Social Problems as Lived Experience: A Response to Educational Theory as a Form of Symbolic Action

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Haithe Anderson's engaging and intellectually challenging essay ends with an unusual confession about its own ultimate coherence: "the terms of critique I offered could also be applied to my own work — that is, it can be said that I have constructed a theoretical problem out of a melodramatic example." This observation is only partially true since the primary problem Anderson identifies — that is, the unjustified characterization of particular individuals based on their inclusion within questionable taxonomies — is more than a constructed theoretical problem based on a melodramatic example. Rather, this problematic research practice represents a serious moral injustice that may impact deleteriously on the lived experience of individuals routinely objectified in this fashion.

Anderson's essay illustrates how identities are socially constructed through discursive ploys and connected images that combine to define individuals on the basis of their perceived circumstances. The human world is correspondingly divided into crude but convenient taxonomies, and personal characteristics and qualities are ascribed to individual subjects based on their placement in these various pseudocategories. The claim that such categorization reflects any meaningful scientific practice is unconvincing at best. For example, Stephen Gould suggests that for all the scientific attempts to understand humans, the complexity of human behavior is impossible to capture. Instead, social scientists' methods define the subject of investigation by imposing preconceived conceptual frameworks and categories onto the observed phenomenon rather than letting the phenomenon speak for itself.[1] The social science categories of race, social class, single mother, and gender, for example, promote associational clusters that objectify and marginalize those named as members of these groups by ignoring the actual complexity of human subjectivities. This observation, although certainly not a new criticism of social science, is an exceptionally important one.

My initial concern with Anderson's essay involves the description of social problems as "a linguistic process because social problems do not (and cannot) exist independently of our describing activities." Although I accept the manipulative power of discourse, I worry that such a claim gives too much to description. Whether they are described or not, problems such as famine, disease, war, and poverty are obviously not mere linguistic processes for the people who suffer their devastating consequences. They are the painful realities of lived experience for far too many economically disadvantaged individuals, and this is where the grand narrative of postmodernism, with its near complete focus on linguistic analysis, fails to provide an effective critical device to challenge social injustice. Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur describe the problem, no pun intended, far more eloquently:[2]

> Although postmodern "masters of suspicion" have managed to deftly map the semiotic fault lines of the contemporary *fracture social*, have uncovered the necessity hidden under the appearance of contingency, have challenged stable genres of discourse, have ruptured the Eleatic cohesiveness of master narratives, have transgressed hidebound and sacred binarisms and rent them apart, and have brazenly and percipiently challenged the right-wing philippics of William Bennett–style cultural brokers, they have failed in the main to challenge in any deep or sustained way the engineered misery of neoliberal fiscal regimes and — more importantly — capitalist relations of exploitation. Consequently, the postmodern Left remains hostage to its own strategic ambivalence.

Indeed, a worrisome moral paralysis is inevitably invoked when all experience is reduced to language, or "semiotic fault lines," a concern that Anderson herself alludes to in the essay's concluding remarks noted previously.

In spite of my personal reluctance to accept that social problems are simply linguistic processes, there is an important ideological understanding achieved by examining how problems, and their proposed solutions, are discursively portrayed in education by researchers, politicians, and others. By defining what counts as a problem, groups with, as Anderson describes them, "sufficient social and cultural resources" design and control the formal agenda for addressing the issue at hand. Within contemporary education, for example, the No Child Left Behind discourse, with its named problems and associational clusters of "failing schools" and "teachers that won't teach," reduces academic achievement to a matter of micro-level management and individual responsibility rather than one of social and economic opportunity.

The ideological underpinning of problem identification and description leads to my other concern with Anderson's essay, that is, its seemingly complete dismissal of structural critiques and, consequently, the potential insight they might provide. Consistent with her earlier rejection of pseudocategories, she categorically rejects this form of critique because it employs the same simplistic binaries that inappropriately vilify single mothers for causing a plethora of social and schooling problems. In Anderson's words, "This Marxist-like strategy pits the haves against the have-nots, and it has been widely used by authors who like to write about the glaring disparities that inequitable educational policies give rise to."

Anderson's contention that Marxist-style critiques rely on simplistic class taxonomies considers only the most rudimentary elements of the most vulgar forms of Marxism. There are components of Marxist-style critiques that might significantly enrich and deepen Anderson's inquiry by revealing the relationship between socially constructed problems, associational clusters, and prevailing ideology. Since we are steeped in language, discourse undoubtedly shapes our ideas about the world, including the identification of social problems and the subsequent proposing of possible solutions. But we also need to explore the underlying and manipulative material, or economic, forces that formulate and naturalize that discourse. In spite of her dismissal of Marxist-style critiques, Anderson implies as much herself when she observes that problems are constructed by groups of people "with sufficient social and cultural resources."

The scientism that dominates contemporary educational research illustrates the way ideological analysis can expose the socially constructed character of many educational problems. The assumed efficacy of scientific inquiry is widely accepted in education, and many individuals share a profound, if ultimately misguided, faith in the ability of science to enhance education. However, the emphasis on scientific inquiry also creates an ideological distraction from the identification, naming, and analysis of moral problems affecting educational outcomes. The socially constructed problem of "failing schools" and the empirical study of individual performance-based outcomes shifts the attention of academics and others away from launching a moral critique of structural inequality. The scientific practice of "measuring" becomes the rational and accepted mechanism for addressing unequal academic achievement rather than grappling with the economic structure of educational opportunity.

Although there is much to enjoy about this rich essay, then, I personally struggle to accept Anderson's dismissal of structural critique on the grounds that it arrests critical analysis by naming convenient scapegoats. The analysis in contemporary Marxist-style critiques is less about identifying scapegoats than it is about elucidating the ways capitalist culture perpetuates the ideological mechanisms, including various discursive ploys, that support the reproduction of social inequality. Rather than simply "pitting one group against another," the moral objective of such analysis in education is eliminating the disparate learning opportunities economic injustices frequently create.

Anderson's critique provides us with compelling insight into how problems are socially constructed through mainstream discourse and how associated images influence perceptions of blame and remediation. Her essay also raises warranted suspicion about the pseudocategories and prevailing scientism that dominate contemporary educational research and deflect our attention from moral issues related to schooling. However, I categorically reject the claim that all social problems are simply problems constructed from language, and I challenge her complete rejection of "Marxist-style critiques." Indeed, without offering some mechanism to escape the analytical paralysis Anderson admits in her conclusion, our critiques remain trapped in the circularity of postmodern-style inquiry. In the final analysis, the problems of education in the United States are not simply manifestations of speech acts and associational clusters, but they are more frequently the devastating practical consequences of profound economic stratification.

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1. Stephen Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

2. Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur, "Reconsidering Marx in Post-Marxist Times: A Requiem for Postmodernism?" *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 3 (2000): 25–33, http://35.8.171.42/aera/pubs/er/arts/29-03/mclaren01.htm.