

# **You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Bus: Critical Pedagogy as Community Praxis**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, I argue that a major task for Leftist activist academics is to be accountable for the “real world” political implications of theory by working out ways to connect education with community struggles for social justice. Here, the action potentiality of critical pedagogy is revealed in the recent writings of Marxist educators, who offer insights into how concrete political struggles can be waged in the sphere of reproduction (labour power) and against the imposition of an alienated life. Operating from the starting point that mutually mediated and collectively enacted struggle activates capacities, ideals and solidarities capable of challenging the lived conditions of social and economic injustice, this article provides a concrete account of academic/activism. I specifically focus on efforts to bridge the gap between theory and practice at the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles. Under class struggle conditions today, the focus of my involvement at the Bus Riders Union (BRU) was my personal commitment to critical/revolutionary praxis organized around the need for individual and social transformation, which is the aim of revolutionary critical pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** academic/activism, critical pedagogy, labour power, community praxis

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I discuss the possibilities for constructing critical pedagogy as a form of community praxis that intervenes in the negation of labour defined as exploitation. This project is linked to the rematerialized field of Marxist educational scholarship for its explanatory theory and concepts (class, ideology, exploitation, revolution) (Allman, 1999, 2001; Cole, Hill, McLaren, & Rikowski, 2001a; Hill, 2004; McLaren

& Farahmandpur, 2001; Rikowski, 2001; Scatamburo-D'Annibale & McLaren, 2003). The power of this explanatory framework resides in the fact that it recognizes capital's direct involvement in the production of 'subjectivity-living labour power' (Rikowski, 2002). In this system of identity production, Marx's value theory of labour reveals the potentially of subjects resisting the self-reduction of their labour power to the 'peculiar' form it takes as human capital under the alien and hostile powers of money and the state (Marx, 1967, p. 167; see also Rikowski, 2002). Here, the political is to carry out praxis to eliminate exploitation, which takes place at the most basic cell of the capitalist economy, the commodity form of labour (Marx, 1967). Without downplaying the importance of ideas and theoretical analysis, my argument is straightforward enough. It begins with the idea that critical praxis can only take place through dialogue, by thinking dialectically, applying knowledge to concrete situations and by working together in an organized and principled way for liberation. This, I argue, implies a level of sensuous and embodied political engagement at the local scale of community, where individual development is organically tied to collective action aimed at social transformation, which is the goal of revolutionary critical pedagogy.

After a headlong dive into the gritty world of unemployment and factory work during a prolonged period of economic crisis in Australia, my employment background has included working with the long-term unemployed in various community-based employment and training programs (Martin, 2000). Despite a steady diet of jobs, I decided that I no longer wanted to be the empty subject of flexible and egregious capitalism. In 1996, I enrolled part-time in the Graduate Diploma in Education at Murdoch University, where I developed a fledging interest in critical pedagogy and action research. On this basis, I left my home in Perth (the most isolated capital city in the world) in 1997 to pursue graduate studies in the United States, first at Kent State University in Ohio and then at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). On the one hand, after I had delved into the Byzantine world of critical pedagogy during my studies at Murdoch, I found much of the literature to be fresh and insightful (Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1994, 1997; McLaren & Lankshear, 1994). On the other, I was also interested in discovering how the ancient divide between theory and practice could be bridged or mediated through Marx's ideal of praxis, with maximum political effect.

Fast forward to 1999, as this is when I arrived as a doctoral student in Los Angeles, one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse and class-stratified cities in the United States. One of the ways in which class and racial segregation is enforced in Los Angeles is through the abysmal quality of the bus system and the corresponding lack of mobility for the urban poor, the disabled and the elderly, who can barely afford to get to work, church, or public services, e.g., schools, hospitals (Mann, 1996). Like many other transit dependent citizens of Los Angeles, I did not have the luxury of a car and was forced to rely on an apartheid-like bus system, with its dilapidated fleet of cancer-causing diesel spewing buses, unpredictable scheduling, long intervals between buses and massive overcrowding (Mann, 1996). I always caught the No. 2 bus to UCLA, which originated from the urban core of the downtown area and traveled a long and winding path through the disparate ethnic enclaves (Chinese, Korean, Thai and Russian) of the city before reaching its final destination, i.e., the beach communities, filled with white shiny faces, glittery eye-shadow and petrol guzzling SUVs.

Without overplaying it, I felt physically sick to my stomach about the structural racism and rampant social injustices I witnessed first-hand as I rode the Los Angeles bus system. Trying to carry the city's contradictions within myself, I felt increasingly isolated and emotionally fatigued as I attempted to establish a foothold in this megalopolis, situated within a County of 9 million inhabitants. Although I was engaged in a strong critique of capitalism in my textual/writing practices, as the bus rattled and belched its way to UCLA I reflected that my inner struggle to become 'fully human' (Freire, 1993, p. 27) would require a more militant, pedagogical commitment.

Operating from the standpoint that self-generated emails, web-log postings and academic writings that 'speak truth to power' are no substitute for real dialogue, in this paper I discuss my modest but sincere attempt in life and struggle to fuse Marxist theory with more collective, politically engaged and embodied forms of educational radicalism. To develop this connective tissue, I reached out to the Bus Riders Union (BRU), a multi-racial, multi-lingual working class political organization built to fight against the state for a first class public transportation system (Mann, 1999). The BRU was established in 1993 as an experimental project of the Labor/Community Strategy

Center, a 'think tank-act tank' also based in Los Angeles that has a history of initiating and building left-organizational forms (Mann, 1999, 2001a, 2001b). Mobilizing the unorganized and demoralized, organizations such as the BRU are developing new models of labour/community organizing through innovative educative processes and political activities capable of challenging the liberal capitalist state (Hernandez, 1998). As society moves toward a deepening crisis of war and revolution ahead, this paper is an experiment in figuring out how academics interested in reactivating a critical pedagogy on the side of the oppressed can expand their involvement in some of organized and united struggles of community against the capitalist state. Bearing this point in mind, the basic premise of this paper is that it is political for trouble making elements in the academy to act independent of the corporate interests of the university and of retreating political parties to reach out in solidarity to various sectors of the working class through social movements.

### **Value Consciousness in the Corporate University**

Wearied with how both teaching and the study of social life are being restricted to improving the bottom line of big business, I struggle in my daily life with how to channel my alienation and discontent in a progressive manner at the local scale of community. Although it is, perhaps, impossible to step outside of my geography of unearned privilege, rather than engage in self-flagellation and other rituals of self-inflicted pain, my social/research practices embody the activist and goal-orientated epistemology of Marxism. As Marx (1978a) famously put it, an emphasis on interpretation (framing the problems of capitalism) ought not to replace the development of social practice (e.g., class struggle, political life and artistic endeavors) enacted through theory, which spawns both knowledge and creativity. Seen from this angle, a political commitment to Marx's epistemology is consistent with Freire's (1993) pedagogical aims and practices, which are not only focused on identifying and evaluating power relations but also dismantling them through praxis. Eschewing intellectual vanguardism, a distinctive feature of a Freirian methodology is its ontological commitment to shared participation in learning and problem solving processes as well as capacity building, i.e., political organization (Martin, in press). Given that the revolutionary leadership that comes forward in any class struggle does not have a monopoly over knowledge, Freire argued that praxis must be rooted in

these dialogical principles of pedagogical engagement. This was because he had a historical understanding of how political outcomes are co-related to the variety of social processes and spatial practices built into the cultural fabric of militant labour struggles and social movement organizations. Thus, although Freire (1993) was aware of the importance of revolutionaries organizing as revolutionaries, he wrote that a pedagogy of the oppressed 'must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity' (p. 30).

Unfortunately, an autopsy of the academy reveals that its teaching and research activities have been reduced to a treadmill devoted to increasingly callisthenic exercises in political futility (Routledge, 2004). Without lapsing into sentimentality and harking back to the 'good old days', which did not exist, now or ever, the intensified modes of production in the university that reduce our vital '*powers of life*' (Marx, 1988, p. 154) to forms of reified academic activity, inflect a specific kind of 'value-consciousness' (Uchida, 1988). What makes this value-consciousness valuable is that it is tied to market behaviors that generate revenues and profits for the university that is acting more and more like a corporation. The psychometric properties of this value-consciousness (a belief in competitive individualism, free market enterprise, private property and market determination of economic reward) are measured and reinforced through internal and external performance indicators such as benchmarking. As universities are increasingly subjected to the discipline of market forces, these performance indicators (often punitive) exist as a rallying point for capital as academics are incited to assert the value of their labour power by bringing more and more commercial value to their work (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Let me make this explicit: the decision to devote one's energy to community struggles organized to fight against all forms of alienation, oppression and exploitation does not occur in a social vacuum (Martin, 2005; Hill, 2005). Academics like myself who want a life in higher education must consider the need to earn tenure to ensure the means of subsistence for themselves and in many cases, their families, which in turn introduces a worm of doubt into their enthusiasm. In Australia, at the very least, to stray from management's 'workload formula'[1] is to break the golden rule, which is to 'give them what they want,' even if it is so corrupt and vulgar it shrinks the boundaries of our moral imaginations. What this contradictory and untenable social relation reflects is

the structural subordination of labour to capital in the academy, and its vehicle of expression, absolute surplus value (Ebert, 1997; Martin, in press).

### **An Anatomy of Community**

Given the multivariate ways in which our congealed identities and reified subjectivities are constituted through place and space, it is not enough to talk abstractly about intervening in community. Within the negating tendencies of the university, the word 'community' has been bandied about in perverse ways as a philistine vanguard of academic entrepreneurs with insatiable appetites come to the trough to feed (extramural grants, consultancies, university-industry partnerships) in the interests of major corporations or any other entity that has funds (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; Hill, 2004; Martin, 2005). Under neo-liberalism, community (school, family, work, leisure) has been reduced to a pedagogical tool that reduces us to the status of alienated and atomized individuals, who compete with other equally alienated and atomized individuals for the means of subsistence (Giroux, 2003). Contrary to popular opinion Marxism is about trying to reverse this dismal state of affairs through the establishment of caring and loving communities, which build bridges to connect different social sectors, people and organisations.

Worn down by the variety of meanings attached like parasites to the term, I draw upon Marx's definition of community, which he argued, 'exists only in and through the division of labour' (1978b, p. 189). It is impossible to do justice to the full complexity and subtlety of Marx's analysis in this short piece, but in summary, he insisted that one of the most important factors in determining the unique social character of community is the mode of production. As a distinctive mode of producing and organizing community that includes its boundaries, social forces and motion, capitalism is best summed up in the opening statement of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx & Engels, 1967, p. 79). In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels outline how the structure and ideology of community become subservient to capital with the triumph of commodity production. Today, there is plenty of discontent at the base of capitalist society and the contemporary relevance of Marx and Engel's writings is best captured in a quote from the same pamphlet, 'Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other:

Bourgeoisie and Proletariat' (p. 80). Engels specified the meanings of these terms in a footnote:

By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern Capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live. (Marx & Engels, 1967, p. 79)

Without overlooking the complex, ritualized and brutal ways in which the history and spatial ordering of capitalism are rooted in patriarchy and white supremacy in countries such as the United States (e.g., the theft of Native American land that provided the foundational basis for the success of capitalism), the general interpretive line here is that labour presupposes the construction of community. Moreover, it is Marx's historical materialist critique of society's economy that will play a determinate factor in the struggle to create a communist future, where 'we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx & Engels, 1967, p. 105). On this point, as capital extends its grubby reach into every nook and cranny of the world, it is worth quoting Marx (1978b) at length:

The transformation, through the division of labour, of personal powers (relationships) into material powers, cannot be dispelled by dismissing the general idea of it from one's mind, but can only be abolished by the individuals again subjecting these material powers to themselves and abolishing the division of labour. This is not possible without the community. Only in community (with others has each) individual the means to cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible. In the previous substitutes for the community, in the State, etc., personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class. The illusory community, in which individuals have up till now combined, always took on an independent existence in relation to them, and was at the same time, since it was the combination of one class over against another, not only a completely illusory community, but a new fetter as well. In the real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association. (p. 197)

Here, what Anderson (1983) refers to as the 'imagined' community of the nation state is not a natural form or homogenous entity but is divided into classes with antagonistic interests, views, cultures, and ethics. As a major site of oppression, the idea of community as a social container has played a historic role for the bourgeoisie

to develop and protect its economy and system of exploitation. Exposing the facade of national unity communist ideology, as encapsulated in Marx and Engel's slogan 'Proletarians of all Countries Unite', urges us to abandon any false allegiance to the liberal capitalist nation state. Communism, which ought not to be reduced to its Stalinist incarnations that negated the 'free, conscious activity' of the individual, is dedicated to the cause of total emancipation (Marx, 1988, p. 76). This, of course, necessarily and inescapably, implies the struggle against poisonous and pernicious ideological constructs such as racism and sexism, which take on specific forms under capitalism. Acknowledging the values, frameworks and interests that work to construct the 'Other' as deviant, irrational and less than human, Marxists recognize the real and material effects of these divisive categories invented to justify exploitation and oppression (McLaren, 1997).

### **Revolutionary Community**

From a relational standpoint, the 'imagined' community of the university does not exist in a separate realm from working class communities, i.e., regular workers who make it possible for academics to speak, write and teach effectively, even if their contributions appear anonymously (Hubbard, 1996). Within a highly bureaucratized and hierarchical division of labour in the university, academics rely upon a vast background army of 'invisible' workers (often women) who receive little or no credit. Other aspects of our lives are also different, with the relative freedom to think about ideas and to speak out (Hubbard, 1996). The reason I want to bring attention to this social relation is because academic freedom (autonomy) is a cover for a privileged social position, which has enabled a parasitic layer of intellectuals who 'speak truth to power' on behalf of the oppressed and exploited to make audacious grabs at academic stardom on the ghetto fabulous conference circuit, e.g., signing books for obsessive fans. To resolve this contradictory situation, academics will need to consciously rework the 'imagined' community of the university as it is normalised in everyday labour practices. In other words, the creation of new forms of human sociability (community) will require academics to take responsibility in bridging the two worlds (Hubbard, 1996). The underlying issue here is that if academics are to develop a reflexive culture of orienting toward working class communities then a new relation between theory and practice is required (Hudis, 2003).



As a way of de-sacralizing the space of the university, I believe that academics ought to place greater emphasis in their *habitus* and field of practice on renewing dialogue and interaction with activists who are working at the most grassroots level of militant labour struggles and the leftward moving layer of social movements (Hunter, 2004; Martin, in press). With regard to differences in structure and strategy, these collective experiments in popular power are mediating forms of participation and front-line political organization by which theory-and ideology-are transposed into material forces (new ways of life, new ways of being, and new ways of communicating). Unfortunately, with no social base, academics on the progressive left (let alone Marxists) tend to fetishise activism as an object of study, thereby reducing it to the status of a commodity (e.g., book reviews, awards, royalties). With merely one note to pluck, their self-authored calls for 'resistance' only grow to be reified and materialized in scholarly books and journals as 'high knowledge', which contributes to the demonisation of academic discourses and practices on the 'street' (Martin, in press).

Avoiding the errors of pragmatism and the 'end' of philosophy, I do not wish to devalue the dignity and importance of intellectual work. On the contrary, as Marx emphasized, the struggle over theory (as an ideal image of the world) is socially practical, especially as ideas are altered, modified or perhaps discarded (if they are wrong) in the course of struggling to put them into practice. Here, as distinct from bourgeois philosophy (idealism), Marx's 'reflection theory' of knowledge (Lenin's term) is understood to depend upon activity in material production (Ruben, 1977/1979, p. 4). What matters here is that given the practice of acquiring knowledge is a social act, an individual's geography matters as theory and practice are dialectically intertwined at the local scale of community, e.g., values, ethics and interests (Ruben, 1977/1979, p. 109).

### **Revolutionary Pedagogies of Engagement**

To fight the unreasonable demands of the ruling class, radical pedagogies such as Paula Allman, Peter McLaren, Dave Hill, Glenn Rikowski, Mike Cole, Ramin Farahmandpur, Helen Raduntz, and Peter Mayo have grappled with and attempted to respond to the demands of social movements for political and educational action by bringing Marxist theory back into conversation with the field of critical pedagogy. In doing so, these Marxist stalwarts have provided an alternative conceptual framework,

in the favor of working class struggle. As painstakingly demonstrated by McLaren (1997, 2000, 2003), the ancestral DNA of revolutionary critical pedagogy reveals that it grew out of disillusionment with critical pedagogy, which was caught in the quicksand of liberal/deconstructive/post Marxist approaches to social change over the past two decades. Even today McLaren (2000) reminds us:

The conceptual net known as critical pedagogy has been cast so wide and at time so cavalierly that it has come to be associated with anything dragged up out of the troubled and infested waters of educational practice, from classroom furniture organized in a 'dialogue friendly' circle to 'feel good' curricula designed to increase students' self-image. It has become, in other words, repatriated by liberal humanism and cathected to a combination of middle-brow, town-hall meeting entrepreneurship and Sunday School proselytizing. Its multicultural education equivalent can be linked to a politics of diversity that includes 'tolerating difference' through the celebration of 'ethnic' holidays and themes such as Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo. If the term 'critical pedagogy' is refracted onto the stage of current educational debates, we have to judge it as having been largely domesticated in a manner that many of its early exponents, such as Brazil's Paulo Freire, so strongly feared. (pp. 97-98)

At any rate, this focus on critical pedagogy as a vehicle for interpellating individuals as particular normalised subjects into the 'imagined' community of liberal democratic capitalism is changing. As a reaction to this primarily institutional form of co-option, domestication and vulgarization, revolutionary critical pedagogy (a term first coined by Paula Allman, 1999, 2001) is a relatively new field of materialist intervention in the field of regular and adult education. What makes revolutionary critical pedagogy a radical shift in social priorities is that it seeks to enrich the knowledge base of grassroots political movements through the development of social relations (labour practices) that encourage critical analysis, genuine dialogue and problem solving based upon people's everyday knowledge of capitalism (Hurst-Mann, 1998; McLaren, 2000). It is important to bear in mind that the goal of such relational and participatory pedagogical practice is not to 'integrate' individuals into the existing social order but to enable them to intervene in the way knowledge is produced by providing them with opportunities for imaging and creating alternative spaces beyond the dead-end horizon of capitalism (Hurst-Mann, 1998).

This struggle for life and dignity is only possible in terms of the dialectic and it is difficult to deny that the existing literature is a little too thin on examples of actual

application. With regards to developing an ontological commitment to the duality of human agency and structure that is both realistic and historical (Despain, 1996), the failure of revolutionary critical pedagogy to account for its implementation within complex and changing praxis communities can only lead to discouragement. For this reason, 'organic intellectuals', to take advantage of Gramsci's (1971) use of the term, should not lag behind the opportunities in today's situation by engaging solely in propagandistic and information practices aimed at a select audience. Instead, an actual task for the tiny cadre of socialists in universities is to settle the problem of strategic orientation to the working class. Although total entry is not possible, I believe that concrete activity in the form of dialogue and interaction could enable Marxist academics to play a role in maintaining and building working class political organizations that might acquire an expanded audience for individuals and groups interested in fighting for an ecologically based socialist future.

### **Mobile Ontologies: Labour Power and Class Struggle**

Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.

--Lenin (1916)

In an age in which the attack on theory is widespread and academics on the blue chip left (direct deposit incomes, adequate health care and pension plans) are consumed by anger, resignation and despair, I do not want to sound pessimistic and reactionary. With the collapse of the Soviet block and the political confusion and prejudices that followed in its wake, it is tempting to resort to bourgeois thinking and acting by 'blaming all problems upon 'objective conditions" (Kronstadt and the Party, 2003, p. 16). The problem with this cynical and detached outlook is that it reproduces a patronizing and oppressive division of labour. What needs to be clarified at the onset is that in contrast to the tendency of white Euro-North American academics to adopt a messianic vision of the 'revolution' as a single or pure act, Marx stressed that the possibility of social transformation was predicated upon the dialectical resolution of the theory/practice divide at the grassroots through a long, protracted and non-linear process of class struggle (Support Every Outbreak, 1980). But after putting aside such

metaphysical/polemical formulations, how should we precede at the local scale of the concrete to press Marx's theory of praxis?

Rather than view the present situation as bleak and empty of political opportunities, I agree with Glenn Rikowski (2000, 2001a, 2001b) who argues that mobilizing against the policies and practices of exploitative capitalism requires identifying its 'weakest link': labour power. Expanding upon Marx's value theory of labour, Rikowski (2005) defines labour power, at the level of the labour market, as our capacities to labour in the form of epistemological paradigms, skills, attitudes and dispositions. Very briefly, what makes the social form of labour power so special is that its transformation into actual labour in the labour process produces a supplementary value, which is the difference between the value created by the wage-labourer and the value necessary 'to generate the next production cycle' (p. 20). Although the wage form masks the exploitation that is at the heart of exchange between the employer and the worker, it is the productive capacity of labour power that is the sole source of surplus value within the social universe of capital (value) (Rikowski, 2000). As Marx (1967) noted in *Capital*, the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour-time used to produce it from start to finish under average working conditions. Functioning as variable capital, labour power plays a key role in the '*maintenance and expansion*' of the social universe of value because it 'always rests on an *act of will* on part of the labourer' (Rikowski, 2005, p. 20). Without falling prey to illusion of voluntarism (free will), Read (2003) argues that the labour-capital relation is inherently 'precarious' because the subjective potential of living labour power is 'fundamentally indeterminate: It can always work for or against capitalist accumulation' (p.136). Within the growing complexity of class struggle, this insight is central to understanding how ordinary workers as 'absolute agents of negativity' can escape the exploitative dialectic of alienation and objectification in the capitalist mode of production (Kovel, 2000, p. xvii).

Due to the underlying contradictions of imperialism, what makes the current historical period significant is the emergence of new forms of human sociability and subjective potentiality (Read, 2003). Under conditions of heightened global competition, capital has strived to offset the decline in the rate of profit by increasing the amount of labour-time that can be extracted for surplus accumulation. In the home citadels of

imperialism, this explains the destruction of 'spatial rigidities' associated with the traditional labour market (De Angelis, 1999). The breaking down of these barriers has fashioned new forms of social cooperation, where the production of labour power is highly fragmented, occurring in a range of dispersed physical/social settings both on and off the job within the total (integrated) sphere of social reproduction (Foley, 1999). This strategy of capitalist integration is characterized by the commodification of new spheres of social life (De Angelis, 1999). Not surprisingly, this has placed an increased burden upon the impoverished worker as the rate of exploitation and domination is raised. Despite this 'intensification of world-wide social relations' (De Angelis, 1999), Lenin (1970) observed that living subjects in their social practices are not spontaneous agents of radical social change. As capitalists of all stripes link hands in order to destroy the political organization of the working class this remains a serious challenge for transforming the embryonic class-consciousness that springs out of the binary division of labour into self-conscious, proletariat class-consciousness capable of being organized into a movement for revolution (Kelsh, 1998).

Rather than artificially prolong the life of the traditional trade union movement (with its complicity with US imperialism), I argue that whilst work organizations are an important site of learning and critical self-consciousness, with their ruthless emphasis on higher productivity and tawdry profits they should not be considered as the holy grail of revolutionary subjectivity and collective action (hooks, 2003, pp. 22-23). Of course, it goes without saying that historically the factory has been fetishised as the starting point of class struggle (Harvey, 2001). However, as the mainstream trade union movement threatens to slide into irrelevancy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the organized left or socialist wing continues to retreat under the leadership of rightward moving political parties (e.g., New Labour, Democrats), new forms of labour/community organizing have emerged out of this deepening crisis to develop serious influence in the working class by organizing the disenfranchised and unorganized, e.g., Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors and the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union (Aubry, 1997; Burgos & Pulido, 1998; Candalele & Dreier, 2000; Houston & Pulido, 2002; Pastor, 2001). As anyone who has participated in a community action initiative or neighborhood protest campaign probably knows, whilst these groups and struggles are not typically constructed for 'educational purposes', many people first develop their self-concept of

themselves as political actors and likewise begin to change behaviors and develop political knowledge and skills through this kind of direct action (Brookfield, 1992, pp. 146-147).

### **Los Angeles Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasajeros (BRU/SDP)**

In supporting every protest and rebellion against exploitation and tyranny, I believe that the strategic task is not the reform of capitalism but its overthrow and this always takes a personal dimension within theories of engagement such as Marxism, particularly socialist feminism. After relying upon the bus system in Los Angeles, I began to look around to see what the advanced elements or forces were doing against the backdrop of neo-liberalism, which is reinscribing boundaries between the haves and the have nots, particularly in reference to gender and race. Appealing to the aspirations and desires of 'atypical' workers left unprotected or ignored by mainstream trade unions, the BRU has developed a spatial politics, which has mobilized a new dispersed cartography of racialised and capitalised bodies. With regards to tactics and strategy, the BRU views the public bus system as a 'factory on wheels' (Mann, 1998, 2001b). When organizing riders, the bus offers BRU activists a way to transverse place-based divisions such as gender and race as well as to transgress the 'interdictory spaces' of the regulatory built environment (e.g., vagrancy laws) (Flusty, 2004, p. 72). What captured my interest in the BRU was that it has engaged the transit dependent in a pedagogical project to rework the socially produced 'attachments' to identity and place within the 'imagined' community of the liberal capitalist state (Hudson, 2001, p. 264). Since no division of space exists between the individual and social, the focus of my one-year engagement at the Bus Riders Union (BRU) was my personal commitment to critical/revolutionary praxis organized around the need for individual and social transformation (capitalism to socialism).

Unlike much of the intellectual left in the United States, the BRU has used radical pedagogy to energize the working class as an agent of social change. With a focus on developing an independent and class-specific response to interpellation, the BRU has altered the structure of the field of knowledge, thereby enabling it to leverage power over the state system. Indeed, using its knowledge and experience to strengthen its day-to-day organizing strategies, the BRU has nurtured a core army of volunteer workers that has achieved a string of concrete objectives and demands (Fight transit

racism, 2002). To take just one example, in 1994, the BRU filed a civil rights law suit against one of the most powerful County agencies, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), winning a precedent setting Consent Decree, which forces it to improve and expand the dismal public transportation system in Los Angeles. Always on the offensive, the BRU is connecting the struggle over public transportation to a whole range of other pressing issues including environmental justice (calling for the cleanest fuel technologically feasible and the complete elimination of diesel as a fuel source), labour struggles (supporting a fully unionized MTA workforce), privatization (of public transit services), and the problems of capitalism (Fight transit racism, 2002).

Over the past ten years, the BRU has built up a shared system of meaning by striving to implement a culture inside the organization that is multi-lingual (all meetings are conducted in English, Spanish and Korean and all flyers are considered public educations and are printed in these languages), anti-racist and supportive of women's liberation in its day-to-day work (Mann, 1998). In addressing the linguistic and cultural diversity of its social base, the BRU has adopted an 'inclusive' stance toward class[2] that situates its members as active participants in social change (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). One of the strengths of learning organizations such as the BRU is that it does not view education as a tool to teach people how to sit still and 'get along' but rather as a generative process that encourages participants to make a difference by examining their lives critically and taking action to change social conditions (Lenin cited in Kelsh, 1999).

The BRU focuses on the recovery of human agency and makes no bones that it rejects what Freire (1993) termed the 'banking' method, which reduces learners to empty containers for ready-made 'deposits' (p. 53). Exposed to radical theory and pedagogy during training (e.g., Marx, Freire), the creative energies and capacities of BRU organizers are directed toward creating a dialogical space that encourages not simply the exchange of peoples' experiences but also critical discussion, problem solving and direct action on a range of issues (e.g., the War in Iraq, Valley and Hollywood Secession and the occupation of Palestine) (Bus Riders Union asks, 2002). When this happens, BRU organizers do not decide the content and focus of the discussion. With an eye to the future, the emphasis in this mediated environment is on opening up

spaces of place-making (community) where members can engage the self and the other in the difficult social negotiations that always take place over struggles to do with truth, knowledge and power.

To its credit, unlike some ultra-left parties, where members are expected to dutifully eat the spinach fed in order to receive its politically correct nutritional value, the BRU does not demand a correct opinion on every issue. Just to provide one snapshot example, at monthly meetings, full-time organizers regularly hold legal workshops and 'teach-ins' to explain the complicated litigation process. In all of this, the BRU organizers recognize who drives the entire process and also hold open microphone sessions to allow for new knowledge and insights to emerge. Creating participation structures for open-ended dialogue allows for interaction amongst peers and for the development of action competencies through the 'inculcation of conscious political subjects capable of participating in the production and not merely the assimilation and (re)privatization of resistant knowledges' (Sahay, 1993). Here, a bottom up approach to the creation of social knowledge prevails, which acknowledges the organic skills, literacies and social competencies of BRU members, whether derived formally, informally or incidentally through everyday work routines, social practices, norms and action or even through the role of memory as 'historical knowledge' is handed down to generations (Houston & Pulido, 2002). With every activity seen to have contain some sort of pedagogical value, whether it be going out to organize on buses or standing on street corners, the BRU has developed a range of knowledge creation techniques to capture and transform any individualized, tacit and everyday learning that occurs 'naturally' into a form of explicit, radical and collective knowledge that the organization can act upon, such as 'shared story telling', 'role playing', 'brainstorming', 'face-to-face dialogue', and 'group work'. One of the best examples of this was the organization's use of Civil Rights Diaries, distributed to thousands of riders in order to develop a spatialized knowledge of problems to do with the bus system. The testimonials contained in these diaries were used as part of the BRU's legal strategy.

By extension, to produce knowledge differently, another focus of the BRU has to do with the division of labour (Martin, in press). Challenging the conventional division of labour into separate jobs for men and women, movement work is created and designed to encourage women and oppressed nationalities (e.g., Chicano, African



American) to take public action and to gain a political voice. Of course, gender and race relations are present in all types of social practices at the BRU, with ongoing conflicts over interpersonal practices of violence (white activists monopolizing the discussion and talking over the voices of people of colour) and hierarchies of organization including issues to do with prestige and leadership (media selectively quoting the leadership rather than prioritizing the voices of members). Be that as it may, with specific mechanisms in place, which reflect a social choice to overcome these contradictions, the potential exists for organizational change and growth. Thus, open mike sessions are not entirely improvisational because organizers do intervene to discipline the flow of interaction and talk by prioritizing the voices of working class women, immigrants and oppressed nationalities, who represent the social base of the BRU. With rare exception, I self-consciously distanced myself as a speaking voice in these participatory activities as I did not want to interrupt or shut down emerging narratives or new frames of understanding, from which I might learn and grow as a political subject (Martin, in press).

At the forefront of what it calls a new Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movement, the BRU is self-conscious about issues of social composition and wages internal struggles to challenge and transform the attitudes and behaviors displayed by its activists, especially those from more privileged backgrounds, i.e., white and middle class. Theoretically and practically, my involvement at the BRU confirmed the central importance of class as an organizing category for challenging the capitalist state, which through its actions created this community of 'dissidents' that self-consciously identified as 'working class' through both personal and collective forms of address and political engagement (Meyer, 2002). However, although the class-bound material interests of members shaped the BRU as a political force, as a grassroots organization in which working class women and people of color have a leading role to play, it refused to ignore forms of oppression that arise out of the exploitative nature of capitalism such as racism, sexism and homophobia (Martin, in press).

Needless to say, recognizing that many social movements have simply imploded by failing to facilitate the broadest forms of participation, a major pedagogical focus at the BRU is on issues of authority, with limited scope for white males to impose institutional or interpersonal order within the organization (Kelly, 1997). To guard

against this toxicity, I found that the BRU worked hard to build working class unity across race and gender by encouraging women and oppressed nationalities to take a leading role in all aspects of the organization's educational, political and legal work. Within these cultural practices, my university background did not afford me any special privileges. Personally, I did not resent being put in my place, so to speak, as it afforded me the opportunity to examine my white skin privilege and the way in which I organized my anti-racist work (Martin, in press). More often than not, though, the daily face-to-face emphasis on challenging white racism within the culture of the organization did cause varying degrees of discomfort, defensiveness and even outright denial amongst some white liberals, whose paternalistic sense of multicultural sensitivity was disturbed. Accustomed to sitting in the diver's seat, these individuals joined the organization with a short time horizon.

On a related point, it was Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) who remarked 'we make the road by walking.' While I would not want to argue that this is the case for everyone, one reason I believe that 'important intellectuals' from the comfortable social layers of the educational left are not represented in the rank-and-file of social movement organizations such as the BRU is that they are unaccustomed to doing the day-to-day 'housework' associated with grassroots political organizing (Hubbard, 1996). For academics used to working within the reward structures of the university, the everyday 'low status' activities that build an expanded sense of community within every effective social movement such as setting up chairs and tables for guest speakers, stuffing and sending out envelopes, distributing flyers to workers and picking up supplies from the shop are often perceived as less than glamorous (Hubbard, 1996; Martin, in press).

### **Toward a Revolutionary Praxis of Engagement**

As a socialist, I feel fortunate to be part of a generation that has inherited a rich body of Marxist theory that offers insights into how concrete political struggles can be waged in the sphere of reproduction (labour power) against the imposition of an alienated life. Without penning an apologetic, I also felt that in its most academic incarnations Marxism required a recovery of human agency. As part of a politics of 'enfleshment' (Cruz & McLaren, 2002, p. 191), I made a conscious choice to take the time to learn from the Bus Riders Union in order to flesh out the contributions and

challenges of that theory with a discussion and analysis of the practical, how-to-do-it methods which might provide educators with the sought after tools to reconstruct critical pedagogy as material force capable of 'building the bridge to the future' (Support Every Outbreak, 1980, p. 1). Given the amount of life and value that must be projected into this ritual of exchange through acts of labour (manual and intellectual), these are not easy bridges to traverse within the 'imagined' community of the university, as such relationships are not "useful for attracting capital" (Logan & Molotch cited in Villa, 2000; Hill, 1997, 2004, 2005). With employment and advancement increasingly tied to teaching and research that brings in the dollars, there is no tiptoeing around the fact that when the use-value orientation of academics is not directed toward surplus accumulation, the university rears its ugly multiplicity of heads, like Cerberus, the guard dog at the gates of Hades.

What I gained as a political subject by engaging in a revolutionary critical pedagogy, as an embodied form of community praxis was a sense of solidarity, renewal and hope. Here, of course, many issues arise, including the temporal and spatial narrativity of this text, which is highly personalised and subjective. Sensitive to issues of authority and representation, I do not want to pretend that I have written a definitive account of this socially constructed place, which is imbued with a whole constellation of rich and varied meanings (Hudson, 2001). Indeed, a survey of the Internet and printed literature reveals a multiplicity of 'co-existing characterizations' of the BRU as well as those (however imperfectly) suppressed (Hudson, 2001, p. 263).

Acknowledging that subjects are situated with different amounts of mobility and spatial power, particularly in terms of discursive power (email), these textual legitimations for particular points of view reflect a variety of attachments and commitments. What I want to disclose here is that as I produce this narrative in a different part of the globe, I am no longer affiliated with the BRU or in close physical proximity with it. However, my relationship with this community of 'dissidents' is not a free-floating abstraction. Clearly, I am not subject to the same level of trust and reciprocity that grows out of the politically and collectively enacted rituals that are always deeply embedded and bounded in time and place. As a result of these routinized and repeated (face-to-face) interactions, I still retain emotional ties with the organization and its inhabitants, which vary from person to person (Hudson, 2001, p. 282). Without forgetting this, as an exercise in memory and history, I am inevitably

colluding with the knowledge interests of some BRU members and perhaps to a lesser degree disagreeing with others, who still reside in this place (Cox, 1998; Martin, in press).

Given these differentiated relationships, attachments and interests, this paper is not a 'neutral' place where theory, ideas and insights are articulated and circulated by a sovereign, non-contradictory and self-authoring subject, who is an authoritative source of meaning (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1994). To break out of this geographical dilemma, I view this paper as a site of ideology: a place in which a particular embodied and interested approach to supporting local 'community' struggles is put forth through text. In the present world situation, where public opinion is increasingly divided, the desired effect of this form of practice is to reach across space in order to interpellate the sympathetic reader as an active subject of class struggle. On this note, in terms of the praxis I am advocating, it may be useful to recall that in *The Transitional Program*, Trotsky (1938) wrote:

All methods are good which raise the class-consciousness of the workers, their trust in their own forces, their readiness for self-sacrifice in the struggle. The impermissible methods are those which implant fear and submissiveness in the oppressed before their oppressors, which crush the spirit of protest and or substitute for the will of the masses the will of the leaders.

By this measure, what I want to argue is that given the social forces that are being drawn into political life today, a revolutionary critical pedagogy speaks to the oppressed and exploited everywhere.

## Notes

[1] In anticipation of the Howard government's *Research Quality Framework* (an idea 'inherited' from the United Kingdom), micro-metrics are being developed around this assessment system to ensure the productive 'quality' of faculty's teaching, research and service (Allport, 2005, p. 2). As reported in the *Advocate* (RQF Update, 2005), what matters here is that competitive funding will be tied to 'the twin arms of the RQF-- excellence and impact' (p. 30).

[2] Drawing upon definitions provided by Marx and Engels (1967), in this study, the terms 'proletariat', 'worker' and 'working class' are all abstract concepts used to refer to

those who do not own the means of production and have only their labour power to sell. Conceived in this way, they are inclusive concepts that are against the exclusive ideology and practice of white male labourism rampant in the Western Trade Union movement (Sears & Moors, 1995).

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