

Proletariat Labor or Praxis? Philosophy of Education in a Neo-Liberal Order

Emery J. Hyslop-Margison
Ball State University

At the 2003 Philosophy of Education Society (PES) business meeting in Miami, a majority resolution was passed against the planned U.S. military offensive to remove Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. A commitment was also made at that meeting to establish an asynchronous electronic forum on the society's web page to discuss the matter and subsequently poll all PES members on the resolution. If the resolution against the anticipated war received majority support, the declaration against the offensive would be sent to the appropriate U.S. Government officials. The ensuing months witnessed limited on-line discussion about the resolution with the debate more often focused on whether PES should publicly adopt positions on political issues ostensibly unrelated to education.

Ultimately, PES leadership decided unilaterally against polling members on the resolution because the war in Iraq was declared "officially over" by President Bush. I assume the politically inflammatory nature of the issue and the well-intentioned if misguided desire not to fracture the society's membership also contributed to the decision. Democratic debate typically involves intense disagreement and the noble quest for academic civility should not trump meaningful discussion on important issues confronting American society. Although the Iraqi conflict deepens and lives continue to be lost at an alarming rate, our debate, or debacle, over this particular resolution appears terminated. In this paper, I wish to address instead a related subject that grapples both with the role of philosophy of education and the political legitimacy of this society.

One on-line argument encouraging PES neutrality in the war against Iraq maintained that education is an apolitical activity and such issues are therefore beyond the scope of philosophy of education. This curious perspective on education reflects a perfunctory understanding of a socializing practice primarily designed to reproduce prevailing cultural belief systems. René Arcilla's synopsis of John Dewey's perspective on the relationship between philosophy, education, and society offers a sufficient rejoinder to the fallacious perspective that education, or any academic discipline for that matter, is somehow detached from political influence:

Each discipline recognizes its filial duty to its parent society. Philosophy is conceived of as a response to society's present problems, education as a response to society's perennial need for regeneration. Both express a devotion on the part of practitioners to keeping their own, contemporary society alive.¹

The relationship between philosophy, education and society involves a continual process of reproduction, critique and readjustment. At its most fundamental level, education is a social delivery vehicle for formal information systems and reflects a manifest connection to the social structures from which this information emerges: "That's true whether the goal of education is education for freedom and democracy,

as Dewey advocated, or education for obedience and subordination and marginalization, as the dominant institutions require.”²

The undeniable connection between academic achievement and social and economic status is confirmed empirically by the sociology of education, and addressed theoretically by critical approaches to educational research. Empirical evidence indicates that students from wealthy social backgrounds generally experience greater levels of academic achievement and attainment than their economically disadvantaged counterparts with socio-economic status the number one predictor of student academic achievement.³ Critical theorists such as Louis Althusser consider schools the primarily vehicle of social reproduction intended to regenerate capitalist class divisions through political and ideological manipulation:

[The education system] takes children from every class at infant school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most vulnerable, squeezed between the family state apparatus and the educational apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new methods or old methods, a certain amount of “know how” wrapped in ruling ideology.⁴

The current pressure from corporations and the state to ensure the needs of business and industry become the principal goals of public schooling and higher education supports Althusser’s contention. My general point here is simply that many of the problems within education are direct manifestations of unequal social conditions and the political policies that create and reproduce them. When philosophers of education refuse to address the political realm as a legitimate unit of analysis the sanguine hope of improving education for all Americans is correspondingly undermined.

Based on the incontrovertible relationship among philosophy, education, and society, then, I want to argue that philosophers of education ought to engage the public political sphere to improve the general quality of education. Politically engaged philosophers of education who assume the role of public intellectuals publicly criticize policy that impacts deleteriously on schooling and social equality because they recognize the intrinsic relationship between these areas. I begin the paper by identifying the personal qualities, behaviors and moral commitments that characterize a public intellectual working for socially disadvantaged individuals, and then explore the forces presently undermining the political engagement of academics within a market-driven university context. I argue that if philosophers of education hope to improve the academic achievement and attainment of economically disadvantaged and minority students, they must challenge the political forces reproducing social inequality rather than drift into a quiescent, narcissistic sea of self-absorption and practical obscurity.

UNDERSTANDING THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

The term “public intellectual” was originally coined by University of California, Los Angeles, historian Russell Jacoby to distinguish between a disappearing brand of politically active academic and the academic as institutionalized scholar.⁵ Whereas the institutional scholar focuses on satisfying bureaucratic demands such as promotion and tenure requirements, the public intellectual transfers knowledge into public discourse and political action. In *The End of Utopia*, Jacoby mourns the

departure of contemporary academia away from the Enlightenment ideals committed to moral and social progress. On his view, many academics within the current technocratic university environment wallow in a “convenient cynicism” that “dismisses utopian visionaries as dangerous cranks.”⁶ The unfortunate outcome of this cynicism is the loss of hope that “inequality and suffering are not inherent to the human condition, [and] that a more humane society is possible.”⁷ Within this morally skeptical academic milieu dominated by market-driven technical rationality and postmodern cynicism, Jacoby observes that, “radicals have lost their bite and liberals their backbone.”⁸

Antonio Gramsci’s distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals elucidates the role of philosophers of education as public intellectuals working on behalf of socially disadvantaged individuals.⁹ According to Gramsci, traditional intellectuals, including most academics, typically view themselves as apolitical and *seem* autonomous and independent, qualities designed to create the appearance of scholarly objectivity. Although they *appear* politically independent, Gramsci argues that traditional intellectuals are actually conservative because they reproduce social inequality through their political inactivity. Political inaction is not equivalent to political neutrality since refusing to act is itself a choice that tacitly supports existing social circumstances. The political inertia of PES leadership on the Iraqi resolution, for example, wrongly interpreted by some of our members as academic objectivity, actually supports the war by obstructing counter political activity.

In addition to its widespread production of traditional intellectuals, the formal education system also creates organic intellectuals to perform an active ideological function that protects ruling class interests. Unlike traditional intellectuals, these conservative organic intellectuals are not interested in the illusion of political neutrality. They typically align themselves with dominant social interests by contributing directly to the organization and reproduction of a class-based society. William F. Buckley Jr., a Yale graduate, American editor, and author provides one obvious example of such an individual. Buckley is the popular, eloquent, and witty spokesman for the conservative point of view in American society who founded the *National Review*, the leading national journal of conservatism. He also authored *The Redhunter* in 1999, a supportive but highly fictional defense of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s troubling “red scare” activities during the 1950s. Conservative organic intellectuals such as Buckley, then, work openly through public activity to protect the ideals and principles supporting a class-based society.¹⁰

In his *Notebooks*, Gramsci encourages the working class movement to develop its own organic intellectuals to counteract conservative ideologues such as Buckley and transform the structural conditions reproducing social inequality. He suggests that the struggle to achieve social change cannot be limited to simple consciousness raising, but demands direct political activism — in other words, the creation of an active political movement created and edified by socialist organic intellectuals. Gramsci explains: “the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in verbal eloquence but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, permanent persuader, and not just a simple orator.”¹¹

Kathleen Knight Abowitz considers Cornell West the epitome of a contemporary academic who has successfully translated scholarly influence into the public political realm. She argues that West transcends the institutionalized confines of the university to “creatively address some deeply rooted social problems related to human oppression in America.”¹² Knight Abowitz also worries, however, that public philosophy as practiced by West risks commercial appropriation by “a market-driven, entertainment-orientated culture” more interested in the character than the message.¹³ She warns that West’s recent confrontation with the neo-conservative president of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, and the former’s eventual departure from that institution, also highlights the occupational hazards academics assume when they pursue public philosophy in lieu of politically benign, university sanctioned activities.

The concern that intellectual rigor is necessarily compromised when academics enter into public discourse is a genuine worry deserving of thoughtful consideration. Michael Berube suggests that public intellectuals need not abandon academic complexity when entering the public domain, but rather they must strive to make that complexity more comprehensible and more relevant to a far wider constituency.¹⁴ Noam Chomsky’s scholarship and public discussions, for example, often focus on the disjuncture between U.S. foreign policy decisions and the political rhetoric doled out by government officials for domestic consumption. The complex craft of ideological persuasion is simplified by Chomsky’s thoughtful employment of concrete historical examples that illustrate the political misinformation and manipulation present within American society.¹⁵

In *The Last Good Job in America*, Stanley Aronowitz traces the career of C. Wright Mills to highlight the personal qualities that characterize a public intellectual: “Mills exemplified a vanishing breed in American life: the radical intellectual who is not safely ensconced in the academy.”¹⁶ Aronowitz views the public life of Mills especially relevant during a period when corporations and their various political allies are seriously undermining the quality of occupational experience for many American workers. Mills was highly contemptuous of the idea that academic investigation is somehow “obliged to purge herself of social and political commitment.”¹⁷ Rather than hiding behind declarations of methodological neutrality, the archetypical and fraudulent mantra of the social sciences, he openly advocated freedom and emancipation as primary political goals, and worked to establish the political foundation for a radically democratic society.

Public intellectuals such as Mills, West, and Chomsky share an action-based commitment to improve social equality by publicly challenging the systematic reproduction of a class-based, racially discriminatory and gendered society. Public intellectuals remain confident that moral progress is possible and seek to propel society in that direction through direct political engagement. Similar to Gramsci’s vision of the working class organic intellectual, philosophers of education acting as public intellectuals utilize their privileged academic position to raise public consciousness about social inequities that impact on schooling, and make manifest the political ideologies and policies that give rise to these conditions. Public intellectu-

als enter the political realm by expanding the content of their discussion, rejecting the chimera of political neutrality and the moral inertia it typically generates, and by pursuing public forums to communicate with a non-academic constituency.

CONTEMPORARY ACADEMICS AND THE DECLINE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Universities currently confront numerous fiscal challenges caused by significant reductions in public funding that impact directly on the structure of contemporary academic life. The growing number of technical training programs at many universities, the generally declining stature of the humanities, and research agendas chiefly dependent on private corporate funding all impact deleteriously on the academic independence of faculty. The university has increasingly become a site for technical training, labor market preparation and instrumental learning, and far less an institution devoted to cultural, moral and political dialogue. Indeed, the utopian ideal of the university as a bastion of intellectual, academic and political freedom now seems largely an anachronism. Instead, the bureaucratic, increasingly authoritarian administrative practices of American universities encourage widespread political passivity among contemporary academics. The university, largely removed from public political influence, is rapidly becoming a subsidiary instrument in the virtually uncontested cultural drift toward economic globalization and technological jingoism.

The institutional demands of contemporary faculty experience are especially damaging to the autonomy, political agency and social activism of young academics. Junior faculty members readily learn the significance of publishing in intellectually obscure, inaccessible and uninteresting scholarly journals, largely irrelevant to most of the general public. Academics are frequently sequestered in their office, working primarily in isolation while writing scholarly articles, compiling accountability notebooks, teaching dossiers, or other evidence of their institutional worthiness. To achieve tenure at recognized research universities, academics require a “research agenda,” which typically constitutes a narrowing of knowledge, understanding and social influence. The entire peer-review process often becomes a bureaucratic mechanism to force academic deference to the prevailing conservative institutional culture:

Peer review is often used as a way to weed out non-conformity. To get tenure entails publishing in the “right” journals (in the double-entendre sense) and prestigious academic presses. Most faculty have long since capitulated to the strictures of the conservative disciplines and the civility and professionalization demanded by academic culture. They disdain any discourse or activity that cannot be coded as civil — institutional power continues to reward conformity.¹⁸

Although rewarded by promotion and tenure committees, this academic myopia renders faculty largely innocuous to prevailing political interests by diverting the former from socially influential scholarship and politically engaged activities. The increased standardization, accountability and use of technology on university campuses centralize administrative control over course content, teaching and assessment practices. These administrative forces limit the control university faculty exercise over their courses and threatens their traditional role as autonomous professionals. Faculty who resist the reduction of academic work to clerical

proletariat labor risk being marginalized or blackballed as political trouble-makers. To employ Aronowitz's less than eloquent but accurate metaphoric description, "The administrators are the cat and the faculty the cat box."¹⁹

Contemporary academic experience is described by Douglas Aoki as a "neurotic little tale" that immerses young scholars in a constant state of anxiety sustained by feelings of personal inadequacy:

The academic subject is compelled to repeatedly act within that system, in accordance with its demands, to maintain the image of an academic in its institutional gaze. The paradigmatic symbolic act is refereed publication, but every submission opens the real possibility of rejection. What is even more daunting is that no instance of publication can succeed in establishing the status of the subject once and for all, for every publication only signals the renewed demand for another one, preferably in a venue that is even more difficult to achieve.²⁰

The aspiring academic is trapped within a cyclical ordeal of production, publishing, and collegial and institutional suspicion; hence, never achieving any lasting measure of personal gratification or professional security. The dispositions emerging from this uncertainty create academics often far more comfortable in relationships marked by political compliance than political activism.

Student course evaluations represent another administrative strategy designed to maintain institutional control over faculty. These evaluations operationally define "good teaching" by equating it with statistically high scores awarded by students. The view that course evaluations, based on problematic assumptions about learning, teaching, and education, provide a useful measure of teaching excellence offers a lucid illustration of Foucault's postulate on the relationship between truth and power. The inferred quality of a given faculty member's teaching, in this case the aggregate scores and abstracted narrative comments on course evaluation forms, is linked in a circular relationship with a system of power, that is, the university's promotion and tenure process. The regime that defines truth is precisely the same administrative body that achieves institutional control over a specified population on the basis of that definition.

Of course, an effective analysis of teaching is far more complicated than any simple quantified system based on scores awarded by students might realistically capture. Such an analysis would begin with a coherent conception of what constitutes teaching excellence and quality education, including specified aims, objectives, and practices. Nevertheless, student course evaluations provide the university with an important mechanism of institutional control over faculty by supplying a punitive instrument cloaked in validity to punish faculty for deviant political behavior. Consistent with the consumer approach to higher education, student course evaluations also reveal the level of "customer satisfaction" with a particular faculty member, a far more important consideration in the contemporary market-driven university milieu than the actual quality of education.

Postmodernism, with its ancient sophistical appeal of epistemological and moral relativism, pervades contemporary philosophy of education through affiliated discourses such as multiculturalism, deconstruction and post-colonialism. Although offering many important insights, this philosophical position, as Peter McLaren and

Ramin Farandmanpur suggest, ultimately disarms academics in their political struggle for social justice and equality:

Although postmodern masters of suspicion have managed to deftly map the semiotic fault lines of the contemporary *fracture social*, 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.²¹

By focusing on the cultural superstructure and ignoring the economic base, grappling with the racist, gendered and colonizing manifestations of fiscal exploitation rather than the economic foundation of inequality, postmodernism fails to confront the material forces reproducing widespread social disparity.

Academics embracing postmodernism inevitably find themselves impaled on the horns of a moral dilemma. On one hand, they typically long for a more just, equal and caring society while, on the other, they lack the conceptual moral machinery to move confidently in that direction. Meaningful dialogue and political action on normative questions presupposes common criteria on which appropriate moral judgments are based. If there is no established moral foundation on which competing viewpoints are judged, if one interpretation of human experience is as good as another, then there is bound to be and there has been a collapse of reasoned debate within the academy on fundamental social questions. Indeed, when objective criteria for moral judgment are abandoned, the idea of an academic as public intellectual pursuing social justice on legitimate and universal moral grounds loses both its forum and foundation.²²

The retreat of the academic from public discourse corresponds to the rising status of the popular political pundit. These figures, most frequently conservative ideologues who represent the interests of their corporate commanders, are portrayed in the mainstream media as expressing the reasoned views of an anti-liberal American majority. Consistent with its indoctrinated commodity fetish, the American public prefers to be entertained more than it wants to be educated and in this market-mediated, consumer-based culture, reactionary media figures such as Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly represent conservative cult heroes. The public intellectual requires an intellectual public and a public forum in which to be heard, but the mainstream media, dominated by these celebrity ideologues, typically facilitates neither. The public intellectual also requires citizens who can suffer an argument of considerable length and complexity, but such individuals are increasingly difficult to identify in a culture of bombastic celebrity talking heads and twenty second news bites. As Knight Abowitz correctly observes: "Celebrities do not make arguments, they make headlines."²³

The neoliberal ideological shift occurring over the past two decades also contributes to the demise of the public intellectual working for social equality. Neoliberalism is largely a reaction against the welfare state policies that secured a minor measure of social justice for the underclass within modern industrialized nations. In the wake of welfare state collapse, neoliberalism has spawned a monolithic market economy agenda with a rising tide of right wing political voices triumphantly championing unfettered global capitalism as the best of all possible

worlds. Within a neoliberal context that embraces social Darwinian assumptions and strategically blames the victim, economic and educational underachievement are viewed as individual deficits, rather than the complex interaction between individual ability and the social structure of opportunity.

PHILOSOPHERS OF EDUCATION AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

Given the conditions outlined above and the current state of research within education, there is a considerable academic vacuum for philosophers of education to occupy. Academic inquiry in education is presently divided between scholarship so abstract that its practical applications are virtually impossible to identify and empirical research employing sophisticated statistical instruments that disregard entirely foundational questions about the legitimate aims and practices of education within democratic societies. To enhance social justice and improve the quality of education for all Americans, philosophers must move beyond the mere analysis of texts and discourses to participate in the struggle for power and resources within schools and society. This requires challenging the present economics of school funding and other fiscal policies that ensure the continuous impoverishment of economically disadvantaged schoolchildren in America. It also means denouncing colossal resource expenditures on unwarranted military ventures that drain the public purse of funds that could help alleviate such disparities.

The philosopher of education as public intellectual adopts a moral vocabulary of equal opportunity that links academic discourses to strategies of political engagement while recognizing the limits of the university as a site for provoking social transformation. Public intellectuals refuse to reduce their scholarship to insular academic debate that ignores broader issues of systemic political power, institutional control, economic ownership, and the general distribution of financial and intellectual resources within public spaces.

As an eclectic philosopher, Dewey understood the intrinsic connections between education, society and politics, and appreciated the importance of working within all of these domains to achieve the progressivist ideal of a more egalitarian and democratic society. As a self-described “non-Deweyan,” Harvey Siegel suggests that, “philosophy has a dignity and integrity of its own and its survival as a worthy scholarly pursuit is not dependent upon conversation with anyone.”²⁴ Philosophy of education, as Siegel submits, is not dependent on the ideas of John Dewey or public political engagement, but we must ask ourselves whether its inherent dignity and integrity provide an adequate moral return for the academic work we perform.

As evidenced in their scholarship many PES members share Dewey’s commitment to inquiry that challenges the profound inequalities present within American society. The success they ultimately experience in their mission to transform these conditions will be contingent on their degree of political influence. The challenge before us is a daunting one because it requires balancing an academic career with public involvement without collapsing into the superficial posturing, binary moral reasoning and hypertrophic political rhetoric spouted by corporate appointed media celebrities. The troubling alternative, however, ensures our philosophical debates

remain little more than “a tempest in teapot,” a disparaging description one member arguing against PES political involvement used to characterize this historic and esteemed society.

1. René Vincente Arcilla, “Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1-11.
2. Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on MisEducation*, ed. Donald Macedo (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), 48.
3. Alan Sadovnik, Peter W. Cookson, and Susan F. Semel, *Exploring Education: An Introduction to the Foundations of Education*, 2d ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 132.
4. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” in *Essays on Ideology* (London: Thetford Press, 1973), 29.
5. Stephen T. Leonard, “Introduction,” in *Intellectuals and Public Life: Between Radicalism and Reform*, ed. Leon Fink, Stephen T. Leonard, and Donald M. Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 15.
6. Russell Jacoby, “A Brave Old World: Looking Forward to a Nineteenth-Century Utopia,” *Harper’s Magazine* 301 (Dec. 2000): 80.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xii.
9. See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).
10. Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved August 27, 2003 from: <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/b/buckley.asp>>.
11. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 10.
12. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “Heteroglossia and Philosophers of Education,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 293.
13. *Ibid.*, 298.
14. Michael Berube, “The Public Intellectual and the Public Sector”; paper delivered at the Provost Lectures, Ball State University, 8 October 1998.
15. See, for example, Chomsky’s discussion of “the prevailing doctrine that America’s victory in the cold war was a victory for democracy and the free market”; Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), 109-11.
16. Stanley Aronowitz, *The Last Good Job in America* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 239.
17. *Ibid.*, 247.
18. *Ibid.*, 35.
19. *Ibid.*, 42.
20. Douglas Aoki, “The Thing Never Speaks for Itself: Lacan and the Pedagogical Politics of Clarity,” *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 3 (2002): 361.
21. Peter McLaren and Ramin Farhmandpur, “Reconsidering Marx in Post-Marxist Times: A Requiem for Postmodernism?” *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 3 (2000): 25-33.
22. Of course, some scholars adopt a far more positive view of postmodern influence on academic discourse. For example, Nicholas Burbules suggests that postmodern doubt simply portrays as problematic the traditional assumption that education entails some form of actual consistent progress. Yet, he also asks the inevitable ensuing questions of whether “this is a view of education robust enough to guide our activities; is it optimistic enough to motivate us in our teaching and learning efforts; is it inspiring enough to sustain us?”; Nicholas C. Burbules, “Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 1995; retrieved electronically, 9 September 2003 from: <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/burbules.html>.
23. Knight Abowitz, “Heteroglossia,” 298.
24. Harvey Siegel, “Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 279.