

The Costs of Consciousness Raising: Comments on Sally Haslanger's Kneller Lecture

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One of the dilemmas at the heart of progressive education involves balancing two critical aims. Educators must aim to introduce citizens-in-the-making into society as it is—to become fluent in the social and cultural “doxa” (as Sally Haslanger puts it) that enables them to achieve their aims, coordinate with others, and become contributing members of our society.¹ As John Dewey writes, “Society exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life. The transmission occurs by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger.”² But the *progressive* educator also seeks to improve society by inculcating in future citizens the critical capacities and progressive values that will disrupt the injustices woven into our existing social practices. In his essay “A Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin notes that, “The purpose of education . . . is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not.”³ These aims frequently collide. The paradox, as Baldwin articulates it, is that no society really wants the kind of person who rejects the accepted social and cultural habitus of our society, even as our advancement depends on it.

What I’m going to suggest today is that this conflict is mirrored in the experience of students. Many find themselves torn between living in harmony with their social world, even though they are thereby playing a part in the perpetuation of an unjust social reality, and resisting and rejecting that reality, but risking the disruption of

relationships to those they love and to their communities. In my comments today, I will not be critical of Haslanger's education for social justice proposal, to which I am largely sympathetic; rather, I will urge us to think more carefully about the potential costs of consciousness raising. I will argue that our vision of progressive education should be more than a politically oriented practice. It should be an intentionally ethical practice that considers the ethical sacrifices that consciousness raising might require even as it succeeds politically.

Haslanger argues, quite persuasively, that education needs to move beyond inclusivity—often understood as including the perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized by offering them a seat at the table—to consciousness raising—a critical, epistemically disruptive collective endeavor. The reason is that we are all reproducers of the social and cultural habitus that serves to maintain and reinforce injustice, even those of us who have been historically marginalized. Consequently, our presence is not enough to disrupt tightly ingrained, injustice-promoting ideologies. Our institutions, educational ones included, encourage, reward, and recognize us when we play along. And so dismantling injustice requires more than education as it is often conceived. Haslanger writes that “education for social justice should teach skills and methods of ideology critique” because what we need is to be able to articulate moral claims that critique, oppose, and reject dominant ideologies. It is this that will lead us to develop proposals for corrective procedures and practices that have any shot at making the world less unjust. Education for liberation seeks to disrupt.

The problem is that this disruption, necessary for social justice, also threatens to upend students' relationships and sense of connection to their community. Those relationships often depend on our shared ways of understanding and interpreting the world. We are

intelligible to others by reference to the social and cultural habitus we share. This doesn't mean that we need to accept all aspects of our shared cultural or social system of norms and beliefs in order to relate to others in our communities, but rather that a shared fluency enables the flourishing of those relationships. But it is this very fluency that education for social justice seeks to disrupt.

To make this point vivid let me turn, briefly, to Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*.⁴ I trust that this book is familiar to many in this audience. In it, Westover describes her journey from growing up in a radically survivalist Mormon household, one that forbade children to engage in public education or to believe in Western medicine and science, to unimaginable academic and literary success—NYU, Cambridge, Harvard, a bestseller. And yet, Westover's story is anything but triumphant. Her story isn't precisely one of consciousness raising, but in the process of being educated, she does acquire a critical lens on her family's culture. And it is, in part, this that increasingly distances her from them. In a critical moment in the story, Westover recounts being unable to feel joy at having received a fellowship at Harvard. She writes, "I knew I should be drunk with gratitude that I, an ignorant girl who'd crawled out of a scrap heap, should be allowed to study there, but I couldn't summon the fervor. I had begun to conceive of what my education might cost me, and I had begun to resent it."⁵ As her connection to the world of her family and her community erodes, she becomes more ambivalent about the price she must pay for her success.

In interviews that I conducted for my book, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*, I talked to many strivers—my term for those seeking upward mobility through education—who found themselves, like Westover, armed with educa-

tion and yet ambivalent about what that achievement had cost them. Many of the strivers I talked to were not undertaking education as consciousness raising; rather, they were seeking better economic and career opportunities. But on the way there, some did come to acquire a critical understanding of race, gender, and other forms of oppression. And this understanding created rifts with those they loved. One young woman who returned to her rural farming community after earning a graduate degree, told me with tears in her eyes how difficult it was to figure out how to talk to her family and friends in ways that wouldn't further the distance between them.⁶ Yet, she also felt compelled to censure them when they said something untrue or, worse, racist or sexist. These criticisms on her part were often a source of tension and conflict that made it harder for her to feel at home in the town in which she had grown up.

Education for social justice will require that we introduce and inculcate students into a different social and cultural habitus, one that casts a critical lens on the one with which they grew up. Consciousness raising seeks to disrupt the ease that students feel at home and in their communities because these are very often sites dominated by ideologies that perpetuate injustice. This transformation, however, leads them to become less intelligible to their families and communities, sometimes, even to themselves.

In one of her wonderful essays entitled, "But Mom, Crop Tops are Cute," Haslanger notices the tensions between the parent and child who are understanding the world through different social milieus.⁷ The parents wish that their child wouldn't subscribe to the sexualized framework shared by her schoolmates; the daughter wishes that her parents would "get it." Haslanger provides an elegant way of understanding the critique leveled by the parents, but what I'm interested in

is the resulting tension in the relationship between the child and parent that results from a clash in how they are understanding the world. We've all been there, of course, we disagree with family and friends. But imagine this rift as the child becomes more and more fluent and steeped in schemas that are increasingly different and hostile to that of her parents, or her siblings, or members of her church. If the child's schema is one better oriented towards justice, we might lament her backward parents, but how do we contend with the friction this brings to their relationship? How do we think of the potential loss here for this child? And, more importantly, what do we say to the student who refuses to engage in the emancipatory project of consciousness raising because it will distance her from those she loves?

One response that might be offered to the worries I have raised is that everyone is better off when new, more emancipatory ideologies take root. Though the conflict might be painful, the result is worth the cost, even for those who refuse to acknowledge it. As Paulo Freire tells us, critical pedagogy aims to have students "liberate themselves and their oppressors as well."⁸ On this view, the potential disruption to a student's relationships and to her sense of belonging to her community are transition costs. But, of course, to those who are paying those costs, these are not simply transition costs. Their lives are worse in significant ways, even as they are better in others. Critically, they are worse in ways that cannot simply be made whole by their newfound knowledge. As educators our task is not only to educate future citizens to embrace better ideologies, but to care for the flourishing of our students here and now. And our students come to us with complicated and rich lives that are suffused with the marks of the unjust world in which we live. It is imperative that we grapple with the impact of consciousness raising on the many other valuable aspects

of a flourishing life—the bonds that tie us to family, friends, and our communities.

Another response we might offer to my worry is that education for social justice is meant to be directed at everyone, in and out of school. I suspect that Haslanger has something like this in mind, and I think many proponents of critical pedagogy also think that the emancipatory project should not be confined to educational institutions. I agree. And yet, if we are engaged in non-ideal theory, we need to think about what this looks like in practice. Schools, colleges, and universities are currently one of the few places in which this kind of critical consciousness raising project is feasible. Of course, there are other places—union meetings, the PTA, book clubs, etc.—in which discussions that can germinate into consciousness raising are being held. But many of these are voluntary organizations that won't have the kind of reach that is required. We still need to think about how to best support the student whose burgeoning critical consciousness creates conflicts with those they love. Reflecting on *Educated*, Sarah Stitzlein suggests some ways in which we might prepare students for the difficult emotional and social sacrifices such students have to make.⁹ She reiterates that the sacrifices students make are compounded when we put it on them to go back to their families and communities to “educate” them.

My critique here is not meant to undercut the claim that we need education that is disruptive of the pernicious grip that injustice promoting ideologies have on all of us. As James Baldwin tells us, “If a society succeeds in [tamping down critical dissent], that society is about to perish.”¹⁰ Rather, I'm asking that we think more carefully about what such an education requires of those whose lives are bound to those we love through those very ideologies. Of course, our relationships to each other involve much more than shared ideology.

But, as we have seen in this age of increasing polarization, we need to figure out not only how to articulate our rejection of the dominant ideologies, but to do so in a way that allows us to continue to love and live with those who might resist this disruption. My concern is not one of political legitimacy, but of ethics—important aspects of our flourishing might be at stake if we cannot figure out how to maintain relationships with those who are reluctant to engage in this political project with us.

1 Sally Haslanger, “Reproducing Social Hierarchy (or NOT),” *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 2 (2021).

2 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 3.

3 James Baldwin. “A Talk to Teachers,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (United Kingdom: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 325.

4 Tara Westover, *Educated* (New York: Random House, 2018).

5 Westover, *Educated* 293.

6 Jennifer Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 93-94.

7 Sally Haslanger, “‘But Mom, Crop-Tops are Cute!’ Social Knowledge, Social Structure and Ideology Critique,” *Philosophical Issues* 17 (2007): 70-91.

8 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, (United States: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 26.

9 Sarah Stitzlein, “Learning from *Educated*: Thoughts of Tara Westover’s Educational Memoir,” *Philosophy of Education Society 2021 Meeting* (online).

10 Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” 325.