

Hip-Hop and Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy: Blue Scholarship to Challenge "The Miseducation of the Filipino"

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Abstract

This paper problematizes education policy in the Philippines and United States through a comparative analysis of the No Child Left Behind legislation (United States) and the Education Act of 1982 (Philippines). I demonstrate how systems of education in these two countries are employed to serve the hegemonic interests of a small group of elites who control the means of production. I make the case that hip-hop that appropriately names the world holds the emancipatory potential to demystify the naturalized social relations of a capitalist society. Utilizing the music of Seattle-based artists Blue Scholars as a case study, I show that hip-hop can assist in developing a revolutionary critical pedagogy that functions to not only understand the world but more importantly to recreate it.

Keywords: Hip-Hop, Critical Pedagogy, Education Policy, Philippines, No Child Left Behind

Introduction

In his acclaimed essay, "The Miseducation of the Filipino," historian Renato Constantino wrote about the ambitions of United States colonial education in the Philippines. Constantino asserts that the educational system created in the Philippines by the United States government was never intended to promote democracy, freedom, and equality. Rather, the system of education was established as means to pacify the Filipino people with "the overriding objective of preserving and expanding American control."¹ Constantino wrote that a truly emancipatory and democratic educational system could only emerge from a broad based people's movement that was dedicated

to the needs of its people and expressive of their aspirations. His first paragraph testifies to this belief,

Education is a vital weapon of a people striving for economic emancipation, political independence, and cultural renaissance. We are such a people. Philippine education, therefore, must produce Filipinos who are aware of their country's problems, who understand the basic solution to these problems, and who care enough and have enough to work and sacrifice for their country's salvation.²

Renato Constantino's analysis, first published in 1966, is still relevant forty years later. Addressing a crowd of state universities and college officials, Philippine President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, recognized the role of Philippine education in preparing Filipinos to become overseas contract workers while boasting that the Philippine's "great human resources are our greatest resources." She goes on to encourage "the local colleges and universities on the occasion of your oath ... [to] train our sights on strengthening [the] overseas workers base. Beginning with tweaking the school curriculum to make the Filipino the best worker in the world."³ Ever since the United States' supported Marcos dictatorship (1969-1986), the comparative advantage of the Philippine economy has been the exportation of Filipino bodies throughout the world as cheap labor. Overseas Contract Workers are glorified as the "mga bagong bayani" (the new heroes) with their annual remittance from abroad keeping the Philippine economy afloat, repaying the interest of foreign debt, and supporting the luxury and privilege of less than 1 percent of the Filipino ruling class. Surely, educating future generations to work and become productive members of society is not a perverse objective in a truly just and equal society. Unfortunately, the nine million Filipinos involved in a forced diaspora are a clear testament that we do not live in such a world and therefore education as a medium to perpetuate economic, political, and cultural domination demands critique.

In this essay, I assert that a genuine redirection of education towards the promotion of the immediate and long-term needs of the Filipino people is required to end the conditions of internal colonialism (in the United States) and neo-colonialism (in the Philippines). I examine how education policy in the Philippines and the United States has served the interests of the elites as it has been "tweaked" in an effort to create and sustain the role of Filipinos as "the best workers in the world." I maintain that the transformation of education to meet the needs of the people is not possible without the

development of a critical consciousness that reflects and acts upon the existing social order. I make the case that hip-hop which appropriately names the world holds the emancipatory potential to demystify the naturalized social relations of capitalist society (the extraction of surplus labor from workers who have nothing to sell but their labor power). Through the specific music of Blue Scholars I show that hip-hop artists can assist in developing a critical consciousness that is carried out in the streets serving the communities where they live and serve.

Hegemony and the Role of Intellectuals in Developing Critical Consciousness

Renato Constantino's essay, *The Miseducation of the Filipino*, acquiesces with the work of Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci as both theorists demonstrate that systems of education in a capitalist based society (such as the Philippines and the United States) serve the interests of the ruling elite and assist in making an unjust social order appear as "common sense." While Gramsci agreed with the Marxist-Leninist analysis that the ruling class utilizes physical coercion (police or military forces) to preserve dominion of society, Gramsci affirms that no matter how powerful or repressive a regime, it could not sustain itself through physical coercion alone. To legitimate control, the ruling class must direct and influence people to consent to their own oppression through a system of coordinated (political, religious, economic, cultural, and educational) alliances. Gramsci referred to the ruling class' combined use of force matched with their exercise of winning the people's consent (so that they will consent to their own oppression) as hegemony.⁴ In his book, *Gramsci, Freire & Adult Education*, Peter Mayo maintains that systems of education serve a hegemonic role in naturalizing the status quo for those in power. Mayo states, "social institutions such as schools and other ... establishments are not 'neutral;' rather, they serve to cement the existing hegemony, and are therefore intimately tied to the interests of the most powerful."⁵ For this reason, pedagogy is a crucial site in the larger struggle to transform society "to a higher view of life" where human beings can transcend the rule of capital and live a life (regardless of their gender, race, sexual orientation, and religion) in promise and peace.

Gramsci believed that intellectuals committed to the masses, are essential figures in countering a naturalized view of class-based society as they can assist organizationally, politically, and culturally in the tasks of transforming the world.

Gramsci believed that with the assistance of revolutionary intellectuals, workers could acquire a “critical self-consciousness” and organize itself into a united political force. In his writings, Gramsci highlights the important roles of intellectuals or the “intellectual-moral bloc, which makes politically possible the intellectual progress of the masses.”⁶ Gramsci states:

Critical self-consciousness historically and politically signifies the creation of an intellectual elite: a human mass does not ‘differentiate itself,’ does not become independent ‘by itself’ without lateral organization, and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders, without the theoretical aspect of the practical-theoretical connection being concretely distinguished by a stratum of ‘specialists’ in conceptual and philosophical elaboration.⁷

Gramsci believed the considerable task of instilling conviction among the proletariat that they are the creators of history would not be possible without a strong understanding of what emerged from a collective past. Gramsci states,

In the most immediate and pertinent sense one cannot be a philosopher, that is, have a critically coherent conception of the world, without being aware of its history, of the phases of development it represents and of the fact that it stands in contradiction to other conceptions or elements of them...How is it possible to think about the present, and a very much determined present, with a thought elaborated from problems of a past which is often remote and superseded? If this happens it means that one is an “anachronism” in one’s own time, a fossil and not a modern living being.⁸

Returning to a Collective Past

Historicizing Philippine education in relation to U.S. imperialism, Renato Constantino declares,

The majority of our educational leaders...still continue to trace their direct lineal descent to the first soldier-teachers of the American invasion army. They seem oblivious of the fact that the educational system and the philosophy of which they are the proud inheritors were valid only within the framework of American colonialism. The educational system introduced by the Americans had to correspond and was designed to correspond to the economic and political reality of American conquest.⁹

In 1901, three years into the Philippine-American War, U.S. President McKinley and his advisors shifted their military strategy in the Philippines from “educating ‘em with a krag” (the standard army rifle of the day) to educating Filipinos with chalkboards, books, and the English language. As a result, a shipload of teachers on an army boat called the SS Thomas sailed from San Francisco to the Philippines. The teachers or “Thomasites” as they later were called, were largely ex-military soldiers and recent college graduates from the top universities in the United States. Unlike the Spanish missionaries, the goals of the Thomasites was not to explicitly Christianize the Filipinos but rather baptize their “little brown brothers”¹⁰ with a United States model of education. The U.S. government’s utilization of the Thomasites to conquer Filipino hearts and minds was an essential strategy in the colonial conquest of the islands. Constantino describes the crucial role of the Thomasites in the development of an educational apparatus linked with the US colonial project. He states, “the primary reason for the rapid introduction of the American public school system in the Philippines was the conviction of the military leaders that no measure could quickly promote the pacification of the islands as education.”¹¹ The successful implementation of colonial education throughout the islands helped to create future generations of Filipinos that adhered to the “benevolence” of United States occupation.

The Education Act of 1982 (EA 1982), set in place by dictator Ferdinand Marcos, continued a legacy of schooling that naturalized foreign control of the Philippine polity and the systematic extraction of natural resources from the islands. The institutionalization of this policy made into law the interests of both the dominant US and native classes. These interests are clearly expressed in an educational survey carried out in 1969 called the Presidential Commission to Survey Philippine Education (PCSPE). Financed by the Ford Foundation, PCSPE was established to evaluate the performance of the Philippine’s education system and explore “initiatives on the part of the Department of Education to interest the World Bank in the Philippine educational improvement.”¹² According to a primer titled, “What’s Behind the Education Act of 1982?” released by the Nationalist Resource Center of the Philippines, the PCSPE report found that the labor force in the Philippines was “underutilized” and the prescribed remedy was to “enhance” it by linking export-oriented economic strategies with education. The PCSPE report goes on to suggest,

“education...be used to harness the [Philippine’s] vast human resources according to the manpower requirements of...economic growth.”¹³

Using the PCSPE report from 1969 as its template, the EA 1982 drastically malformed education in the Philippines. For instance, the curriculum of the first six grades was altered to serve as the “basis for the formation of trained manpower.”¹⁴ Former World Bank president Robert McNamara acknowledged, “effective elementary education ...helps make the labor force more easily trainable and mobile. It facilitates skill development during subsequent formal and on-the-job training as well as through agricultural and industrial extension programs.”¹⁵ Therefore, to make the Philippine labor force “more easily trainable and mobile,” elementary curriculum was standardized with an emphasis on the English language along with an increase in the school hours devoted to mathematics and science.

Creating Two Paths

Education modifications set in place by the EA 1982 created two distinct paths for Filipino youth in their last two years of high school. The path less traveled for students was admission to a university or college where funding for such departments in the humanities and the arts were cut in favor of education programs that would efficiently ease social unrest. This is evident in the large amounts of financial support the World Bank provided in the Philippine agricultural sector. In 1982, the Philippine government received a \$25 million dollar loan from the World Bank to support the agricultural sector with more educational programs. The Philippine deputy budget minister states in a World Bank sponsored report, “We need further to reduce the unemployment and underemployment rates in the rural areas, and stem the tide of migration from country to city.” The report continues with a solution to “give the farmer what he needs –the fertilizers, the pesticides, the farming tools. Teach him the modern secrets of mechanized farming to boost his yields.”¹⁶ With the assistance of the World Bank, Filipino youth were educated to maintain their reliance on United States technology, agricultural inputs (such as fertilizers and pesticides), as well as mechanized farming. Therefore, the legacy of the Thomasites continued into the 20th century as the technocrats of the World Bank trained future generations of Filipinos the logistics of environmental pillage, economic dependency, and social appeasement.

The second and more common path available to high school graduates was terminal vocational training that explicitly prepared students for export-oriented labor. The World Bank provided financial assistance for the development of technical training centers and experimental agricultural schools that were installed near export processing zones.¹⁷ The connection between educational curriculum and the needs of an export economy ensured that multinational corporations would have an abundant supply of semi-skilled labor. Letizia Constantino clearly articulates this point in her essay, *World Bank Textbooks: Scenario for Deception*. She states,

the kind of educational system the World Bank wants to shape is therefore one that will meet the manpower needs of transnationals...and above all, one that will insure the internationalization by the entire student population of values and outlooks supportive of the global capitalist system.¹⁸

Through World Bank sponsored textbooks, Letizia Constantino maintains that students are inculcated with information that will, “mold [the student] as an individual who will accept the present social order and his/her place in it.”¹⁹ She goes on to argue that these books foster what she calls a “bland cultural nationalism” that urges students to celebrate shallow notions of identity that expunge a history of Filipino struggle against exploitation and colonialism. She elaborates how these corporate textbooks,

teach the young students to be patriotic, to be proud of their indigenous culture and their national identity. But national identity is equated only with having...our national flag, national flower, national tree, national costume...In short, a bland cultural nationalism is fostered.²⁰

Neoliberalism and No Child Left Behind

Allow me to emulate the commentary made by Karl Marx in his preface to *Capital, Volume 1* to connect education policies in the Philippines with the education policies of the United States. If the North American reader shrugs his or her shoulders at the conditions of education in the Philippines, or optimistically finds comfort with the thought that in the United States things are not nearly so bad, I must plainly say: De te fibula naratur! (The tale is told of you!).²¹

The passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 with bipartisan support was a superficial attempt to remedy the paltry conditions in U.S public schools. A recent

study conducted by Harvard University, provides a picture of these conditions as it reports,

only two-thirds of teenagers graduate from high school, a proportion that is closer to 50 percent for students of color.²² Policymakers have ignored the decades of consistent government cutbacks in educational funding. Instead of tackling root issues, NCLB makes cosmetic changes in addressing educational inequality while hiding behind the verbal guises of “efficiency” and “accountability”.

NCLB legislation is related to the neoliberal policies that have been forced down the throats of the Filipino people by the spoons of structural adjustment. Martin Hart-Landsberg accurately defines neoliberalism as “an ideological cover for the promotion of capitalist interests.”²³ Throughout history, business and political leaders have utilized this “ideological cover” to defend an unjust social order that allows a small minority of people to extract surplus value (wealth) from the great majority. In their essay, “Neoliberalism and Schooling in the U.S.,” David Hursh and Camille Anne Martina, historicize the ascension of neoliberalism during the time period after World War II. They state,

This period was marked by unusually rapid and stable economic growth, fueled in large part because of the growing wages of workers. However, while workers were earning and spending more, businesses’ net rate of profit fell by more than fifty percent between 1965 and 1974...In order to restore higher rates of profit, the U.S. and other developed countries implemented policies that would support corporations over workers [characterized by] inducing a recession to deflate wage demands, escalate the scarcity of jobs and reverse the growth of social spending.²⁴

Despite the harsh realities of neoliberal policies that are intensifying inequalities throughout the world, defenders of global capital continue to spread its myths. During a recent World Trade Organization meeting, William Cline, a senior fellow for the Institute for International Economics, stated, “if all global trade barriers were eliminated approximately 500 million people could be lifted out of poverty over 15 years.”²⁵ However, the strategies that Cline speaks of have already been implemented in the Philippines for more than 50 years. The results are astounding as 75% of the Filipino population lives in abject poverty.²⁶ In the United States, youth, parents, and teachers are only beginning to experience the truth behind the dismantling of

education services in service of a small minority that seek to quench their insatiable desire for power and wealth.

With NCLB legislation, schools must rely on standardized tests in math and reading to gauge their school's "adequate yearly progress." In some districts, schools that fail to make adequate progress are required to offer students tutoring conducted by private companies. If a large number of students from a respective school are consistently unable to meet test benchmarks, state officials have the option to privatize, which would allow corporations to administer all of the school's functions. Hursh and Martina make clear that standardized tests are not merely benign measurements of student achievement but also methods for exclusion. Focusing on the burdens that face the state of New York, they maintain that students are required to pass five exams in order to graduate from high school. They explain how these exams continue the trend in the

New York State educational system [that has] been turned into a two track system, with Regents exams and curricula for college bound students and non-Regent courses for non-college bound students, with the latter courses dominated by working-class and students of color.²⁷

What is happening in New York is occurring throughout the nation as NCLB legislation and its promotion of standardized testing continues to funnel youth towards two distinct paths. One path constitutes rigorous mathematical and scientific curriculum for students whose test scores "measure" them as college bound. The more common path for the majority of working class and students of color are militarized school zones to train the future reserve army of the unemployed.

Comparable to the struggle over education in the Philippines, the conflicting desires of working people and capital interests are easily identified in United States education. In their classic book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis express these opposing forces. They state,

Social elites have sought to use the schools for the legitimation of inequality through an ostensibly meritocratic and rational mechanism for allocating individuals to economic positions; they have sought to use the schools for the reproduction of profitable types of worker consciousness and behavior through a correspondence between the social relationships of education and those of economic life. On the other hand, parents, students, worker organizations,

blacks, ethnic minorities, women, and others have sought to use schools for their own objectives: material security, culture, a more just distribution of economic rewards, and a path of personal development conducive not to profits but a fuller, happier life.²⁸

Consequently, those seeking to utilize education for the betterment of humanity must map out their struggles with a critical consciousness that refuses the type of education that functions to create docile laborers. One of the most important education theorists of our time, Peter McLaren emphasizes the importance of a critical consciousness that contests the bland and shallow approaches to education reform epitomized by NCLB in favor of an educational model geared for equality, democracy, and human potential. These goals can only be attained through an intimate connection with the masses, whom Bowles and Gintis specifically define as the “parents, students, worker organizations, blacks, ethnic minorities, women, and others.” McLaren affirms,

We need to be able to speak our struggle not just in abstract terms, but in ways that touch hearts and minds. Thus, we must...engage in finding ways of recognizing points of commonality, of mutual interest, where our own struggle for liberation intersects with the struggles of others, where we can begin to transcend the limitations of what is, in the struggle for what could be...[This struggle] must take place not only on the picket line or protest march, but also in the schools, places of worship, libraries, shop floors, and corporate offices – in every venue where people come together to learn, to labor, and to love.²⁹

Aligning Gramsci with a Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy

At the forefront in theorizing revolutionary critical pedagogies, McLaren’s work upholds the belief that the more conscious people become of exploitative social relations that lie at the root of a global division of labor and the corporatization of our world, the more people will in quantity become active in the changing of society. Only through the imagination and creation of a world outside of the capitalist law of value, will people come to realize that struggle is their historic right and work to attain the intense desires of freedom that burn within. Echoing this sentiment in his latest book, *Rage and Hope*, McLaren asserts:

Revolutionary critical pedagogy can assist us in understanding history as a process in which human beings make their own society, although in conditions most often not of their own choosing and therefore populated with the intentions

of others... The actions of human beings are what shapes history. History is not given form and substance by abstract categories. The idea that a future society comes into being as a negation of the existing one finds its strongest expression in class struggle (19).

In their lucid essay, “Rethinking Critical Pedagogy and the Gramscian and Freirean Legacies,” Peter McLaren and Gustavo Fischman answer a crucial question presented in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, where he poses: “is it better to ‘think,’ without having a critical awareness, ... or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the world?”³⁰ McLaren and Fischman highlight the importance of a collective critical consciousness that transcends a social relation of domination as they support the capacity of human beings to not only understand the world but more importantly to transform it. McLaren and Fischman recover Gramsci’s notion of hegemony from theorists who employ its use but disregard the fundamental social contradictions between capital and labor. Furthermore, they make clear that the strategy to recreate society must take place not only in the transformation of civil society but more comprehensively in the creation of proletarian hegemony. They state:

The problem with [uncritical] view[s] of hegemony is that in their emphasis, to distance themselves from what they consider to be a crude economism, they often seriously neglect the fundamental social contradictions between capital and labor and resecured the prohibitions on challenging the contradictions of capitalism...³¹

They go on to argue that such exclusions in Gramsci’s notion of hegemony,

have effectively caused domination to hemorrhage into a pool of relational negotiations in which certain ideological positions are won through consent. Here, we need to be reminded that intellectuals themselves are always the products of new forms of collective labor power brought about and consolidated by the forces of production.³²

Hip-Hop and the Naming of the World

Gramsci believed that “ordinary men and women could be educated into understanding the coercive and persuasive power of capitalist hegemony over them.”³³ Gramsci highlighted the important roles of intellectuals who aligned with

subalterns and acted to transform the social existence of oppressed communities. He states,

The...new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader,' and not just a simple orator.³⁴

As I have mentioned in my article, "Filipino American Hip-Hop and Class Consciousness: Renewing the Spirit of Carlos Bulosan," the oral expression central to hip-hop comes from our nation's racialized youth, who are surviving in a system that mandates inequality and exploitation.³³ Hip-hop artists often speak "in active participation in practical life" revealing people's present needs for adequate food, shelter, and security. Furthermore, hip-hop is an important musical outlet that possesses the ability to leave a lasting imprint in the hearts and minds of the struggling. For instance, the Seattle based group Blue Scholars, contributes in the development of a revolutionary critical pedagogy as they disseminate lyrical messages that demystify the exploitative nature of capitalism while at the same time sharpen the lens for social analysis, untie the tongue for cultural critique, and strengthen the heart for activism among those who listen and relate. Through their music, Blue Scholars assist in the development of a critical consciousness by naming the world and helping to uncover the material reality for many Filipinos and other oppressed communities who are "shackled in the chains of international capital gain."³⁶ In their song *Southside Revival*, Blue Scholars identify how the critique of capital and the satisfaction of human needs are at the roots of their musical philosophy:

*"Hungry is an adjective attached to my philosophy,
You got to be, progress revolves around economy.
I can see the consequences of capital first hand,
Monorail construction push[es] the tenants off the land."*

The Word Employed to Unveil and Transform

The musical duo of Blue Scholars, consisting of Filipino-American, Geologic (vocals) and Sabzi (DJ) are examples of hip-hop artists who serve as intellectuals and "permanent persuaders" whose purpose is to serve the social groups with whom they

share fundamental interests. They use their music as an organizing tool to reclaim history, challenge what is viewed as “natural,” and engage with the masses in charting alternatives to capitalism. Through their various performances in mainstream concerts, community organized benefits, and anti-imperialist conferences, Blue Scholars work to build relational knowledge of and with the masses to help them develop a critical and collective reflectiveness. As Paulo Freire emphasized, critical inquiry and unveiling is not enough for social transformation. Freire asserts,

If it was possible to change reality simply by our witness for example, we would have to think that reality is changed inside of our consciousness. Then it would be very easy to be a liberatory educator! All we would have to do is an intellectual exercise and society would change! No, this is not the question. To change the concrete conditions of reality mean a tremendous political practice, which demands mobilization, organization of the people...all these things, which are not organized just inside the school.³⁷

Freire’s words remind us that the transformation of the society does not take place only within the individual basis of self-reflection but through the collective actions of people. Through their connection with the pro-democratic organizations, Blue Scholars directly engage with youth, workers, and students in translating theory into concrete strategies for improving their communities. Demonstrating this commitment, Blue Scholars performed a benefit concert to financially support a national Filipino youth conference organized by the group Sandiwa.³⁵ The conference, in recognition of this year’s centennial of Filipino migration to the United States, brought Filipino youth from around the country to critically examine the role Filipinos have played as cheap labor in the sugar plantations of Hawaii, the agricultural fields of California's Central Valley, and the canneries of the Pacific Northwest. Sandiwa proclaims their hope “that this conference connects our history with the ongoing struggle millions of Filipinos face today in search of new homelands away from the existing conditions in the Philippines.” In a workshop organized by the youth collective, Anakbayan (whom Geo is an active member), to honor Filipino labor organizer, writer, and activist, Carlos Bulosan, Anakbayan proclaims:

we hope to improve our conditions by studying and educating others about the rich culture and proud revolutionary heritage of the Filipino peoples continuing struggle. We also work towards building anti-imperialist unity among all people to expose and oppose U.S. imperialist intervention in the Philippines.³⁹

Because their music is intimately connected with Seattle's working class community of color who are politically active in reflecting and acting upon the problems that engulf their lives, Blue Scholars is not simply employing resistance (which is largely passive and individual in focus) but more significantly serving as committed agents to make possible another world.

Lyrical Examination

Blue Scholars' music substantiate the testament that "'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' already existing activity."⁴⁰ In their song, "Wounded Eyes," Blue Scholars reflect upon the conditions of their racialized and working class communities who they describe as "poverty stricken folks, constantly liv[ing] in hope. American dreams angling from a rope." Further exposing the difficult realities many people face in their communities, rapper, Geologic declares,

*"I study to survive...
...where the struggle and the hustle coincide.
In this moment in time, a shift in the tide.
Get the blindfold lifted from your eyes,
and see what we see.
And stop pretending it's all right."*⁴¹

Paralleling the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Blue Scholars recognize that as artists their music must not consist solely "in eloquence [as] an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions." As "permanent persuaders" in their community, Blue Scholars utilize their music as an outlet for study as well as a conduit to promote the transformation of the systems that have left many without proper food, housing, and education. In the same song, they state,

*"My wounded eyes seen through the lies.
Many brutalized,
so we rise and fight for the future we strive.
...Who am I?"*

A student.

Observing my environment to see contradictions,

In concrete conditions.

Evidence we're living in an obsolete system.

...I got folks working in the public school sector,

who lose one youth to death per semester.

I guess the cost of living is going up,

*While the chance of living is going down.*⁴²

Supporting the dialectical process of praxis, Blue Scholars pull at the roots of a material relation (between labor and capital) that dehumanize those left with no other option but to sell their labor power. Scrutinizing the personal effects of such a system, in his song “Cornerstone” vocalist, Geologic rhymes how he, like many people, “don’t really own a damn thing, except for my labor. And maybe, a couple thousand pages of my rhymes.” He goes on to assert that this system has placed our brains in a cage, unless

“...knowledge itself is given proper prospective.

To see how politicians keep the dollars protected...

[with their] false prophesy,

promising we will all be free.

As long as we fall in line with the flawed philosophy...

[while]the ranks start to swell,

*in the hoods and jail cells.*⁴³

Providing further explanation of this “flawed philosophy” I turn to the writings of Epifanio San Juan, Jr. At a talk he gave at the Carlos Bulosan Symposium in Washington D.C., San Juan lucidly provides the characteristics of the present social system that dichotomizes society leaving the majority “deprived of land, tools or animals...confined to sell their labor-power and do manual ‘labor’ while those free from laboring with their hands, supposedly educated, occupy a higher position or status.” He maintains that those who occupy the lower rungs in this division of labor are there not as “a result of being uneducated, but of being dispossessed, racialized and colonized.”⁴⁴

As I have shown with the education policies in the Philippines and the United States, the educational apparatus in its present form legitimizes inequality by assigning individuals to unequal social positions. Blue Scholars provides further detail into this system that disseminates a “false philosophy” to the majority of the people in society. In their song “Commencement Day,” Blue Scholars sing, “you know they made curriculums designed to create obedient drones.” They elaborate,

“They never tell you the conditions in which to apply the math.

Only 65 percent of your peers,

freshman year, are still here.

And half that total will move on,

But three out of four, will drop out in two years.

Add it up and it equals some shit has gone wrong.

Now the snakes gave the education budget rollback,

No Child Left Behind is just a backdoor draft...

It’s the next generation of miseducated youth,

next time ask them for proof.”⁴⁵

Lyrics such as this strongly conflict with the endorsements made by educational bureaucrats who claim that privatization is the panacea for students, parents, and teachers. For instance, Education Secretary, Margaret Spellings, recently defended the policy of No Child Left Behind stating that “the law works.” She argues that people who are “critical of the law simply fear the results.”⁴⁶ Ironically, Spellings is not entirely wrong. Many youth of color, are fearful of recent education legislation as they witness their peers entering militarized zones as opposed to school zones. Authors such as Angela Davis and Mumia Abu-Jamal have already revealed the harsh reality for many African Americans in the United States whose attendance in prisons exceeds the numbers for those in institutions of higher learning.

Education, Economy, and War

Education in the Philippines was transformed in 1982 to further produce the necessary labor for an export-oriented economy. In the United States the economy does not evolve around export but rather a “military-industrial complex.” As the United States

fights its wars in the occupied countries of Afghanistan and Iraq, the country's labor force must meet the demands of a war-based economy. The "backdoor draft" that Blue Scholars allude to in their song "Commencement Day" further discloses how No Child Left Behind is utilized to serve the labor needs of the U.S. armed forces. Currently, the U.S. ruling elites promoting the occupations in the Middle East are calling for an expansion of their "wars on terrorism" to such places as Iran and Venezuela. However, public support for U.S. imperial aggression dwindles reflected not only in the millions of people who have taken to the streets in protest but also in the military's failure to maintain monthly recruitment goals. Provisions in NCLB legislation assist the U.S. military with their recruitment problems. Buried on page 559 of the legislation's 670 total pages, a small section requires that schools turn over names, phone numbers, and addresses of all students to the military or risk losing NCLB funding.⁴⁷ Succinctly explaining this precarious connection between education policy and war, Blue Scholars explains that the elite's "solution for the poor, [is to] recruit them for the war."⁴⁸

The common denominator that links education and war is found in the system of capitalism.⁴⁹ This is not a new phenomenon. Author and social activist, Rosa Luxemburg, echoed these sentiments at the turn of the 20th century. She said, "if we consider history as it was not as it could have been or should have been – we must agree that war has been an indispensable feature of capitalist development."⁵⁰ It is impossible to omit war and imperialism in the histories of Filipino Americans. Echoing Luxemburg's words in their song, "The Long March," Blue Scholars state, "War? What the fuck is it good for? Absolutely everything that this country has stood for."⁵¹ The words of both Rosa Luxemburg and Blue Scholars, while expressed in two different centuries, embody a continuing past, which began with the conquest of the Philippines and carries on in its present forms characterized by U.S. "military training" in the Philippines, secret prisons throughout Eastern Europe, and the ongoing occupations in the Middle East.

Ever-imminent Hope

The central objective of education should be for the formation of men and women with minds and attitudes that are in tune to the needs of its people. This is expressed

wonderfully in the music of Blue Scholars as they state, “My purpose as of now is to serve the people to the fullest.”⁵² Serving the people of all colors, genders, ages, and religions requires the development of a consciousness critical of our present social order. As I have introduced throughout this essay, the lyrics of Blue Scholars participates in the development of this consciousness by naming the world. Furthermore, developing a critical consciousness is only the first step in a collective path towards equality and justice. Contrary to the widespread belief that “there are no alternatives” to a system responsible for global environmental degradation, widespread impoverishment, and perpetual war, we must actively seek to attain what many believe to be impossible. The present system will not collapse on its own. As it has transpired throughout history, the small group of elites will continue to make the necessary changes of appeasement in order to accomplish their parochial objectives for profit and power. For those who demand more, the lyrics of Blue Scholars provide a strategy. They call us to “look critical and begin to organize quietly, underneath the sugar coated surface of society.”⁵³ *Such* messages that inject the people with courage and hope are indispensable in the long march ahead. The obstacles in our path will continue to be great and for many they will seem be an unsurpassable. However, closing with the words of Blue Scholars,

“No uprising fails.

Each one is a step forward

towards the victory

at the end of the trail.”⁵⁴

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Suzanne Schmidt, Curry Mallot, and Dave Hill for providing me with valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this work. I dedicate this paper to the memory of my former teacher and friend, Professor Robert Proudfoot.

Notes

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