

Saving Us from Sentimentality

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Just as feudal economies relied upon the forced labor of peasants, and the Southern U.S. economy relied upon slaves, the modern consumer economy — in Alexander Sidorkin’s worldview — depends upon the enforced work of students. Students not only work without pay, but they have the added indignity of performing unproductive labor; as toilers in the “microeconomy of the wastebasket,” their “products” are mere preparations for entrance into the work world, and thus subsidize businesses that will eventually profit from their mastery of the times tables. Students must endure a sense of worthlessness that accompanies their status as unproductive members of a society that only values productivity.¹

Sidorkin offers a perspective that frees us from the sentimental metaphors — of curious children, loving teachers, and warm classroom communities — that are signs that exploitation is underway. Students who see through the ruse of sentimentality commit the “student error,” which is actually a truth living in contradiction with the teacher’s truth: students say they should be able to trade a stipulated amount of time and effort for a grade, but teachers assert that education is provided entirely for the student’s benefit — to help them be all they can be. Sidorkin appears rather uninterested in resolving this tussle over power; indeed, he lauds resistant students for preventing educators from taking their sentimental language “into the world of total fantasy.” But the teacher’s truth is destined to remain privileged, because the teacher has the institutional backing of the government and its accountability schemes, the myths of Horatio Alger, and the endless string of movies featuring a heroic teacher who wins the hearts of street kids and sends them on their way as upwardly mobile citizens.

One exciting aspect of Sidorkin’s argument lies in his portrayal of students and teachers as ontologically intertwined while, at the same time, having contested relationships. Here, Sidorkin’s work overlaps fruitfully with Sharon Todd’s combination of Levinas and Freud, where pedagogical relations can be understood both in their underlying unity and in the ways teachers and students violate the other’s expectations.² However, unlike Todd, Sidorkin quite realistically veers from the dyadic model of relationships that has shaped existential phenomenology since Buber and Sartre. Sidorkin’s relational pedagogy focuses our attention on the many relationships which constitute the school. His central metaphor is an “archaic economy” where students and teachers exchange goods and services in somewhat reciprocal ways; people keep tabs on what has been given to who and what is owed in return, while repressing the knowledge that reciprocity is expected. That way, each occasion where a student gives to a teacher or a teacher gives to a student appears as a singular expression of generosity. By focusing upon economic relations, Sidorkin replaces the romantic metaphors of student-centered education, or Todd’s focus on nonviolent relationships, with a more pedestrian relationality — a

sort of I'll-scratch-your-back-if-you-scratch-mine variety.³ Good teachers find out what students need — whether it be emotional support, athletic opportunities, or intellectual excitement — and assertively provide for those needs, knowing that their initiative will be rewarded with student compliance, dedicated academic labor, and convivial relationships. Just as the most powerful member of the Haida tribe threw the biggest and most generous potlatch, the best teacher is one the who both gives the most and receives in return.

Ethically, Sidorkin's view is refreshing in its collectivism. He considers not the individual student and her social capital but the student in relation the whole school and society. Yet, this ethical collectivism is not, as with Paulo Freire, combined with an adversarial politics committed to overcoming the student's forced labor. Indeed, Sidorkin's approach is conservative and the prescriptions he offers are humble: he hopes to curb the arrogance of teachers. Moral indignance when students cheat or slack off is simply not justified if the students are resisting a system of forced labor. Moreover, in the name of making school more worthwhile for students, we should direct our attention towards enriching the social relationships students value most highly. If the school is an integrated economy with a logic greater than any of us, it would be superficial to think that any subset of us could simply create a new logic. So, Freire's conceptions of "critical consciousness" and freedom through activism are just more educational flights of fancy — disconnected from the logic of the school's archaic economy.

This disagreement between Freire and Sidorkin deserves some attention. Freire, unlike Sidorkin, focuses our attention upon students' group membership and that group's place in the larger society.⁴ For Sidorkin, Freire's tendency to discuss pedagogy as one aspect of class struggle must appear as an imposition of economic reasoning upon the school, for he says, "The ideology of schooling cannot closely follow to that of the rest of the society, simply because the realities of schooling are dramatically different from those of workplace, political life, or social life outside of schools. Schools are unique, and should develop an ideology that is also unique." Here Sidorkin is surely right. If critical educators reduce schools to class warfare, it reflects disinterest in the actual relationships and processes of schooling itself.

Yet, an ethical commitment to understanding, appreciating, and improving in-school relationships does not absolve us from considering the ways in which extra-school factors — such as, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation — influence the character of educational relationships. As I attend to the felt tensions in my classroom, they often appear to arise from the relationships my often-pathological groups have to other groups in the society. When a working-class Latina education major is unwilling to tell me what she thinks, it may be due to my own pedagogical clumsiness, or it may be due to the distrust she has for my whiteness, maleness, straightness, or middle-class standing. When there is a high degree of polarization between one of my groups and one of the student's groups in the larger society, that social reality often translates into a tension the student and I jointly experience in the classroom. So, even though I agree with Sidorkin's wise suggestion that we direct our unflinching attention to the dynamics of relations that occur within school, I

think a sensitivity to the most endangered educational relationships involves some of what Freire provides, that is, an understanding of the ways in which educational relationships are already shaped by larger social processes.

Sidorkin does say “the student error is relatively more prevalent among lower class and minority students,” yet this implies that such resistance — like the resistance of white middle-class kids — is a matter of negotiating for a more realistic contract, when it could reflect larger political concerns, such as, a student’s resentment of neo-colonial language policies in schools. When a Spanish-speaking student resists a teacher who tells her not to speak Spanish on school grounds, this may signal that there is not just one archaic economy operating in the school, but several. When a gay, lesbian, or transgender student responds to homophobic baiting in schools by hiding her or his identity, this may tell us that some of the school economies remain underground. What if, instead of there being one archaic economy, the school is composed of several economies, depending upon teacher and student subgroups, which themselves are shaped partly by the participants’ class, race, gender, and sexual orientation? Some of these economies might have no exchange relations with other economies; some might have exchange relations where members of one of the two economies are systematically disadvantaged; some might be understood by all involved as simply outside the mainstream processes of exchange.

If we expand Sidorkin’s model to consider not merely the dynamics within one economy, but among several, we might be able to wed his pedestrian relationality with attentiveness to difference. Sidorkin’s aim to improve students’ in-school relationships might lead teachers to ask, “what counts as a ‘gift’ in each economy, and how might I give to students in another economy?” Where such giving involves the negotiation of borders between economies, teachers would need to scout those borders, looking for paths that might allow passage. Teachers might need to return to Todd’s central concerns and ask about the ways in which teachers might initiate nonviolent relationships with students whose economies have been historically subordinated to their own.⁵ Teachers would also need to learn about the underground economies and ask themselves about the sorts of pedagogical relationships that would facilitate the educational development of students who find themselves in an economy that is systematically disconnected from the mainstream economy.

Whether or not Sidorkin finds these questions helpful, it’s clear that he has offered us a distinctive relational language with which to consider the character of school relationships, and for this, I would like to express my appreciation.

1. Alexander Sidorkin, *Learning Relations* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 15, 17, 26, and 48.

2. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 12–13.

3. See Sidorkin, *Learning Relations*, 105.

4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970), chap. 1.

5. Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 12–15.