

Coming to Critical Pedagogy: A Marxist Autobiography in the History of Higher Education

Curry Stephenson Malott

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, West Chester, Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

In this essay Malott traces his journey to critical pedagogy focusing on a significant element of his family's ethnic and class background and its connection to his own educational experiences from public schooling to university. Drawing on Marx's historical discussions at the end of Volume 1 of Capital Malott traces his own German/English background to the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe and how that process was connected to the American colonies and the emergence of capitalism in what would become the United States of America. Malott argues that this historical discussion both helps better understand the current neoliberal era of perpetual budget cuts and austerity measures, and the true class position of most workers who wrongly self-identify as middle-class. In the end, this autobiography is intended to advance a proletarian class-consciousness and the movement to transcend capital it demands.

Critical pedagogies emerge as direct responses to concrete material conditions and historical processes. For example, the word socialism first appeared in England in the nineteenth century as a socio-economic alternative vision to capitalism (Cole, 2008). Enslaved Africans in the southern region of what would become the United States forged a black liberation theology as part of the struggle to end slavery. Whereas *progressive education* in the United States was a liberal response to save capitalism from the economic crisis of the late nineteenth century, Paulo Freire developed what we know

today as *critical pedagogy* during the 1960s in Brazil to challenge the illiteracy resulting from the impoverished social conditions stemming, in large part, from U.S. imperialism. My own experiences growing up in U.S. bourgeois society, relying on a wage to survive, led me to critical pedagogy. I believe this should be the case for anyone who is committed to the values of democracy but is forced to sell their labor capacity on the market as a consequence of not having direct, collective, access to the means of production. That is, the vast majority are forced to sell themselves because of the many ways humanity has been primitively accumulated from the soil to create the conditions for capital, which has been developing since the 16th century; from the Enclosure Acts beginning in England violently forcing former peasants from their lands creating the first proletariat, to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the shameful legacy of *men stealers*, to the colonial expansion and conquest of the Americas and its First Nations, a process still being contested; to British imperialism subverting the cotton industry in India and the opium-induced instability that eroded Chinese sovereignty leading to the first waves of Chinese immigrants coming to California, U.S.A. in the 1830s. However, coming to critical understandings and radical practices are not developments that happen all at once or immediately. In this essay I will discuss the experiences that led me to critical pedagogy and how my own understanding of social class has changed over time. First, however, and throughout the essay, I outline my own family history situated in the larger historical context of the development of capitalism and the role of higher education in that process.

Higher Education and the Post-War Boom

The post-WWII boom in the U.S. provided the evidence for much of the working-class, and many baby boomers in particular, including my parents, aunts and uncles, that capitalism, and bourgeois society more generally, was delivering its promise of equality and freedom, which was not an unreasonable, irrational, or unfounded conclusion. For example, in the six years following WWII college enrollment “doubled its pre-war levels” (Cohen and Kisker, 2010, p. 195). Consequently, “the belief that everyone could go to college became firmly established in the minds of the American people; college was no longer reserved for an elite few” (Cohen and Kisker, 2010, p. 195). Underscoring the

movement of working class people into colleges is reflected in the growth of public institutions. That is, “by the first decade after the war, expenditures for campus expansion in the public sector were running at least 50 percent higher than at the private institutions” (Cohen and Kisker, 2010, p. 200) boosted by the GI Bill and the more affordable tuition at state schools. Consequently, “public institutions rose from 35 to 44 percent of all colleges and universities, and public enrollments went from 49 to 79 percent” (Cohen and Kisker, 2010, p. 200). Reflecting this era’s substantial growth trend it is noteworthy that between 1945 and 1975 college enrollments increased by more than 500 percent, from 2 million to around 11 million (Cohen and Kisker, 2010).

However, contrary to the popular belief that this “golden era” of higher education was marked by democratic commitments to equal access embodied in the first ever report on higher education, commissioned by President Truman in 1946, and that the corporate agenda for higher education did not emerge until the advent of the neoliberal era following the economic downturn of the 1970s, Truman’s report, I am arguing, was actually responding to capital’s growing need for a larger supply of highly educated workers. The economic context of higher education is clearly a dominant theme in Truman’s 1947 report, despite its eloquent title, *Higher Education and Democracy: A Report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education*. Consider:

As the national economy became industrialized and more complex, as production increased and national resources multiplied, the American people came in ever greater numbers to feel the need of higher education for their children. More and more American youth attended colleges and universities, but resources and equipment and curriculum did not keep pace with the growing enrollment or with the increasing diversity of needs and interests among the students...Enactment of Public Laws 16 and 346, the “Veterans Rehabilitation Act”...increased...numbers...far beyond the capacity of higher education in teachers, in buildings, and in equipment.ⁱ

It is discursively clever and deceiving to attribute growing college enrollments to the democratic will of the people because most parents obviously do want their children to have more opportunities and higher wages than themselves. However, what this argument ignores is the role of capital’s changing needs in the post-war era as American capitalists’ demand for college-educated workers skyrocketed. The report does hint at this as it goes on to identify “science” as responsible for creating “new devices and techniques of

production” thereby altering the necessary skills and educational attainment American capitalists required of many workers. Additionally, America’s growing responsibility in world affairs after WWII, the Report argues, required that more Americans gain “a knowledge of other peoples,” including economic, political, and cultural knowledge. We know, historically, that this has been central to colonialism, that is, to most efficiently manage the affairs and influence the thinking of the people of other nations. William Blum’s (2004) *Killing Hope* documents the role of U.S. military and CIA interventions in making the world safe for democracy in the post-war era, which, in reality, actually meant, and continues to mean, the opposite of democracy. That is, the process of ensuring the world would provide first world capitalists stable markets in cheap labor ruthlessly disciplined by their own U.S. supported/propped up dictatorships.

While the report is clearly situated within the context of the changing needs of U.S. global capitalism, its discourse celebrating the extension of democratic culture and minority access through “equal liberty and equal opportunity” invaluable served public relations campaigns in the Cold War. That is, the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of working people the world over surely provided incentive for the Supreme Court’s overruling of Plessy in the 1954 Brown decision. Even though it has been argued that the Civil Rights era benefited from the context of the Cold War for this very reason, the sacrifice, courage, and tactical brilliance of Civil Rights leaders and activists should in no way be minimized. However, if capital’s needs can be met, and citizens believe their interests align with capital’s, hegemony can be achieved with minimal disruption or instability.

For example, both of my parents, in the post-war era, were able to go to college like millions of other mostly white working class youth, and achieve a degree of upward social mobility, which, in the brutally savage, classless, red-scare discourse of the Cold-War, was perceived not to be a way to shift power to the working-class’s historic struggle against their subordination to capital, but, cynically, a way out of *ignorance* and into *enlightenment* conceptualized as an individualistic project. Both of my parents earned doctorates and became university professors at large state universities, Miami of Ohio and Oregon State University, neither institution were unionized, which undoubtedly

contributes to such school's cultures, accommodating relationship to capital, and antagonistic history with the more *blue-collar* communities many new professors were coming from. However, in my experiences even education workers at unionized universities have a tendency, perhaps less pronounced, to see themselves as not part of the working class (see below).

In reality, as indicated above, what working class people were experiencing was not the flourishing of democracy, but a temporary global advantage U.S. manufacturers had as a result of having the only intact post-war industrial infrastructure, leading to an equally temporary spike in U.S. corporation's need for a greater supply of highly educated workers; engineers, scientists, managers, and so on. Howard Zinn (1995) describes these people as *loyal buffers against trouble, those who are paid to keep the system going*. This is what we think of as the middle class. For the purposes of developing a critical, class-consciousness we might therefore say that this middle-class is really just a temporarily elevated segment of the working-class.

From Feudalism to Capitalism and the Conquest of Ohio

Contributing to the sense that this was more than just a dream for American working class youth, including my family and the working class communities we come from, especially those living in recently industrialized areas, was the fact that many of their parents had arisen from abject poverty with the expansion of factory jobs in the twentieth century. Prior to 1945 higher education was still primarily an elite institution whose student bodies, dating back to the seventeenth century, came from the sons of the rising class of wealthy slavers as well as from Native Americans—educating *Indians* brought handsome donations and investments from Europe's bourgeoisie fascinated by Rousseau's *Noble Savage*. However, the education of Native Americans seemed to have been just a scheme for raising revenue, and was therefore never a serious intellectual endeavor beyond the most remedial basic instruction. Intimately entangled with the slave economy and the expansionist drive of an emerging global capitalist system, the Ivy league also became the place where arguments for slavery and compulsory assimilation were refined and refracted through the discourse of science (Wilder, 2013). The Ivy

League student body also played a role as strikebreakers before WWII (Norwood, 2002). For example, in *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* Stephen Norwood (2002) offers a case in point:

In March 1905 Columbia University students deserted their classes en masse to help break a strike of subway workers against the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), the biggest strike New York had ever experienced... The IRT management was delighted that so many athletes had volunteered as strikebreakers, since it considered their physical prowess invaluable for the expected violent clashes with strikers and their allies... The IRT company also specifically appealed to students at the New York area's major engineering schools... to enlist as strikebreakers ... Newspapers commented that the students regarded their strikebreaking as part of the frivolity of college extracurricular life... The collegians were surely not working on the subways out of any dire need for money, for observers were struck by the fact that many of them wore expensive attire. (Pp. 15-16)

For those college students coming to college from the working masses of unskilled labor in hopes of achieving some upward mobility, what a better way to show their loyalty to the capitalist class than to take up sides against the class they were coming from. However, since university was not a significant path into a higher social position until after WWII, most college strikebreakers surely came from the class they were supporting, as Norwood (2002) suggests. What a better lesson for the young, strapping sons of professionals and industrialists in disciplining their future employees than breaking their strikes while college students? Summarizing the role of students here Norwood (2002) notes that, "throughout the period between 1901 and 1923, college students represented a major, and often critically important, source of strikebreakers in a wide range of industries and services" (p. 16).

This *purpose of education* represents the class higher education primarily served prior to WWII. Consequently, as previously mentioned, for most European immigrants, since the first permanent, English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, higher education has not been the means to escape poverty. Working hard and fighting for unionization has been the working class route to upward mobility (Marsh, 2011). For example, my parents had a father and a stepfather whose employment on General Motors' assembly lines in southern Ohio represented, for them, upward mobility into the working class, an option available for far fewer non-whites. My mother's father in particular, of German, English

and Irish descent, came from the former homeland of Tecumseh's Shawnee Nation aggressively seized after the American Revolutionary War despite years of armed resistance and an attempt to forge a pan-Indian alliance toward these ends.

For example, in the towns of Chillicothe and Piqua alone, both in the current State of Ohio, the newly formed U.S. government, in a savage act of Westward Expansion (i.e. primitive accumulation) destroyed more than five hundred acres of corn and every edible vegetable they could find (Churchill, 2003). Similarly, in 1794, General Anthony Wayne and his troops "laid waste a huge swath through the Shawnee heartland...for a distance of fifty mile" (Churchill, 2003, p. 304) destroying vast tracks of cornfields and homes. Commenting on the continuation of one of the most barbaric practices of U.S. military aggression Ward Churchill (2003) notes, "in the aftermath, leggings crafted from tanned human skin again made their appearance, this time along the Ohio frontier" (p. 304). Reading these passages invokes the words written in the sixteenth century by Bartolomé de las Casas. Commenting on the bewildering atrocities he had witnessed in *History of the Indies*, de las Casas, Spanish missionary and former plantation owner gone staunch critic, offers a sobering account of the enslavement and subjugation of the Indigenous peoples of what is now Cuba:

Our work was to exasperate, ravage, kill, mangle and destroy... Thus husbands and wives were together only once every eight or ten months and when they met they were so exhausted and depressed on both sides...they ceased to procreate. As for the newborn, they died early because their mothers, overworked and famished, had no milk to nurse them, and for this reason, while I was in Cuba, 7000 children died in three months. Some mothers even drowned their babies from sheer desperation. In this way, husbands died in the mines, wives died at work, and children died from lack of milk...and in a short time this land which was so great, so powerful and fertile...was depopulated...My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write. (Quoted in Zinn, 1995, p. 7)

The horrors that caused him to "tremble" as he documented them, of course, were premeditated. For example, in 1513 the Requerimento, written by jurist Juan Lopez, was promulgated by the Crown's lawyers ensuring Spain's dominion and title to Columbus' so-called discovers (i.e. gold, slaves, and land). The Requerimento is a message to not only European monarchies letting them know the Pope has dominion over the whole

world and the *New World* was to be managed by Spain, but more importantly perhaps, it was a message to those who would come under the merciless sword of Spanish Conquistadors—America's First Nations. The Requerimento, written on behalf of the King of Spain, the *subduer of barbarous nations*, Don Ferdinand, is claimed to be directly linked through St. Peter to God, creator of all the Earth and people, and therefore “the head of the whole human race, wherever men should live, and under whatever law, sect, or belief they should be” (Lopez, 1513, p. 1). The following except from the Requerimento highlights its general tone and its premeditation for mass murder:

With the help of God we shall use force against you, declaring war upon you from all sides and with all possible means, and we shall bind you to the yoke of the Church and Their Highnesses; we shall enslave your persons, wives, and sons, sell you or dispose of you as the King sees fit; we shall seize your possessions and harm you as much as we can as disobedient and resisting vassals...and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of your highnesses, of ours, or of these soldiers who come with us. (Lopez, 1513, p. 1)

The logic informing this requirement, that the Christian ruling class of Europe shall hold dominion over all non-Christian peoples, is the same logic informing the Puritan New Englanders in the sixteenth century. Making this same point Marx (1867/1967) comments:

The treatment of the aboriginals was, naturally, most frightful in plantation colonies destined for export trade only, such as the West Indies, and in rich and well populated countries, such as Mexico and India, that were given over to plunder. But even in the colonies properly so-called, the Christian character of primitive accumulation did not belie itself. Those sober virtuosi of Protestantism, the Puritans of New England, in 1703, by decrees of their assembly set a premium of \$40 on every Indian scalp and every captured red-skin...Some decades later, the colonial system took its revenge on the descendents of the pious pilgrim fathers, who had grown seditious in the meantime. At English instigation and for English pay they were tomahawked by red-skins. (p. 753)

It is predictable enough that the crimes referred to here by Marx, and the ones documented by de las Casas, are among the same class of horrors that led to the forcible removal of Ohio's Indigenous nations, and guided by the same logic of Christian dominion. It is this logic informing the Discovery Doctrine that provided the legal argument for the Indian Removal Act of 1830 in the United States, which is still law in

the United States, drawn on by the Supreme Court as recently as 2005. Consequently, the removal of Native Americans from Ohio, by 1831, was well underway. According to Robertson (2007), “a group of the Seneca Nation signed a treaty exchanging their lands in Ohio for fee lands west of the Mississippi; over the summer, other Ohio groups, including Shawnees and Ottawa, did the same, as did the Ohio Wyandots the following January. Removal was proceeding as planned” (p. 132).

During and after the barbaric process of *Indian Removal* the Ohio Country was being repopulated by, “New Englanders, Middle States people, and Upland Southerners, as well as smaller representations from the Tidewater. Quakers, Pennsylvania Dutch (i.e. Germans), free blacks, and escaped slaves added to the mix from the beginning of statehood” (Knepper, 1989, p. ix). However, Ohio Historian George Knepper (1989) goes on to explain that, “the German and Irish contingents” were “among the earliest and most significant” (p. ix). A great deal of this German and Irish immigration occurred after 1837 when the engineers working for the Board of Public Works approved the construction of the Erie Canal through Ohio. By this time in the history of the U.S. a permanent and stable market in labor had nearly been established made possible by not only growing immigration, but an artificial inflation in the price of primitively accumulated Native American land. Making this point Marx (1867/1967) observes:

Let the Government put upon the...soil an artificial price, independent of the law of supply and demand, a price that compels the immigrant to work a long time for wages before he can earn enough money to buy land, and turn himself into an independent peasant...The Government is...to import have-nothings from Europe into the colonies, and thus keep the wage-labor market full for the capitalists. (p. 772)

One example of what Marx is referring to might be the Land Ordinance of 1785 that “provided that land ceded by the states and purchased from the Indians be divided into townships six miles wide” (Knepper, 1989, p. 56). The violent subjugation and forced removal of Ohio’s Native peoples outlined above renders Knepper’s characterization of it as a benign financial transaction a grotesque apology. However, Knepper’s (1989) description of the selling of Ohio Territory “with the minimum price set at one dollar per acre” and the minimum unit for sale being “640 acres” (p. 56) demonstrates how the vast

majority of former peasant immigrants would be unable to access land, especially since “no land was to be sold on credit” (Knepper, 1989, p. 56). What is more, “Congress...reserved out of every township the lots numbered 8, 11, 26, and 29 for future sale, anticipating that they would bring a higher price as those around them were sold and improved” (Knepper, 1989, pp. 56-57). That is, if the minimum price of land was high enough to keep most immigrants in the labor market, surely these specially reserved lots only contributed to ensuring the soil and the means of production would stay in the hands of land speculators and industrialists. The intended immigrants themselves, the “have nothings,” as Marx referred to them, with no ability to purchase land were the expropriated peasant-proprietors who were “chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers” (Marx, 1867/1967, p. 734) with the transition from feudalism to capitalism from one European monarchy to the next. Bringing attention to the contradictory legal cruelty surrounding the enclosures and the process of forcing the first working class into existence Marx (1867/1967) offers a telling historical analysis:

The proletariat created by the breaking up of the bands of feudal retainers and by the forcible expropriation of the people from the soil, this “free” proletariat could not possibly be absorbed by the nascent manufactures as fast as it was thrown upon the world. On the other hand, these men, suddenly dragged from their wonted mode of life, could not suddenly adapt themselves to the discipline of their new condition. They were turned en masse into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, partly from inclination, in most cases from stress of circumstances. Hence at the end of the 15th and during the whole of the 16th century, throughout Western Europe a bloody legislation against vagabondage. The fathers of the present working-class were chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers. Legislation treated them as “voluntary” criminals, and assumed that it depended on their own good will to go on working under the old conditions that no longer existed. (p. 734)

What is perhaps most striking about this passage is Marx alluding to the role of ideology in transferring the cause of deteriorating social conditions from the transition from feudalism to capitalism to the individuals forced into dependency and thus into the working class—what amounts to a classic example of *blaming the victim*. Former peasant-proprietors, forced from the soil, were thus criminalized and demonized and blamed for the conditions they were forced into, a use of discourse the ruling class continues to rely heavily upon—countless examples come rushing forward. It was this

class of criminalized, former-peasant, European beggars whose labor power was put to use in North America in the most brutal and savage ways, as described above, expanding the social universe of capital westward. Who are the most suited to attack the humanity of others than those whose humanity and self-esteem had already been degraded, and those whose consciousness had been shaped by religious dogma to blindly accept an unquestionable universal hierarchy of civilizations with the plunderers at the top?

Of course, I, like millions of white Americans, are descended from these former peasants, who, like the English peasant-proprietors of the sixteenth century, were both victims of primitive accumulation expropriated from their lands, and then employed as the savage mercenaries of capital's global expansion. A self-awareness of this dual role as both the oppressed and the labor power of oppression coincides with Howard Zinn's (1995) insistence that those who join the movement for a more just future and become revolutionaries must have both empathy and self-interest, collectively conceived, and, I am arguing, it is Marx who best provides the socio-historical foundation for this level of critical consciousness. That is, all workers (including future, current, and unemployed) have a direct interest in fundamentally transforming the labor-capital relationship and therefore uniting, globally, with all those who rely on a wage, or less, to survive, to collectively reclaim the land/the means of production/the Earth's natural capacity to support its life-systems. For me, this is key for avoiding the debilitating consequences of white guilt and anger that lacks a critical focus. In other words, while I am descended from the German and Irish hoards who were victims of the historical development of capital and then consequently employed to commit unspeakable crimes against humanity in exchange for a common meager existence, it is, again, the one-sidedness of capitalism that creates the necessary conditions of dependency whose polluted ground sows the seeds for such atrocities. Rather than feeling guilty or cynical for past and present injustices, the correct response is to better understand ones own relationship to capital and join the push toward a post-capitalist, more democratic, and socially just future.

Again, the criminalized, dehumanized, and uneducated immigrant hoards were largely unable to gain direct access to the American soil, and therefore forced to sell their labor as soldiers and farm hands occupying primitive shacks on the small scraps of backwoods

hills. In *A Call to Action* (Malott, 2008) I explore the tensions and complexities of what have historically been articulated as competing goals for a more just North American future. That is, settler-state labor fighting the settler-state capitalists for control over the means of production, which are lands that were appropriated from Native American nations through the breaking of treaties, genocide, trickery, and every other immoral means condemned by international law. Native American tribal nations, on the other hand, at their best, have been committed to restoring their sovereignty and therefore regaining occupied tribal lands (i.e. the Americas).

The Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), in *The Program of the PSL* edited by Andy McInerney and Ian Thompson (2010), argue in their outline for “A New Government of Working and Poor People,” that it “shall honor all treaty obligations with Native nations, and shall provide restitution for land and resources stolen by the capitalist U.S. government” (p. 19). The ethic of respect for indigenous sovereignty informing this commitment seems like a positive place of departure for a socialist alternative. Winona LaDuke (1992), speaking from an Ojibwe Native American perspective, has addressed this issue situating the solution within a process of collective relearning and collaboration:

I would argue that Americans of “foreign” descent must become Americans. That is not to become a patriot of the United States, a patriot of the flag, but a patriot to the land of this continent... You were born here, you will not likely go away, or live anywhere else, and there are simply no more frontiers to follow. We must all relearn a way of thinking, a state of mind that is from this common ground... If we are in this together, we must rebuild, redevelop, and reclaim an understanding/analysis which is uniquely ours. (p. 1)

Rather than viewing the settler state and Indigenous nations as completely separate and distinct, LaDuke alludes to a common interest compatible with today’s calls for international solidarity echoing a central commitment of Marx. Of course rethinking our worldviews is not an easy challenge, however important it is, due, in large part, to the ideological indoctrination, from religious, governmental, mass media, to educational institutions, much of the world’s working class is subjected to from the cradle to the

grave. However, a change in ideas is not all that is needed. A fundamental transformation in bourgeois society, including the basic relationship between labor and capital, is required. The alienation, exploitation, negative ideology, and environmental destruction are examples of a few points that can draw all non-capitalists together against our common capitalist class enemy, which can offer a safeguard against social movements that devolve into more privileged workers attempting to do less privileged workers paternalistic favors.

We might therefore note that throughout the process of North American repopulation and the establishment of capitalism, destitute immigrants frequently squatted on former Native American farm lands, but were driven off and eventually forced to take their labor capacity to the market ensuring the necessary conditions for capitalism to take hold were present, namely, a stable market in labor, a working-class of dependents. Being born into an isolated world with no running water, electricity, or money, or hope of establishing an independent existence, selling ones labor into the grueling life of endless, mind-numbing factory work came to be perceived as not only their only option, but it represented a substantial improvement from scratching out of the woods a crude existence. It is not surprising that middle-class educational, moral reformists like Horace Mann (1853) preached and lobbied against “the danger arising from the great influx of ignorant foreigners.” Mann seemingly knew that immigrants alienated and criminalized from the processes of primitive accumulation were not socialized for so-called *civilized* life. That is, they needed to learn obedience and passivity to be suited for routinized, assembly line, poverty-wage, industrial labor.

Further compelling destitute immigrants to seek out factory jobs was the fact that these opportunities (i.e. the opportunity to be exploited by selling ones capacity to labor for a wage) were not as readily available to all Americans and white privilege was certainly creating very different experiences for African Americans in particular. For example, even though Ohio supported Abraham Lincoln, African Americans fleeing slavery and then, after 1865, from the former slavers and the new penal codes of the South, were “kept in their place” (Knepper, 1989, p. 204) with the same white supremacist, bourgeois terrorism and discrimination plaguing the south. As this alludes to, white privilege serves

to not only keep the working class divided and unable to unite around their common class interests, but it turns white workers into the violent, disciplining force of the bosses, as argued above—something Marx was well aware of and worked tirelessly against.

The 21st Century and the Need for a Marxist Critical Pedagogy

Today the general trend of upward mobility within the global capitalist settler-state, however unequal, has nearly ground to a halt with little to no prospects of reversing it leaving the current generation, the grandkids of the baby boomers, with very little to look forward to in terms of jobs, opportunities, or a democratic culture marked by public institutions such as schools and universities. Highlighting the situation in the US Mike Cole and Peter McLaren (2013) observe:

In the United States the situation is spectacularly grim. The U.S. economy has not managed to climb back from its pre-recession level of unemployment. Far from it. Nearly 14 million Americans currently are jobless and things look to be getting worse before they get better (assuming they do get better), in what is increasingly becoming an era of downward mobility for 99 percent of Americans and a new “gilded age” for the 1 percent who constitute the financial aristocracy. (p. 248)

The authors go on to note that these conditions, which amount to nearly 80 percent of Americans living at or near the poverty line, are directly related to the fact that 100 percent of economic growth from 2000 to 2007 went to “the richest 10 percent of Americans” (Cole and McLaren, 2013, p. 248).

However, despite these devastating conditions many of the sons and daughters of the working class baby boom generation, my generation, have managed to find a place within the academy or some other professional career. Most, however, have returned to the grueling lives of their grandfathers, but usually not in factories, but rather, in the service industry earning below subsistence wages. Perhaps due to my own white privilege I am one of the lucky ones. Yes, now I am among the ranks of the professoriate myself, but,

unlike my parents, I am a union member and benefit from the advantages of collective bargaining, but rather than labor, professors tend to view themselves as professionals and experience little unity or solidarity with other trades. As I argue below, this is a deadly mistake making the existence of this one last area of relative, intellectual freedom increasingly tenuous.

Indeed, this is a major change. The public university, while it has always been designed to serve the interests of capital except when education workers can do otherwise, it is not the public university it was just twenty years ago. Today it is nearly completely sold off or privatized making the ability to engage in counter-hegemonic work, especially in teacher education, increasingly difficult. But the time the current generation comes to age, the public school might be completely gone, unless we can either stop privatization by ending capitalism or slow it down enough so as to extend its life so our kids can experience it before it is finally laid to rest, or saved, and along with it, humanity and the possibility of a life after capitalism. Of course the top elite universities, the Ivy League institutions, who serve the kids of the capitalist class, will undergo very little change while the universities of workers perish under neoliberal privatization.

Children of the Baby Boom Working Class: My Own Road to Critical Pedagogy

My own particular road to the academy, however, was not, at anytime in my life, certain, despite the divisiveness of white privilege. For example, because I was subjected to a *special education* education for an apparent learning disability I was diagnosed with in Oxford, Ohio, which followed me all the way to Corvallis, Oregon, I was tracked for manual labor. In special education my classmates were always the poorest kids in school. None of us seemed to like school, and most did not graduate from high school. I was an exception, but just barely. Going to school, before high school in particular, was always embarrassing, humiliating and degrading. While it is widely understood that the lack of available resources and funding prevents many special education teachers from providing the individualized instruction to students the IEP model is based upon, in my experience,

the very label of special education itself degrades self-esteem to such an extent that, for some students, no amount of funding or individualized instruction can correct the deep psychological damage. As most of the kids went to their normal homerooms, I had to go to the “retarded” class. This experience played a huge role in my own desire for, and therefore openness to, critical analyses and ultimately, critical pedagogy. For far too many youth, however, special education is highly destructive and debilitating crushing whatever self-esteem is left, especially for those students already damaged by racism and/or the perceived lack of intelligence associated with poverty. This is especially troubling since minoritized youth and ESL students are over-represented in special education.

When I got to high school, a high school (Crescent Valley High School) that would be considered largely middle-class, I was mainstreamed. Special education in that context was just for those with severe disabilities. I therefore spent high school in the limited vocational track with my old special education colleagues. Everyone I knew in this lowest, working-class track, including myself, never took the SATs and were never encouraged to by any school official. But social class was never something that was discussed, at home or at school, so I, like all the classmates that I knew, never developed, as far as I could tell, a class-consciousness, and thus never considered our own often contradictory class position. Growing up during the 1980s citizens were just individuals and ones economic position reflected only the quality of the individual—a necessary diversion because the upward trajectory of the post-WWII boom was fast on the decline.

Coming of age during this time, alienated from school and society as a direct result of my educational experiences, I gravitated toward punk rock and skateboarding, which, during the 1980s, were expressions of primarily working and middle class white and Latino youth resistance mediated through the hyper-individualized context of Reagan and Thatcher. At its best, punk rock was a new social movement advancing a sophisticated class analysis and understanding of race and gender in bourgeois society. However, in my experience in Oregon the skate-punk-scene was little more than a drop out culture existing on the margins against society, but lacking a coherent theory or understanding of why and how to enact a more critical praxis.

Working endless hours in restaurants and as a maintenance man at a nursing home after high school, barely earning enough to pay rent and buy food, my mother, wanting the best for her son, encouraged me to attend community college. With a tuition of around two hundred dollars a term in 1990 I was able to attend Linn-Benton Community College in Albany Oregon until 1992 when I transferred to Miami of Ohio where my father was a professor, which enabled me to attend tuition-free, as it should be for everyone interested in studying. My first semester at Miami I had a general education composition class with a Native American graduate student, Malea Powell, who had us reading essays about the American Indian Movement's occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971 and many other genres of writing about Native American experiences. A characteristic passage that reminds me of that experience comes to mind:

The second half of the 1960s saw the growth of a strong and steadily more effective movement toward national liberation among the native peoples of North America. In the U.S., traditional forces joined forces with younger militants to engage in an extended series of confrontations, some of them armed, with federal authorities. These were highlighted by a protracted fishing rights campaign in Washington State (1964-69), the thirteen-month occupation of government facilities on Alcatraz Island (1969-70), the seizure of BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C. (1972), and the 71-day siege of the Wounded Knee hamlet, on the Pine Ridge Reservation (1973). (Churchill, 2002, p. 63)

In addition to studying the North American indigenous movement against the settler-states' illegal occupation of millions of acres of land (i.e. the means of production), that semester I also had a class called African Americans in Sports taught by Othello Harris, an African American professor steeped in the critical black tradition. In that course the work of Harry Edwards introduced me to the ways in which schools, the media, and sports serve to perpetuate the view of African Americans as *of the body*, and therefore not *of the mind*, a stereotype that worked to legitimize the extreme economic exploitation of slavery, which continued to operate in very similar ways after the Civil War, and into the contemporary era. That semester was my introduction to academic criticality, and it changed my life forever. Both classes made so much sense to me as a white youth educated in the 1980s in the United States to be a low-level waged worker. Offering frameworks for critical analysis this course work put me on the long path of making some

coherent sense of my life and experiences, and joining and starting struggles challenging the hegemony of bourgeois society.

Marx's Conception of Class and a Marxist Critical Pedagogy

Attempting to make sense of my complicated class position later in life as a PhD student at New Mexico State University studying critical pedagogy and the social studies with Marc Pruyn, Rudolfo Chávez, Herman García, and James O'Donnell, I began self-identifying as both working class and middle class situated in the context of white privilege. However, this perspective is informed by a Weberian conception of social class characterized by an obsession with categorizing social classes based upon a wide gradation of consumption patterns. Two essays played a central role in shifting my thinking away from the Weberian conception of social class that dominates critical pedagogy and multicultural education. The first essay is "After the Box People" by Paula Allman, Peter McLaren and Glenn Rikowski (2005). The other important essay, "The Culturalization of Class and the Occluding of Class Consciousness" by Deb Kelsh and Dave Hill (2006), offers an enlightening comparison between Marx and Weber. Kelsh and Hill (2006) begin their investigation noting that for both writers "class determination involves property" (p. 5).

However, Marx's conception of how property determines class position is based on the realization that those who do not own property or the means of production are forced out of necessity to sell their labor for a wage while those who do own property live off the profit or surplus value extracted or exploited from labor. In other words, Marx demonstrates that at the heart of capitalism is a contradictory, internally related relationship between the sellers of labor power, workers dependent upon a wage to survive, and the purchasers of labor power, capitalists whose wealth comes from surplus or unpaid labor hours. Weber, on the other hand, does not connect his theory of property to capital, but to consumption patterns and culture (Kelsh and Hill, 2006).

We might therefore say that unlike Marx's theory of class Weber's is not relational. That is, Weber does not situate class in the context of ones' relation to private property. Making this point Kelsh and Hill (2006) conclude that, "Weberian-based formulations of

class serve the interests of the capitalist class...insofar as they erase both the proletariat and the capitalist classes as antagonistic entities unified in the contradictory and exploitative social (property) relations of capitalist production” (p. 6). Failing to grasp the root of inequality under capitalism, Weberian approaches only appear radical because they mention class and *transforming* capital. However, to transform does *not* necessarily mean to transcend or overthrow.

Following these insights it seems reasonable to argue that the major limitation of multicultural foci on white privilege and consumption patterns resides within the fact that they are informed by a Weberian conception of social class thereby treating capitalism as something to *equalize access to* rather than something to *overcome*. While I certainly support reforms designed to equalize, they must also be guided by the larger need to transcend. Reflecting on my life experiences from a Marxist conception of social class has resulted in much deeper understandings and a radical class-consciousness.

For example, I never considered the significance of the obvious fact that from the fifth grade on myself, my two sisters, and my mother were thousands of miles from our family because we needed a wage to survive, and Oregon State offered one that supported us. I also never considered the fact that that wage existed not because of democracy or white privilege but because of capital’s need for a highly educated work force, and that white privilege offered the least alienating and exploitative jobs mostly to whites, ensuring the continuing existence of a racialized inter-class division. We might therefore say that through graduate degrees my mom gained some autonomy over her own labor, eventually made a wage significantly above the poverty line, and realized a growth in social status as a professor and even more as the Dean of the Graduate School at Oregon State. According to many neo-Weberian demographers, my mother would be considered to have gained middle-class status.

However, my mother, like other professionals, while they are supposed to be the loyal, middle-class, buffers against trouble, they nevertheless rely on a wage to survive, situating their relationship to capital no differently than the factory worker, who also sells her labor for a wage out of necessity. That is, her wage does not come from the unpaid

labor hours of others. On top of that, public university systems, since the Morrill Act of 1862, and the subsequent creation of the Land Grant Universities, have historically played a central role in the technological advancement of capital rendering the (im)material labor of professors *value creating*, and thus *productive*, in the capitalist sense. Charged with educating future workers our labor is also indirectly value-creating. Consequently, professors, especially those outside the most elite institutions, from the perspective of capital, are not viewed as equals or special, but as sources of direct and indirect value, and therefore no less disposable than the factory worker or the schoolteacher. The working-class university has only had democratic tendencies because of academics and their unions struggling for intellectually rigorous education, academic freedom, tenure, and self-governance.

The neoliberal assault on the non-Harvards of higher education has attacked all of these worker-created foundations of democratic culture by undermining the professor herself. That is, contingent, relatively powerless, adjunct professors now make up somewhere between forty and sixty percent of all professors. The push back against these movements has been limited, I am arguing, by Weberian conceptions of social class and the middle-class culture of education workers. Part of the push back against neoliberal policies, from my point of view, is thus a need for the class-consciousness of educators and the necessary engagement with Marx it demands.

Yes, we are relatively privileged as compared to many other wageworkers, but no, our own interests do not align with capital. Radical professors are often looked upon with confusion as if our very existence as paid scholars confirms the legitimacy of free market ideology. From this perspective, why would professors or teachers have any interest in challenging capitalism? As I have argued elsewhere, the rise and fall of the initiative to increase the supply of highly educated laborers represents not only the ebb and flow of workers' democratic culture, but it represents the changing needs of capital. Professors and teachers, outside of elite institutions, must realize their existence, like the existence of billions of workers around the planet, is not secure, it is not guaranteed. Aligning our interests with capital is a grave mistake. We need to realize that our interests are with all

others who also rely on a wage to survive. That consciousness is needed to help link the university struggle to larger alternative visions to capital.

This is not an easy task knowing that there exists in the U.S. a crisis of class-consciousness. There is a perception that if you are not living in abject poverty or if you do not occupy an industrial factory occupation, you are middle class. Consequently, millions of working class people believe they are middle class. What is the consequence or implication of this? This belief thwarts proletarian consciousness and revolutionary movement against capital in an age of growing immiseration and insecurity from line cooks to professors (Malott, Hill, and Banfield, 2013). Similarly, in a recent interview Chomsky (2013) notes that, “we don’t use the term ‘working class’ here because it’s a taboo term. You’re supposed to say ‘middle class,’ because it helps to diminish the understanding that there’s a class war going on.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the US, as Chomsky (2013) comments, the capitalist class “runs the show,” and the bottom seventy percent of the population basically have no influence over policy and politics beyond the local level.

What is more, the so-called middle class, according to mainstream, neo-Weberian demographers, is currently about half the size it was during the 1970s. The term middle-class is therefore an increasingly outdated category. In Volume One of *Capital Marx* (1867/1967) makes a similar point in the context of explaining how the capitalist expands his or her capital through the consumption of labor power noting that, “the distinction between skilled and unskilled labor rests in part on pure illusion, or, to say the least, on distinctions that have long since ceased to be real, and that survive only by virtue of a traditional convention” (p. 197). Because the term middle-class suggests that such people should feel like they have no right to challenge capital due to their privilege, and thus feel a closer affinity to the capitalist class, rather than to the class to which they actually belong, the working class, perhaps it should be reserved for just those elites who are not quite capitalists since no real distinction exists between skilled and unskilled labor in terms of their relationship to capital.

Henry Giroux often speaks of the need for a new language, but as a Marxist, part of the struggle is to refuse to let go of the powerful language we already have, if for no other

reason than, “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” (Marx and Engels, 1960/1848, p. 109). This statement rings unpleasantly true when we consider that approximately 80% of the U.S. population lives near or below the poverty lineⁱⁱⁱ. Globally, the situation is equally grim. As I have argued before, our struggles for social justice within capital must therefore be informed by a vision and commitment to achieving social justice beyond capital.

This, in itself, demands a much deeper understanding of capitalism than currently tends to exist within the educational Left. For example, it is commonly believed that the universal, final goal of a socialist revolution would be to redistribute wealth equally. For some socialists this is certainly true. Other socialists argue that while redistributing wealth might be a good short-term goal because it will reduce human suffering, if production relations are not fundamentally altered, then the dehumanizing process of value-production unique to capitalism will remain in place and its internal logic that propels it forward toward ever-deepening crisis. To explain what this means within the historical theme of this essay we would need to go back to the transition from feudalism to capitalism starting with a few theoretical generalizations exploring what it was about feudalism that led to capitalism. While this investigation is beyond the scope of this essay, which I am now at the end of, I will leave you with a few passages from Marx to consider:

The starting point of the development that gave rise to the wage laborer, as well as to the capitalist, was the servitude of the laborer. The advance consisted in a change of form of this servitude, in the transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation. To understand its march, we need not go back very far. Although we come across the first beginnings of capitalist production as early as the 14th or 15th century, sporadically, in certain towns of the Mediterranean, the capitalistic era dates from the 16th century. Wherever it appears, the abolition of serfdom has long been effected, and the highest development of the middle ages, the existence of sovereign towns, has been long on the wane...The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. (Marx, 1867/1967, p. 715-716)

Clearly for Marx the exploitation of people based on social class not only predates capitalism, but represents the developing relation between the bourgeoisie (that existed as

a class within feudalism) and the laboring classes that would come to define the entire capitalist process of perpetual value-expansion. However, unlike in capitalism where the capitalist owns the means of production, production, under feudalism, was “characterized by division of the soil amongst the greatest possible number of sub-feudatories. The might of the feudal lord...depended on...the number of his subjects... [being] peasant proprietors” (Marx, 1867/1967, p. 718), and by the 15th century the English population was upwards of four fifths peasant proprietors. Consequently, because the peasant had direct access to the means of production and thus directly consumed the product of his own labor, he was not completely alienated from his own feudally-predetermined labor, and was also not at the mercy of the capitalists’ wage who would have his existence reduced just to what is socially necessary, even though his product was heavily taxed or exploited by the Feudal Lord. Again, while rare forms of wage labor did exist during feudalism, segments of the peasant population enjoyed too many entitlements or direct access to life’s most vital use values presenting a barrier to the possibility of establishing the basis of capitalistic wealth. In other words, a fundamental requirement or condition for capitalist production relations to solidify is an ever-expanding pool of dependent wage laborers who have no other option to survive but to exchange the use-value of their own labor for exchange value, for a price, for an equivalent (i.e. money) that can be exchanged for any other product of labor, especially food, clothing and shelter (Malott, Hill, and Banfield, 2013).

For Marx, a new society can only be born from the womb of a preexisting one therefore only gradually shedding the traces of the old social relations. In Peter Hudis’ (2012) provocative text, *Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capital*, he challenges the too often taken-for-granted assumption that the strength of Marx resides only in his explanation of capitalism offering very little in the way of an alternative vision. Hudis (2012) argues that throughout Marx’s many critiques of capital one can find signs pointing to possible directions toward post-capitalism not necessarily explaining what it would look like, but by outlining what it would not look like. In this respect Marx identified two phases of a new society. From the outset the central defining feature of capitalist production must be abolished, which is the subsumption of actual labor time

with socially-necessary labor time. Socially necessary labor time, or a generalizable average dictated by technology and consumer markets, is therefore distinct from actual labor time, and comes to dominate concrete labor by serving as the universal standard allowing different products of labor to be mutually exchangeable (Malott, Hill, and Banfield, 2013).

Hudis (2012) therefore summarizes Marx's concept of a new society as being based upon "the *replacement of the dictatorship of abstract time with time as the space for human development...*" (p. 191). In a new society a market where products of labor are equally exchangeable ceases to exist because "there is no substance that renders different magnitudes qualitatively equal" (Hudis, 2012, p. 192). In the highest stage of socialism, for Marx, individuals no longer learn to produce for production, but that the development of the human species is an end in itself.

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Writer's Details

Curry Stephenson Malott is an Assistant Professor of educational foundations in the Department of Professional and Secondary Education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Co-edited with Pierre Orelus and Romina Pacheco (New Mexico State University) his most recent book is *Colonized Schooling Exposed: Progressive Voices for Transformative Educational and Social Change*. Email: currymalott@hotmail.com

ⁱ <http://courses.education.illinois.edu/eol474/sp98/truman.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.alternet.org/economy/chomsky-business-elites-are-waging-brutal-class-war-america>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://politicalblindspot.com/us-poor/>