite the optimism that such questions bear, what also has become clearer to me in the last fourteen years teaching at the university level is that the assault against critical thought based in the humanities stems from the top-down restructuring of higher education, what Robert Abele rightly calls “the capitalist takeover of higher education.” This “means-to-an-end capitalist-oriented enterprise,” according to Abele, is based on this simple principle: “one cannot be a critical thinker, or engage in deepening one’s knowledge of human ideas or cultural development, if one is to be an employee of an American business.”¹¹ The ideology of utilitarian education is something that students have internalized before even entering the university and which has been adopted by capitalist pedagogy. Thus, the challenge I always face can be characterized in the following terms: for the bulk of the working-class students who go to CUNY, their idea of education is based upon the idea of exchange between knowledge and capital, rather than based upon the idea that knowledge can sharpen the imagination and open spaces for creative and critical inquiry. More and more it has become clear to me the extent to which the educational industry has erased students’ ability to grasp social reality beyond the manufactured formation of capitalist reproduction, the consequence of aggressive standardization. The systemic erasure of what I would label the “slow violence” of educational institutionalization truly substantiates Althusser’s focus on the ideological state apparatus as the quintessential educational ideological apparatus, one that has only intensified under the regime of flexible accumulation and neoliberal privatization in the last three decades.¹²

In short, neoliberal austerity has devastated our ability to cultivate strategies for critical thought particularly in the realm of public education. And yet, as Henry Giroux notes, public education seems to be the last bastion of resistance against the onslaught of the neoliberal assault: “Public schools and higher education are ‘dangerous’ because they hold the potential to serve as laboratories for democracy where students learn to think critically. Teachers are threatening because they refuse to conflate education with training or treat schools as if they were car dealerships.”¹³ Henry Giroux’s assertion that pedagogical praxis in the era of neoliberal capital has fostered “A new kind of infantilism and culture of ignorance... in which the only obligation is to live for one’s own self-interest and to reduce the responsibilities of citizenship to the demands of consumer culture” seems to capture the state of higher educational institutions in the era of neoliberal maintenance.¹⁴ The strengthening of these attacks on both institutions and individuals within them who speak truth to power is not only a symptom of corporate consolidation of the knowledge/power nexus in higher education, but also can be understood within the context of emergent neo-fascism with its necessity to quell and eradicate forms of dissent that yield a systemic critique of state power, as the Salaita case and other cases of

repression against students and professors around the world have aptly demonstrated.¹⁵ And yet the very notion that the university (and schools in general) at one time existed outside the realm of capital is a fantasy. As Michael Parenti argues:

To say that schools fail to produce an informed, critically minded, democratic citizenry is to overlook the fact that schools were never intended for that purpose. Their mission is to turn out loyal subjects who do not challenge the existing corporate-dominated social order. That the school has pretty much fulfilled its system-sustaining role is no accident. The educational system is both a purveyor of the dominant political culture and a product of it.¹⁶

As much as institutional education acts as a formative mechanism in perpetuating and maintaining the social order of things and conditions workers for their inevitable place within the system of exploitation and class dominance, activism in the classroom will inevitably create the necessary fractures to reshape the possibility of resistance. Against this, the task of edu-activism is to grasp the dialectical totality of the historical conditions that correspond to the dictates of capitalist education and the politics of disengagement that it breeds.¹⁷ At the core of edu-activist dialectical thought is the necessity for fortifying the radical imagination in the process of active knowledge that both demystifies capitalist ideology while also forging an emancipatory ethics based upon the worldview of collective struggle. Edu-activism, thus, becomes the basis for thinking through active participation in the process of social change by locating the conditions for oppression in the everyday reality of capitalist miseducation. It is the outcome of the process of dialectical inquiry that enables a thoroughgoing understanding of the world, but also the concrete positioning we have in relation to systemic regimes of oppression that in turn determine and structure our struggle against them.

In order to develop the theory of edu-activism further, I turn to George Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, a seminal work that also reveals itself in Freire's theoretical development.¹⁸ Lukács' accomplishment lies in his ability to concretize a theory of dialectical thinking that is derived from the inevitability of class struggle that in effect shatters the logic of false consciousness upon which capitalism is founded. The "mendacious consciousness" that solidifies the economic base of capitalist reproduction, in other words, "becomes fatal" when subjected to what Lukács calls "the question of totality," by which he means the unseen historical forces that create the contradictions inbuilt within capitalism, and which by nature the bourgeoisie fail to grasp, yet are unveiled in the process of increasing class antagonism as experienced by the proletariat. The inevitable shattering of reified consciousness upon which capitalist social relations are reproduced is what enables the proletarian subject to grasp new forms of knowledge-production as a constituent element in the struggle against its appropriation by capital itself.

That the development of class consciousness on the part of the proletariat can fragment the reified consciousness of the capitalist class is revealed especially during moments of crisis. As Lukács writes:

In the class struggle we witness the emergence of the hidden forces that usually lie concealed behind the façade of economic life, at which the capitalists and their apologists gaze as though transfixed.... In this struggle for consciousness

historical materialism plays a crucial role. Ideologically no less than economically, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are mutually interdependent. The same process that the bourgeoisie experiences as a permanent crisis and gradual dissolution appears to the proletariat, likewise in crisis form, as the gathering of strength and the springboard to victory. Ideologically this means that the same growth of insight into the nature of society, which reflects the protracted death struggle of the bourgeoisie, entails a steady growth in the strength of the proletariat. For the proletariat the truth is a weapon that brings victory; and the more ruthless, the greater the victory.¹⁹

There are a number of elements in Lukács formulation that correspond to radical pedagogy: firstly, the notion that class struggle produces new forms of collective awareness that allow the proletariat to comprehend from an internal position the very blind spots inherent in capitalist social reproduction, what Lukács calls the “dialectical contradictions in its class consciousness.”²⁰ The passivity of cognizance under the rubric of capitalist social relations, caught between “the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism,” is what proletarian class consciousness seeks to transform: for Lukács, as the working class grows to understand its position as the historic bearer of revolutionary transformation, it is able to penetrate the “superficial view of the world” upon which the proletariat is dependent in a system based upon the self-interest of the owner class. While at first this insight is systematically obscured, it is the very contradiction that comes into focus as a consequence of sharpening class struggle, breathing into life the revolutionary “self-knowledge” of the proletariat and its historic role in the process of revolutionary transformation, as Lukács exclaims: “In the class struggle we witness the emergence of all the hidden forces that usually lie concealed behind the façade of economic life, at which the capitalists and their apologists gaze as though transfixed. *These forces appear in such a way that they cannot be ignored.*”²¹

Class consciousness for Lukács is based upon the notion that the proletariat comes to grasp the essential contradictions upon which capitalist social relations are determined through the concrete struggle against capitalist totality, which breaks through what Lukács calls the “conscious attempt at forgery” of bourgeois cultural and intellectual hegemony. It is interesting to note the extent to which Lukács in this part of his seminal work puts specific emphasis on the organic quality of proletarian ascendancy, which for him emerges within the space of capitalist hegemony not as an outcome of external influence (i.e. the intervention of the vanguard party), but the consequence of the proletariat’s recognition of capitalist totality, which it penetrates in the wake of class struggle. While not at odds with the Leninist notion of vanguardism, Lukács’ scrupulous reading of the Marxian dialectic evokes Mao’s “from-the-masses-to-masses” dictum, accentuating the role of intellectual capacity within and across the space of proletarian embryonic formation. As Lukács writes, “The dialectical cleavage in the consciousness of the proletariat is a product of the same structure that makes the historical mission of the proletariat possible by pointing forward and beyond the existing social order.”²² Working-class ascendancy, in other terms, is born out the necessity to struggle from within the parameters of capitalist hegemony, thus for Lukács enabling an inimitable outlook and understanding on the part of the proletariat of what constitutes revolutionary transformation in the process of becoming.

Most important in Lukács sentiments here is the emphasis on dialectical thought as the key mechanism in the process of emergent class struggle. Exposing what Freire calls “the

vulnerability of the oppressor” in the process of active liberation entails the cultivation of dialectical thinking to the extent that it can be utilized as means of shattering what Lukács cites as “the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism” that underlies the ideological formation of capital, resulting in either complete obedience to systemic conditions or false consciousness of the mastery over such conditioning itself.²³ Lukács sentiments reveal the very process by which dialectical thinking—that is, thinking that locates itself in relation to the concrete conditions—restores the critical sensibility necessary to overcome the predominance of reified knowledge reproduced by capitalist pedagogy. The authority of Lukács’ “liberation” of dialectical thinking, according to Fredric Jameson, is not simply about the advance of working-class agency, but also encodes a form of self-reflexiveness that is able “to understand the dilemma itself as the mark of the profound contradictions latent in the very mode of posing the problem.” Jameson continues to argue that:

Dialectical thinking thus proves to be a moment in which thought rectifies itself, in which the mind, suddenly drawing back and including itself in its new and widened apprehension, doubly restores and *regrounds* its earlier notions in a new glimpse of reality: first, through a coming to consciousness of the way in which our conceptual instruments themselves determine the shape and limits of the results arrived at...; and thereafter, in that second and more concrete moment of reflection..., a consciousness of ourselves as at once the product and the producer of history, and of the profoundly historical character of our socio-economic situation as it informs both solutions and the problems which gave rise to them equally.²⁴

My use of Jameson’s rather long quote is meant to rethink the parameters of critical pedagogy and the ways we can inject the essential qualities of dialectical thought into strategies of effective resistance in the classroom. For me, dialectical thinking lends itself to the development of our own “conceptual instruments” of critical thought that can be utilized in the fightback against the institutional limits of reified knowledge reproduction, as a means to cultivate critical literacies to undo the grim reality of education-as-domination. As such, the foundation of education-activism materializes firstly as a theoretical approach to the problem of knowledge as it operates in capitalist pedagogy itself: as Lukács repeats throughout his seminal work (echoing Marx’s gravedigger maxim), the blind spot of bourgeois ideology is that in reproducing its hegemonic position it is also cultivating and sharpening the tools of working-class resistance from within its own sacred domain. The criticality of dialectical thought emerges from within capitalist institutions, which is why—as Lukács emphasizes—working class agency does not need a *table rasa*, but is the outcome of the inevitable class struggle as a self-reflexive process of overcoming the boundaries fortified by capitalist ideology. As a way of analyzing the specifics of such an inquiry, I now turn to the work of the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui and the fightback against the myth-making machinery that fortifies capital’s hegemonic structuration.²⁵

Smashing the Bosses’ Lies: Mariátegui the Undoing of Capitalist Mythicization

One of the most enlightening sections of Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, comes in the 4th chapter where he discusses the “well-organized” propaganda machine of the ruling-class, a notion that in the current moment of the U.S. election cycle smacks us in the face on a daily basis. Subjugation by the oppressor, according to Freire, stems from the requirement to

erase the inquisitive nature of the oppressed, what we have been discussing as the necessary criticality in the emergent class struggle that has been systematically eradicated by capitalist pedagogy. Freire writes that

Since the oppressors cannot totally achieve this destruction they must mythicize the world. In order to present for the consideration of the oppressed and subjugated a world of deceit designed to increase their alienation and passivity, the oppressors develop a series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it rather as a fixed entity, as something given—something to which people, as mere spectators, must adapt.²⁶

Freire's insights bring up central questions for militant teachers in the struggle against capitalist mythicization: most importantly, how do we fight against its hegemony? But is that the most we can do to enable students to see the falsehoods of ruling-class ideology? Or, can we also construct a counter-mythology based upon radical premises in order to overcome the alienation and passivity reproduced by capitalist ideological formations?

In order to investigate such questions further, I turn to the work of José Carlos Mariátegui, a central figure in Marxist historiography. And yet it might come as a surprise that I would choose to focus on the work of Mariátegui here and now, as many would see his Marxist writing to be oriented simply towards a rigorous analysis of the conditions in his native Perú.²⁷ Seeing his work only through the lens of the emergence of Latin American Marxism, however, obscures the breadth of his analysis and his insightful contribution to the development of Marxist theoretical inquiry in the 20th century and into our own time. While his primary focus was his native Perú, Mariátegui's acute sensibility enabled him to provide to the world with one of the first comprehensive analyses of several crucial topics: the rise of fascism in the 1920's, the emergent struggles across the Third World, and issues related to the struggle for women, not to mention most importantly his insight into the question of indigeneity and racism. He also wrote several portraits and critiques of his contemporaries, which encompassed Lenin, Trotsky, Freud, George Sorel, and Maxim Gorky, marking the internationalist character of his work. Mariátegui's anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist theory and praxis have become the basis for movements across Latin America, particularly in his native Perú.²⁸

For my own purposes, I am interested in two interconnected aspects of Mariátegui's work: first, his insistence on what I call term the materialization of *insurgent knowledge*, a formation plays a central role in what I have been calling edu-activism. I define insurgent knowledge as the dynamic of collective antagonism that arouses *resistance* against the everyday reality of capitalist exploitation and inhumanity. It corresponds not only to the process of self-realization of one's alienation within the realm of capital (to utilize Marx's terminology), but also to the praxis of action by which revolutionary consciousness enacts and determines the possibility of radical organization. As Terry Eagleton explains, "knowledge" for Marx "becomes itself a kind of social or political force, part of the material situation it examines rather than a mere 'reflection' of or upon it. It is knowledge as an historical event rather than as abstract speculation."²⁹ In a related way, Mariátegui is primarily concerned with advancing a revolutionary sensibility—what I am calling here insurgent knowledge—that simultaneously disengages the bourgeois ideology of national sovereignty while also advocating the necessities of class consciousness in the formation of the revolutionary vanguard. As he argues in his classic *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian*

Reality, “To believe that the abstract idea of freedom...is to be trapped by an illusion that depends perhaps on a mere, though not disinterested, philosophical astigmatism of the bourgeoisie and its democracy.”³⁰ The second characteristic of Mariátegui that is relevant here comes from his writings on myth and optimism, a curious aspect of his exploration of Marxism based upon his reading of the French syndicalist George Sorel, among others. While some of his insights border on hybrid mysticism, his intention was to interrogate the crisis of bourgeois cultural hegemony while also rethinking the possibility of revolutionary mythology in the emergent struggle for socialism. As the editors of his anthology assert, “The essays represent faith in a new, revolutionary belief system that would inspire men and women to create socialist revolution,” a sort of materialist optimism much needed, I would argue, in our own time of perpetual war and fascism.³¹ In his essay “Man and Myth,” for example, Mariátegui interrogates the façade of liberal mythicization as means to posit an alternative belief formula based upon the a reconceptualization of myth grounded in materialist reality, as he writes:

The bourgeoisie no longer has any myths. It has become incredulous, skeptical, nihilistic. The reborn liberal myth has aged too much. The proletariat has a myth: the social revolution. It moves towards that myth with a passionate and active faith.... The strength of revolutionaries is not in their science; it is in their faith, in their passion, in their will.... They are not divine; they are human, social.³²

It is such “revolutionary excitement” that opens up new avenues for the spaces of optimism and the radical imagination, which under the regime of capitalist accumulation is thwarted and reduced to base mode of survival.

Bracketing for the time-being the mysticism intrinsic in Mariátegui’s writing above, what is crucial to take form his inquiries is the extent to which dehumanization underlies capitalist mythicization, which in turn produces the impossibility or thinking beyond the confines of its dictated reality, what Freire also refers to as the instruments of domination. It is not difficult to imagine the ways in which the educational apparatus of capitalism annihilates students’ ability to cultivate optimism (revolutionary or otherwise), through standardized testing and disciplinary mechanisms of repression that result in the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline in the current era of mass incarceration. For Henry Giroux, “drill-and-test modes of pedagogy...kill the imagination of students” and thus mirror systematic forms of tyranny enveloping out social lives.³³ This form of revolutionary positivity to combat the squashing of the imagination and political agency is something to which Freire himself subscribes in what his theory of the “action-reflection” model founded upon a process of re-naming of the world-as-is: “To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.... People are fulfilled only to the extent that they crate the world...and create it with their transforming labor.”³⁴

In this sense, both the concept of insurgent knowledge and capitalist de-mythicization lend themselves to the praxis of edu-activism with the focus on cultivating spaces of resistance both within and external to the classroom walls. As recent history has revealed to us, the global insurgency is growing: while the class struggle in the capitalist centers of the North wanes in comparison to burgeoning movements in the global South, where workers have experienced the brunt of neoliberal structural adjustment and state-based violence, movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter in the North mirror the concerns about a world dictated by psychopaths who are sharpening the tools of racism, militarism, and fascism in order to “solve”

the crisis in capitalist globalization. What is “new” about the current manifestation of insurgency is that it is occurring within the era of what many see as permanent capitalist crisis, thus lending itself to a retrieved semantics of revolutionary internationalism. Similarly, Mariátegui’s resolve to cultivate dialectical materialist inquiry as a foundational component of heterogeneous workingclass consciousness is what fortifies the repudiation of the fascist counter-revolution. His inquiry also pushes the ideology of revolt beyond the contemporary fixation on corporeal multiplicity, which has serious limits in terms of its revolutionary potentiality. As the trajectory from reform to revolution in Mariátegui’s thought makes clear, class consciousness needs to become the organizing principle for building solidarity among the ranks of the globally dispossessed. It is the ultimate praxis by which the platitudes of resistance become more than symbolic and in fact push back against recurrent forms of systemic injustice. In other terms, such revolutionary enthusiasm needs to become an ontology of collective revolt based on the principles of radical egalitarianism, anti-capitalism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, in the forming of a revolutionary model of social justice beyond the ballot box or the limitations associated with one-dimensional acts of corporeal multiplicity. Mariátegui’s emphasis on solidarity among the varying facets of the working class offers a critical methodology and praxis in the struggle against the illusions of freedom offered by the capitalist bosses, a principle which needs to be constantly injected into the collective struggles against ruling-class forces, both within and outside of the capitalist centers, especially in light of sharpening inter-imperialist rivalry and the recent turn to the fascism from the US to the Philippines and beyond. The question, as I will explore in the final section of this essay, is how to incorporate such strategies into our everyday teaching so as to break the formative myths concocted by the rulers to dupe workers into reproducing their own oppression.

Counter-memory as Praxis: *Kani Kosen* and Contemporary Class Struggle

So what are the ways we can fight against capitalist hegemony in the era of emergent fascism, crisis, and endless war? How do we undo the alienation and passivity instilled in students who have been seduced into accepting the world-as-is doctrine in a time when capitalist mythicization has intensified and sharpened its tools? Is revolutionary optimism even possible in such dark times when the haves have fortified their positions while the bulk of humanity wades in the filth that capital has fostered upon it? With these questions in mind, my final comments will offer a “reading” of the Japanese proletarian novel *Kani Kosen* (*The Crab Cannery Ship*), written by the communist writer and activist Takiji Kobayashi, to materialize the kinds of praxis-oriented steps fundamental to edu-activism and the possibilities of collective dialogue needed in order to *de-mythicize* the world-as-is paradigm which compels us to accept the inevitability of perpetual war, racism, and fascist conditioning. My analysis of *Kani Kosen* will not at all be comprehensive; rather, I hope to flesh out some principle concerns Takiji³⁵ raises in his groundbreaking work about the possibilities of working-class resistance in light of our current situation. In particular, I emphasize the ways critical reading of texts can break through the phony lessons that are nurtured by capitalist pedagogy in the hopes of planting the seeds for the inevitable fightback against systemic oppression both within and outside of the barriers of our respective institutions.

Let me begin first by characterizing the novel’s curious influence in the contemporary period, which in itself is astonishing. For it is important to note that the novel was on Japan’s bestseller list in 2008, and after forty years continues to attract readers across the globe but particularly

young Japanese workers who have suffered under Japan's economic crisis that has loomed since 1991. The *Kani Kosen* "boom," as it is called, is thus no coincidence, given that Japanese youth are searching to ways to understand and rethink their post-war present through history, a history that is very much obscured in public discourse, especially in relation to education.³⁶ As Heather Bowen-Struyk argues the "boom" represents a moment of revolutionary optimism in the present era: "Faced with uncertain economic growth since the bursting of the economic bubble in 1991, an entire generation has now grown up without the sureties experienced by their parents.... For those intimate with Takiji's writings, this "boom" represents the possibility of change."³⁷ One particular concrete effect of the "boom" has been the increase in membership of the Japanese Communist Party, an outcome that (in my own view) seems to have had little effect on contemporary Japanese politics, with the turn to the authoritarian right led by Shinzo Abe, who has led Japan down the road of re-militarization.³⁸

So why is it important to note the impact of a novel published in 1929 on today's culture and society? In the context of the present argument, I would argue this is a crucial starting point for a critical reading of the novel, as it points the way forward for a dialectical intervention into both the history of inter-imperialist rivalry and the impact upon working-class formation in the centers of empire, not to mention its illuminating examination of the effects of imperialist extraction in the global "margins." As means of exploring this question, let me give a synopsis of the novel and the author's intent. In short, *Kani Kosen* tells the story of a group of unorganized workers who are super-exploited for their labor aboard the *SS Hakko Maro*, a fishing vessel and crab canning boat. In the course of their voyage into the disputed waters off the coast of Russia to the north of Hokkaido (Japan's northernmost island), the crew start to realize that their sacrifice for the survival of Japan's empire is futile, based upon the rhetoric of ultranationalism and racism utilized by the bosses to keep the workers unorganized. The horrific conditions the workers experience on the ship cause the workers to organize and revolt against the ship bosses, ending in a strike that fails but also radicalizes the workers to build the class struggle among the ranks of the proletariat. As a consequence, they come to recognize the conditions of their own alienated labor against which they begin to act collectively, bearing in mind the interrelationship between their own struggle and those led by millions of workers around the world, but especially those in Japan's colonized spaces. Written at the height of Japan's imperial expansion across Asia, Takiji's intention is to broaden the political context of the late 1920's which witnessed a watershed in the class struggle waged by workers, students, and intellectuals against the imminent rise of Japanese militarism and fascism, which would reach its peak after Japan's full-blown invasion of China in 1933, the same year that Takiji was tortured and brutally murdered at the hands of the police in Tokyo.³⁹ As Takiji unapologetically writes at the end of the novel, "This narrative is a page from the history of capitalist expansion into colonial territories."⁴⁰

Without being overly programmatic about it, what is clear is that Takiji is using the novel form in order to "teach" us several lessons: inter-imperialist rivalry and the building of empire; the symbiotic relationship between racism and ultranationalism; the reproduction of alienated labor and the ideology of individualism versus collective action; and finally, the emphasis on the need for collectivity in the face of overwhelming violence on the part of the state, particularly under the form of emergent militarism and fascism. Just as Japan's empire necessitated the building of a massive military apparatus in order to bolster its position on the world stage, a move that resulted in the genocide of tens of thousands of people across Asia, U.S. imperialism, as John

Bellamy Foster writes, “has led the United States to turn to extra-economic means of maintaining its position: putting its huge war machine in motion in order to prop up its faltering hegemony over the world economy.”⁴¹ Such pedagogical moments in his text can be utilized as a means to historicize and expand the context of racism, imperialism, and capitalist hegemony, which in our own time has become globalized. That is, despite its taking place in another time and place, the novel facilitates a conversation about the historical realities of imperialist conquest and the extraction of resources, uneven development between the global South and North, as well as the contradictions of capitalist progress, which in the current era has instead wreaked havoc across the globe.

Ultimately, Takiji exposes the lies that are enshrined in capitalist institutions of learning: that the coveting of global resources by archcapitalists demands an ideological machinery that hooks the working class through militaristic nationalism, and the belief that we need to fight for the bosses instead of organizing our ranks in the struggle against the super-exploitative mechanisms that dis-unify us both locally and globally. To characterize Takiji’s lessons a bit more concretely in the context of our own historic period, we can see the extent to which privatization and the educational reforms that stem from budget cuts, tuition hikes, labor exploitation and the like are in fact ways to prepare us for more and more war in the emergent inter-imperialist rivalry unfolding across the globe. Re-organization of education through privatization, budget cuts, and tuition hikes means that more students and workers will be unemployed or out of school and are likely to become the target of military recruiters who are more and more appearing on our campuses and whose objective is to coerce our students to join military to fight “against terror,” when in reality the military needs bodies to ensure the expansion of imperialist profit. Again, we see how education is used during capitalist crisis for the purposes of ruling-class priorities: it is only for the betterment of the ones who own, and not the ones who pay, often with their lives. In short, capitalist education is *privileged* education, for those who will remain silent and who will eventually run the ruling class machine.

That we must interconnect the localized struggle on our campus (budget cuts, tuition hikes, and adjunctification) with U.S. imperialism and the global crisis, which will only deepen as the militarization and destabilization of Afghanistan and the region unfolds, is an essential part of rethinking of strategy in light of global struggles for transformative change. The universality of the current era of insurrections springs from the collective rage against the inequalities of globalized capital, despite the inconsistencies that vary from place to place in terms of social and strategic configurations. To this extent, resistance itself has taken on a “new” form, one which not only moves beyond counter-hegemonic and cultural strategizing, but also as such reveals the potentiality of a universal paradigm directed at exposing, combating, and overcoming the effects of globalized capital and for building revolutionary solidarity beyond the fictionality of borders and nationalist cultural paradigms. As Marx reminds us throughout *Capital*, the super-exploitation of labor is an essential and inevitable in the reproduction of accumulation, the abstract process of which comes to be embodied in the commodity form or the symbolic requisite of capitalist social relations itself. The mechanism of abstraction that underlies the obligatory exploitation of labor power is the catalyst that also configures the insurgent response to the ever-widening conditions of impoverishment, particularly in our current era of capitalist crisis in which the gap between the poorest and richest is at a record high. At a time in which the ruling class is sharpening the tools of fascist oppression, what we need is to foster new forms of

revolutionary mythology and excitement, particularly among our students whom the ruling class is bent upon using as cannon fodder for their imperial project.

In conclusion, I would like to keep Mao's dialectical maxim in mind: "All views that overestimate the strength of the enemy and underestimate the strength of the people are wrong."⁴² In other words, what is clear is that the current crisis offers an opportunity for exposing the fallacies of the capitalist class. We must unite internationally to fight the menace of fascist encroachment in our schools and within our social lives, while also paying close attention to the particularities of our "own" environments. From Haiti to India, students, teachers, and workers have resisted the attacks on education and the encroachment of neo-fascist elements. International solidarity cannot be shut down by state violence, and while the struggle to overcome what seems to be the overwhelming power of the ruling class seems daunting, the contemporary crisis is a sign of their weakness and decline. Learning from each other's local struggles will enable us to recognize and implement strategies on an international scale for organizing our forces to overcome the catastrophe of the global system. To close with Takiji's revolutionary optimism concerning the striking workers: "Gradually they realized that their own power, whose presence they had not suspected, was manifesting itself.... Once they understood it, a wonderful spirit of rebellion filled their hearts."⁴³

Notes

¹ Lili Loofbourow and Philip Maciak, "Introduction: The Time of the Semipublic Intellectual." *PMLA* 130.2 (2015): 439-445.

² Sharon Marcus, "How to Talk about Books You Have Read" in *Ibid.*, 474-479.

³ Hua Hus, "In the Context of Infinite Contexts," in *Ibid.*, 461-466.

⁴ See Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual*. London: Vintage, 1996.

⁵ See Steven Salaita, "Why I Was Fired," at [rticle/Why-I-Was-Fired/233640](http://www.stevensalaita.com/article/Why-I-Was-Fired/233640)

⁶ Henry Giroux, "The Curse of Totalitarianism and the Challenge of an Insurrectional Pedagogy." <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/09/29/the-curse-of-totalitarianism-and-the-challenge-of-an-insurrectional-pedagogy/>

⁷ *Ibid.* Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1993. See Chapter 2 in particular.

⁸ Sarah Knopp, "Schools, Marxism, and Liberation," in *Education and Capitalism: Struggles for Learning and Liberation*. Ed. Jeff Bale and Sarah Knopp. Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2012, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰ See Giroux's comments on this concept in his "Lessons from Paolo Freire" at <http://chronicle.com/article/Lessons-From-Paolo-Freire/124910/>

¹¹ Robert Abele, "The Capitalist Takeover of Higher Education." <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/03/25/the-capitalist-takeover-of-higher-education/>

¹² I am referring to Rob Nixon's masterful work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012. The well-known Althusser reference is in "Ideology and

Ideological State Apparatuses.” Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 152.

¹³ Henry Giroux, “Why Teachers Matter in Dark Times.” <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/35970-why-teachers-matter-in-dark-times>

¹⁴ Henry Giroux, “The Curse of Totalitarianism and the Challenge of an Insurrecional Pedagogy.”

¹⁵ I am thinking here of the state repression against students at JNU in India in particular.

¹⁶ Michael Parenti, *History as Mystery*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999, 22.

¹⁷ I borrow the term “edu-activism” from Ian Christopher Fletcher’s brief but cogent “Critical Pedagogy: Radical History in Two Spaces.” *Radical History Review*. Fall (2008): 23-26. Fletcher uses the term to describe critical workshops he develops in the classroom “to emphasize local-global interconnections and historicize the transnational scope of social movements and the left today” (Ibid. 25).

¹⁸ My use of Lukács’ dialectical methodology will be limited to the “class consciousness” chapter in which he outlines the rigorous character of proletarian thought which according to Fredric Jameson “has the capacity for resolving antinomies which middle-class thinking by its very nature was unable to deal with.” See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, 186.

¹⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971, 65 & 68.

²⁰ Ibid., 64.

²¹ Ibid., 65. Italics added.

²² Lukács, 73.

²³ Freire, Ibid., 46; Lukács, 77.

²⁴ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 186 & 382-383.

²⁵ Sarah Knopp, Ibid, 31.

²⁶ Freire, 120.

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of Mariátegui’s legacy, see Lance Selfa, “Mariátegui and Latin American Marxism,” at <http://isreview.org/issue/96/mariategui-and-latin-american-marxism> For a lengthy analysis of Mariátegui’s life and works, see the “Introduction” to the anthology of his works, Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker, ed. *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011, pp. 11-61. Citations will be drawn from this source here.

²⁸ I refer here to movements such as Sendero Luminoso and the Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru, among others. For an overview of Mariátegui’s legacy in Perú, see Sheldon Liss, *Marxist Thought in Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 129-148.

²⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Marx and Freedom*. London: Phoenix Paperbacks, 1997, 4.

³⁰ José Carlos Mariátegui: *An Anthology*, 94. ³¹ José Carlos Mariátegui: *An Anthology*, 383.

³² Ibid., 387.

³³ Henry Giroux, "Why Teachers Matter in Dark Times."

³⁴ Freire, 69 & 126.

³⁵ Scholars often refer to him by his given name, as a sign of solidarity and affection. For an explanation, see Heather Bowen-Struyk, "Why a Boom in Proletarian Literature in Japan? The Kobayashi Takiji Memorial and The Factory Ship." <http://apjif.org/-Heather-Bowen-Struyk/3180/article.html>

³⁶ The debate over Japan's cleansing of its imperial history and war crimes is still unfolding. Some of the debate can be read here: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/researchAndExpertise/researchHighlights/politics/Japanesetextbooks.aspx>

³⁷ Heather Bowen-Struyk, "Why a Boom in Proletarian Literature in Japan? The Kobayashi Takiji Memorial and The Factory Ship."

³⁸ This is an aspect I am exploring in a recent piece, set to be published in the next year. For an analysis of Shinzo Abe and Japan's re-militarism, see https://www.democracynow.org/2014/1/15/shock_doctrine_in_japan_shinzo_abesand and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/16/shinzo-abe-japan-pm>

³⁹ For example, see Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) for an analysis of the labor movement, from 1900 to the 1930's, and Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka, *The Making of Japanese Manchuria, 1904-1932* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Louis Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) for an analysis of The Manchuria Incident and its implications; for an analysis of the rise of Japanese fascism, the drive towards imperialist war, and the repression of leftists in Japan, see Germaine Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986), pp. 251-293.

⁴⁰ Kobayashi Takiji, *The Crab Cannery Ship and Other Novels of Struggle*. Trans. Zeljko Cipris. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013, 96.

⁴¹ John Bellamy Foster, *Naked Imperialism: The U.S. Pursuit of Global Dominance*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006, 136.

⁴² Mao Tse-Tung, "The Present Situation and Our Tasks." https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_24.htm

⁴³ Kobayashi Takiji, *The Crab Cannery Ship and Other Novels of Struggle*, 79.

John Maerhofer teaches English and interdisciplinary studies in the City University of New York system. His book, *Rethinking the Vanguard*, was published in 2009. His recent article, "Can Starving People Go on Hunger Strike?" (a critical analysis of the Maoist Movement in India), is forthcoming in *International Critical Thought*.



cultural logic

marxist theory & practice



Since 1997

ISSN 1097-3087

<http://clogic.eserver.org/>

Editors

Rich Gibson
San Diego State University

Martha Gimenez
University of Colorado (retired)

Gregory Meyerson
North Carolina A & T University

James Neilson
North Carolina A & T University

Joseph G. Ramsey
University of Massachusetts - Boston

E. Wayne Ross
University of British Columbia

David Siar
Winston-Salem State University

Advisory Group

Robert Albritton, *York University, Canada*
Theodore W. Allen, *Brooklyn Public Library (1919-2005)*
Crystal Bartolovich, *Syracuse University*
Rosalyn Baxandall, *State University of New York, Old Westbury*
Vladimir Bilenkin, *North Carolina State University*
Jamie Owen Daniel, *Director of Organizing and Development, UPI Local 4100, IFT/AFT/AFL-CIO*
Anthony Dawahare, *California State University, Northridge*
Greg Dawes, *North Carolina State University*
Teresa L. Ebert, *State University of New York, Albany*
Barbara Foley, *Rutgers University*
Marcial González, *University of California, Berkeley*
Rosemary Hennessy, *State University of New York, Albany*
Mike Hill, *State University of New York, Albany*
Peter Hitchcock, *Graduate Center-City University of New York*
Amitava Kumar, *Vassar College*
Neil Larsen, *University of California, Davis*
John McClendon, *Michigan State University*
Sophia A. McClennen, *Pennsylvania State University*

Andrew Milner, *Monash University, Melbourne*
Warren Montag, *Occidental College*
Bill V. Mullen, *University of Texas, San Antonio*
Richard Ohmann, *Wesleyan University*
Bertell Ollman, *New York University*
Vijay Prashad, *Trinity College*
Russell Reissing, *University of Toledo*
Modhumita Roy, *Tufts University*
E. San Juan, Jr., *Philippines Cultural Study Center*
Sean Sayers, *University of Kent*
Helena Sheehan, *Dublin City University*
David Slavin, *Westfield State College and Emory University*
Paul Smith, *George Mason University*
Alan Spector, *Purdue University Calumet*
Michael Sprinker, *State University of New York, Stony Brook (1950-1999)*
Carol A. Stabile, *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*
Richard Stahler-Sholk, *Eastern Michigan University*
Kenneth Surin, *Duke University*
Jeffrey Williams, *Carnegie Mellon University*
Richard Wolff, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*
Michael Yates, *University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown (retired)*

Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor

© 2018 John Maerhofer