Marcuse, Bloch and Freire: reinvigorating a pedagogy of hope

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ABSTRACT Critique of the current order of things is a necessary starting point for any project for radical change. Without an analysis of what is wrong, it is hard to convince anyone that change is necessary. And yet critique alone rarely inspires people to act. We need something to fight for as well as against. The article looks at the centrality of hope as a necessary complement to critique. Combining insights from Freire, Bloch and Marcuse, it argues that critical pedagogy needs to seriously engage methods to create an environment amenable to resistance and struggle for change, founded on a belief that a better world is possible. Marcuse, in particular, offers three key insights that can be instrumental in moving beyond the overly negative discourse and cynicism that prevail today – including a trenchant analysis of capitalism and desire, a program for aesthetic education and a model for utopian dreaming and embodied hope. It is argued that critical pedagogy must move beyond consciousness raising and identity formation alone to foster the belief that change is possible. We need to move toward a discourse and action that can capitalize on repressed desires and provide a provisional alternative vision that can galvanize people to act toward its realization.

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. (Chinese Proverb)

Overview
Critique has been at the forefront of the project for radical social change since its inception. From the Cynics, Plato and Rousseau to Hegel, Marx and Freud, there has been a long tradition of starting the call for social change with a critique of the current order of things. This seems appropriate, as it would be hard to imagine convincing people that a better alternative exists if we do not first highlight the limitations of present circumstance. And yet today it appears that critique has come to dominate the Left without the accoutrement of an alternative vision. Critical theory, critical race theory, critical media literacy and critical discourse analysis all tend to share too firm a commitment to the first half of their sobriquet, forgetting that critique alone has never led any revolution. These theoretical paradigms often share the notion of false consciousness or consciousness raising as the starting point for change, appearing to argue in many cases that when people become aware of their situation they will automatically work to change it. But as Fromm (1941) and Freire (1970) among many recognized, people are often complicit in their own subjugation, even when they are fully aware of its repressive nature.

Today it can be argued that critical pedagogy, which started as a movement that combined strong critique with a commitment to hope, has itself fallen prey to too much negativity. Some, like Antonia Darder (2002), bell hooks (1994) and Ira Shor (1994), have focused more attention on issues like empowerment, care, love and hope, but in much critical pedagogy, ideology critique and raising consciousness predominate. In seeking to reconstitute a pedagogy that incorporates hope
into its core, the insights of Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch can be instrumental together with a return to the spirit of Paulo Freire.

What do Freire, Bloch and Marcuse have to offer in rekindling the hope at the center of a project for radical social transformation? Freire, as the inspiration for critical pedagogy, always stressed the centrality of hope in reaching critical consciousness. By returning to his work, we can recuperate the necessity to look beyond the here and now to the possibility that galvanizes people to act. Bloch concurred, stressing the need for an affirmative politics and pedagogy that move beyond critique to embrace the utopian traces that exist in most cultural artifacts and activities. To him, ideology was never separated from utopia, with utopian longing embodied in every ideological text. Finally, Marcuse offers one of the most trenchant and compelling critiques of instrumental rationality together with insights on how to overcome the increasingly totalizing power of its titillating grasp.

One of the article’s central contentions is that the Left, and critical pedagogy in particular, are steeped in critique. Rather than falling prey to critiquing critique, I leave it to the reader to decide if they agree with this contention. The article will instead focus on the centrality of hope as a necessary complement to critique if we are to escape the endemic cynicism infecting people across the political spectrum today. It will begin with a brief analysis of Freire and Bloch and then offer three main areas in which Marcuse can strengthen critical pedagogy, including his analysis of capitalism and desire, his aesthetic education and his dedication to utopia. It concludes by arguing that we need to find ways to empower children, moving toward a discourse and action that can capitalize on repressed desires and provide a provisional alternative vision that can galvanize them to act toward its realization.

Freire and Bloch: the centrality of hope

Paulo Freire’s sanguine theories on education have emboldened generations of progressive educators across the globe, from South America to Africa, to Asia and even the USA. He centered his project for radical social change on the foundation of critical theory and Marxism, believing critique of the current order of things is an essential starting point toward critical consciousness. But he always highlighted the centrality of hope and love as necessary facets of a pedagogy that could overcome the injustices and inequalities of the past and present. His pedagogy thus starts with the key insight that we must help people recognize not only their oppressed situation, but their position as subjects in history with the power to change it.

In his final book, Pedagogy of Freedom (1998), Freire argued that hope was essential if people were to overcome the cynical and ahistorical fatalism at the heart of neo-liberal ideology. Teachers need to do more than awaken students to the surrounding world; they need to simultaneously give them the faith and strength to work to transform the world. For Freire always rejected fatalism as short-sighted, failing to acknowledge our ‘unfinishedness’ in the world. To him the future is never preordained, unless we accept it as such. He thus argued that the ‘global tendency to accept the crucial implications of the New World Order as natural and inevitable’ (1998a, p. 23) simply revealed the power of hegemony to spread, through education, the media and civil society, the precepts of the dominant class, transforming them from modes of repression to commonsensical norms. But like Jean Paul Sartre, Freire (1998b) believed that while we are conditioned, we are not determined, and are thus free to revolt against that conditioning:

Our being in the world is much more than just ‘being.’ [It is] a ‘presence’ that can reflect upon itself, that knows itself as presence, that can intervene, can transform, can speak of what it does, but that can also take stock of, compare, evaluate, give value to, decide, break with, and dream. (pp. 25-26)

By taking this position, he eviscerates the deterministic and monological philosophy of neoliberalism, which relies on a solipsistic vision of reality founded on extreme individualism, instrumental rationality and, though unstated, essentially subjects as passive receptors of objective being. Freire’s intersubjective ontology instead argues for a reality founded on dialogue where individuals work in fellowship and solidarity to first envision their surrounding reality and then work collectively to change it. In the move, he builds the foundations for a communal vision of
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humanity, where reality is constructed and negotiated in collective action, rather than through an individual subject looking out at an objective world.

Freire always believed that history was problematic but not determined. As he argued in 1992, ‘For me, history is a time of possibilities, not predeterminations ... History is a possibility that we create throughout time, in order to liberate and therefore save ourselves’ (1998b, p. 38). Our ability to hope what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom, and what makes possible the utopian vision of a better future: a future of unity in diversity where we confront and overcome our ‘limit situations.’ For hope really is the leitmotif of Freire’s work and the key constituent to rebuilding a progressive movement that can break through its own cynicism and doubt to inspire people anew to struggle for collective emancipation. The work of Bloch and Marcuse can help enrich this key aspect of the project.

Bloch offers two key insights that can be instrumental in transcending critique and reigniting hope. In his magna opus Principles of Hope (1986), he argued that one reason the fascists won in Weimar Germany was because the socialists were too negative, centering their project on critique alone. He believed we must move beyond a condemnation of the present to offer an alternative vision of the future, or utopia, that captured the imagination and deeper desires of the people. With the collapse of communism and the relativist perspectives of post-structuralism, many on the Left have abandoned efforts to name an alternative to the present order of things. Freire and Bloch, however, believed that this was essential, as we must move beyond describing the world as it is to imagining an alternative that both highlights the shortcomings of the present and offers a provisional road map for action toward its realization.

A second key insight relates to the presence of utopian dreams within everyday life. Bloch believed all cultural artifacts hold some trace of deeper societal desire. From magazine advertisements to movies to television programming and window display sets, underlying aspirations and dreams peek out from behind the cracks and crevices of the commodified form they take in contemporary society. Bloch believed we must locate and capitalize on these traces in offering a compelling alternative. Marcuse largely agreed, arguing in Eros and Civilization (1966) that dreams hold traces of happiness and freedom outside the technological rationality that he believed dominates our thoughts, senses, desires and even needs.

The remainder of the article will focus specifically on Marcuse and the contributions his thoughts can offer to a more hopeful and empowering critical pedagogy that can fight through the rampant cynicism, political disengagement and embrace of consumer and technological culture that currently predominate among the young. The next section offers Marcuse’s analysis of the increasingly fortified and complex mechanisms for social control and domination. The subsequent two explore his educational project for overcoming these repressive and oppressive dynamics and the importance to radical politics of embodied hope.

Desire and Technological Rationality

Marcuse and his Frankfurt School compatriots were among the first to recognize the power of capitalism to create a desiring system that manipulated people into capitulating their most basic desires to those dictated by the culture industry and the underlying capitalist structure. In Eros and Civilization and then One-Dimensional Man (1964), we see the full realization of this shift, where technological rationality comes to dominate and the ability to see beyond the strictures of market imperatives become increasingly difficult.

Marcuse (1966) argued that contemporary society has established a system of repression more complex than that described by Freud. There was the necessary repression that accompanied agreeing to live in society with others (the performance or reality principle) and a surplus repression, which was the source of social domination. Forms that this surplus repression took included the monogamous, patriarchal family, the hierarchical division of labor, and public control of an individual’s private existence.

With the advent of surplus repression, individuals became encased within an overarching technological and instrumental rationality that seriously circumscribes thought, dreams and even needs. The resulting organization of desire altered the very nature of the pleasure principle, orienting it toward the perpetuation of the system of domination and control. A phenomenon that
emerged in response is *repressive desublimation*, where the promise of immediate gratification and small measures of freedom led people to embrace the system and work to sustain it. An example is pornography, where direct libidinal satisfaction is abandoned for its approximation.

Simulation and simulacra become the mechanisms for social control as the commodified object replaces the unattainable deeper libidinal desires. The system creates an internal process of self-perpetuation where want and desire can never be filled but ephemerally become the basis of a repression that is internalized. Since we cannot see outside the imposed rationality and sensibility, we are trapped in a system that never offers the happiness and satisfaction available outside it.

In this way, one can argue, we become estranged from our own deeper libidinal desires and a new form of alienation emerges, where we cannot find satisfaction in the system that we see as a natural extension of our psyche. Instead of looking for ways to transcend this reality, we instead seek only to consume more, to work harder and to strive for more material satisfaction, assuming this is the route to happiness. But in the failure this effort continues to sustain, we become further and further alienated from ourselves and our desiring systems and become victims of a vicious circle of internal dissatisfaction and confusion that could easily result in cynicism and disengagement.

The problem for social transformation then becomes more than reaching critical consciousness through ideology critique. It must be accompanied by a new way to view the world and, as Kellner (2000) has argued, a more radical subjectivity that breaks the failed essentialism, idealism and various prejudices of the past. In this movement, the Great Refusal is one key component, finding ways to awaken a sense that more than freedom and satisfaction on the cheap are available and an alternative world-view and order of things is possible. Desire and its embodiment in a more ecumenical Eros can then become a revolutionary force, rather than one of the main sources of oppression. This is a necessary but not easy precondition to any radical project for change not destined for ultimate failure.

If the Left wants to move beyond critique to mobilize a real resistance, it must also work to offer an alternative vehicle for desire satisfaction. It is not state intervention and ideological hegemony alone that fortify the capitalist behemoth, but its ability to harness and redirect energy and desire. The Great Refusal appears like an appropriate starting point for a revolution against capitalism, but why would people refuse that which seems to be the fount of their satisfaction? In the 1960s, it was the sexual revolution and the opening of the imagination that awoke a revolutionary ferment. And Marcuse became a guru of the New Left because he saw the potential here. But an effective revolution today must abide by the advice he offered in *Eros and Civilization*, finding ways to channel sexual desire into a communal sense of Eros, where the striving for lasting satisfaction replaces the need for instant individual gratification – a milieu where reason and happiness can converge and the needs of the many overcome the repressive instincts of the few and the one.

But what are the desires the Left can capitalize on in working to challenge the juggernaut that capitalism has wrought? The hints lie in the very system of desires capitalism pretends to meet. As Bloch argued, every cultural artifact that has the power to persuade holds the vestiges of some deeper, more primordial desire. In advertising and consumer culture, there must be traces of people’s alienation from a more authentic series of desires. Among the most popular themes appear to be the desire to sign on or become part of a larger community (fashion, music, sports), to have a voice (reality television, desire for fame), to satisfy libidinal desires (pharmaceutical culture and commodified emotions) and to find love and freedom. As Marcuse argued, there are ways to make these seemingly individual desires into collective ones toward true liberation from the commodities that ail us. And this is founded on first recognizing that we are both sexual and social animals that need others to be truly happy.

**Eros, Reason and the Senses**

Beyond a more complex and multidimensional analysis of capitalism and its power to channel desire, Marcuse offers specific pedagogical strategies to overcome this rationality and fortify a new sensibility more in line with a just, equitable and humane society. In *Eros and Civilization*, he offers mechanisms to approach a new sensibility where reason and the senses come together, allowing
reason to incorporate sensuality into its core and escape the dualisms of the past. In this movement, the potential exists to create a new rationality where reason and happiness converge, rather than working at odds as is often the case in contemporary society. Marcuse calls for an aesthetic education to help facilitate this new sensibility.[1] In the paragraphs that follow, some aspects of the pedagogy will be discussed that can be useful in helping students to see outside the prevailing rationality and awaken the desire to change society.

The first aspect is arts education, where production and appreciation are incorporated as key components of pedagogy. Marcuse (1972) argues that art offers the opportunity to step outside the dominant discourse and rationality and both deconstruct society and offer alternative dreams for children. Art is one form of the Great Refusal, in its rejection of the discourse and rationality of its epoch – superseding them even as they are co-opted from within. As Bloch noted, gaining appreciation for art and a more critical view of popular media can aid children in beginning to discern the traces of deeper libidinal desires that contemporary society fails to satisfy. And art offers an opportunity to awaken and foster the imagination, which has become increasingly verboten in contemporary schools and society. Maxine Greene (1986) has advocated poetry and art for this very reason, seeing them as conduits for students to contemplate a different future. There is no reason not to go even further to incorporate music, media production and theatre.[2]

Sensual education is a second facet of Marcuse’s aesthetic education that can be useful to critical pedagogy. Like Dewey (1916) before him, Marcuse believed all the senses are key in the learning process. He thus argued in Counterrevolution and Revolt (1972) and other works that we should incorporate the body more fully into learning, allowing students to explore the world in new ways. This will help shatter the false Cartesian logic of a separation between mind and body and open the door to a more immanent perspective on existence that escapes the dangers of transcendental thinking, where the present is sacrificed for an unknown future.

A third element is the return to nature. Unlike Freire, Marcuse (1972) rejects humanism in some sense, and instead argues for a symbiotic relationship with nature where we overcome a rationality that subordinates nature to human domination. This can help overcome the logic of humans dominating humans, by challenging the human domination of nature. If we can imbue children with an appreciation of nature as something we are part of, they may start to see the symbiotic relationship of all life. In this shift we reconnect with ecological and environmental movements and their belief that we are part of a world that offers us pleasure outside commodification. This is in some sense a movement toward Rousseau, although I believe Marcuse would reject the nostalgia and atavism at the core of some of his thinking. In education, this means getting children out into natural settings where they can explore their sensual relationships with nature outside the colonizing logic of science and classification.

A final aspect of an aesthetic education worth noting is Marcuse’s efforts to follow the feminist movement in arguing for a pedagogy that escapes the patriarchal, andocentric and aggressive system of reason and attempts to embrace a sensibility more commonly affiliated with femininity. This admittedly essentialized view would involve a movement toward empathy, sensitivity, peace, caring and non-exploitative practices – challenging the conservative, masculine skew of mainstream media. In this movement, another key idea from Eros and Civilization comes to the fore – which is the rechanneling of libidinal desires into an intersubjective, communitarian system of beliefs where a non-repressive reality principle can come more into line with the pleasure principle.

**Utopian Dreaming and Embodied Hope**

Marcuse offers two other insights into critical pedagogy that can be instrumental in moving beyond the current historic moment. One is his vision of utopia and the other is the idea of embodied hope. Marcuse, unlike Freire and Giroux (2001), believed in going beyond concrete utopia to also explore a utopia that existed outside the current rationality. As Lyotard (1974) argued, critique is always encased within the discourse one is trying to overcome, and thus cannot really transcend that reality. If we allow an affirmative vision of an alternative reality to move toward rather than one based solely on the eradication of negative elements, it can embolden people to act. For individuals are arguably more apt to struggle for a positive vision than one founded solely on negation. The utopia is provisional and can vary from community to community, but there must
be some movement toward solidarity in diversity that allows a broader movement for change. This involves embracing the different projects across the diverse groups that make up the ‘Left’ while searching assiduously for points of convergence where we can work collectively. In education, this means offering children the tools and time to contemplate a different future and their role in actualizing it.

Finally, I think it is essential to point out Marcuse’s emblematic role as the embodiment of hope. Even in recognizing the increasing effectiveness of technological rationality and social control, Marcuse knew that hope was essential in planting the seeds for change. So while there were moments in his intellectual career when he was among the most deterministic of thinkers, he always embraced all efforts at transforming society. From Marxism to feminism to queer politics, the civil rights movement, the student movement and anti-colonialist insurgencies, he always supported these groups, even when he did not see them as strategically or theoretically sound. He became a guru of the New Left based on this hopeful embrace of all forms of resistance and his unflappable faith in the power of people to overcome the domination and oppression that surrounded them.

Like Gandhi, Marx and Martin Luther King, Marcuse lived the change he wanted to see in the world, rather than sequestering himself in the comfort of the academy. Critical teachers and researchers must also embody the change they are advocating, showing students an alternative through their actions together with their words. This requires more than critique, activism and alluding to the Great Refusal; it also most include a positive dream that can inspire others to follow, embracing their creativity and beliefs.

Conclusion

If we are to empower people to hope and dream of a different reality, we must engage the important question of convincing them that real freedom is not an individualistic pursuit but one predicated on the fostering of a community where the reality principle is a boon rather than the source of our repression. In this move, the intersubjective ontology of Freire together with Marcuse’s affirmation of a communal rather than individual Eros appears key.

To accomplish this, three things must coexist with the requisite critique of the order of things. The first is empowerment, where we follow Freire in fostering a belief in the power people have to become subjects in history toward changing it. This will help to fight cynicism and the fear of freedom endemic throughout most of our history, through the reigniting of hope. The second is to build a discourse and performative program for rechanneling desire. The Left must again engage the centrality of desire, as did Marcuse and the 1960s radicals in the USA and France, working to overcome the various forms of repression and sublimation engendered in capitalism, Oedipus, religion and language. Finally, there must be a normative ideal to work toward. Freire argued that we are always struggling against something and for something. The latter is critical in seeing what is on the other side of critique that can mobilize the masses toward action. And here the aesthetic dimension Marcuse highlighted can be powerful in awakening the mind to the power of imagination.

In looking forward, it is always helpful to look backward for exemplars and mistakes that can be avoided in the future. A perfect example is Martin Luther King, who had a powerful critique of American society, combining questions of race with those of class and war. But he also had a dream. And it was that dream that galvanized the masses to follow; a dream the Left must find a way to reawaken. The dream should be founded in an affirmative ethic rather than one of absolute negativity, tied to the hope that has always driven humanity forward against the riptide of inertia.

Notes

[1] Marcuse’s aesthetic education takes much of its inspiration from Schiller’s aesthetic education (see Schiller, 1983). An Essay on Liberation (1991) and Counterrevolution and Revolt (1972) give further articulation of these ideas.

[2] The techniques of Augusto Boal’s theatre of the oppressed can be quite useful in this sense, giving children a voice and the tools to struggle against their subordination (see Boal, 1985).
References


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