

## **Contributions to a Marxist Critical Pedagogy: Revisiting Marx's Humanism**

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### **Abstract**

*In this essay Malott makes a case for a Marxist-informed critical pedagogy situating Marx's approach to Hegelian dialectics at the center. After reviewing Marx's critique of Hegel in his 1844 manuscripts, Malott outlines Marx's shifting conception of the falling rate of profit reflecting his developing understanding of what the negation of the negation means under capitalism. Finally, Malott argues throughout the essay that critical pedagogy can offer a powerful tool to help students and teachers situate their own experiences in this larger social, historical context fostering self-empowerment and collective critical agency. In other words, Malott argues that in order to negate ourselves as alienated labor, we need to be able to see ourselves as such, and then see ourselves as the negation of ourselves as such. Throughout the essay Malott stresses the point that this is the historical process of becoming, which, for Freire, is a process that should be conceived and rigorously lived, as a never-ending process, individually, and collectively. The nature of existence here is conceptualized as perpetual movement. The question is, in what direction shall this movement proceed? Bringing these questions to the surface and challenging students and teachers to think deeply and seriously about what it means to answer them is the task of critical pedagogy.*

**Key words:** Marx, Hegel, Critical Pedagogy, History

According to the fundamentalism of capitalist propaganda, declining educational attainment is the result of individual deficiencies, such as poor teaching and delinquent learners. This message, bombarded on an increasingly emasculated public a

billion times over, does not let up even when its worldview has become common sense and resistance is minimized. This process of indoctrination is surely a sophisticated form of ideological warfare because the purpose is to manufacture consent for ramping up exploitation, redundancy and immiseration in general (Malott, Hill, Banfield, 2013) thereby progressively forcing hegemony upon working people, and subsequently building a case to immiserate by further defunding public services handing them over to for-profit venture capitalists. Apparently hegemony is experiencing some notable achievements as roughly eighty percent of Americans are at or near the poverty line and while there are numerous small, relatively isolated social movements within the U.S. (Malott & Agostinone-Wilson, 2013), we are not exactly living in an era of mass revolutionary movement. The good news is that the story is somewhat different outside of the U.S. For example, the movements against austerity and for socialism in such places as England (Canaan, Hill, & Maisuria, 2013), Turkey (Inal & Öztürk, 2013), Ireland (O'Flynn, Power, McCabe & Silke, 2013), and Greece (Vatikiotis & Nikolakaki, 2013) are notable. Furthermore, the push for socialism in Venezuela offers the world an electoral approach for advancing a country toward socialism and social justice (Cole & McLaren, 2013). Despite the countless examples of critical agency found throughout the world, the challenges humanity faces are daunting. Again, perhaps one of the greatest challenges we face is the relentless system of indoctrination. For example, in much of the world, and in the U.S. specifically, low-test scores are given as the cause explaining the astronomical rise in poverty and human suffering—at least when they are acknowledged. This is a clever piece of manipulation especially since we know the opposite is true. That is, growing poverty leads to low educational attainment, not the other way around (Marsh, 2011).

Offering a far more convincing account of poverty, István Mészáros (2010; 2011), writing and speaking since the nineteen sixties, argues that the current crisis, unlike previous crises marked by distinct periods of growth and recovery, such as the

Great Depression followed by the post-WWII boom era, is not *cyclical*, but *systemic*, and thus far more serious and permanent, ultimately threatening the survivability of humanity and the natural ecosystems more generally. Consequently, to slow down growing rebellions and the violent destruction of the capitalist system, even though evidence seems to point to the conclusion that no efforts can reverse capital's current "irreversible descending phase" (Mészáros, 2011, p. 19), the elite architects of capital have, nevertheless, desperately increased state-intervention (i.e. neo-Keynesian and Neoliberal) in the form of corporate bailouts, tax breaks, militarization, and incarceration, as well as escalated social control mechanisms through relentless propaganda campaigns and advertisements in the media, military, and in education.

For example, given the logic of capital whose first presupposition is that capitalism makes freedom and democracy possible, and without it, freedom and democracy can never exist (even in the face of permanent crisis and impending doom), it follows that poverty is caused not by heightened levels of exploitation, or the loss of jobs triggered by the self-destructiveness of competitive capitalism itself, etc., but by bad life decisions on the part of the poor. Again, this logic exists in a context with skyrocketing levels of global inequality, nearly all of humanity currently live at or near the poverty line, while the capitalist class is more wealthy than ever. The propaganda explaining away poverty as the fault of the poor is highly effective because it is based on the grotesque distortion of partial truths. That is, in a society where work tends not to be satisfying, but rather a means to satisfy ones basic needs through the consumption of the products of other peoples' labor, and where jobs are increasingly scarce, especially jobs that pay a living wage and include a degree of autonomy, dissatisfaction and alienation abound. Acting out in undirected bouts of frustration is widely common, but surely has no real direct causal relationship to poverty rates. But by connecting "bad choices" to poverty, through a decades-long propaganda campaign, has made the false correlation between *bad choices* and poverty *common sense*.

Consider, one would be extremely hard pressed to find someone that does not know someone, or at least has heard of someone, who is struggling financially because of what are perceived to be *bad life choices*, such as dropping out of school; having too many children at too young an age; over-spending beyond ones means; making unwise decisions regarding ones romantic life; being an insubordinate employee and getting fired; abusing drugs and alcohol; etc. Again, with a psychologized and decontextualized dominant ideology in place, it is not hard to convince working people to view poverty as the product of irresponsible behavior rather than a consequence of the historical development of capital itself propelled by its internal logic and mediated by the agency of antagonistically-related social classes. We therefore need a critical pedagogy that can help us see the less apparent processes at work below the surface of poverty (and below the surface of the sickening wealth of the capitalist class).

For example, below the surface appearance of the slew of “bad choices” (and bad luck) that engulf the poor is an economic system that requires a growing portion of potential workers to be unemployed. It is a system collapsing under its own weight and own contradictions. Consequently, we can be sure that while some of those who wind up at the bottom had made bad choices in life, the vast majority of humanity relegated to the status of unusable commodity cannot have anything to do with the personal choices of the worlds’ peoples. The way the working classes are divided against each other, we can be sure that those who wind up on the bottom first tend to have not been born with the correct sex, home language, national origin, or ethnicity. The subsequent raced and gendered competition between workers for a limited number of shrinking jobs drives down wages and destroys working class pride and unity.

In a capitalist economy dominated by an increasingly savage capitalist class it is certain that there will be losers amongst those forced to sell their labor capacity for a wage—this has been true in

nearly every stage of its historic development. If the competition between potential workers can be artificially escalated, then wages can be further driven down, and the rate of exploitation can be increased. As we will see below, this has been a common way that capitalists have countered capital's tendency toward the falling rate of profit, which is ironically driven by the competition between capitalists for market share, and ultimately, for survival. However, this competition is destroying the natural environment as well as the basis of social life on the planet. This is, of course, one of the central contradictions of capital that compel it toward its own negation.

Compounding this issue, as mentioned above, is the alienating nature of capital, which generates often self-destructive cultures of resistance that, according to the absurd logic of capital, are evidence of the bad life choices that cause poverty. At their best though, cultures of resistance transform into things like the labor movement, the Industrial Workers of the World, the American Indian Movement, the Zapatistas, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the Socialist Workers Party, The Party for Socialism and Liberation, the Cuban Revolution, the Bolivarian Revolution and the push for 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism in Venezuela and Latin America more generally. This essay seeks to contribute to such a purpose of education—an education that can provide students with the cognitive tools to detect what is at work below surface appearances, which, of course, always includes a move toward action against material conditions and their relational causes. The urgency of this transformative action is escalating as the cyclical nature of capital's crises has entered an “epochal” (Mészáros, 2010) era where crisis is no longer able to be overcome as was the case in earlier periods of its historical development.

Consequently, as the common sense logic of mainstream society is mediated by the illogic of capital, reflecting the hyper-individualized ideology of neoliberalism, a robust alternative educational vision is needed. It is therefore my intention to contribute to a critical pedagogy capable of challenging the logic of

capital that includes not only explaining declining educational attainment as the product of culturally inappropriate instruction; as the result of growing poverty; and as the result of capital's shifting needs in terms of the training and use of human capital; but a combination of all of the above, which points to a much deeper understanding of the social totality. That is, because the larger forces that make up society, and also mediate society, tend to be disguised and distorted in educational psychology, rendering education as a counter-hegemonic tool less and less possible, the further development of critical pedagogy in general, and Marxist educational theory and practice in particular, remains highly relevant.

In this essay I make a case for a Marxist-informed critical pedagogy situating Marx's approach to Hegelian dialectics at the center. I therefore begin with a brief outline of Marx's take on Hegel's dialectics. Because of the aforementioned current systemic crisis of capital, I then look to Marx's shifting conception of the falling rate of profit (which reflects his developing understanding of how contradictions operate within capitalism). I argue that this analysis reflects Marx's developing understanding of what the negation of the negation means under capitalism. Due to the role the U.S. continues to play as the center of global capitalism, these discussions focus on the United States. As argued below, we might therefore note, drawing on Hegelian dialectics that the hegemonic logic of capital described above serves the purpose of countering the tendency of capital's contradictions from leading to change. Finally, I argue throughout the essay that critical pedagogy can offer a powerful tool to help students and teachers situate their own experiences in this larger social, historical context fostering self-empowerment and collective critical agency. In other words, in order to negate ourselves as alienated labor, we need to be able to see ourselves as such, and then see ourselves as the negation of ourselves as such. For Marx, as we will see below, this is the historical process of becoming, which, for Freire, is a process that should be conceived and rigorously lived, as a never-ending process, individually, and

collectively. The nature of existence here is conceptualized as perpetual movement. The question is, in what direction shall this movement proceed? Bringing these questions to the surface and challenging students and teachers to think deeply and seriously about what it means to answer them is the task of critical pedagogy.

### *Revisiting Hegelian Dialectics*

The North American turn away Marxist analysis in educational theory following the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall and the advent of postmodern theory would lead critical pedagogy down the road of liberalism—a road dominated by identity politics and a Weberian conception of social class (McLaren, 2005). Building a new approach to Marxist educational theory for the twenty-first century in North America and beyond Peter McLaren has transcended the crude economic determinism and limited understanding of Marx within North American education circles prevalent in the 1970s. In the process of developing this groundbreaking critical pedagogy McLaren has introduced the critical pedagogy community to cutting-edge Marxist philosophers such as Peter Hudis (2012), who has gone to great lengths to flesh out and celebrate Marx's concept of the alternative to capitalism and its connection to Hegelian dialectics, which could not be more relevant to a Marxist critical pedagogy.

Hudis (2012) argues that traditional Marxism is based on the false assumption that Marx rejected Hegel's dialectics for its idealism. Rather, Hudis (2012) demonstrates that Marx does not in fact reject Hegel's dialectics, but revises it. In so doing Marx (1844/1988) argues that "there is a double error in Hegel" (p. 147). The first error, for Marx (1844/1988), is that while Hegel understood the essence of man/woman as the outcome of his/her own labor, he wrongly took consciousness, rather than material conditions, as absolute reality. Making this point Marx (1844/1988) notes:

...Wealth, state-power, etc. are understood by Hegel as entities estranged from the *human* being, this only happens in their form as thoughts...They are thought-entities, and therefore an estrangement of *pure* i.e., abstract, philosophical thinking...The whole *history of the alienation-process* and the whole *process of the retraction* of the alienation is therefore nothing but the *history of the production* of abstract (i.e. absolute) thought—of logical, speculative thought. (p. 147)

Hudis (2012) therefore summarizes Marx's critique of Hegel here as involving the inversion of what Marx calls the subject and object. Correcting this Marx argues that it is not the opposition between consciousness and self-consciousness that needs to be overcome, but the opposition between "abstract thinking and sensuous reality" (p. 148). For Hegel then "the appropriation of man's essential powers, which have become objects—indeed alien objects—is thus in the *first place* only an *appropriation* occurring in *consciousness*, in *pure thought*—i.e. in *abstraction*: it is the appropriation of these objects as *thoughts* and *movements of thought*" (Marx, 1844/1988, p. 148). Hudis (2012) points out how these sections of his 1844 *Manuscripts* have been used to justify the position that Marx flipped Hegel right side up thereby placing him back on Earth on his feet and rejecting his core philosophy in the process. However, challenging this assumption, Hudis (2012) is struck how Marx's next few passages have been largely missed or ignored, even by self-proclaimed Marxists, where he reaffirms the usefulness and genius within Hegel's dialectics:

But inasmuch as it keeps steadily in view man's *estrangement*, even though man appears only in the shape of mind, there lie concealed in it *all* the elements of criticism, already *prepared* and *elaborated* in a manner often rising far above the Hegelian standpoint...The outstanding thing in Hegel...is...the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle. (pp. 148-149)

Clearly, Marx is not breaking from Hegel here. As stated above, rather than abandoning Hegel, Marx is re-contextualizing his



dialectics, his negation of the negation. As an example it would be best to turn momentarily to a sizable excerpt from Hegel (1812/1993) himself. In the following quote we find the philosophical kernels Marx both critiqued and praised:

...The absolute itself appears only as the negation of all predicates and as the void. But since equally it must be pronounced as the position of all predicates, it appears as the most formal contradiction...The absolute is not merely being, nor even essence...The identity of the absolute is thus the absolute identity, since each of its parts is itself the whole, or each determinateness is the totality, that is, determinateness as such has become an utterly transparent illusory being, a difference which has vanished in its positedness. Essence, existence, the world-in-itself, whole, parts, force—these reflected determinations appear to ordinary thinking as a true being which is valid in and for itself; but the absolute as against them is the ground in which they have been engulfed...The absolute does not determine itself; for determination is a form difference which, in the first instance, counts as such...In the absolute itself is no becoming, for it is not being...It is the beyond of the manifold differences and determinations and their movement, a beyond which *lies at the back of the absolute*; consequently, though it accepts them, it also destroys them; it is thus the *negative exposition* of the absolute...The logical movement of the sphere of *being and essence*, the content of which has not yet been raked together from outside as something given and contingent, or submerged in the abyss of the absolute by a reflection alien to that content...But at the same time this exposition has itself a *positive* side; for in so far as in it the finite fall to the ground, it demonstrates that its nature is to be connected with the absolute, or to contain the absolute within itself... (pp. 530-533)

Again, the dialectical movement expressed here, taken from the first chapter (The Absolute) of the final section (Actuality) of *Logic*, constitutes a good portion of the brilliance Marx saw within Hegel's work. Hegel is pointing to what would be interpreted by Marx to be a structurally determined movement toward the end of capital, and simultaneously, toward the emergence of something new,

something absolutely distinct from *what is*. Significantly elaborating on these essential contributions he saw within Hegel, Marx (1844/1988) continues:

Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of *labor* and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man’s *own labor*...Hegel’s standpoint is that of modern political economy. He grasps *labor* as the *essence* of man—as man’s essence in the act of proving itself: he sees only the positive, not the negative side of labor. Labor is man’s *coming-to-be for himself* within *alienation*, or as *alienated* man. The only labor which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental* labor...For Hegel the *essence of man—man*—equals *self-consciousness*. All estrangement of the human essence is therefore *nothing but estrangement of self-consciousness*. The estrangement of self-consciousness is not regarded as an *expression of the real* estrangement of the human being—its expression reflected in the realm of knowledge and thought. Instead, the *real* estrangement—that which appears real—is from its *innermost*, hidden nature (a nature only brought to light by philosophy) nothing but the *manifestation* of the estrangement of the real essence of man, of *self-consciousness*...The man who takes hold of his essential being is *merely* the self-consciousness which takes hold of objective essences. Return of the object into the self is therefore the re-appropriation of the object. (pp. 149-151)

Again, even within his affirmation of Hegel Marx’s correction can be found in all of its rigor and vitality: essence is more than consciousness and thus the transcendence of estrangement is more than just a mental act. As we will see this is fundamental for correcting a growing tendency in critical pedagogy that reduces liberation to the self-reflective process of acquiring a critical consciousness as an end in itself (rather than a prerequisite for fostering a collective approach and targeting a more material or concrete object of intervention). At the same time, as suggested above, Marx is not arguing for a form of *materialism over idealism*,

but for a combination of them both, what he calls *humanism* or *naturalism*. Consider:

Here we see how consistent naturalism or humanism distinguishes itself both from idealism and materialism, constituting at the same time the unifying truth of both. We see also how only naturalism is capable of comprehending the act of world history. (Marx 1844/1988, p. 154)

For Marx (1844/1988) naturalism, as opposed to the abstractness of idealism, is grounded in the fact that humans are sensuous beings that are *in* and *of* the natural, concrete world, and thus endowed with “natural powers of life” (p. 154) that compel and drive us. The species’ natural, biological endowments simultaneously enable and limit the human life as it engages objects external to it—“objects of his *need*—essential *objects*, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers” (Marx, 1844/1988, p. 154). Using hunger as an example Marx notes that, “*hunger* is a natural *need*; it therefore needs a *nature* outside itself, an *object* outside itself, in order to satisfy itself, to be stilled” (Marx, 1844/1988, p. 154). Contrasting this concreteness to what we might take as the abstractness of absolute knowledge read, in the most progressive sense, as self-consciousness, which displaces the object for the idea of the object, Marx (1844/1988) notes that “a being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a *natural* being, and plays no part in the system of nature” (pp. 154-155). Transitioning to the uniqueness of human history Marx (1844/1988) makes the point that because men and women are objective and sensuous beings, they suffer, and because humans feel what they suffer, they are *passionate* beings. Consequently, for Marx (1844/1988), “passion is the essential force of man energetically bent on its object” (p. 155).

Making this point even more concrete are remarks made by Marx’s eldest daughter, Eleanor Marx Aveling (1896/2014), in the Introduction to a series of articles on Revolution and Counter-Revolution in 1848 Germany. Ironically, these unsuccessful

peasant rebellions (i.e. the counter-revolution) would lead to Marx's expulsion from Germany and then France, and ultimately lead to him to find refuge in London. To best understand his work the reader would therefore benefit from knowing the details of "the conditions under which [he] was working" (Marx Aveling 1896/2014, p. 5). When Marx speaks of suffering and passion, despite his *middle-class* background, he is speaking from experience.

Being a refugee, for Marx, like millions of refugees, is not an experience experienced alone. First, refugees, like immigrants more generally, rarely emerge as individuals, but are born of historic changes as societies develop new modes of production, for example. Consequently, refugees tend to be part of a community of refugees. Many of these people are parents. Marx was a husband and a parent. Consequently, when he found refuge in London, and, like thousands of German refugees in London, was "more or less destitute" and thus experienced "years of horrible poverty" and "bitter suffering" (Marx Aveling 1896/2014, p. 5), he did so from the perspective of a parent who lost a number of children along the way. Describing one of these horrific and deeply saddening losses experienced by the Marx family Eleanor (1896/2014) quotes from her mothers' notes, "three days...the poor child wrestled with death. She suffered so...Her little dead body lay in the small back room...We wept for the little angel resting near us, cold and dead. The death of the dear child came in the time of our bitterest poverty. Our German friends could not help us..." (p. 6). As a result, when Marx speaks of suffering and passion, it is a knowledge gained not just from rigorous study and critique, however important and indispensable they are, but it also comes from his lived, *sensuous* experience.

Showing her readers an image of Marx as the passionate father toiling away on some of the world's most important manuscripts Eleanor (1896/2014) writes, "in that 'front room' in Dean Street, the children playing about him, Marx worked. I have heard tell how the children would pile up chairs behind him to represent a couch, to

which he was harnessed as horse, and would ‘whip him up’ even as he sat at his desk writing” (pp. 6-7). Supporting this sentiment, that Marx was not *just* a fiery writer and revolutionary, but a deeply caring and engaged father, Jonathan Sperber (2013), in his acclaimed biography, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life*, argues that, “the desolate moods that followed his children’s death bespoke a paternal love that was anything but distant. Marx profoundly enjoyed the presence of children” (p. 469). Sperber (2013) cites Wilhelm Liebknecht, regarding his knowledge of Marx, the playful father, who spent much time with him at his home, “one must have seen Marx with his children to obtain a complete notion of the depths of sentiment and the childlike nature of this hero of *Wissenschaft*. In his free minutes, or while strolling, he brought them along, played the wildest and most lively games with them—in short he was a child among children” (p. 469). From these works and reflections on Marx we get a picture of Karl as a passionate father and lover of life, someone who deeply understood the human condition and the great joy that can be found within living. In other words, we might play with Marx’s own words and note that he was a person concretely connected to *the system of nature*.

Being able to begin to see the deep connections between Marx the writer and Marx the human being are invaluable. In this context his work finds remarkable vitality and relevance. For example, connecting his discussions on the passion and sensuousness of the human being, as a counter to Hegel’s abstractness, to his developing humanism, is insightful. That is, Marx (1844/1988) was clear that the human is not merely a natural being, but a *human* natural being and therefore “a being for himself,” that is, a “species being who has to confirm and manifest himself as such both in his being and in his knowing” (p. 155). Uniting being and knowing here Marx brings us back to his previous statement that humanism is a combination of idealism and materialism. In other words, humans not only require knowledge of self, but the material conditions necessary for the collective human society to reach its natural, human potential, which Hegel described as *becoming*. But as we will see below, becoming, for Hegel, was about realizing an

abstract, divine essence, and was therefore limited to the realm of pure thought. Bringing the reader back to his other point that humanism is the basis for history Marx (1844/1988) comments:

...*Human* objects are not natural objects as they immediately present themselves, and neither is *human sense* as it immediately *is*—as it is objectively—*human* sensibility, human objectivity. Neither nature objectively nor nature subjectively is directly given in a form adequate to the human being. And as everything natural has to have its beginning, man too has his act of coming-to-be—history—which, however, is for him a known history, and hence as an act of coming-to-be it is a conscious self-transcending act of coming-to-be. History is the true natural history of man. (pp. 155-156)

We might again remind ourselves that what Marx is capturing here is the culmination of his correction of Hegel's dialectical movement. The ontological and epistemological perspective here is the heart of Freire's critical pedagogy, and continues to be the focus of the critical pedagogy tradition, especially the Marxist approach developed by Peter McLaren, Dave Hill, Glenn Rikowski, Paula Allman, Antonia Darder, Rich Gibson, and others. Ontologically, the world is conceived of as a process and continuously in motion. It is a concrete world driven by concrete human needs—needs that transform and develop by humans as they make and remake their world. The ability or inability of humanity being a part of this process determines, to a large extent, the level of self-actualization and "coming-to-be" in a given mode of production and historical era. Epistemologically, Marx helps us here direct the knowledge production process through education. That is, the purpose of a critical education is to overcome the ideological and material obstacles of "coming-to-be." Marx offers a concrete, historical context to understand this uniquely human process.

However, while Marx's critique and correction are growing in complexity and clarity, his challenge to Hegel is not yet complete. That is, by reducing the sensuous world to pure thought, Hegel

winds up reaffirming estrangement rather than transcending it as his negation of the negation implies (see below). Making this point Marx (1844/1988) accuses Hegel's *positive* (i.e. a new beginning), that exists within the negative (i.e. the world as it exists), as being a "false positive" because it "pretends to be *at home in his other-being as such*" (p. 158). Expressing Hegel's logic here in its most general terms, Marx (1844/1988) describes it in the following way, "reason is at home in unreason as unreason" (p. 158). As an example Marx (1844/1988) refers to "the man who has recognized that he is leading an alienated life in politics, law, etc., is leading his true life in this alienated life as such" (p. 158). Consequently, Marx (1844/1988) delivers a heavy blow to Hegel: "with him the negation of the negation is the confirmation of the pseudo-essence, or of the self-estranged essence in its denial; or it is the denial of this pseudo-essence as an objective being dwelling outside man and independent of him, and its transformation into the subject" (p. 159).

Offering a more concrete contextualization or interpretation of Hegel's negation of the negation Marx (1844/1988) describes the process as "the *appropriation* of the objective essence through the annulment of its estrangement" (p. 161). As an example Marx (1844/1988) discusses the annulment of God and private property as "the advent of theoretic humanism" (i.e. atheism) and "the justification of real human life as man's possession and thus the advent of practical humanism" (i.e. communism) (p. 161). Drawing a clear distinction between communism and atheism and Hegel's end point, Absolute Knowledge, Marx (1844/1988) states that they are "no abstraction...[and no] primitive simplicity...On the contrary, they are but the first real coming-to-be, the realization become real for man, of man's essence—of the essence of man as something real" (p. 161). Making this point in his important book, *Marx and Education* (2005), Robin Small notes that while Marx agreed with Feuerbach that religion works to alienate humanity from itself by permanently displacing itself in an abstract God, atheism is limited by the fact that it is a theoretical position:

Atheism...overcomes alienation with the realm of thought, but it does not overcome the alienation of thought itself—that is, the alienation of thought from the other aspects of human life. Atheism remains a theoretical standpoint, with all the drawbacks that this implies: abstractness, unreality and irrelevance to the practical concerns of humanity. Still needed is the reunification of the theoretical and the practical which only revolutionary activity can accomplish. (Small, 2005, p. 26)

The message here, however, is not to conveniently replace atheism with communism, as many religious Marxists have done. The point, however, is that the critique of ideology or discourse, religious or otherwise, is severely limited without a concrete mass movement aimed at the real, objective conditions of peoples' lives and the very relations of production that underlie this material basis of bourgeois society. As previously discussed, this is the ultimate goal of a Marxist critical pedagogy. That is, to use education as a vehicle where students can begin self-reflecting on their internalized "reason as unreason" that comprises the central epistemology of the dominant ideology. Critical pedagogy, at its best, challenges students to become conscious of their own consciousness as part of the process of self-transformation. For example, coming to know ones position within capitalism as a wealth-generating commodity, and thus as alienated existence, can lead to self-consciousness. But again, Marx pushes us beyond the estrangement of thought alone and challenges us to consider the concrete objectivity of the source of estrangement situated in the context of the social nature of human existence (i.e. contrary to the romantic, mythology of bourgeois ideology, the development of productive forces is always and unavoidably social)—in this case capitalism itself—and thus the need for a concrete, collective, social movement to transcend the labor-capital relationship that prevents the development of the productive forces in a direction toward general *coming-to-be*.

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Peter McLaren has taken a version of this Marxist Humanism as a central influence in his own approach to critical pedagogy. As



discussed above, central to this approach is Marx's interpretation or correction of Hegel's concept of the negation of the negation, which, for Marx, implies the complete negation or transcendence of a real, concrete social system, such as feudalism or capitalism, and the simultaneous emergence and movement toward a new basis of human sociability, such as communism. Breaking from utopian socialism Marx was specifically interested in *how*, *when*, *why*, and by *whom*, the *what is* can develop into the *what can be*. Following Peter Hudis here, McLaren also draws on the work of Raya Dunayevskaya, a Marxist theoretician, philosopher and revolutionary who further developed Marx's Hegelian dialectics in the 1950s after breaking from Stalinism and then Trotskyism (Hudis and Anderson, 2002). In collaboration with the Trinidadian revolutionary, C.L.R. James, and others, Dunayevskaya continued the development of Marx's humanism. In the 1950s, Dunayevskaya, frustrated with what she felt was the vulgar simplicity of Soviet Communism, justifying state-sanctioned exploitation and violence, she revisited the relationship between Hegel and Marx. In the process she read Hegel with new eyes, seeing, as Marx did, the revolutionary potential within the negation of the negation. Summarizing what they argue was Dunayevskaya's major contribution to Hegelian Marxism Hudis and Anderson (2002) note that it:

...centers on what many other Marxists have ignored or rejected—Hegel's concept of *absolute* negativity. In Hegel, absolute negativity signifies not only the negation of external obstacles, but also the negation of the earlier negation. The power of negativity gets turned back upon the self, upon the internal as well as external barriers to self-movement. Such a negation of the negation is no mere nullity, for the positive is contained in the negative, which is the path to a new beginning. (p. xviii)

Hegel's concept of the force that generates the movement that Hudis and Anderson refer to here is contradiction—it is contradiction that gives purpose and motivation to the concept of critical pedagogy—and the contradiction of the promise of bourgeois ideology that capitalism is the system that guarantees

freedom and equality (and thus *becoming*), but can only ever promise general poverty, exploitation, and permanent alienation, is one of the primary insights cultural hegemony is designed to obscure and distort, as highlighted in the opening paragraphs of this essay. Again, the contradiction referred to by Hegel is contradictory existence, which Marx recontextualizes within the sensuousness of the suffering human. For example, the determinations and thus alienation of capital create a socialist potential within capitalism. Capitalism therefore embodies its own negation, and is thus contradictory.

As alluded to above, Mészáros (2011) warns of the destructive dangers capital's structurally-determined, inner contradictions are engendering. Again, economic crisis is no longer cyclical—it is permanent. What is more, no intervening measures, such as imposing and exporting its systemic contradictions through war and imperialism, can resolve or reverse capital's self-destruction (this theme will be further explored below in the section on the Falling Rate of Profit). Troubling, for both Marx and Mészáros (2011), is not the decline of capital, but that it is taking humanity and the larger system of nature down with it. Mészáros (2011) notes that it was Marx, in the mid nineteenth century, who first foresaw this concretely or objectively, rejecting Hegel's tendency to mystify or make abstract (as noted above).

The parts of the violently and destructively descending capitalist whole also contain the same contradictions—individual particularities and the universal. The wageworker in general, living in and out of various degrees of exploitation and alienation, embodies his or her own negation as such, and thus the potential to become his or her own Other, already embodied within the laboring classes. This is a reconceptualization of Hegel's positive contained within the negative. However, in the case of this potential positive within absolute negativity is not a guaranteed and predetermined product of the negation of the negation. We might therefore say that the apocalyptic end of capitalism does not guarantee democratic socialism, it might lead to new fascist mass

genocides and consensual enslavement as the indoctrinated masses desperately look to an authoritarian leader for a false sense of security as the crises of capital deepen. Critical pedagogy, from a Freirean tradition, is therefore a call to action to take a moral stance and play a purposive role in pushing against the negative potential and pushing for the positive, democratic, anti-racist, womanist socialist alternative. For example, summarizing Freire's revolutionary, solidarity-based approach to class struggle Antonia Darder (2009) comments:

...Freire's work was unabashedly grounded in Marxist-Socialist thought...[F]or Freire, the struggle against economic domination could not be waged effectively without a humanizing praxis that could both engage the complex phenomena of class struggle and effectively foster the conditions for critical social agency among the masses...Although he openly acknowledged the existence of racism, he was reticent to abandon the notion of class struggle...He insisted that the struggle against oppression was a human struggle in which we had to build solidarity across our differences, if we were to change a world engulfed by capitalism. (pp. 570-571)

Darder's (2009) insights here could not be more important situated in the context of a larger critical pedagogy community that has disconnected (and abandoned) a Marxian class analysis from the focus on race, gender, and identity. Darder (2009) challenges others in critical pedagogy to reconsider the importance of Marx taking note of the heightened global proliferation of capitalism. Mészáros's (2011) work on the irreversible downward spiral of the capitalist mode of production outlined above provides additional support to Darder's (2009) analysis. Making her point absolutely clear, Darder (2009) emphasizes the purpose of critical pedagogy—to subvert domination—and without an adequate theory of the historical development of capitalism and all its contradictions and determinations, a well-thought out critical pedagogy pointing to the *positive* within the *negative*, is an unlikely outcome. Offering a similar example of a Freirean approach to critical pedagogy, Henry Giroux (2013) notes that it, “unlike

dominant modes of teaching, insists that one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world” (p. xiv). McLaren (2005) articulates this purpose of critical pedagogy, yet, like Darder (2009), more concretely situated within the Marxist Humanist tradition:

The ideological formations intergenerationally reproduced within schools betray a pragmatic efficacy and validity of apologetic purpose as well as the fetishistic character of everyday thinking. Such formations help to orient students into an unreflexive acceptance of the capitalistic world. Of course, the accession into the social order has always been incomplete, always in process, in that there has always been a space between self-formation and its dismemberment. Critical pedagogy seizes upon this space as its major terrain of struggle. (p. 23)

That is, the existence of internal contradictions, which exist within all entities, represents the force that compels, but does not determine, human societies to change and develop, for example. Callinicos (2011), another contemporary Marxist scholar and activist I discovered in McLaren’s rich body of work, describes this tendency toward perpetual change and growth using the example of the acorn and the oak tree. Consider:

The acorn, in becoming an oak, has itself ceased to be. The oak is different from the acorn. The oak is *not* that acorn. Hegel would say that the oak is the *negation* of the acorn. Yet implicit within the acorn is the potential to become an oak. The acorn contains within itself its own negation, and is thus *contradictory*. It is this contradiction...that allows it to grow...Hegel then takes this a step further. When something negates itself it turns into its opposite. (p. 63)

Callinicos (2011) therefore offers a way to conceptualize change from a sort of Hegelian-Marxist point of view. Growth or development, what has been called movement, is therefore a never-ending process. This conception of the human condition can be seen functioning at the center of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy (Blunden, 2013), which is the starting point for critical

pedagogy in general, including Peter McLaren's, Antonia Darder's, and Henry Giroux's. Using the framework outlined by Callinicos we can replace "acorn" with *alienated worker* and "oak tree" with *non-alienated humanity freely engaged in a collective effort to reproduce social existence*. Hegelian dialectics allows us to understand that the potential to be free, to reunite thinking and doing, already exists within the alienated wageworker, from the privileged engineers and managers to the more oppressed manual laborers. Those of us who rely on a wage to survive are therefore contradictory—we embody our own potential negation as dehumanized existence because our vital powers, our humanness, are externally commanded and controlled.

The basis for a new society, in other words, already exists within us as a potential. But if a new society is to be the opposite of what exists, what might Marx's developing conception of the opposite of capital offer our understanding here? As we will see below, Marx's work retained its Hegelian roots over time, even as he changed and refined it and discarded much of the Hegelian rhetoric. In *The Grundrisse*, the notebooks with arguably the heaviest Hegelian language since his 1844 Manuscripts, Marx (1857-1858/1973) elaborates on capital's opposite, one of the central contradictions or antagonisms at the heart of capital:

...The opposite of capital cannot itself be a particular commodity, for as such it would form no opposition to capital, since the substance of capital is itself use value; it is not this commodity or that commodity, but all commodities. The communal substance of all commodities, i.e. their substance not as material stuff, as physical character, but their communal substance as commodities and hence exchange values, is this, that they are objectified labour. The only thing distinct from objectified labour is non-objectified labour, labour which is still objectifying itself, labour as subjectivity. Or, objectified labour, i.e. labour which is present in space, can also be opposed, as past labour, to labour which is present in time. If it is to be present in time, alive, then it can be present only as the living subject, in which it exists as capacity, as possibility; hence as worker. The only use value,

therefore, which can form the opposite pole to capital is labour. (p. 207)

Marx's conceptualization of commodity here is reflective of Hegel's chapters on absolutes in *Logic*. The opposite of the living laborer, of labor potential, for Marx, is dead labor, or expended labor embodied within material transformed into a more valuable use-value, which is profit. The opposite of capital therefore, the laborer, as future profit, profit that enriches and thus empowers the capitalist to dominate the laborer, is therefore contradictory, and embodies his or her own negation as alienated and exploited labor power. The opposite of the laborer is therefore capital in general or expended labor in general, not the capitalist since the capitalist and the laborer are merely two parts of the same whole. The negation of labor as such would simultaneously negate the existence of the capitalist as such. The capitalist cannot exist without a stable market in labor; that is, without a working class in which to extract surplus labor. As suggested above, the opposite of labor as alienated subjectivity is therefore non-alienated humanity engaged in free associations with each other reproducing their existence as the product of the unification of thinking and doing. In this context each person is a producer and each producer has a vested interest in participating in the decisions concerning what, how, and with whom they produce because each one has no method of surviving in this world but through the products of their labor. Here work is not an external, alienated means of meeting one's immediate needs, but rather satisfies basic human psychological needs in itself. When we speak of humanization, and creating an economy that facilitates it, rather than negates it, this is the goal—the goal of a Marxist-Humanist critical pedagogy. Making a similar point McLaren (2005) identifies what he sees as critical pedagogy's most central internal challenge as it presses forward:

The struggle among what Marx called our "vital powers," our dispositions, our inner selves and our objective outside, our human capacities and competencies and the social formations within which they are produced, *ensures* the

production of a form of human agency that reflects the contradictions within capitalist social life...Critical educators must play a role in preventing the domestication of the general intellect, and directly challenge capital in its role in reifying and commodifying the production of emancipatory knowledge, of a critical social brain. (pp. 56-57)

It is this critical pedagogy driven by a deep desire to know and to transcend that pushes the critical educator to always be searching for new tools that students can use to deepen their perspectives and critical thinking skills. For example, we might note that the complexity and diversity of the current capitalist system is characterized by a continuum of alienation where some forms of livelihood are more alienating than others. This continuum offers a glimpse into the potential of a non-alienated existence, which is always a difficult task for students—that is, imagining a life after capital (McLaren, 2005). For example, U.S. capitalist society is large enough to support many independent craftsmen who do not sell their labor capacity to a capitalist to generate more wealth, but to individuals as a form of consumption of revenue. Discussing this phenomena Marx (1857-1858/1973) elaborates. Consider:

Labour as mere performance of services for the satisfaction of immediate needs has nothing whatever to do with capital, since that is not capital's concern. If a capitalist hires a woodcutter to chop wood to roast his mutton over, then not only does the wood-cutter relate to the capitalist, but also the capitalist to the woodcutter, in the relation of simple exchange. The woodcutter gives him his service, a use value, which does not increase capital; rather, capital consumes itself in it; and the capitalist gives him another commodity for it in the form of money. The same relation holds for all services which workers exchange directly for the money of other persons, and which are consumed by these persons. This is consumption of revenue, which, as such, always falls within simple circulation; it is not consumption of capital. Since one of the contracting parties does not confront the other as a capitalist, this performance of a service cannot fall under the category of productive labour. (p. 208)

While Marx was drawing this example to underscore what specifically is required for labor to be productive in the capitalist sense, we can see a less alienated and less coerced existence within the life of Marx's independent woodcutter or carpenter than in the factory worker or the teacher working at a for-profit privatized charter school expected to follow a scripted curriculum, and whose job security rests on her students' annual standardized test scores. Following this movement, a Marxist critical pedagogy challenges us to not only understand the historical process that led to capitalism, but it challenges us to imagine ourselves in a world where the labor-capital relationship had been negated completely/absolutely.

Again, collectively, laborers across the planet, embody the knowledge and ability of the current global society that is more than capable of meeting everyone's material needs (as thousands upon thousands perish daily from easily preventable starvation-related diseases). The world as it exists is therefore both the source of today's dehumanized existence, as well as the source of humanization—it is both the problem and the solution; it is therefore contradictory, and thus compelled, but not predetermined, to change. The negation of ourselves as alienated objects is therefore as present within ourselves as it is within the acorn to negate itself in the process of becoming an oak tree. What then prevents humanity from *becoming*?

The internal drive of the capitalist to ensure laborers remain dependent on a wage to survive and the ideological indoctrination that convinces workers that the capitalist is not our negative, cancerous counter-part, but our savior. Making this point McLaren (2005) notes that, "It is no longer just the capitalists who believe that they are the salvation for the world's poor, but the workers themselves have become conditioned to believe that without their exploiters, they would no longer exist" (p. 22). We might therefore argue, as mentioned above, that it is cultural hegemony that plays a central role in preventing the contradictions of capitalism from



leading to the negation of the negation and thus from creating change (i.e. the transcendence of capital). However, there is something much deeper going on, the systemic crisis of capital mentioned above, that threatens not only itself, but existence more generally.

Remember, Marx's conception of change was dialectical, that is, the new (i.e. capitalism) always develops out of the old (i.e. feudalism) so our critical revolutionary pedagogy is firmly grounded in the old with a keen eye on likely directions for the new. Making the case that Marx's "late writings" offer the most explicit vision of a post-capitalist society, Hudis (2012) summarizes:

According to Marx, the amount of time engaged in material production would be drastically reduced in the new society, thanks to technological innovation and the development of the forces of production. At the same time, labor, like all forms of human activity, would be *freely* associated and not subject to the autonomous power of capital that operates behind the backs of individuals. Here is the most important determinant in Marx's concept of the new society: social relations must cease to operate independently of the self-activity of the associated individuals. Marx will oppose any power—be it the state, a social plan, or the market itself—that takes on a life of its own and utilizes human powers as a mere means to its fruition and development. Marx's opposition to the inversion of subject and predicate constitutes the reason for his opposition to all forms of value-production. It is also what grounds his conception of socialism. Human power, he insists, must become a self-sufficient end—it must cease to serve as a means to some other end. He will project this concept even more explicitly in his last writings, which contain his most detailed discussion of the content of a postcapitalist society. (p. 182)

Hudis points to the Paris Commune of 1871 as the single most important event in pushing Marx to revise and deepen his concept of a postcapitalist society—of absolute negation, or the negation of the negation. Making this point Hudis argues that "the Paris Commune led Marx to conclude, more explicitly than ever before,

that the state is not a neutral instrument that could be *used* to ‘wrest’ power from the oppressors. *Its very form is despotic*” (p. 185). That is, because the new society will consist of freely-associated producers democratically “allocating social wealth” (Hudis, 2012), the means of achieving this must therefore too be non-coercive, which, for Marx after 1871, was no longer the state, but rather, the commune. However, the commune here is not socialism, but it could lead to it if it were allowed to survive and develop. We know that this was not the case with respect to the Paris Commune of 1871, and we know that it has never been since—the contradictions within capitalism that gave away to the human agency and critical consciousness manifesting in revolutionary struggle was, and will always be, met with counter-revolutionary bourgeois repression. That is, workers’ self-directed programs (i.e. revolutionary movements) have always been the primary targets of the capitalist class’ military aggression—again, contradiction cannot be allowed to create change, because by negating oneself as workers, she and he collectively negate the existence of a capitalist in practice—all that is left is the former capitalist alongside the former worker, both now compelled to realize their individual labor capacity to survive or perish collectively, as equals. A postcapitalist society is therefore something that will almost certainly have to be bitterly fought for in the streets, sites of production, and schools across the world—the capitalist class, and, ironically, all too frequently, much of the working class, will resist absolute negativity, the positivity embodied within the power of negativity.

Hudis (2012) summarizes Marx’s concept of the positivity embodied in absolute negativity as a new society based upon “the *replacement of the dictatorship of abstract time with time as the space for human development...*” (p. 191). In a new society a market where products of labor are equally exchangeable ceases to exist because “there is no substance that renders different magnitudes qualitatively equal” (Hudis, 2012, p. 192). In the highest stage of socialism, for Marx, individuals no longer learn to

produce for production, but that the development of the human species is an end in itself.

For Marx, a new society can only be born from the womb of a preexisting one therefore only gradually shedding the traces of the old social relations. In this respect Marx identified two phases of a new society. From the outset, however, for Marx, the central defining feature of capitalist production must be abolished, which is the subsumption of actual labor time with socially-necessary labor time. Socially necessary labor time, or a generalizable average dictated by technology and consumer markets, is therefore distinct from actual labor time, and comes to dominate concrete labor by serving as the universal standard allowing different products of labor to be mutually exchangeable. (Hudis, 2012, p. 190)

Critical pedagogy, at its finer and more relevant moments, represents an educational sub-tradition designed to create learning experiences and understandings that allow students and teachers to situate their own experiences within the contradictions of capitalism creating an ideological bridge allowing them to see themselves as part of humanity's vocation to realize the potential within us to negate our existence as a class as such, as alienated labor. That is, Freire's critical education for humanization was informed by the Hegelian Marxist understanding that the alienation of abstract labor (i.e. disconnecting thinking from doing) represents a central contradiction of capitalism and a primary source of dehumanization. Freire therefore stressed the importance of students and educators being engaged in a life-long practice of reflecting on their consciousness and perpetually changing their practice as their understanding develops and their commitments deepen. Critical education here is not merely designed to help workers advocate for a higher wage, but to be engaged in the process of *becoming* (in the Hegelian sense), leading workers, collectively, toward the transcendence of capital. This critical pedagogy is therefore purposeful and directed by the educator while simultaneously designed to engage students as active learners and transformers of history. This is a revolutionary pedagogy; it is prescriptive because it is directed (toward

revolution), but it is democratic in that it is based on a deep commitment to humanization. I am therefore drawing on the concept of *absolute negativity* as the place of departure for a twenty-first century Marxist critical pedagogy.

*Critical Pedagogy and The Falling Rate of Profit: Connecting the Individual to Larger Social Forces*

Following the Civil War the U.S. saw a surge in industrial output coupled with a spike in college enrollments from 1,000 to 65,000. Similarly, in the years immediately following WWII college enrolments increased from one million to eleven million (Malott, 2014). How do we make sense of these surges in educational attainment—surges that offered many working-class people, especially the white working-class, a degree of upward mobility (Malott, 2014)? Do these spikes in college-educated workers represent the bourgeois promise of general equality and the flourishing of democratic ideals? Or, do these changes reflect the changing needs of capital as the demand for U.S. manufactured goods exploded on a national and then global basis? If we are to view capitalist schooling as serving the needs of capital by educating the kind of workers required by capital, then these surges in education point to the perpetually declining proportion of capital being invested in variable capital, human labor power, and the simultaneous increase of investments in constant capital, that is, in labor-saving technology as capitalists compete for market share and competitive advantage driving down, over time, the rate of profit. This is the primary force that has led to the cyclical (and then systemic after the 1970s) nature of crisis in capitalism described above (Mészáros, 2011). In short, we might call this the recurring *historical event* relevant to the development of capitalism—the cycle of deepening crisis fuelled by the tendency toward the falling rate of profit—a major contradiction one would think would lead to widespread working-class consciousness, critical agency, and, ultimately, change (i.e. the negation of the negation). After many years of theoretical development, in Volume Three of *Capital* Marx (1894/1981) describes the falling rate of profit in the following terms:

The relative decline in the variable capital and increase in the constant capital, even while both grow in absolute terms, is...simply another expression for the increased productivity of labor...[W]ith the progress of capitalist production, the mass of value that must simply be reproduced and maintained rises and grows with the rising productivity of labor, even if the labor-power applied remains constant. (Marx, Pp. 322-324)

While Marx is describing what he identifies as one of the fundamental laws of capitalist production, he took the concept from classical political economic theory and developed it through many notebooks and over the course of many years. Making this important point in “Crisis and the Rate of Profit in Marx’s Laboratory” Peter Thomas and Geert Reuten (2013) argue that, “Marx’s views on the ‘law’ or ‘tendency’ of the rate of profit to fall developed throughout his life from a law about the historical destination of the capitalist system as tending toward breakdown, into a theory about the functioning of the capitalist mode of production as a potentially durable system” (p. 312). Marx’s humanist or naturalist framework developed in his 1844 manuscripts and outlined above, allowed him the freedom to develop his ideas based upon reflections on the real, concrete world, unlike Hegel’s work hopelessly tethered to the abstractness of the *essence* of the *absolute idea*.

In his earlier dealings with the subject, such as his 1857-1858 notebooks, *The Grundrisse*, Marx focused on the internal laws of the historical development of capital as the contradiction or force that would self-destructively lead to the violent overthrow of capitalism—the negation of the negation, as it were. As an example of what they refer to as Marx’s “crisis rhetoric,” Thomas and Reuten (2013) cite *The Grundrisse*:

The growing incompatibility between the productive development of society and its hitherto existing relations of production expresses itself in bitter contradictions, crises, spasms. The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation... These contradictions leads to explosions, cataclysms, crises, in which momentous suspension of labor and annihilation of a great portion of capital the latter is violently reduced to the point where it can go on... Yet, these regularly recurring catastrophes lead to their repetition on a higher scale, and finally to its violent overthrow. (p. 314)

Thomas and Reuten (2013) argue that at this time Marx was still under the influence of the young Hegelians who deterministically saw the economic crisis of 1848 as the precursor to the end of capitalism—an end that was not the result of an organized critically-conscious, working-class agency, but the inevitable conclusion of the development of the internal contradictions of an economic system operating by its own laws leading to absolute negativity independent of human intervention. In other words, Hegel's dialectic, the negation of the negation, was viewed as unfolding deterministically without, or despite, human intervention. However, Mészáros (2011) and others have provided substantial evidence and argumentation for the current demise of capital stemming not from the revolutionary agency of the worlds' working classes, but from the system's own *internal logic* or *structural determinations*. But during his era, years after the predictions of the economic determinists failed to pass, Marx began rethinking the destructive role of the falling rate of profit in capitalism as less *terminal* and more *restorative*, as argued by Thomas and Reuten (2013).

Citing the 1861-3 notebooks as indicative of this shift in Marx's thinking, Thomas and Reuten (2013) quote, "...apart from theory there is also the practice, the crises from superabundance of capital, or, what comes to the same, the mad ventures capital enters upon in consequence of the lowering of the rate of profit.

Hence crises...acknowledged as a necessary violent means for the cure of the plethora of capital, and the restoration of a sound rate of profit” (p. 319). Marx therefore began to see the crises stemming from the contradictory tendency toward the fall in the rate of profit as allowing the process of capitalist accumulation to begin anew and therefore an integral component of developing *the productive power of capital*. No longer did Marx express crises and the falling rate of profit as “the gravedigger of the capitalist mode of production” (Thomas & Reuten, 2013, p. 319). Thwarting the deterministic unfolding of capital’s internal contradictions, it would seem, is the role of human agency. Capital’s interest resides within moving human agency toward supporting capital, toward maintaining the hegemony. The role of a Marxist-informed critical pedagogy, on the other hand, is committed to counter-hegemony, as noted above in the work of Peter McLaren (2005).

For example, in stressing the tendential nature of the falling rate of profit Marx not only elaborated on the productive role of destruction or crises driven by the internal logic of capital, but he explored the measures capitalists themselves—expressed as human beings with choice and agency—take to counter the falling rate of profit. “Explaining why this fall is not greater or faster,” Marx (1894/1981) notes that, “counteracting influences must be at work, checking and cancelling the effect of the general law and giving it simply the character of a tendency, which is why we have described the fall in the general rate of profit as a tendential fall” (p. 339). Summarizing these “counteracting influences,” David Harvey (2014), in a recent book on capital’s contradictions, describes them as “labor saving innovations” (p. 107), which, in the contemporary context, include:

...The opening up of entirely new product lines that were labor-intensive; a pattern of innovation that was devoted as much to capital saving as to labor saving; a rising rate of exploitation on the labor-forces still employed; the prior existence or formation of a class of consumers who

produced nothing; a phenomenal rate of growth in the total labor force which would augment the mass of capital being produced even though the individual rate of return was falling. (p. 107)

However, while counteracting forces such as increasing the rate of exploitation of labor help to explain the general laws' tendential manifestation, they are ironically also the same factors that speed it up. Marx (1894/1981) therefore comments that "these factors that inhibit the fall in the rate of profit, though in the final instance they always accelerate it further" (pp. 340-341). Extending his comments here Marx (1894/1981) argues that the falling rate of profit operates:

...[A]s a law whose absolute realization is held up, delayed and weakened by counteracting factors. However, as the same factors that increase the rate of surplus-value (and the extension of the working day is itself a result of large-scale industry) tend to reduce the amount of labor-power employed by a given capital, the same factors tend both to reduce the rate of profit and to slow down the movement in this direction. (pp. 341-342)

Again, Marx is getting at one of the central contradictions or paradoxes of capital here. That is, as the mass of labor set in motion by capital increases, and with it, accumulated value or profit, the rate of profit actually decreases. This tendency leads to stagnation and crisis. As argued above, rather than immediately and inevitably leading to the violent overthrow of capitalism, Marx began to see crises operating in a different way. The counter-acting forces, such as increasing the rate of exploitation, and relying heavily on consumer-debt for realization while leading to crisis and the breakdown in the business cycle, they serve a kind of contemporary primitive accumulation enriching and revitalizing today's most powerful capitalists, the bankers and financiers.



Similarly, Mészáros (2011) calls capital's attempts to prevent its own self-destruction as a form of *hybridization* where the state intervenes on behalf of corporations. However, looking at the concrete context and conditions of capital since the 1970s Mészáros (2011) does not see crisis and capital's attempts to displace it as restorative. While some restorative measures can be identified at work, such as the Great Depression and the World Wars, current measures (i.e. militarism, neoliberalism, etc.) are simply unable to overcome the crisis. Mészáros (2011) takes his cues from Marx and looks to the social structure of capital and the determinations it embodies as providing a framework for the system's historical development. For example, capital is a system based upon perpetual growth and economic expansion, but planet Earth is not equally infinite, that is, it is finite, and currently, there are no significant regions where capital has not expanded. Without an ability to expand, capital faces serious structural problems that are simply not resolvable. Clearly, Mészáros (2011), while acknowledging the needed working-class agency to transcend capital before it destroys all that exists, he focuses on hidden mechanisms or internal logic of capital.

Challenging this focus on the *laws* of capital in the late 1970s, Antonio Negri (1991) published a widely influential book, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. In other words, Negri (1991) takes issue with Marx's "objectivist" conception of the historical development of capital that is grounded in an analysis of *structural determinations*, as outlined above. For example, in his discussion of the falling rate of profit Marx identifies the force that propels it as embedded within the very structure of capital itself. For Negri, it is not the laws of capitalist production, but the subjectivity of labor that the capitalist class is forced to respond to, that drives the historical development of capitalism. In his critically important and controversial text, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, Peter Hudis (2012) argues that while "Negri's effort to account for agency illuminates important aspects of Marx's

work,” his exaggerated analysis assumes that, “every stage of capitalist development is a product of heightened subjective resistance” (p. 30). The neoliberal era of capitalism, for Negri (1991), is not the result of the internal logic of capital mediated by human actors, but is a result of new forms of discipline developed by capital as a response to “intensifying subjective resistance” (Hudis, 2012, p. 30). In the Introduction to the 1991 Autonomedia edition of *Marx Beyond Marx* Harry Cleaver (1991) offers a powerful summary of the significance of the subjective resistance of labor at the heart of Negri’s work:

Marx is keenly aware that capital’s power to extort surplus labor is a power exerted over an “other” whose own active subjectivity must be harnessed to capital’s designs. Marx explored this subjectivity and saw that it fought the primitive accumulation of the classes: the forced creation of the labor market and the forced submission of people to the lives of workers. He explored this subjectivity and saw that *it struggles against being forced to work*. Although he paints a true horror story of living labor being dominated by capitalist-controlled dead labor, Marx also makes clear that living labor cannot be killed off totally or capital itself would die. The irony of capitalist reproduction is that it must assure the continued reproduction of the living subject. The antagonism is recreated on higher and higher levels as capital develops. What begins as the horror of zombie-like dead labor being summoned against living labor, becomes, over time, an increasingly desperate attempt by capital to protect its own existence against an ever-more-powerful-and-hostile working class. Capital can never win, totally, once and for ever. It must tolerate the existence of an alien subjectivity which constantly threatens to destroy it. What a vision: capital, living in everlasting fear of losing control over the hostile class it has brought into existence! (p. xxiii)

What is apparent here is Cleaver’s ability to demonstrate, via Marx, the inherent conflict between the contradictory class interests that have, no doubt, influenced the historical development

of capital. However, what Cleaver (1991) and Negri (1991) pass less attention to are the socializing and thus hegemonizing influence of not only education and the dominant culture of bourgeois society, but the act of work itself where selling oneself on the market for a wage becomes so commonplace and taken-for-granted that it rarely is the subject of critique or discussion, let alone a working-class movement against it. In this essay I therefore more closely follow Hudis' (2012) position that the internal laws and logic of capital define the parameters through which social actors, both capitalists and laborers, confront themselves, each other, and the world more generally. In other words, both subjectivist and objectivist orientations are important for understanding the totality of the social universe of capital. In other words, the internal contradictions of capital compel it toward absolute negation, but the agency of humans facing each other antagonistically, push and pull toward and away from transcendence. I also follow Hudis (2012) in his critique of Negri's one-sided subjectivism because it falls short of offering viable alternatives to capital as it is based on the assumption that an alternative to capitalism will emerge spontaneously with the flourishing of subjective resistance. Making this point Hudis (2012) notes that, "although Negri is highly critical of theorists that emphasize the automaticity of capital's self-expansion, he seems to fall prey to embracing automaticity in another guise, insofar as he thinks that an alternative to capitalism will arise spontaneously, without the mediation of theoretical labor that tries to envisage future modes of social organization" (p. 31). Put another way, I am advocating for taking a more objectivist approach focusing on the internal logic of capital and the subsequent tendency toward the falling rate of profit, needed to develop a complex understanding of subjective resistance and a subsequent, purposeful, critical pedagogy—a pedagogy of *becoming*.

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Again, from an objectivist perspective, the current neoliberal era represents the capitalist response to counter the falling rate of profit beginning around the 1970s. We might note that WWII enabled the US to emerge from the economic crisis of the 1929 Stock Market crash and decade long Great Depression as an unprecedented super power. One of the most significant factors contributing to global U.S. economic and militaristic hegemony was the fact that the industrial infrastructures of China, Germany, France, England, and Japan had been obliterated from the destruction of war. Consequently, after WWII US manufacturers were in an unprecedented state of global advantage with their international competitors virtually bombed out of existence (Malott, 2014).

Consequently, US industrial capitalists' need for more managers, engineers, professors, etc. boomed. That is, the supply of highly educated workers, as was the case during the industrial surge following the Civil War, was below capitals' demand. In the years immediately following WWII public higher education enrollment therefore increased from two to eleven million giving working people in the US the sense that general prosperity was achievable within capitalism as bourgeois revolutionaries had always asserted. However, around the 1970s the US post-WWII boom began to decline as international competition had recovered from the devastation of war. The capitalist state's support for public higher education has been declining ever since. Today, the supply of highly educated workers is far greater than capital's demand due to many factors such as technological developments making production more efficient and the shifting of centers of production to China and the so-called third world made possible by free-trade agreements, robotics, and computerization (Malott, 2014).

Put another way, this international competition led to a technological race in computerization and robotics leading to massive improvements in production efficiency and the creation of

many new markets (especially in electronics). This competitive race at the heart of the internal logic of capital, over time, requires a growing proportion of investments going to machines and technology rather than to the purchasing of productive labor power capacity, therefore leading to the falling rate of profit and crisis. In other words, as production becomes more efficient, it becomes more costly, therefore eating up more potential profits on the production process, subsequently contributing to the falling rate of profit. The capitalist at the front of this race will have a temporary competitive advantage.

Again, the economic crisis of the 1970s can be understood as stemming, in part, from international competition and the subsequent falling rate of profit. Situating this current crisis in a global context Harvey (2014) notes:

Developmental paths of this sort have effectively held off falling profits for some time now. The absorption of the peasantries of China, India and much of South-East Asia (along with Turkey and Egypt and some Latin American countries, with Africa still the continent with massive untapped labor reserves) into the global labor force since 1980 or so, along with the integration of what was the Soviet Bloc, has meant a huge increase (rather than decrease) in the global wage labor force over and beyond that supplied by population growth. The rising rates of exploitation with the creation of horrific labor conditions in China, Bangladesh, Vietnam and elsewhere are also palpable, while the demand problem has largely been taken care of by way of a vast expansion of credit. (pp. 107-108)

As previously mentioned, neoliberal policies and ideology can be understood as a contemporary shift to counter the falling rate of profit, operating in this dual way, leading to an unprecedented concentration of wealth at the top and simultaneously slowing it down. With 80% of Americans, for example, at or near the poverty

line, the notion of general prosperity within capitalism reveals itself as bitter mockery. This insight can be understood, in part, by underscoring the very relationship between labor and capital itself.

While forms of wage labor existed during feudalism, segments of the peasant population enjoyed too many entitlements to life's most vital use values presenting a barrier to "the possibility of capitalistic wealth" (Marx, 1857-1858/1973, p. 274). In other words, as we will see below, a fundamental requirement or condition for capitalist production relations to solidify is an ever-expanding pool of dependent wage laborers who have no other option to survive but to exchange their own labor for exchange value, for a price, for an equivalent (i.e. money) that can be exchanged for any other product of labor.

In the exchange between labor and capital, which labor, again, is compelled, out of necessity, to engage in, labor sells her commodity (i.e. labor capacity) to the capitalist for a price, a certain amount of exchange value (i.e. money) needed to access other use values (i.e. articles of subsistence). The use value the capitalist obtains is labor capacity, "the productive force which maintains and multiplies capital, and which thereby becomes the productive force, the reproductive force of capital, a force belonging to capital itself" (Marx, 1857-1858/1973, p. 274). Again, in the historical development of capitalism, we find no examples of widespread voluntary expropriation and thus self-imposed dependence. As previously mentioned, as capitalism develops through time, and the productivity of labor is increased through labor-saving technology and more effective educational and training pedagogies represented in a greater portion of capitalist investment being consumed by constant capital (i.e. machines and material) leading to the falling rate of profit.

Neoliberal tactics to counter the falling rate of profit include, but are not limited to: The elimination of competition through monopolization; Increasing the rate of exploitation; US military intervention nearly eliminating the cost of labor in the so-called third world for foreign investors; So-called “free trade” policies that really amount to a form of protectionism designed to limit international competition; And one of the most significant mechanisms, as it relates to education, has been financialization, represented by a dramatic shift in investment from the real economy to speculation; Ideologically, this has been accompanied by abandoning commitments to the welfare state and the public in general as socialist, un-American, or an attack on freedom.

Why? Financialization creates the appearance of growth where none actually exist. Rising profits in the financial sector do not necessarily come from real growth, but the plundering of public resources. In their quest for new markets and new sources of profit in an increasingly technicized world, the public sector has been a major target for hungry investors desperate to set capitals in motion to engage the process of expansion and accumulation. The strategy has been to: reduce taxing the capitalist class; cut education spending when state coffers dry up as a result; the quality of said programs therefore become degraded; the public is thus more easily convinced that the problem with education, ironically, is that it lacks competition; privatization is therefore offered as the only solution.

Part of the ideological component here is the normalization of business language, and the abandonment of compassion and civic responsibility, replaced with a mean-spiritedness which now dominates education. Students in this context are not respected for their unique positionalities and potential or actual critical agency, needed now perhaps more than ever, but are disrespected as mere customers or economic entities and thus sources of profit. Again, much of this profit is not the result of real economic growth,

but the result of growing student debt, and debt can only displace crisis for so long. Teachers and professors, according to neoliberal logic, are not political militants or even stewards of the common good, but mechanistic product deliverers. It is therefore increasingly difficult to enact a Freirean critical pedagogy in this savage context.

Systems of public higher education, consequently, once a necessary cost of production, are now treated as sources of profit as tuitions skyrocket and students are saddled with crushing debt in a world with fewer and fewer employment opportunities. Contributing to our understanding here Marx (1867/1967) offers a concise explanation of the role of debt in capitalist economics, consider:

The public debt becomes one of the most powerful levers of primitive accumulation. As with the stroke of an enchanter's wand, it endows barren money with the power of breeding and thus turns it into capital, without the necessity of its exposing itself to the troubles and risks inseparable from its employment in industry or even in usury...The national debt has given rise to...stock-exchange and gambling and the modern bankocracy... [Debt is] the best system for making the wage-laborer submissive, frugal, industrious, and overburdened with labor. (pp. 754-756)

Because of falling wages accompanied by longer work hours in the so-called first world since the 1970s, debt has been used to keep consumption apace with global production and to discipline an increasingly alienated and impoverished work force. Privatized systems of education have created fortunes off of student-debt in an economy with little chance of employing the growing swell of unemployed college graduates. Meanwhile, the elite institutions, the Harvards, will remain unscathed as working class universities are sacrificed to appease the angry gods of the market. The financialization or privatization of charter schools and universities



are contributing to the erosion of unionization, which is at a 100 year low at 11.3% of the total work force, contributing to the redistribution of wealth upwards and escalating immiseration, again, countering the falling rate of profit without increasing real productive output.

Consequently, there does not exist a real plan or vision for widespread prosperity coming from either faction of the business class, a point made by Shawgi Tell in a forthcoming book on Charter Schools. University presidents at public institutions, for example, increasingly refer to this as the new normal—a downward spiral of perpetual budget cuts suggesting privatization is inevitable and somehow good. Democracy has been redefined as profit making and cutthroat competition between workers (Giroux, 2013). This suggests that the vast majority of humanity suffering at or near the poverty line are to blame for *their own immiseration*.

While all workers have taken substantial economic blows in the neoliberal era, blacks and immigrants are offered to whites as scapegoats and targets. This has had deadly consequences, especially in states like Florida with Stand Your Ground laws where white middle-aged men seem to be killing young black males with impunity. As Giroux has recently pointed out, the welfare state has been replaced by the punishing state, the surveillance state, the incarcerating state targeting blacks and Latinos at alarming rates. This is the larger context of neoliberalism. That is, in the U.S., neoliberal economic policy has effectively countered the falling rate of profit at the expense of the working people of the world. Neoliberal economic policy, as argued above, would not have been successful without a strong ideological component. Hegemony, in other words, works to prevent the growing contradictions of capital from leading to the type of paradigmatic change discussed above.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay should be taken as a call to action for a critical pedagogy of becoming—a pedagogy saturated with the urgency of challenging the ideological warfare of bourgeois education and media in order to clear the way to engage in honest critique and reflection. Herein lies the heart of a democratic public culture, the likes of which are nearly nonexistent within the capitalist world, especially in the U.S. Critical pedagogy has the task of fostering this culture as an indispensable component of building an international movement to transcend all current obstacles to becoming, which, in bourgeois society, stems from capitalism. Mészáros' (2011) Marxist analysis, as argued throughout this essay, gives pressing urgency to this charge, as capitalism now threatens humanity and the very existence of *the system of nature*. I will leave you with a short passage crediting Marx with his framework:

The radical novelty of Marx's conception was made possible at a time when the objective *need for an epochal change* from capital's social order to one *qualitatively* different in all of its fundamental determinations as a mode of humanity's social metabolic control appeared with its peremptory finality on the historic agenda, with the *onset of the capital system's descending phase of development*. (Mészáros, 2011, p. 15)

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