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Persistence of Vision: Hegemony and Counterhegemony in the Everyday

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Sitting in Carmel above Haifa
Watching the receding
Orange-pink globe
Sink
Into
The
Mediterranean,
It suddenly dawned on me that
My sunset is someone else's sunrise,
And someone else's noon in between.
And we are all in this together.¹

Conference of the Walking Birds²

Once upon a time an entire population of birds had forgotten how to fly. So they walked everywhere, generation after generation. Every one complained about sore feet and how

¹ Robert Bahruth, "Problematizing persistence of vision: a demonstration activity" (paper presented at International Institute on Peace Education at Kibbutz Beit Oren, Haifa Israel, July 28-August 4, 2008).

² Oral tradition in Mexico, version written by Roberto Bahruth.
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long it took to go anywhere. Finally, one bright bird made the suggestion that they bring in an expert for a weekend long conference on flying. They found such an expert and soon the arrangements were made at a beautiful hotel on a mountaintop. The expert arrived and all joined in singing such lovely songs as “We can fly, we can fly.” They sat and went through the motions, flapping their wings to the instructions of the expert. At the end of the conference, they were all led to the hotel terrace and encouraged to follow the expert as he jumped off and flew around and around. First, only the bravest among them followed, but eventually all were encouraged and took the leap of faith. For an hour they all rode the thermals and glided through the air. Some even sang with delight the songs they had learned. Finally, one by one, they landed on the terrace and took their seats for the closing ceremony. Awards were handed out and praise was heaped upon the expert. After saying farewell, all the birds then walked home.

A gathering of subjects of history, activists who are engaging in the struggle for humanization, provides the ideal circumstance for pedagogical explorations that are generative and organic. Contrary to state-sponsored schooling, where inductees are treated as objects, receptacles of what Gabbard³ refers to as “the secular gospel,” participants in the International Institute of Peace Education (IIPE) 2008 held in Haifa, Israel demonstrated the power of critical pedagogical encounters to move people to act not only with clarity and determination in, but also if necessary, against the everyday. After years of cultural work in a variety of terrains of engagement, I learned that a persistent, generative question regarding hegemony deserved an activity, which I designed to problematize the inertia of the status quo and neutralize the effects of hegemonic encounters. Implemented at IIPE, the effort was to promote a mindset to counter-respond by exposing inertia as a hegemonic practice.

During the opening panel introducing the central notions of critical pedagogy, numerous breakout groups worked separately, yet composed in different ways the question of how to resist conforming to the pressures of hegemony. In my response to this question, I pointed to my session later in the week as a direct response. I call it “persistence of vision,” a scientific concept that explains the double exposure that occurs in our vision naturally and allows us to see a continuous flow of movement rather than a staccato of snapshots. It is what makes movies work, for example, and which provides, more generally, coherence.

Persistence of vision can be both positive and negative in determining how we perceive our worlds and our places in them. In the negative sense, we can begin to explore the hegemony of our received cultures and how we have been programmed to be in the world, accepting structures of inequality and injustice as inevitable, normal, and often invisible. Patriarchy and privilege are normalized rather than critically questioned. Traditional gatherings for conventions, conferences and workshops usually do more to

³ David Gabbard, “The prairie is wide: Conrack comes to ‘The Rez,’” in *Cultural Circles* (Boise: Boise State University, 1997), 31.

reinforce these structures than to challenge them. This is why I introduce my arguments with the folktale of the Conference of the Walking Birds.

Upon leaving a conference, energized and awakened to new ways of seeing our worlds, the threat still looms that we will succumb to the seductive bombardments of the media and our well-programmed ways of being. Our families, friends and fellow citizens will still be marching through the everyday in rhythm to the corporate beat of capitalism and consumerism, tuned in to their televisions and cell phones more than to us, or their surroundings. We are left with a problem: explaining what we have just experienced in a “you just had to be there” situation while maintaining our focus not to be dragged back into the dance of death that is killing the planet, experienced as a struggle that distracts us from living richer lives.

A Pedagogy of Invitation

Practicing a pedagogy of invitation⁴ demonstrates a conscious recognition of the forces of hegemony and received culture that promote conformity to the status quo, normative thinking--what Foucault termed “governmentality”⁵, an internalization of the “secular gospel”⁶ that fosters well-behaved thinking and acting in the everyday. An invitation can be extended to participants in any critical pedagogical space for them to engage in a process that questions the logic of hegemonic structures that foster injustices based upon the “isms” (e.g. gender, class, race, etc.) of society, while promoting greed and self-interest as positive dispositions.

Such an invitation recognizes that consciousness cannot be forced, and that the abandonment of received culture cannot simply and abruptly be foisted upon learners. It requires a “pedagogy of question”⁷ so that a dialectical engagement of learners can begin to make the connections between the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the resulting abject poverty of the many. Critical pedagogues can invite learners to examine issues of social justice and the human conditions of others, but they must not bash learners over the head for their own participation in reproducing the status quo. Ultimately, as the saying goes, “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.”

⁴ Robert Bahruth, 2005. “Critical literacy versus reading programs: schooling as a form of control,” *International Journal of Learning* 11 (2005): 509.

⁵ Michel Foucault et al., *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality : with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁶ David Gabbard, “The prairie is wide: Conrack comes to ‘The Rez,’” in *Cultural Circles* (Boise: Boise State University, 1997), 31.

⁷ Paulo Freire, “Foreword,” In *An unquiet pedagogy : transforming practice in the English classroom*, ed Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook/Heinemann, 1991), ix-x.

Perhaps the best way to accomplish change is to begin by making the horse aware of his thirst. According to Chávez Chávez⁸

What Kosik explicates as the “doctrinaire systemization of ideas (ideology)”, Freire, it seems, operationalizes by his notions of reading the word and reading the world, thus our theories of dialogical action based on the initial work by Freire are revealed when we as critical pedagogists, pursue to interrogate pedagogical *and* cultural tools of oppression and pedagogical *and* cultural tools of liberation.

Participation in the everyday of capitalistic logic has produced many dissatisfied customers, but often they are unaware of their own dissatisfaction because they are unable to imagine how life could be any different. Stress, partial attention to those around them, postponement of their own pleasures, chasing after new possessions predicated upon the faulty logic that this signifies happiness, all leave us with a sense of emptiness.

Media bombardments portray ideals for the images of men and women that few of us can measure up to, so we feel dissatisfaction with our bodies. This is reflected in the diet and fitness industries springing up in modern societies. How ironic that we watch television and are programmed to crave foods that are not healthy for us, then we pay to burn off the calories we should not have consumed in the first place. Food photographers are hired to make hamburgers look irresistible for television and on menu boards in the fast food chains. I invite my students to take a careful look at the photo in juxtaposition to what they are actually served. This is an invitation to do what I call “the algebra of life.” What equals what, and what does not? I watch a sports event on television and soon I have an incredible urge to buy a six-pack of beer and a muscle truck! Factoring for X becomes an exercise in counterhegemony. My happiness is on one side of the equal sign and all of the distractions from it, assaulting me in the everyday of hegemony, I try to isolate on the other side.

When students are invited to critically examine the hypocrisies and contradictions of the distractions that well-trained propagandists and snake oil merchants are paid to produce, students can begin to do the math for themselves. Through juxtapositions and critical questions they begin to see that what you see is not what you get. They can unpack the lies of “waging a war for peace.” They can see that the defenders of freedom are really the defenders of corporations and globalization. To see such things displays a skill set of critical literacy that makes it increasingly difficult *not* to notice the inconsistencies; they begin to pop out at us at an alarming rate. They were always there, but through the successful normalization of our received culture, we were taught not to see and, therefore, not to question.

⁸ Rudolfo Chavez-Chavez, “The direct and indirect influence of Karel Kosik on Paulo Freire’s work” (computer printout, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, New Mexico State University, 2008), 2.

Students may refuse the invitations to read the world critically. Our received culture is deeply embedded into our ways of being. Some may refuse to engage in the critical examination of modern society. Non-engagement is common, especially from those who are heavily invested and materially benefitting from the status quo. The spiritual bankruptcy they may be vaguely feeling is offset by their material comforts and distractions. Like-minded friends and associates support and reaffirm their continued investment in the system. Perhaps the best we can hope for with such students is to plant seeds of doubt, and hope a few sprout to make their participation in oppressive or exploitative practices a bit unnerving. Here, too, the idea of invitation is important: when too forceful an approach is used, we tend to alienate and further entrench people in hegemony that might otherwise have considered our ideas. We should not make it easy for anyone to dismiss our ideas as ludicrous.

IPE as a Counterhegemonic Gathering:

Audre Lorde⁹ forewarned us, “you cannot dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools.” Unlike most academic conferences, at IPE, rather than following traditional formats and arrangements of time and space, pedagogical spaces were provided for critical encounters where all participants were included through a pedagogy of invitation. While extremely productive and useful, further improvements in the structure of the gathering are possible. As I had stated in my panel address, critical pedagogy is critical of the status quo, but it must also be critical of itself. One structure that was not provided is central to critical pedagogy: a complete cultural circle of all of the participants conducted by a person with experience in running such a structure. Room for many smaller circles and debriefing groups was productive, but a complete circle maximizes the effects of the experience as the smaller groups come together. A closing circle at the end of the conference would have an exponential effect on the new vision we all hope will persist as we return to our everyday situations.

This then is the positive side of persistence of vision that I hoped to create through my session. Commitment is born out of deep theoretical and philosophical understandings that must be arrived at through generative and organic critical encounters. The damaging effects of hegemony must be problematized to establish a sense of “what against”¹⁰ in order to understand what we are “for” in composing a counterhegemonic response. The connecting of the dots experience of a critical encounter should illustrate the destructive elements of the present neoliberal agenda of globalization in order to understand the consequences for all life on this planet. This should promote an urgency to act with clarity of purpose, rather than to conform to the insistent pressures of hegemony upon return to our everyday lives.

The theme on the first day that several groups generated begged the question: How can we resist the tug of hegemony after a critical pedagogical experience? My response is that a new persistence of vision must replace the hegemonic one we were programmed to accept through our received cultures. This requires “revision” or seeing things again, but

⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: essays and speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

¹⁰ Paulo Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 24.

in new and critical ways. This amounts to a skill set that I refer to as “critical literacy.” As Freire so often stated, before you can write upon the world you must learn to read the world critically. While hegemony has written upon us all as objects of history, to write upon the world is to act as historical subjects. History is not dead, as the powerbrokers would have us believe. History is being made in the everyday by people who choose to act, rather than to be acted upon.

I grew up with one foot in my parent's generation and one foot hovering over my own which was still in the making. My stability and perspective in the world derives from my anchoring in both worlds. The generation of the microchip is moving so fast that there is little time for reflection and response. This has led to an "on demand" culture that has both benefits and disadvantages. I would argue that the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages and would propose that this distinction at least be engaged as a point of dialectical encounter in a form of critical pedagogical problematizing. I see egocentrism and a sense of powerlessness and nonengagement as acts of fatalism and conformity among those born into the world of the microchip. From my view, the on demand culture is being swept away on the currents of popular culture without criticism and media literacy that might provoke agency. According to Giroux¹¹:

Against the encroaching forces of militarization, corporatism, and ideological intolerance, educators have the difficult task of matching their sense of engaged scholarship with a meaningful and critical pedagogy, one that enables students to engage in debate and dialogue about pressing social problems and to believe not only that civic life matters but that they can make a difference in shaping it.

What follows is a brief description of an activity that works in an on demand culture. It was designed and implemented at IPE¹² in a cultural circle of approximately thirty engaged activists from around the world and from all walks of life.

Problematizing Persistence of Vision: A Demonstration Activity

Seated in a circle, our group began with a brief overview of what was to come. Walking around the circle, I twirled the strings of a thaumatrope, a two-sided cardboard device with a sketch of a bird on one side and a cage on the other. It has been used for centuries to demonstrate the scientific concept of “persistence of vision.” When twirled quickly, the images become superimposed on the retina making it appear as though the bird were

¹¹ Henry A. Giroux, *The university in chains: confronting the military-industrial-academic complex* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 5.

¹² Robert Bahruth, “Problematizing persistence of vision: a demonstration activity” (paper presented at International Institute on Peace Education at Kibbutz Beit Oren, Haifa Israel, July 28-August 4, 2008).

in the cage. Through a series of questions we reached a scientific understanding of the concept, and then explored the metaphorical nature of the images, to provoke through questions, how received culture puts all of us in cages that aren't immediately visible. The saying in anthropology is "the last thing a fish would discover is the water in which it swims."

Without further explanation, I introduced the next activity described as the lowest budget documentary in the world. Rather than just using two images, a collection of images would be used. I told the group I was the producer, director and editor of the film. I asked for silence as we "watched the movie." A series of pictures circulated, one by one, around the circle with nothing more than an invitation to ponder the meanings and to write a quick response to general impressions of the photographs. The first picture was of a family farm with curved furrows of fields, surrounded by woods left intact. The next picture was a housing tract of identical houses in straight rows, followed by another picture of a "sanitary landfill" (euphemism for a dump). In the next picture, two men are bathing in the waters warmed by the thermal pollution of a factory, apparently oblivious to possible pollutants in the water. The following picture shows a worker in ultra-protective gear, wearing a hardhat, gas mask and rubber gloves, while handling a long steel pole to maneuver a dangerous substance. Next, a miner is digging through ore with a pickaxe. Next in the sequence is a man with a chainsaw cutting down a huge old growth tree. Then, comes a photo of two people covering their faces with their t-shirts as they walk through what appears to be a violent dust storm. The next photo is of a black person's feet wearing sandals handmade from bits of cloth and empty plastic soda bottles. Next is a photo of a young boy with an assault rifle. Finally, the dramatic ending of the documentary shows a field where numerous men on crutches are playing soccer; all are missing a leg, apparent victims of landmines.

As a documentary, it is through the overall cumulative effect of the series of photos that I hope to create a response. The participants and I write our general impressions for a few minutes and then they are invited to share in pairs what they have written. Once time has been allowed for sharing, I ask the group for one of two ways to engage. First, when invited, someone may be more than willing to share. Second, someone may wish to nudge the person they shared with, encouraging them to share. I do not nominate my students. Nomination is a misuse of power and the affirmation of an authoritarian, patriarchal approach to schooling that reinforces the very structures of hegemony I am attempting to problematize. Nomination is one of the "master's tools," while invitation is an alternative pedagogical response.

It is through the dialectical interaction of the group that we can collectively make meanings from the common experience of the documentary. My goal is to guide the discourse in ways that help people to connect the dots and to see that this is far from a random assortment of photos. Instead, it is a deliberately arranged collection of photos thoughtfully selected and positioned to reflect the connectedness of daily actions and the direct or indirect consequences of lifestyles in consumer cultures, within those cultures, and on powerless people caught in the wake of a globalized neoliberalism.

It is humbling and encouraging to be among a critical mass of people working consciously and conscientiously to humanize the everyday in a world under pressure to be globalized into an increasingly antihumane experience for the bulk of humanity. Such gatherings and interactions offer hope, which the encounter just described practices as a critical pedagogy of invitation. All such engagements provide opportunities for cultural workers to hone their ontological clarity, an important project in order to increase the effectiveness of our work. They require persistence of vision.

Conclusion

Freire was clear that one cannot provide the circumstances for others to become liberated if one is enslaved to a system of indoctrination. The first moment of embarking on a journey away from the “pseudoconcrete”¹³ is to recognize the big lies inherent in the invented reality bestowed upon us through our received culture. The internal logic of hegemony is kept unexamined by providing a “banking” experience in schools where the necessary skills to write upon the world, rather than to be written upon, are systematically taken away. Critical pedagogical considerations begin through the interrogation of the unseen hegemonic structures that depend upon “the ‘innocence’ of the exploited.”¹⁴ Understanding begins through a process of naming, where language used in new ways reveals the elephant in the room that no one has yet recognized, but all have felt the weight of in the everyday experiences of stress, hunger, inhumane treatment of people, violence and other forms of oppression. Kosík was instrumental in naming the faulty logic of the received hegemonic culture and structures that promote the exploitation and oppression of people in capitalist orientations to reality.

Once the sources of inhumane and unjust social relations are identified, the cultural work necessary to respond pedagogically requires a praxis of transformation. Working with students it is also necessary to comprehend the tendency for them to succumb to the consistent and insistent pressures of hegemony beyond the classroom. The concept “persistence of vision” is useful. Received culture runs deep and is not undone over night. This is why the idea of lifelong learners is so vital as a disposition of curiosity and criticism toward received definitions of reality. Freire advised a practice of patient-impatience¹⁵ as we work with students to generate new understandings after deconstructing the dialectical relationships between the social, economic, historical and political contexts of pseudoconcrete hegemonic constructions of reality. Denouncing the dehumanizing practice of banking requires the announcing of a humanizing praxis where power relations in the classroom replace dominance and oppression with inclusion and edification of the learners as intellectuals and subjects of history prepared to engage in the continuous project of agency in a history which is always unfinished.

¹³ Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of the concrete: a study on problems of man and world*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976), 1.

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Teachers as cultural workers: letters to those who dare teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 85.

¹⁵ Paulo Freire, and Ana Maria Araújo Freire, *Pedagogy of the heart* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 64.

That critical pedagogy is political is undeniable, but all education is political. Discovering the hidden agendas of hegemonic schooling is an important first step towards transformation. As Freire¹⁶ stated:

“The defenders of neutrality of literacy programs do not lie when they say that the clarification of reality at the same time as learning to read and write is a political act. They are wrong, however, when they deny that the way in which they deny reality has no political meaning.”

Just as there has been a persistence of vision driven by war, so too there has been a quieter persistence of vision of peace. The media give most of the play to war since it sells, is more dramatic and spectacular and fits well into --and promotes-- the “secular gospel”¹⁷ of militarism and capitalism. However, peace has been a constant among many enlightened human beings throughout history as well. Signs of the masses of the world awakening to peaceful consciousness shine through the haze of war-minded media, but it takes critical literacy to avoid the distractions, to peel away at the propaganda, and to connect the dots. A good example is the fact that world wide protests occurred before the war on terrorism was launched following nine eleven. This is the first time in human history that a war was protested before it began, rather than to end it. Unfortunately, the arrogance of ignorance (I consider these synonymous) insisted upon the agenda of globalization and the will of capital to hoard the world’s energy resources. Iraq was not blessed with oil, but cursed for having it. No one is invading the Sahara, but if they discover oil beneath the sand, the shit will hit the fan there too. Just look a bit to the south to Nigeria, a country that had made gains in reclaiming the desert for agricultural purposes only to let the desert reclaim the lands once oil was discovered.

Powerbrokers often claim that terrorists are attacking the American way of life, and they are not entirely wrong. The hazy vision of neoliberalism can only focus on profit through a warped lens that does not wish to see the futility of destroying the planet through excessive consumerism. Greed, ambition and moral decay are served by distractions, destructive ego and ethnocentrism, and patriotism as destructive nationalism when the lives of one country or group are valued more than the lives of any other. Media literacy should help students to protect themselves from the barrage of propaganda that creates compulsive consumers of products they do not need. A major difference between buying something and being sold something should be part of our proficiency in negotiating the everyday. Many people are materially wealthy while spiritually poor, and unhappiness in the land of plenty is common. Buy, spend, consume, borrow for material gain. The latest model makes the one we own no longer desirable even when it still functions. Planned obsolescence is in the deliberate design of products. We have been raised in a throw away culture, where identity is tied to possessions and work rather than to peacefulness, nature, and consciousness.

¹⁶ in Moacir Gadotti, *Reading Paulo Freire: his life and work* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 59.

¹⁷David Gabbard, “The prairie is wide: Conrack comes to ‘The Rez,’” in *Cultural Circles*, (Boise: Boise State University, 1997), 31.

Chomsky¹⁸ refers to schooling as “the social construction of not seeing.” The indoctrinated ways of seeing, or not seeing, the world through received culture burn/etch perceptions onto our mind’s eye and corrupt our ways of seeing and being. According to Bruner,¹⁹ “formal structures may get laid down early in the discourse of family life and persist stubbornly in spite of changed conditions.” When a critical educational experience is provided, often the new ways of seeing are superimposed on old images that persist. Hegemony is so thorough it seems necessary for multiple counterhegemonic experiences for a breakthrough to occur. Otherwise, the students may have profound experiences that shake their confidence in received worldviews, but once they return to the many surrounding experiences provided by the bombardments of hegemonic signs, symbols, media and schooling practices, the old image becomes restored and a central tendency toward mediocrity wins out. Students must be equipped with a set of critical literacy skills and profound humanizing experiences that will allow them to recognize the oppressive and antihuman nature of hegemony, therefore to resist succumbing to it. They must be prepared to continue to broaden and deepen, on their own, the cultural work started in a critical classroom. They must be taught to see in new ways, what Bruner²⁰ refers to as a “metaphysical assist,” that will enable them to defend themselves from the persistence of vision of what Kosik refers to as the “pseudoconcrete”²¹ version of reality tainting their vision.

The next generation must understand that every time we spend a dollar, it is a political act. We are financing the destruction of the planet instead of boycotting products, industries and corporations whose excess profit maintains destruction of the environment as a set of deliberate calculations. In the spirit of resistance, this amounts to what Huffman²² identified: “the key element was noncooperation with the colonial infrastructure.” As Freire (1970) stated, they must learn well, through critical literacy, “what for and what against”. These lessons are not learned through banking, one of “the master’s tools,” but through dialectical engagements with history as an unfinished project to which we can all contribute through a pedagogy of invitation.

¹⁸ Noam Chomsky and Donaldo P. Macedo, *Chomsky on miseducation* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 19.

¹⁹ Jerome Bruner, “Life as narrative,” in *The need for story: cultural diversity in classroom and community*, ed. Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994), 36.

²⁰ Ibid, 36.

²¹ Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of the concrete: a study on problems of man and world*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976), 1.

²² Vern Huffman, “Stories from the Cha Cha Cha,” in *The impossible will take a little while: a citizen's guide to hope in a time of fear*, ed. Paul Rogat Loeb (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 161.

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