

Capitalist Schooling: An Interview with Bertell Ollman

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Bertell Ollman is a leading Marxist intellectual and scholar. His many books include *How to Take an Exam and Remake the World*, *Alienation*, *Dialectical Investigations*, and the forthcoming *Dance of the Dialectic*. He is also creator of the first ever Marxist board game, *Class Struggle*. A professor at New York University, Ollman is now actively involved in the anti-War movement. *Cultural Logic* caught up with Professor Ollman this past October.

Cultural Logic: What roles does education play in Capitalism?

Bertell Ollman: The place to start thinking about the role of education in capitalism is with the class that rules in capitalism: How it gets its power and wealth. What that class needs from the greater society, things that they can't provide for themselves. This is really the best way to approach the various spheres outside the economic sphere in capitalism: the state, but also the sphere of education.

If you go at the question that way, then what you see, and you see quickly, is that education is there primarily to provide the ruling capitalist class with people who have the skills, knowledge and behavioral attitudes that will help the capitalists make a profit and make the conditions and relations in which they make their profits secure. There are lots of ways of doing that, both positive and negative. The positive are pretty obvious, how you teach people certain things: ideas, skills, and attitudes which the capitalists can make use of. The negative are just as important as the positive. The negative ways are not always so easy to recognize, but they have a lot to do with what you make sure people *don't* learn. One of the best examples is how people are kept from finding out that there *is* another way of doing things, that there are *alternatives* to the capitalist system. So you don't get socialist ideas presented to practically anybody, with the exceptions being some big universities in some major towns where, for other reasons, some socialists manage to get jobs and present to a limited number of students.

CL: What roles do tests play in capitalist education?

Ollman: Well, I really came to my understanding of tests rather late in the game. Most students realize that tests are biased and that tests are not the best way to determine how much and what students know. That in itself wasn't something that took much thinking to arrive at.

But then one began to see that one could begin looking at tests as something that *teaches* people much more than they test people. In keeping with what Marshall McLuhan said about television, "The Medium is the Message." If you adopt this approach, you begin to see that tests are a wonderful way for organizing people into particular patterns of thinking, but also of behavior, which are functional to the way that capitalism runs. There are all sorts of ways this is carried out: by preparing people to come to work on time, by preparing people to take orders without questioning, preparing them to have the right attitudes towards their superiors. Preparing them to have the right attitude towards their own lack of success: to view it as a personal failure, something that came from their not studying hard enough or a lack in natural ability, rather than being caught up in a system where that is the, if not inevitable, at least likely, outcome. That outcome in life is failure: that is not finding a job; that is finding a lousy job. This corresponds to tests by not doing as well on tests as you'd like to.

For a long time I was interested in Reich and the role of sexual repression in making people the kind of accepting, non-complaining, pliable workers and citizens that capitalism needs. I did a fair amount of thinking and writing about the roles sexual repression plays on the intellects and emotions of people. I came to realize that tests do the same thing in their own way. In fact, given the growing prevalence in testing and the importance tests play in young people's lives today -- and not just when they're taking a test but when they're worrying about taking the test beforehand and worrying afterwards about the outcome -- testing may be as important as sexual repression is in creating the same kind of person capitalism needs.

Testing and sexual repression are two very important socializing devices. Whereas sexual repression, at least after the writings of Wilhelm Reich, Freud and others, has been written about and studied, I don't think the contribution of testing towards creating the same kinds of people has been as widely recognized. Therefore, there has been, to my knowledge, no left politics that has centered around the political role of testing. We have objected to individual tests and particular kinds of tests, always on an individual basis. But there hasn't been any systematic critique of the entire notion of testing and what function it serves in our society. I would like to see a systematic program and critique of the role testing plays. I think young people should get involved and organize around this issue. This could prove to be very important politically.

Let me make a parallel with what happened to the analysis some people made to the role that sexual repression plays on young people. It's not well known, but the March 22nd movement in France -- which was the group that triggered off the events in May of 1968 -- this group was a group of students at Montereau university (a branch of the University of Paris) who got together, primarily because of a protest they made at the women's dormitories. Their protest was over the rules that forbade men from being in these women's dormitories after a certain hour in the evening. The students, male and female, took over the dormitory. They refused to leave, saying this wasn't just a policy to keep fellows from seeing their girlfriends, but that this was *a conscious effort on the part of the state* -- it was a public university -- to repress them sexually in order to make them the kind of people capitalism needs to run its enterprises.

The reason they took that line is there had been a talk given at the Monterre University by a French Marxist named Boris Frankel. I was at that talk. There were about 500 people in the hall and he was very well received. Frankel had just translated some of Reich's work into French. His talk was on Reich and the social function of repression. Afterwards, Frankel's little booklet, his French edition of Reich's work on this subject, was sold door to door by some students at the dormitories. Reading this booklet and discussing these ideas, these students were able to engage in an action that would, then and now, I suppose, be a version of a panty raid at a university in the United States. But in France it had a really political content and because of that action this group got started.

The students were thrown out of the women's dormitories by the police. They protested. Some of them got expelled. The police broke them up. They went with some followers to Paris. They called upon students in Paris to join them. There was a larger protest that the police broke up with some violence, leading to massive student protests which led to workers taking over their enterprises after the cops got involved. And then you have the famous May events of 1968 in France.

At its origins, you have a protest by students over rules forbidding them from entering the female dormitories; a protest based on a Marxo-Freudian understanding -- Freudo-Marxist understanding? -- of the role of sexual repression in the social life of the society. I think a Marxist understanding of the role of exams, especially of so much testing as we see in today's capitalism, has the *potential* of giving students the kind of understanding of society and contributing to a radical politics which is somewhat similar to what happened thirty years ago in France against sexual repression. This is giving it a huge role, but I think this needs to be investigated.

CL: What do you say to a teacher who says to you, "*Look, I don't see how I fit into this whole proletariat. I'm not creating surplus value in a capitalist's factory. My boss is the Board of Education, the City, the State.*"

Ollman: A lot of people have said that the working class has disappeared or is in the process of doing so because the number of industrial workers in the United States is getting smaller. I think the definition of worker is pretty elastic. It isn't simply a matter of producing value the way an industrial worker produces value. More important in understanding who and what a worker is, is to see someone who has a relationship with a boss. In order to work, that person needs to be hired by a boss. That boss tells the person what to do, where to do it, how to do it, how fast to do it. That boss decides how much the worker should be paid. That boss decides whether to continue to employ the person. So, if you're in a relationship with another person like the one I just described, you're a worker.

That holds for an awful lot of people who wear white collars to work and who have titles. Even the title of "manager" is used to disguise the fact that they (managers) are in a relation to the boss as worker. This is a broader sense of "worker." It is one Marx and Marxists have used. It has to do with how one fits in terms of relations to people who are telling you what to do, and that these people are telling you to do such-and-such in order

to further their own interests. Usually their interests are profit making. But even if you are a state employee, like many teachers, if you see the State as serving the Capitalist class, there is an indirect link with profit making. In either case, you're being told what to do and how to do it. It's not in your interests and it's not helping you fulfill your potentials.

In this sense of the term "worker," we have more workers in our society and our world today than in Marx's time. In Marx's time there were a great number of people who owned their own piece of land and were private farmers. We hardly have such people now. There are a small number of farmers and many of them work on industrial farms, so they are workers on the land.

In Marx's time, there were a lot of people in the professions, doctors, lawyers, engineers, who worked for themselves. Today many of these people work for firms. They have bosses, whether those firms are called hospitals or law firms. Their relation to their bosses is similar to the relations I've been describing. A lot of people who consider themselves "professionals" today may be professionals in some sense in terms of the character and standards of their work which exists cross-culturally, but in terms of their relations to the boss, they are workers. Perhaps they are high-paid workers, workers with titles. These titles and high salaries are meant to keep them from seeing that they are workers. If this is one's definition of worker, then it can be estimated that we may have as many as 90% of the people in our society who are working class.

Occasionally one sees some of these people forming unions. A lot of people were surprised when they saw a group of doctors in hospitals organize and start a union. No surprise at all. They were being super-exploited by the hospital bosses. These young doctors saw their exploitation and realized that, besides being doctors, they were also workers, and they needed to protect themselves, as workers always have, against the boss.

CL: Another student comes to you and says, "*You know, I'm going to school, undergraduate and graduate, getting all these degrees, and I don't really feel like I'm gaining a whole lot of knowledge. I feel like a dog jumping through hoops, day-to-day, semester-to-semester. As if all these degrees are just keys to the next gate: a higher salary, a better position.*" What do you say to a student like this?

Ollman: I'd say that's the beginning of wisdom. There are a lot of people who are unhappy, not satisfied. They recognize that the life they have been preparing for doesn't give them as much satisfaction as they'd hoped. What they don't understand is where the problem is coming from. It's like the fighter in the ring who is being clobbered but doesn't see where the punches are coming from. What's needed is some Marxist analysis of the system in which you're living to see where you fit and where the punches are coming from. You have to move beyond merely suffering and complaining. The Marxist step is a matter of contextualizing, trying to see where you, your job, where everything fits in the system given the kind of system it is. Also where it fits in history, how the system itself has developed and seems to be heading. It's not easy and it's something that you never

quite finished doing, but it's essential. Otherwise, all you do is continue to complain and be unhappy, taking it out on the wrong people: yourself, your family, your loved ones, your pets. None of them is responsible for what's happening to you.

CL: What is PPT and what has it taught you about students, perceptions of knowledge and power, and education?

Ollman: Earlier in my career, when I did give exams, I realized that students were giving back to me directly what I gave to them. One had the sense that they weren't thinking through the problems I was presenting. So, what I did once is give them a kind of nonsense lecture. They didn't know at the time that it was nonsense.

I told them I was going to introduce them to a new political theory, something called Proportional Political Theory (PPT). I asked them to listen carefully and that after talking to them for a while I was going to give them a little quiz on PPT. Then I spoke total nonsense about adding up Aristotle and Marx, subtracting Rousseau from Hegel. I created all sorts of new words and drew lines and mathematical symbols on the board. All of this, I told them, came from the great insight a German thinker had before World War I. It's always a German thinker, and it's always before World War I. And that insight was something like politics is the logic of the political mind. I repeated that three times, more seriously each time. Then I said that it was obvious from this insight that everything I had just shown them, the adding and subtracting, follows. I erased all the crap on the board and I asked them to write and answer the question, "What exactly is PPT and what do you think about it?"

Most of the students gave me back exactly what I had told them and thanked me for sharing this cutting-edge political theory with them. They explained how PPT helped them understand the world. It was very scary. So I said to them, "Hey, look, isn't it obvious that everything I said here is nonsense?" The students began to look uncomfortable. I said, "Look, if I had told you that Americans are gullible, everybody would have shaken their heads and mentally made an exception for themselves. But what I've done is shown you how gullible Americans are and that you are among them." I asked them that if they proved to be so gullible in this case, what makes them think they'd be any less gullible with other teachers? What if their heads were full of such junk from years of education? What if it wasn't just teachers pushing this junk, what if it was politicians, priests, rabbis and parents?

I said, "If I were you I'd be very scared right now." I told them that in the future I would not give them any more nonsense lectures. I said I might say things that sound like nonsense but that those would be things I believed in. I warned them that they wouldn't know what I said was nonsense unless they thought with me and against me and challenged the things I would say. I encouraged them to listen with their minds as well as their ears. Then we had a big discussion about whether what I did [the PPT lecture] was fair. I still give that lecture every now and then. I think the lecture has a good effect because I have noticed that students in those classes who got the lecture are more critical afterwards.

CL: Your Marxist board game, *Class Struggle*, didn't supplant *Monopoly*. But what if it had? Can you address the seeming contradiction of leftists investing in the Stock Market, of being able to "make a living" as a critical writer/teacher/activist?

Ollman: People were really worried that I would make money off that game as a Marxist. You can't imagine how many people were asking me about how much money I had made or what was I doing with all my money. That really bothered me. But as a matter of fact, we lost a lot of money. We sold over a quarter of a million copies, and it's a long story about how one loses money selling a quarter of a million copies of a board game, but I assure you it is possible. But, if one had made some money, it depends what they do with their money and do with their time.

Something people need to understand is that Marxist socialism is not like Christian socialism. Jesus said if you had two shirts you should give one away. Basically the Christian socialists agreed, living humble lives and sometimes-primitive existences, not allowing themselves vacations or eating out at restaurants. They want to share the situation of those who are least well off. They also think that that might trigger people's recognition that society needs to change. The Anarchists call this sort of action Propaganda of the Deed.

I don't think this is part of Marx's understanding of society. This doesn't mean that Marxists should live high off the hog. Marxists know that the society that we live in doesn't work too well, that we must change it. But we don't think you can change it as an individual, we must change it together. And that takes time. I have seen many comrades who fought capitalism seven days a week, without ever making space in their lives for fun, for vacations and relaxation, I have seen these people burn themselves out. They didn't remain in the struggle for very long. So I think Marxists deserve at least one day of rest a week, maybe two. And they need to take vacations, to go to films for pleasure sometimes, to live in spaces that are comfortable if they can afford to.

I do think there are limits to the kinds of pleasures they can enjoy given the amount of suffering around the world. This means giving what one can to certain radical causes and contributing in whatever ways one can to bringing about the revolution. It isn't living with a hair shirt. It isn't living without money. If I had made a little profit, I might have taken an extra vacation. But we didn't make any profits. That question came up a lot though; people were really worried that a Marxist might make some money off of a revolutionary board game.

CL: Talk, if you would, of any contradictions inherent in being a Marxist educator employed by a private university.

Ollman: It's a *huge* contradiction. There is an exchange going on here. The university gets something. The university gets a certain amount of legitimacy by being able to say, if they ever put it into words, that, "Look, we have some Marxists on our faculty." The university brags that they are representing all viewpoints, giving the students and their

parents the idea that they will be equally exposed to all points of view and that the university and education in general is not biased on behalf of the capitalist position. As we know that is not true, because there aren't many Marxists in universities. There are not many Marxists in lower grades of education either. If they do exist they don't really have the freedom to present Marxist interpretations. I know a number of Marxist high school and elementary teachers, but they operate with constraints. The university gets something and I am giving it to them by agreeing to work here.

At the same time, the university is giving something. They're giving me and other Marxists a chance to present Marxist interpretations of what's going on in the world to a fair number of students. We contribute in that way. There is a kind of unspoken rule in the universities that Marxist teachers have to be better teachers than the other teachers, to compensate for what the administrations sees as their extremist views. There is a sense among administrators and boards of trustees that they don't want Marxist educators to get too much power in universities. So Marxists seldom, if ever, get positions like chairman of the department, where they could have greater power. It's never quite clear how many are too many.

I have had direct experiences with this in the past. In 1978, I was offered the job as Chairman of the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. That would have been the first time that a Marxist had become the Chairman of a major Political Science department in an American university. The people who hired me were mostly liberal, some non-Marxist radicals. The roof fell down on our heads. The governor denounced the university in three different press conferences. No fewer than 15 members of the State Legislature called or visited the President of the University, threatening reprisals if I was appointed chairman. The board of trustees, led by J. Edgar Hoover's younger brother, put pressure on the President. Ten columnists of national newspapers got involved, all denouncing the university. The university eventually turned around, after giving me the job, and rejected me.

It wasn't that the university had hired a Marxist that angered these people, but that I would have had a piece of the action, some power and decision-making abilities. Obviously, I wasn't going to make the place into a Red base. I didn't have the power to do that. But as one businessman said, in a letter which we obtained because we got to look at the President's files during the court case, *we can't let a Marxist get a hold of a Government Department so close to the White House*. His image was of me putting a cannon on top of the department and aiming it twenty-miles away at the White House.

In the majority of American universities there are no Marxists. But even in the better universities where a few exist, there is a constant debate on how many is too many and where do you limit their powers. This is a debate that continues to the present day and has helped keep a lid on the number of critical voices that get heard. But there are enough of these critical voices to give the university an aura of being marketplaces of ideas. It gives them some legitimacy. And again, if all the Marxists chose to resign we would lose exactly that ability we have to reach those students we do.

CL: Could you address the power relationship, perceived or real, inside the classroom?

Ollman: I have a lot of sympathy for the ideas of people like Ira Shor and others who focus on changing the dynamic of classroom relations as a way of empowering students. I can see that I would be doing a lot of what he does in his classrooms if I were teaching certain subjects. Since my subjects are Socialism 101, Marxism 102, Dialectics 103, where there is a certain amount of material that has to be covered, I've basically sacrificed these strategies which my libertarian side approves of. I've gone along with more traditional classroom relationships as a way of permitting myself to present students in the limited amount of time available with the ideas, facts and questions with which otherwise they would never come into contact. So I make a compromise, because of the kind of topics I am teaching.

CL: In the wake of September 11th's tragedies, what should be the role of Marxist educators here in the USA? How do you think September 11th will impact the Left Academy?

Ollman: I already see how it is impacting the Left Academy. It is having a very divisive role. I think it's clear that everyone was shocked and deeply hurt by what happened. We have great sorrow and sympathy for the victims of the tragedies. And likewise, even people on the left have an enormous hostility to those who did this.

There are some people on the left who stop there. They have said that we must not go beyond this expression of sympathy for the victims and solidarity for other Americans and hostility to the perpetrators. We must not go beyond that. These people believe that any search for an understanding of why people might hate America is directly or indirectly justification for the actions of September 11th.

I reject this position completely. I think what Marxism is about is to avoid the temptation of taking a stand based solely on our emotions. Marxism encourages us not to moralize about good and evil and who is more good or more evil when you are confronted with many people capable of such actions. Marxism encourages us to contextualize what happened and who is involved; of how this happened in our world today and how it fits into history, into time. When you do that you can't avoid dealing with and trying to make sense of the role that the US has played in its foreign policy and also in global capitalism. One must look at that and figure out ways of dealing with it so that we can handle not only September 11th but all of the September 11ths which are coming up ahead.

You cannot allow yourself to simply stop thinking, which some of my comrades have done because they are so angry and want to confront what they see as Muslim fascism. Some of them are willing to make concessions to capitalism to confront this fascism, but I don't think such concessions are necessary. Right now we are bombing Afghanistan and undoubtedly killing civilians. We are making a bad situation much worse. We are probably killing a lot more innocent people than they killed -- if, indeed, it was bin Laden -- at the World Trade Center. Some people don't understand that it is always possible to make a bad situation worse. The bombing could swell their ranks with volunteers.

Aside from that, as leftists we cannot trust that this is the Bush administration's main aim. There are other aims, having to do with securing oil resources, keeping certain vassal states in line and spreading American influence, that leftists must see. One must view this as, in part, the application of military Keynesianism to forestall the mounting crisis of American capitalism. At the same time as we do not support the Taliban, we cannot support any criminal actions the US government takes.

CL: What does it say about an education system in a country where the President, *selected* by the Supreme Court, can denounce terrorists who "*hate what they see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government*"? What does it say about American education that Bush can say this with a straight face and have it swallowed whole, hook, line and sinker?

Ollman: He's a funny guy from start to finish. I'm still waiting for him to declare war on Florida. Miami is a haven for terrorists, it's the terror capital of the world. All these Latin American and Cuban terrorists go there to refresh, to retire, to conduct their business. If Bush wants to make a war on terror he should start by bombing Miami and arresting the governor of Florida, even if he is his brother. You know, we laugh when we hear that, but that really is the most logical thing to do coming from the general principles he's announced. So maybe we should all support the war on terror by urging Bush to attack Florida. And after he's successfully done away with terrorism in Miami, then we'll talk about the next step.

I want to dwell on the previous point that some people on the left and in mainstream American society are making about whether it is even legitimate to look for an explanation of why what happened on the 11th happened. This is a difficult task because so many hear an explanation as a justification for what happened, when in fact there is no justification for what happened. I think we have to see the people who are making this case the most, the ones who say any explanation is a justification, are doing so because they want to avoid explanations that point the finger at them. They have a responsibility to contributing to the conditions from which these kinds of things can and do spring. This being the case, it becomes a very radical question to ask, and you have to ask it again and again: *why do they hate us so?*

People must demand an answer. One ridiculous answer that has been given numerous times over the last few weeks is that "they" are jealous of our "freedom" and "democracy." That's a ridiculous answer and you can see how foolish it looks by comparing it to other answers, such as what Israel is doing, what the US and UN are doing to Iraq. Another ridiculous answer is that "these people" are just purely "evil."

CL: What might/should education look like in a future Communist society?

Ollman: In the transition to communism, what is sometimes called socialism, it is a matter of giving more of a role to the people who are directly involved in getting educated, that is, the students. Give them a greater role in determining what they do learn, the conditions in which they learn, the pedagogical techniques and practices.

The relationship between students and what we now call teachers should have much more give and take. Obviously, much smaller classes are necessary with people working together to find answers collectively. Socialist education should do away with hierarchy as much as possible, except those hierarchies that arise naturally out of someone being good at a particular something and knowing more than others about it.

We'd have to do away with the power of the administrators and completely do away with the role of a board of trustees. Boards of trustees represent economic power in our society and should have no place in deciding structural questions in educational policy. Democratic processes should be used in the classroom and at the administrative level.

Education should be much more a technique of people satisfying their curiosity collectively. Guidance will be given at all levels but none of this will take the forms of dictates and exams. A lot of questions will be asked but not in the forms of exams and nothing life or death will be riding on the answers given to these questions. Those are some general directions in which I think socialist education should move.

CL: In closing, who looks more like Karl Marx: you or Marshall Berman?

Ollman: (laughs) Maybe if we put our two faces together, the top of my head and the bottom of his. Then we might have a pretty good composite.