

Social Justice, Marxism, and Education in the Seiche Time

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From time to time in the St. Clair River, which runs rapidly along the eastern coast of Michigan connecting Lake Huron with Lake St. Clair, a combination of high winds and atmospheric pressure causes the river to split apart, leaving a wet marsh between an onrushing tide of water headed south, and a trailing wave of great power. The locals call this a seiche, and the long moments that pass as the broken water surges to connect with itself, usually accompanied by dark purple skies, they call the seiche time.

Let us point with one hand, and say that the nature of alienated work, in which people do not control the processes or products of their labor, in which they continuously enrich those who gain from the misery of most, in which freedom and creativity are ever more limited, and the crises of capital, ranging from war to stock collapses, overproduction, flagging rates of growth and profit, massive permanent unemployment (worldwide), and with the other hand, let us point and say that these are waves in seiche. Yet the history of the last century and a half does not suggest that there is much reason to believe that there will be a spontaneous, or even imposed mass understanding of these realities, nor mass action that has any significant permanence. Let us say that what people comprehend, and *how* they come to understand it, may be more important than people have traditionally noted.

What shall we say is the relationship of education, the struggle for the truth, and social justice? Who would be foolhardy enough to teach for sweeping social change in the early 21st century? If the choice is democracy and equality, or barbarism, how shall we think of the potential for a barbarous future that may be built into a violent upheaval? How might knowledge help eradicate the relationship of the Master and the Slave, so the practical process does not once again savage the Slave?

How is it that the struggle for what is true was brutalized by regimes that offered, initially, the greatest hopes for the greatest numbers in the last century? How is it that those hundreds of millions of people, after years of socialist training, learned so little, apparently, about how to discover the processes of truth, equality, and wisdom, that they could not see the obvious horrors of the future after they were betrayed? What might be

the relationship of what the *new* socialist people learned, and how they learned it?

What is the continuing appeal of the Volk-state? Is it possible, now, to break the marriage of nationalism and struggles for social justice? How might happiness and freedom meet in educational circles, not merely as products of the withdrawn mind, or reckless hedonism, but linked to the struggle for social solidarity--now? Perhaps more importantly, who would consider a revolution, or even the simple struggle for truth, in these best and worst of times--in the face of the mightiest emancipation of selfishness through science and technology in the history of the world?

Perhaps this is the seiche time, the murky purple space between powerful waves, moments of great upheaval and crisis, the time when what is most sensibly linked appears to be forever disconnected: people from their work and the products they make, their love, and from one another; theory from practice, language from life, the parts from the whole, and social justice from equality, democracy, care, and inclusion.

In this seiche time, schools hold a centripetal position in North American society. More than the military, more than the tax system or the welfare system, schools are the organizing point for most people's lives--in part because of the deindustrialized nature of North America, in part because of the absence or likelihood of serious struggle emanating soon from the industrial working class, the civilizing influence that won not only reforms like the shorter work week, social security, and formal rights of organizing, but which awakened culture and literacy in its wake.

One in four people in the US are directly connected to schools: school workers, students, parents. Many others are linked in other ways. School now is not merely school, but the point of origin for health care, food, and daytime shelter for many people. Constructing hope, false and real, schools are also huge markets (consider the bus purchases, architectural and building costs, salaries, and potential for corruption), as well as bases for technological instruction skill training. Schools warehouse children, serving as an important tax supported day care system for companies whose workers are on the job, in the US, more often than any other industrialized society, companies which slashed wages by nearly half, creating the dual income family, companies that require hours of work that cause the present day adults in a family to see their children an average of 20 hours less a week than they did in 1979. Fully imbued with the habits and problems of capital at work, schools suffer the same kind of petty thievery that the market generates. Dozens of small time criminals operate at the school house door, rigging bids, slipping sugar water into bottles falsely marked apple juice, taking kickbacks for adopting textbooks, stealing the cheerleaders charity funds and the football gate. More than six Detroit school principals have been charged with thievery in the last year. The past Superintendent of the California school system is a convicted criminal.

Schools, too, are battlegrounds in the combat for what is true, the issue being: Can we understand the world, and can we change it? If the dominant rival on the field conceals the battle-fronts, the other can reveal them, in work, knowledge, and love--and survive, now, by holding the schools to their contradictory claims: schools for democratic

citizenry, schools for capitalism. A base of solidarity, structured with an understanding of the collective value school workers of all kinds create, and the subsequent work place and community struggle to control that value, makes defense possible. One paradox of many in schools: the freedom to struggle for the methods to gain and test truth is often greatest in the richest and poorest schools--where youth have often learned that the construction of rational knowledge is a waste of time. But across the spectrum, school is the most free of working-class jobs. Teaching against the destruction of reason is possible in public schools in the US, at least during this seiche time.

The processes of school can, done well, go beyond demonstrating the well-springs of social change and justice, but involve people in its construction in daily life--or not. The counter-current to the democratic abolition of thought, hegemony, the theft of volition itself, is not solely to be found in the contradictory interests of production, but in the inexorable struggle for what is true, counter-discipline, intellectual and practical work, the social praxis of school, which must also be seen as a basis for the necessary envisioning of a better world and how to live in it--that can be the only propellant for people to fight for it. Clearly, it is not material conditions alone which challenge capital as the mother of inequality, injustice, but a profound understanding of how things are, how they change, and how we might live in better ways, in solidarity and creativity, that make social change possible, and lasting.

Our project is to note the seiche time as a temporal part of a transcendent process and to seek answers to the "what is to be done" and "why do it?" questions of those who take social justice as a life and death issue--in schools and out. How shall we overcome, the best English word we know that encompasses dialectics, is the question at hand.

And what shall we say social justice is? What might education and Marxism have to offer the notion? Historian E.H. Carr, in his lighthouse work, "What is History?," offers this: "It moves," meaning: Things change. In this process of matter in motion, Marx offers a method of analysis, and a related ethical stance; a similar beacon: From each according to their commitment to each according to their need. In education, where knowledge is both a material and theoretical product, the struggle to understand what is true, as things change, is or should be paramount--not simply a matter of the withdrawn and contemplative mind, but as a social construction forged within the seiche of an inequitable, segregated society--the case everywhere. This means, in part, that the struggle for what is true, gaining and testing knowledge, one of school's main goals, is a partisan struggle, in which the Masters, whose interest in work is secondary to an interest in domination, hold neither outlook, nor the fundamental experience to overcome injustice, to take up the task of the struggle for what is true.

Jean Anyon has said, to paraphrase, that to seek to change education without changing the social and economic conditions that surround school is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door. School may be one of many points where philosophy meets political economy, history; but school in North American, as a result in the practical shifts of the economy and parallel politics, is now where what people do counts--most. To be blunt: The middle school kids today are likely the next recruits in the next major

conflict. How they come to know, and what they know, as a relationship, will set up whose interests live when the seiche's waves meet one another, as they will, again--when the conflict is joined.

If it is the theory that sets up what is observed and learned, a relationship of the all and its parts, then the rivalry of irrationalism and reason in schools has an even deepened import. The analysis of things in flux, harmony and disharmony, the powerful unity-tension of the bent bow and arrow, suggests both a very clear understanding of concrete conditions, coupled with a requisite sense of the whole, the direction of things as they change, applied to society: knowing the importance of North on a compass. At issue is a simultaneous joining and splitting apart, *within the expanding whole*, interpenetration, rather than a template of unity-split-unity; relationships in tension as distinguished from brittle binaries that do not interpenetrate: overcoming rather than merely dividing. The complexities of change are humbling, particularly when they are taken up, not solely in the mind, but in a careful analysis of reason and practice, testing, the humbling work of the teacher.

There is power in a humbled outlook which understands the potential wisdom of those who suffer most from Mastery. Power also emanates from the humbling notion that every fact is a superficial fact, that more can always be known, and the issue at hand is to go beyond worshipping the gap between what is known and what is not yet known, but recognizing that there is always more to be realized, to struggle toward what is true using rational processes developed from thousands of years of work. No idea has occurred solely in the mind of anyone without first being anticipated in the work and social struggles of masses of people. Classroom humility, listening, in short, makes sense.

In school, the contest to link an outlook of the whole of the processes of society with a careful analysis of its many parts meets the powerful processes of capital: exploitation, alienation, reification, commodity fetishism--and the wise school worker can recognize this as all friendly turf, where sense can be made of all, where the maturing unity of all people through systems of production, exchange, and distribution can be discovered jointly with students, and undermine the apparent segmentation of the mass of humanity through nationalism, pluralism, racism, sexism--and the wars of class and caste. The wise educator sees the world and the classroom as his or her briar patch. Throw her in and let her work, teach. Offer tyranny, get the critique. Standardize the curricula; get Who wrote this, What are their interests, Who gains?

Teachers change people. It is the job. At issue: How? Toward what end? How can "Know thyself" be connected to "Know yourself in relation to others, and how they relate to work, rationalism, and common concern"? Why should this matter? What might we do?

Teaching upstream offers limitless counter-moves. In economics, dominance offers scarcity, competition, and choice; and gets from the critical educator questions about labor, solidarity, and exploitation. In political science, offer the core democratic values; get interrogations of the tyranny of the work-place and the simile of politicians as faces

on dollars. In science, offer test scores; and get questions about the fascist history of the SAT. In history, offer triumph; get inquiries about standpoint. Eliminate philosophy, sociology, drama, psychology, anthropology; find them swept quietly into the entire curriculum by the patient school worker who understands that all terrain is home terrain. Declare the terrain as secure property, discover too late the Tunnels of Cu Chi. Defame happiness and sensuality with abstinence, measurement and consumption; well, who can halt the gaze of a middle schooler, much more sacred than profane? Passion still slides beneath the construction of indifference. Troll the private, get the social. Privatize reason; get social criticism. Locate happiness anywhere but in authentic caring inclusive social relations; have it noticed. Offer national unity, get international commonality. The promise of hope, to struggle for what is true in schools, offers a wide plane for educators to play upon. Hope, the reason most people send their kids to school, can be demonstrated in the rational classroom; not dangled as a promise to move up in a society where moving up is most unlikely, but to show the ethics and the ontology of moving up as one.

Schools, whose claim is to be centers for gaining and testing knowledge, thus are sites where it may be possible to go beyond the double errors of past struggles for justice: the belief that equality will first rise from abundance, not commitment, and the position that the analysis of capital's crises (on which it thrives) is the key to social change; when indeed it appears that the leap into social change comes not from crises or their analysis, but from a concurrent leap in consciousness that must (also, not instead of) be concerned not only with what people learn, but how they come to learn it, in pedagogy, affect, and practice.

Schools have been centers of working class struggle in this period: the 1999 Detroit Teachers Wildcat (*Cultural Logic* Vol. 2, No. 2) that aimed at "Books! Supplies! Lower Class Size!"; the massive Ontario, Canada teachers' strike, the largest job action of the decade in North America, that challenged a repressive Taylorist curriculum; the Oakland California student walkout of 2000 ("Schools! Not Jails!"), and the burgeoning resistance to high-stakes exams, growing inequality, segregation, and, indeed, the alienating and indifferent processes of capital itself--all these underline the potential to link theory and practice in schools in meaningful ways that point to larger issues, bigger actions.

This special issue of *Cultural Logic* is offered as an effort to study the reality of the seiche, and the gap that appears before us today, to interrogate the appearances of a disjointed world, in the context of our knowledge of change, with a special emphasis on schools and education. The question of social consciousness, the prerequisite for the solidarity that can make social change possible, is imbued with every educational act.