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The Untruth of Truth: A Suggestion for Teaching in the Information Age

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The notion of representation has entertained thinkers for centuries. How can anything, any idea, any concept or object truly be represented by a language, institution, idea or image? In the information age the notion of representation is even more pressing. Twenty-four hour news feeds, YouTube, social media, government propaganda, iPhones, the mass media, the advertising industry and other agencies and devices disseminate a seemingly infinite amount of images and information. McDonalds, Pepsi, CNN, Fox News and Old Spice portend to represent something, from consumer products to political intentions. They claim to produce nutritious food, unbiased news or be the voice of a new generation. However, more times than not, these supposed truths do not correspond to any underlying reality because they no longer need to. They are not meant to convey truth, only accrue profits. Profit and truth are increasingly incompatible. Information is now viral; it proliferates and leaves its referents behind. And it is the social studies that deal with many of these emerging avenues of information. Economist's reports, political pundits, the seemingly endless plethora of historical information on the internet, all of these must be grappled with by teachers and students in the social studies. The current era must be understood historically and it is the role of social studies teachers to provide us with this understanding. More than this, it is the job of the social studies educator to illustrate the human condition. However, with the proliferation of information, truth becomes precarious and this historical situation becomes more difficult to teach. The human condition is increasingly obscured by viral images and half-truths. Nonetheless, it is the job of the social studies to provide some truth, or some notion of truth.

This paper devises a methodological tool to better examine misrepresentations that may arise in the course of the teaching and learning of the social studies. The ultimate hope is that this conceptual framework, by using postmodernism and critical theory, can "realign" the misrepresentation to better fit the actual state of affairs (if the actual state of affairs can even be ascertained). Essentially, the framework will be used to create a referent. This paper however, while drawing on postmodern thought, is ultimately a work of critical theory because the intent is to rectify oppression, the oppression of signs not bound to referents. A two leveled framework will be employed which uses postmodern ideas, specifically the idea of simulacra to identify oppression, and critical theory, specifically the notion of the dialect to rectify it. Following the explanation of the conceptual framework, an example of its use will be illustrated.

Intersection of Critical Theory and Postmodernism

Critical theory emerged in the 1930s at the University of Frankfurt. Max Horkheimer, who is usually thought of as its principal founder, sought to use Marxism as an emancipatory theory to rectify oppression in contemporary society (Jay, 1996; Kellner, 1992). One of the central tenets of critical theory is the notion of dialectal movement. The dialectic can be described as a perpetual movement of opposing ideas which are mediated with each other. The dialectic is a simultaneous destruction of outdated structures and a preservation of their beneficial qualities, all mediated with new ideas (Jay, 1996, Kellner, 1992). The aim of a dialectal movement is not the attainment of a universal truth, but rather the sparking of social transformation (Horkheimer, 1974; Jay, 1996). Herein lays the foundation of Critical theory: its ability to rectify oppression (Crotty, 1998; Jay, 1996; Kellner, 1992).

Postmodernism is not a coherent school of thought, however some commonalities can be discerned within it. Postmodernism dispenses with the notions of objective reality, hierarchies, and of representation (Bess & Dee, 2008; Lemert, 2010). Instead, many postmodernists believe that an objective reality does not exist, only subjective interpretations. As such, the western paradigm of science, capitalism and reason, which we will collectively refer to as the modernist paradigm, is no longer the universal norm, but only one of many subjective interpretations. Postmodern theory is disparate and wide ranging. As a result, this paper only focuses on one aspect of postmodernism, the notion of simulacra.

The modernist paradigm holds that the social and natural world can be accurately represented by various structures, such as languages, images, ideas, numbers and formulas to name a few. This notion came under heavy fire by postmodernists during the 1960s and 1970s because postmodernists question if any structure or language can accurately represent what it portends to represent. Here, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard elucidated his concept of the simulacrum. He argued that simulacra are images that do not accurately correspond to a referent. Rather, they either mask the absence of a reality, or they simply do not correspond to anything at all but are taken as truth (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard goes on to argue that truth does not happen anymore but is made to happen by various institutions in society such as the media, corporations and the government. And all of these truths, even contradictory ones, are valid because there are no longer any referents. A referent is the corresponding truth that a sign or image is supposed to represent. When this loosening of referent and sign occurs, Baudrillard describes this is as hyperreality. In a society based on hyperreality, referents pose a threat to that society (Baudrillard, 1993). This is because referents demand a correspondence between sign and the signified. Without a referent, simulacrum can manifest virally, there is no obligation on the part of image creators to correspond. Major media outlets, political candidates,

advocacy groups and so called experts purvey information which caters to certain audiences. Many times these various outlets are not concerned with accurately representing a referent, just ratings, profits or winning election bids (Glassner, 1999). Baudrillard's ideas elide with the field of semiotics as well. Semiotics is the study of signs and signifiers (Bess & Dee, 2008). While this short paper cannot fully explore the nuances of semiotic theory, semiotics is crucial for an age that abounds in signs.

There is a tension between postmodernism and critical theory (Allan, 2008). As noted above, the goal of critical theorists is not just pointing out oppression, but also rectifying it. Many postmodernists on the other hand are content with criticizing oppression, but not rectifying it. Postmodern thinkers are usually cynical of reform efforts, they do not believe in a dichotomous division between oppressed and oppressors. Rather, postmodernists see oppression not as the result of one specific party, but an amorphous occurrence that occurs through language, cultural norms and scientific discourse to a name a few. Postmodern thinkers face reality with little hope of redemption or rectification (Bess & Dee, 2008; Crotty, 1998; Lemert, 2010). Of course, this is not meant to suggest that postmodernity followed chronologically from modernity. Further, many would argue that modernity has not been superseded or replaced. Still others argue that pockets of postmodernism exist within pockets of modernism side by side. And still others see postmodernity not as fundamentally different than modernity, but rather as its outgrowth (Bess & Dee, 2008; Bloland, 2005; Crotty, 1998; Jay; 1996; Kellner, 1992; Hatch & Cunliff, 2006). Thus, the analysis of this paper is tenuous at best.

Level 1: Simulacra

The various forms of information today can be likened to the notion of simulacra. Debord (2011) argued that we live in the society of the spectacle, where the endless stream of images and information, which is created by man, has taken on a life of its own. The spectacle alienates members of a society from each other and even from themselves. Baudrillard (1994) described this as hyperreality. In earlier societies, prior to the advent of capitalism's productive technologies and modern media technology, "truth," in the form of accurate image to referent correspondence was possible (Baudrillard, 1994). This prospect is very difficult to achieve in contemporary society.

There is simply a multitude of simulacra producing entities that interact with one another in the information age which serves to severely compromise the notion of truth. This is not abstract however, because members of a given society take those simulacra as truth. We then become slaves to the spectacle, something of our own creation that is now beyond our control (Debord, 2011). So, how can simulacra be observed in a concrete and practical way? There are two methods. Information produces hyperreality when it does not

match up to the evidence or the referent. While there may not be positivist truths, there is nonetheless evidence which can help signs more accurately reflect their referent. Secondly, the theories of simulacra and hyperreality are sociological theories. As such, they are meant to detail how people interact in society. Thus, if a sign does not correspond to evidence, this may fundamentally restructures human interactions and behavior.

Level 2: Dialectal Praxis

Adorno (1969) and Horkheimer (1969) argued that modern society was sinking into a new barbarism, due to the tyranny of efficiency and standardization, which they argued were outgrowths of the Enlightenment's preoccupation with rationality and order. At the heart of this new barbarism is the separation of the sign from the thing signified (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969). In the effort to give a formulaic, calcuable meaning, modern science rendered the world chaotic by inaugurating this separation. In a later section, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the use of words hijacked by science constitute a type of modern magic; words, without any type of true referential, can be used to say anything. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the separation between the sign and the image, between the sign and signified, is inevitable in modern society, but it tends toward a destruction of truth. Of course this was not a static, objective truth as in the positivistic or modernist tradition; rather it was a dialectal and fluid truth which was always open to change. Horkheimer sought to use philosophy and critical theory to "name things," to try and pin down meaning in the amorphous sea of images (Horkheimer, 1974, Kellner, 1992).

If this line of reasoning is followed, it stands that to preserve any measure of truth the sign must be reconciled with a referent. And if information is found to be a simulacrum, it has dispensed with a referent. Critical theory can signal this reconciliation. Of course, here erupts another fundamental tension between critical theory and postmodernism, because postmodernism does not see the capability of an objective referential. This aversion to an objective structure is not without good reason, as objective structures or seemingly objective structures can become ossified and oppressive (much like the Enlightenment freedoms did, at least according to Adorno and Horkheimer). The notion of dialectic may provide the basis needed for creating a new referent that will not fall prey to ossification, because the dialecticis a notion of perpetual transformation (Jay, 1996; Kellner, 1992). With this in mind, dialectic can be used to create a new referent for any information that is deemed simulacra by purveyors of the social studies.

The notion of dialectal movement permeated critical theory. Another thinker associated with critical theory, Herbert Marcuse (1992) furthered the idea of the dialect. The power to negate is the cornerstone of the dialect. Negation is criticism; it is the ability

to criticize existing structures. Here lies the key to realignment. Each simulacrum found must be negated by removing the repressive elements from it. Negating the repressive or false elements of a policy can help create a referent. The aim of critical theory is to submit existing societal structures to criticism, to prune the malignant and oppressive attributes of them. That is precisely what this conceptual framework is meant to do. Negation would occur by a detailed and thorough examination and criticism of these simulacra. Realignment would occur with the creation of a more suitable and accurate referent. The creation of the referent could restore some measure of the notion of representation and work to realign the signifier and the signified. Caution must be exercised however. A referent could easily become reified into a positivist structure if it becomes uncritically accepted. The dialectal process can safeguard against this.

The Framework in Use

Now the task is to show how this abstract framework can be used practically by educators. As mentioned earlier, we as a society are saturated with information which emanates from a variety of sources. We as educators cannot ignore this fact; we must have a way of dealing with the proliferation of information and providing some notion of truth. A brief example of the use of this framework will be provided below.

One particular area that is fraught with numerous sources of information is that of student achievement and teacher accountability. Student knowledge is said to be accurately represented by standardized tests and further, it is believed that these tests can be used to assess the ability of teachers (Hill, 2006; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). Outside of the educational community this simplistic view that test scores accurately represent student achievement is almost taken for granted. Policies such as No Child Left Behind and President Obama's Race to the Top to name a few are clear examples of this reliance on test scores. It is to this idea, the simplistic notion that test scores equate with learning that we can apply the conceptual framework to.

If we apply the criteria for simulacra identification, test scores can be viewed as a simulacrum. Number one, do student scores on standardized tests accurately reflect student achievement? The answer to this is no (Gardner, 1990; Hill, 2006; Kohn, 2000). At best, achievements on standardized tests only represent a facet of student learning. Bloom's taxonomy is a common assessment of learning. Bloom argued that there are different levels of learning; the lowest level is that of knowledge retention and simple memorization. The highest levels are synthesis and application of knowledge, which are creative acts. Most standardized tests cannot measure application and synthesis (Kohn, 2000). Further, there is big money in education. Educational magnates such as Pearson, ETS and McGraw-Hill rake in millions every year from standardized tests (Hill, 2006; Kohn 2000; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). So, the proliferation of standardized test cannot

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be separated from the fact that certain companies profit handsomely from them. The second question is whether this simulacrum has the potential to restructure human behavior. The answer is yes. Students are ranked and categorized by their performance of test scores (i.e. GPA's, SAT scores) which in turn are the determinants of college admission. In a wider sense, these test scores are used to determine the collective knowledge of schools, states and even nations. Right now, "parent trigger laws" in certain states allow for parents to petition to have failing public school taken over by for-profit companies. Failing schools are determined solely by test scores (Layton, 2012). So, we can say with some certainty that standardized test scores are a simulacrum because they do not accurately represent what they claim to (learning) and because this misconception further restructures human behavior.

The task then is to create a new referent using the dialect. Following Adorno and Horkheimer, we can use the dialectic to bring the name and thing, or sign and signifier, in closer relationship, while always leaving open room for interpretation (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969; Horkheimer, 1974; Jay, 1996; Kellner, 1992).Since the foundation of the dialectic is perpetual criticism, the new referent will be written as a serious of questions. This will leave a space for dialogue.

With the above points in mind, what is needed is not so much a new assessment of learning, but a new *conception* of learning. *So what would a new conception of learning entail in the information age? Is it possible to create a new conception of learning that more accurately reflects what learning is?* While this is a complex question, we could turn to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and to Bloom as well. *Further, how much is our current conception of learning entwined with the profit motive and how do we uncouple these notions?* This is a topic which will need to be duly explored in a neoliberal society. If the free-market is synonymous with justice, as neoliberal ideology holds, than education becomes a commodity, able to be sold and bought. It may lose its critical dimension. If this does happen, then *what type of behavior is produced when only the lower rungs of Bloom's taxonomy are engaged for profit? Is this behavior compatible with the ideas and virtues of a republic?* This last question may be the most complex of all, but one that needs to be tackled so long as education and profit are entwined.

It is the hope that this new referent can spark a much needed dialogue not only regarding standardized tests, but representation in the information age. This referent however is only a starting point; it must be modified and critiqued by other scholars. In the process of this critique, a fluid referential will develop.

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