

An Autonomist Rethinking of Resistance Theory and Pedagogical Temporality

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For many pedagogues, the prevailing models of resistance theory are problematic. The paucity of tangible transformative acts of resistance results in the valorization of strategies such as playing dumb, acting out, and not caring.¹ In an educational landscape that reflects what seems to be a protracting matrix of oppressive forces, such strategies certainly do not offer much reassurance. The weight of this reality has prompted, paradoxically, a call for the participation in and recognition of more resistance. Indeed it has become both prescriptive and fashionable to highlight the various ways that students resist practices such as standardized testing, English-only, tracking, zero tolerance policies, and the persistence of deficit discourses that target students marginalized by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, and nationality. Consequently, such calls for resistance both direct and delimit our theoretical gaze: we are to look only to the concrete expressions of opposition that are seemingly provoked by undemocratic education and the larger crushing world that it mirrors. While acknowledging the importance of such opposition in asserting and defending the humanity of students against forms of domination, this essay suggests that understandings of revolutionary subjectivity and transformation that accompany the larger body of resistance literature are doomed by a theoretical myopia. In fact, prevailing conceptions of resistance theory may actually obscure much of the creative and productive forces that are the generative basis for transformation.

It may seem curious to suggest that resistance theory obscures aspects of revolutionary subjectivity. After all, as Henry Giroux points out, what we think of as resistance concretely embodies “the logic of moral and political indignation.”² This logic is significant for Giroux, as is the task of bringing clarity to the concept of resistance. Such clarity around a constellation of resistances should, according to Giroux, inform the development of a critical pedagogy. Yet I want to suggest that it is precisely the creative and productive forces that resistance theory precludes from its field of vision that most urgently warrant our attention and pedagogical consideration. Here the problem, as I will pose it, is one of starting places, for what is limiting about resistance theory is the assumed temporal frame of reference. What I mean here is that resistance theory insists on focusing on the struggles that *follow* acts of domination. Lost in such a focus is recognition of pure and indeterminate potentialities that actually call domination into existence. As a result, resistance theory lapses into an ahistorical grammar and tends to render normative technologies of control — like zero tolerance policies that associate students of color with criminality — by granting them the status of *the backdrop* against which resistance takes place.³ In such a formulation it is accepted that “undemocratic education generates resistance.”⁴ That is, resistance is understood as a *response* that is

provoked by schools and the larger culture from which they spawn. Armed with this understanding of the genesis of oppositional behavior, critical educators have sought to develop pedagogies that harness this indignation.

Against this tendency, this essay will turn to aspects of an autonomist tradition in order to pose another way of thinking about students' potentialities and the pedagogical openings they offer. In particular, an autonomist tradition should aid in directing pedagogues to alternative starting places where apparatuses of capture are understood as reactive and resistant forces. From this perspective, students' potentialities along with their creative and productive forces are given primacy and understood as the constitutive motor that calls forth repressive resistances in the form of technologies of control. By starting from this premise educators can ask a different set of pedagogical questions. For instance, if standardized testing is recognized as a reactive form of resistance in so far as it is an attempt to territorialize knowledge production by imposing order and hierarchy, what, then, are the creative and productive forces that standardized testing resists, and how can we pedagogically appreciate these forces? Ultimately, I suggest that such pedagogical questions have profoundly different implications and possibilities from those that accompany prevailing models of resistance. Thus what this essay calls into question pertains to the very vitality of the pedagogies and perspectives that owe to standard accounts of resistance theory.

In what follows I will attempt to highlight the pedagogical possibilities that emerge through a reframing of the standard interpretative schema of resistance and struggle. First, I shall point to the ways in which aspects of an autonomist tradition enable an intervention in the prevailing temporal horizon of resistance models. I will try to show how an autonomist understanding of a politics of affirmation casts an alternative to dialectical logics of opposition and can thus open up pedagogical possibilities that theories of resistance may prematurely foreclose. Ultimately, this essay hopes to highlight "a general limitation of the concept and practices of resistance"⁵ and thus contribute to a larger project seeking "to orient critical pedagogy toward a new appreciation of and respect for the theme of 'potentiality'."⁶

It may be helpful to begin by demonstrating how contemporary streams of resistance theory in education have grown out of a critical confrontation with the work of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, who have been charged with adopting a reproductive model to explain the tenor of schools in a capitalist society.⁷ Contemporary resistance theory is in large part a response to Bowles and Gintis's insistence on a correspondence principle whereby schools reproduce social relations in the interest of capital's economic base. Here resistance theorists stress two interrelated points: Reproduction models are too deterministic and therefore fail to recognize that many students actively reject the dominant ideologies that schools attempt to inscribe. To buttress these arguments against facile and deterministic reproduction models, many theorists of resistance turned not only to Antonio Gramsci, but also to Louis Althusser, for it was in large part his concept of relative autonomy that was used to explain student opposition.⁸ A theory of relative autonomy — the idea that the superstructure is granted some independent movement

and only determined by the base in the last instance — helped critical educators “point to those non-reproductive ‘moments’ that constitute and support the critical notion of human agency.”⁹ What is important here is that resistance theory’s critical appropriation of the concept of relative autonomy seemingly permitted a dialectical notion of human agency, one that thoroughly rejected unidirectional conceptions of power such as those found in reproduction models that render students docile and complacent.

Yet resistance theory’s adoption of relative autonomy leaves intact a temporal frame of reference that posits a conception of students as subjects to be determined rather than subjects animated with determining capabilities. Put in Marxist terms, resistance theory does nothing to challenge the idea that the base is the determinant that produces oppositional behavior in schools. Sure, relative autonomy questions the degree to which this is true by highlighting agency amongst students, yet resistance theory uncritically retains the position of the base as a *starting point*. It places students in a secondary position — on a terrain of reaction — rather than the primary position of protagonist. From this perspective resistance theory appears just as unidirectional as reproduction theory. Thus in maintaining the sequential primacy of the base, resistance theory remains safely within the confines of orthodox Marxist readings, but obscures revolutionary subjectivity and limits the imaginative scope of pedagogical possibilities.

This fundamental oversight of resistance theorists — refusing to acknowledge the primacy of students — reveals not only the theoretical shortcomings of resistance theory, but also, as we will see, the short circuits of a critical pedagogy that takes its cue from models of resistance. If resistance is understood as an oppositional logic, domination too easily acquires the status of the backdrop or norm. Resistance, then, is conceptually grasped as an exceptional act, a response that attempts to disrupt equilibrium. The twist here, for what it is worth, is that resistance theorists, whose task is to complicate mechanistic conceptions of power, reinscribe its centrality through its normalization. Furthermore, there are related problems with how resistance is spatially located in so far as it is understood to be *framed by domination*. It is important to consider how this metaphor constructs our theoretical gaze. Within the frame we search for resistance, which is seemingly exposed, finite, and ascertainable. On the outside, eluding our attention is domination, which is seemingly infinite, mysterious, and always already there.

However, the apparent seductive ease with which we are able to grasp the substantiality of expressions of revolutionary subjectivity is a trap. This trap explains, in part, why the major theoretical task for resistance theory has been to account for the tangible signs of human agency, a task that propels critical educators in the ongoing quest to exhaustively highlight concrete acts of resistance against domination. Yet the imperceptible, unformed forces and potentialities of students fail to figure into the formulaic gaze of resistance theorists. As a result, revolutionary subjectivity becomes reduced to the concrete and thus appears imaginatively, quantitatively, and qualitatively limited — a mere kernel of a larger revolutionary project of becoming that is always already ensuing in the time of the now.

Paradoxically, then, in resistance theory's hasty quest to prove that students actively resist reproduction, the value of the finite and ascertainable comes to eclipse the value of that which is not readily visible or easily understood. In other words, it may be the case that resistance theory obscures the creative forces and deactivates the pure potentiality of students by starting with and limiting itself to the most tangible and ascertainable acts of opposition. Nonetheless, for critical educators, the strength of the metaphor described above lies in the axiom that resistance "has helped us understand how domination works."¹⁰ The idea here is that an understanding of the exception illuminates the operation of the norm.

But what if we turn this formulation on its head? What if we argue that the power that characterizes domination is actually the exception, and that the constituent, creative, and generative forces of students are primary? This is precisely the premise that Antonio Negri offers in his analysis of constituent and constituted power — the former of which is an inventive, immanent, and rupturing power while the latter is ordering and territorializing.¹¹ In other words, from Negri's perspective constituent power names the collective, immanent, and creative forces of social transformation that enact a type of permanent revolution. Constituted power, on the other hand, attempts to fix and establish order. Its aim is to inscribe hierarchy and stability into a social structure. The autonomist strands within Negri's development of these concepts can help guide us through a rethinking of some of the more troubling aspects of resistance theory mentioned above while also offering a theoretical foundation and set of conceptual tools to rethink our orientation to pedagogical temporality and potentiality.

First, it is instructive to note that constituent power has traditionally been theorized as the exception, and constituted power the norm. Such a formulation, mirroring what we find in resistance theory, suggests that constituent power is a resistant threat to an already established order. The strength of Negri's theory is that it inverts this idea and instead establishes constituent power as an antecedent to constituted power. Hence constituent power is understood as primary and constituted power as reactive force. This inversion offers critical educators a more nuanced view of how apparatuses of capture attempt to resist and curtail the creative forces and pure potentiality of students. In this regard, we would be wise to consider the argument of Patricia Carini, who provocatively suggests that schools resist children, fearing the capabilities that cannot be corralled to predetermined ends or reduced to pre-given categories.¹² Consider the practice of high-stakes testing. Despite resistance theory's tendency to highlight the ways in which students oppose testing, we could point out that as a technology of control or an appendage of constituted power, it is high-stakes testing that first resists the unique and creative forces of students, especially those which defy and escape measure. From this view, high-stakes standardized testing posits a truncated conception of knowledge and its epistemic, social, and political sources, not only restricting expansive possibilities for collective engagement and knowledge production, but also rendering such production a contagion. Such testing aims to posit a normative and territorialized conception of the so-called educated subject, one that is tethered to linguistic, cultural, racial, and

economic demarcations.¹³ Thus standardized testing is a reactive measure to establish value and order, and therefore impose and preserve a fixed hierarchy. In short, it is fear of engagement with the creative forces and potentialities of a significant number of students that calls forth an apparatus of capture such as standardized testing.

In Negri's work constituted power, along with apparatuses of capture, ceases to be understood as the natural, universal, normative backdrop. On the contrary, it becomes understood as a profoundly reactive form of resistance against constituent power, which is always already there. This is a significant inversion of values in that it not only posits constituent power as the site of innovation, or the political motor, but also suggests that constituent power is the more inexhaustible form of power that actually calls into existence constituted power. In this sense, no matter how much constituted power tries to absorb, contain, or eradicate the potentialities and constituent forces of students, an indiscernible and immeasurable excess will always remain — a surplus that cannot be subsumed by repressive forces. Despite tremendous efforts, standardized testing or any other apparatus of capture cannot subsume the “pure potential” and “unformed life force” of students.¹⁴ In other words, to complete the inversion, it is the pure potential and creative forces of students that are primary, infinite, always already there, and mysterious. Constituted power, enacted through technologies of control, is reactive, finite, and exposed. It is the exception.

Now that the formula is inverted, what does an understanding of the exception — the apparatus of capture, in this case — illuminate? According to Carini, this question is paramount for pedagogues. Carini suggests that schools resist the creative and productive forces of students, and that in “resisting the children ... the system resists what might be its undoing. Resisting its undoing, the system resists also its remaking.”¹⁵ Hence for Carini, pedagogues must be attentive to that which is being resisted, and pedagogically appreciate the pure potentiality and latent forces of students. We could say, then, that understanding apparatuses of capture and *what* they resist does indeed offer some insight into a productive substratum that I have been referring to as creative forces and pure potentiality. In other words, understanding what schools resist points critical educators to the very aspects of revolutionary subjectivity that are not just resistant but also creative. This is significant because while resistance theory points pedagogy toward concrete material expressions of indignation, an autonomist formulation continuously returns to already existing pedagogical locations and dislocations that can foster new relations, social processes, and desires that may otherwise remain neglected.

What exactly is meant by creative forces and potentialities? Perhaps one of the better examples can be found in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. Just over a century ago, Du Bois sought to cultivate a “social power” as the creative and material expression of “deep knowledge” in common, which is “gotten in many ways by experience, by social contact, by what we loosely call the chances of life.”¹⁶ Thus for Du Bois, social power is a concrete manifestation of revolutionary subjectivity. Yet to cultivate a creative social power, the pedagogical starting place must be situated on the plane of pure and indeterminate potentiality. Du Bois writes,

[W]hen a human being becomes suddenly conscious of the tremendous powers lying latent within him, when from the puzzled contemplation of a half-known self, he rises to the powerful assertion of a self, conscious of its might, then there is loosed upon the world possibilities of good or of evil that make men pause. And when this happens in the case of a class or nation or a race, the world fears or rejoices according to the way in which it has been trained to contemplate a change in the conditions of the class or race in question.¹⁷

The importance of this passage is twofold. Du Bois writes about a pure and indeterminate creative potentiality. What is revealed is the pedagogical problematic of Du Bois, and the great fear that the established order — constituted power — has of pure potentiality. First, Du Bois's pedagogical problematic is the transition from an unformed force to a material manifestation of that force. In other words, it is the pedagogical question of the facilitation of a revolutionary force into a creative material social power — what John Holloway refers to as a constituent “power-to.”¹⁸ Second, and more importantly, what is revealed in the passage above is that pure potentiality is the source of great fear and anxiety for constituted power. As Paolo Virno explains, “The living body becomes an object to be governed, not for its intrinsic value, but because it is the substratum of what really matters: ... the most diverse human faculties (the potential for speaking, for thinking, for remembering, for acting, etc.)... The living body ... is the tangible sign of a yet unrealized potential.”¹⁹ In other words, pure and indeterminate potentiality is in itself a material threat to constituted power. Therefore it is no surprise that educational practices attempt to absorb, harness, contain, or eradicate this potentiality. Yet, if technologies of control so easily recognize the value (threat) of this indeterminate potentiality, the question remains, why resistance theory and critical pedagogy experience so much difficulty in pedagogically appreciating the pure potentiality of students.²⁰

In short, models of resistance overlook potentiality. In looking only at the most tangible signs of resistance that *follow* domination, the pedagogical considerations stemming from resistance theory — those that inform critical pedagogy — will lag behind, resulting in efforts that are too little, too late.²¹ While it is true that resistances in the form of walkouts, protests, and demonstrations against forms of domination illuminate the agency of students, these acts remain largely demand-based and, to the delight of apparatuses of capture, most often become “stuck in an oppositional stance,” squarely within the coordinates of constituted power.²² Apparatuses of capture revel in the perpetual renewal of this reactive opposition, which functions to exhaust and breakdown the turn to the creative and productive dimensions of revolutionary subjectivity. Thus what is often missing in resistance theory and critical pedagogy is the supplemental notion of revolutionary subjectivity as an affirmation of pure potentiality. Moreover, critical pedagogy's inattention to and deactivation of the potentialities of students results in pedagogies of resuscitation in which students are characterized as subjects in need of emancipatory intervention from critical educators. From this perspective, much of critical pedagogy is predicated on a desire characterized by a presumed lack in students rather than a desire characterized by abundance and pure potentiality.

In contrast to the pedagogies of resuscitation that disarm and exhaust pure potentiality, I will conclude with a brief sketch of two of the more prominent themes

within the autonomist tradition — *the refusal of work* and *exodus* — in an attempt to link these themes with educational theory. I will begin by outlining three basic components of the refusal of work, an important principle advocated by Mario Tronti during the Italian autonomist movements of the 1960s and 1970s that has since taken on a variety of inflections.²³ First, the refusal of work is at odds with any attempt to glorify work. Second, it does not seek to improve work or working conditions; rather it flat out rejects work, opting not for a “liberation *of* work but rather a liberation *from* work.”²⁴ And third, encompassed within the refusal of work is the abolition of the worker *qua* worker.

There exists significant overlap between the idea of the refusal of work and the untimely observations of another educational theorist whose ideas we have yet to fully grasp. Ivan Illich’s notion of *deschooling society* speaks to all three of the characteristics outlined above. First, Illich rejects the glorification of the ritual of schooling, arguing instead that it “prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught.”²⁵ Second, Illich prefers a liberation *from* schools rather than a liberation *of* schooling. More specifically, a liberation from schooling would break up the radical monopoly that schools claimed over knowledge production. And finally, Illich’s notion of deschooling entails the abolition of the learner as *homo educandus* — the person in need of education.²⁶ Echoing Tronti’s position Illich writes, “We have become accustomed, through Karl Marx’s writing, to speak of the alienation of the worker from his work in a class society. We must now recognize the estrangement of man from his learning when it becomes the product of a service profession and he becomes the consumer.”²⁷ Here, Illich wants to break with the notion of *homo educandus* and the dependency on schooling.

What these parallels point to is a second autonomist theme of *exodus*. The very notion of exodus implies an affirmative operation, a “flee[ing] from the apparatuses of control” toward “autonomous production.”²⁸ Virno elaborates:

The “exit” modifies the conditions within which change takes place, rather than presupposes it as an irremovable horizon; it changes the context within which a problem arises, rather than deals with the problem by choosing one or another of the alternative solutions already on offer. In short, the “exit” can be seen as a free-thinking inventiveness that changes the rules of the game and disorients the enemy.²⁹

For Virno, the key is the understanding that exodus is based on an abundance of pure potentiality. In contrast to many of the models of resistance, the allure of exodus resides in escaping the dialectical logics of opposition and keeping pure potentiality alive. Where celebrated educational resistances often contain demands for improved schooling — a type of opposition that both resembles and remains fastened to the very technology being resisted — exodus breaks with the ever-renewed logics of opposition and validation, opening the autonomous channels of revolutionary subjectivity and indeterminate potentiality for the creation of something entirely new.

To date, the best account of educational exodus is Tyson Lewis and Richard Kahn’s project of *exopedagogy*: an education out of bounds.³⁰ For Lewis and Kahn, exopedagogy opens a space outside and beyond the prescribed limits of the

anthropological machine of education. It is a project predicated on the potentiality and creative forces of students and resonates with aspects of an autonomist tradition. Like Virno's description of exodus, the compelling aspect of exopedagogy is that it is an affirmative, inclusive, and creative practice of collective becoming.

In the educational theories of Illich, and more recently, Lewis and Kahn, we can see signs of refusal "defined not by opposition but by rupture and transformation."³¹ There is also a turn to the creative dimensions of revolutionary subjectivity and potentiality. If resistance theory is unable to account for this potentiality then dimensions of autonomist thought and the works of scholars like Lewis and Kahn become all the more important. For critical pedagogy to serve a vital role, it must develop a new appreciation for potentiality and address the limitations of educational theories of resistance. If domination tends to render invisible those it oppresses, does it not also render invisible and devalue the very life activity of those relegated to the margins? The point here is that critical pedagogy must strive to recognize the creative dimensions of revolutionary subjectivity and avoid exhausting the pure potentialities of students. This means rethinking pedagogical temporality and the very starting places for pedagogy. Far from suggesting that we discard resistance theories or dismiss the significance of particular resistances, my aim is rather to transform the frame of reference within which it operates in order to pedagogically appreciate and conserve potentiality. Without such appreciation, any conception of revolutionary pedagogy is doomed.

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2. Henry Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*, revised and expanded edition (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 107.

3. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177–182.

4. Shor, *Empowering Education*, 135.

5. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 102.

6. Tyson Lewis, "Messianic Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 2 (2010): 232.

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9. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education*, 102.

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14. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York, Penguin Press, 2004), 192.
15. Carini, *Starting Strong*, 157.
16. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Training of Negroes for Social Power," in *Du Bois on Education*, ed. Eugene Provenzo, Jr. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 72.
17. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Hampton Idea," in *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906–1960*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 24.
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19. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Beroletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 83.
20. See Tyson Lewis, "Messianic Pedagogy"
21. See Tyson Lewis, "Too Little, Too Late: Reflections on Frederic Jameson's Pedagogy of Form," *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 3 (2009): 438–452.
22. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 102.
23. Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 28–34.
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