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Negative Thinking and the Denial of Tolerance: The Challenge of Marcuse to Contemporary Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper seeks to insert critical theorist Herbert Marcuse's concepts of rebellious subjectivity and repressive tolerance into adult educational discourse.

Rebellious Subjectivity

Critical theory of adult learning drawing on the Frankfurt school tends to stress the importance of social learning and to denigrate as a humanistic diversion any extended focus on individual learners. Individualism is usually condemned as an ideological prop of the capitalist superstructure, one that emphasizes capitalist values of competitiveness, separation, and the efficient division of labor over solidarity and collaboration. An emphasis on individualism is often taken as a sign of political naivete, an indication that the writer concerned has swallowed the 'pulling yourself up by the bootstraps/anyone can be President' ideology of individual betterment. However, Marcuse's elaboration of rebellious subjectivity prompts us to reassess this automatic dismissal of individualism.

Marcuse explored individualistic dimensions of adult experience (such as inwardness, privacy, memory and distance) that receive little attention from critically inclined adult educators. His insistence on the importance of individual isolation, and the need to look inward to the deepest instinctual impulses, add a very different tone to contemporary adult education discussions of critical theory. Marcuse also developed a theory of aesthetics that stressed the importance of individual immersion in artistic experience. He believed that an intense private engagement with art could trigger a revolutionary estrangement from everyday life, thus nurturing a tendency to political critique. Artistic experience could threaten the political order, even art that was highly stylized and part of the dominant 'highbrow' culture. In acknowledging the liberatory possibilities of art, and in stressing the importance of rebellious subjectivity, Marcuse opposes critical activists' instinctive dismissal of individual isolation as an a-political and anti-revolutionary turn away from social commitment. Privacy is now the necessary antecedent to revolution.

Marcuse's lamentation of the passing of privacy, and his stress on the revolutionary power of detachment and isolation, sits uneasily alongside the belief held by many adult educators that learning (particularly critical learning) is inherently social. In my own work I have argued that introspective analysis of a private and isolated sort leads us into perceptual dead-ends. Critical reflection for me is a social learning process in which people depend on others to be critical mirrors reflecting back to them aspects of their assumptive clusters they are unable to see. I have viewed isolation as a step backward, a retreat into the divisive, competitive, privatized creation of knowledge characteristic of capitalistic epistemology. How could privacy and isolation challenge the social order?

To Marcuse, this question is assinine. In his view we should be asking instead ‘how can we possibly challenge the social order *without* experiencing first the separation from this order that isolation provides?’ When a person experiences a deeply personal, completely private reaction to a work of art, she “steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 4). This is the dimension of inwardness, of liberating subjectivity. Such subjectivity is liberating because within its borders we are moved by primal aesthetic and creative impulses, not the dictates of majority opinion or common sense criteria of beauty. Privacy, inwardness and isolation are all revolutionary because they play the role of “shifting the locus of the individual’s realization from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 5).

According to this logic a truly critical adult education would be concerned not just with locating itself within existing social movements. It would also be seeking to create opportunities for people to experience the privacy and isolation they need for memory, introspection and meditation to trigger a rupture with present day experience. In defending individual creativity that produced art containing no explicit political message or intent, Marcuse broke with those who believed that the content of art should always serve a predetermined revolutionary purpose. He criticized the way that “Marxist aesthetics has shared in the devaluation of subjectivity, the denigration of romanticism as simply reactionary; the denunciation of ‘decadent’ art” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 6). Marcuse argued that “in contrast to orthodox Marxist aesthetics I see the political potential of art itself, in the aesthetic form as such ... by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis a vis the given social relations. In its autonomy art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them” (1978, p. ix). For him overtly political art explicitly dedicated to raising adults’ consciousness of oppression and igniting the fires of change – agit-prop theater, socialist realism, the theater of the oppressed – was actually less revolutionary than some forms of introspective poetry. This was because “the more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change” (Marcuse, 1978, p. xii). As Marcuse acknowledged, his logic meant that “there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht” (1978, p. xiii).

To Marcuse individual artistic experience represents rebellious, liberating subjectivity. Again and again he asserts that “the flight into ‘inwardness’ and the insistence on a private sphere may well serve as bulwarks against a society which administers all dimensions of human existence” (1978, p. 38). By instigating a separation from the routinized, unthinking life “inwardness and subjectivity may well become the inner and outer space for the subversion of experience, for the emergence of another universe” (p. 38). Tasting a new form of experience is inherently revolutionary, and initiating this is “the critical, negating function of art” (1978, p. 7). Art can induce “the transcendence of immediate reality” which “shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity” (p. 7).

Although he does not draw strongly on Marcuse’s theory of aesthetics, Australian adult educator Michael Newman’s (1999) provocative meditation on images of adult

learning contains several examples of how immersion in the different language of artistic experience is inherently emancipatory. For example in describing the activities of Australian surfers he notices how the different grammar of surfing – “sensing the currents, noting their distance from the rocks, maintaining their balance on a narrow piece of fiber-glass, watching the water for unwelcome shadows” (p. 92) – induces an altered sense of reality. Referring to the intense concentration surfing induces, Newman declares that “this form of focused reverie can result in profound personal and political change” (p. 92). Later in his book he describes attending a production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, with Patrick Stewart (better known as Captain Jean Luc Picard in T.V.’s *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) as Prospero. Newman writes that “Prospero uses conflict openly to generate learning and promote change” (p. 175) and sees him as “an eccentric and passionate learner and educator, driven by anger at injustice, a belief that the world could be a better place, and a readiness, given the opportunity, to intervene in order to shift people towards his view of the world” (p. 175). In Marcuse’s terms Prospero, like other dramatic protagonists, restructures our view of life “through concentration, exaggeration, emphasis on the essential, reordering of facts” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 45) and other dramatic devices. In the hands of Shakespeare and Patrick Stewart “the aesthetic transformation turns into an indictment – but also into a celebration of that which resists injustice and terror, and of that which can still be saved” (ibid.).

Another adult educational illustration of the connection between privacy and the development of rebellious subjectivity is Cale and Huber’s (2001) analysis of two attempts to create in adult learners a critical perspective on dominant, racist ideology. As part of this study Huber summarizes a distance teacher-education course focused on understanding diversity and promoting anti-racist practice. She records the surprising fact that “the assignments students completed that were most thoughtful and critical of their own positions of power were the ones that were completed alone” (Cale and Huber, 2001, p. 15). In these assignments students “discussed openly the racism and sexism that they experienced in their families, their lack of contact with people of color, and their own passive racism” (ibid.). However, when these same learners formed an informal study group to work collaboratively on confronting racism “the autonomous learning and thinking that manifested itself during their self-study disappeared after they completed the next two assignments together” (ibid.). As a consequence “students who openly addressed the inherent racism in their classrooms and expressed a desire to end the racist practices that were a part of their hidden and overt curriculum did not complete a significant plan for change within their classrooms” (ibid.). Huber suggests that dominant ideology reproduced itself automatically in the informal group setting, whereas it could be kept temporarily at bay when participants inhabited the private space of autonomous, distanced thought. Both Newman and Huber prompt a reappraisal of the role of isolation in developing a critical perspective.

Adult Education as the Practice of Liberating Tolerance

As a practicing educator Marcuse often returns to the dynamics of teaching and learning, particularly the tendency of dialogically-inclined teachers to embrace diverse perspectives in the name of democracy. In an essay that is unsettling to contemporary adult education sensibilities, he argues that an all-embracing tolerance of diverse views always ends up legitimizing an unfair status quo and restricting the breadth of

perspectives and traditions we take seriously (Marcuse, 1965). Marcuse mistrusts educators' instinctive preference for presenting students with a diversity of perspectives and then letting them make up their minds about which makes most sense to them.

On the face of it, teachers' willingness to run discussions, and develop curricula, in which a variety of mainstream and dissenting perspectives are present hardly seems like a problem. Indeed, a broadening of curriculum to include a diversity of radical ideas and traditions seems an important and obvious part of building both a liberal and a critical practice of adult education. Marcuse argues that such tolerance is repressive, not liberating. Broadening the perspectives learners review makes them feel like equal weight is being granted to radical ideas, when in fact placing these alongside mainstream ones always dilutes their radical qualities. The central thesis of his essay – that “what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 81) – extends the concept of hegemony and has important implications for the practice of adult education. Repressive tolerance ensures that adults believe they live in an open society characterized by freedom of speech and expression while in reality their freedom is being constricted.

How does repressive tolerance work? Essentially it ensures the continued marginality of minority views by always placing them in close, comparative association with dominant ones. This subtly positions critical voices as inherently off-center, unnatural. When an adult education curriculum is widened to include dissenting and radical perspectives that are considered alongside the mainstream perspective, the minority perspectives are always overshadowed by the mainstream one. This happens even if the radical perspectives are scrupulously accorded equal time and space. As long as the dominant, mainstream perspective is included as one of possible options for study its presence inevitably suffocates the minority perspectives which will always be perceived as alternatives, as exotic others – never as the natural center from which the analysis should start. Even if the educator is strongly opposed to dominant ideology the mere inclusion of that ideology as one of several options ensures its continued dominance. This is because the mainstream ideology has so seeped into our structures of feeling (Williams, 1977) that it operates at a preconscious level shaping our responses to alternatives that are proposed to it. The only way to promote real tolerance – liberating or discriminating tolerance in Marcuse's terms – is to deny learners the chance to consider mainstream perspectives as one possibility among many. Instead of exposing people to a smorgasbord of mainstream and radical perspectives, educators practicing true tolerance will allow students exposure only to alternative views, to dissenting traditions.

The contemporary discourse of diversity, of opening up the field of adult education to diverse voices, perspectives and traditions, can be analyzed quite disturbingly using the idea of repressive tolerance. An honorable and emancipatory position to take is that adult education research, theorizing and practice needs to include alongside the grand narrative of Eurocentric rationality work that draws on other cultural traditions and represents different racial perspectives. Providing an array of dominant and subjugated, alternative perspectives and sensibilities seems to be a major step in moving away from a situation in which only white, male, European voices dominate. Yet Marcuse alerts us to the possibility that this apparent broadening of mainstream curriculum and ideology to include subjugated discourses can be subtly manipulated by

gatekeepers in the field so that it actually reinforces the ideology of white supremacy that it seems to be undercutting. By widening curricula to include a variety of traditions we appear to be celebrating all positions. But the history of white supremacy, and the way that language and structures of feeling frame whiteness as the natural, inevitable conceptual center, mean that the newly included voices, sensibilities and traditions are always positioned as the exotic other. Adult educators can soothe their consciences by believing progress is being made towards racial inclusivity and cultural equity, and can feel they have played their small but important part in the struggle to combat racism. But as long as these subjugated traditions are considered alongside the dominant ideology, repressive tolerance ensures they can be subtly marginalized as exotic, other than the natural center. The logic of liberating or discriminating tolerance would require an immersion only in a racial or cultural tradition that diverged radically from mainstream ideology; for example, an adult education graduate program that allowed only the consideration of Africentric ideas and perspectives. The logic of repressive tolerance holds that as long as Africentrism is considered as one of many possible perspectives, including Eurocentrism, it will always be positioned as the marginal alternative to the white supremacist center.

An interesting adult educational case study of repressive tolerance in action is Cale's analysis of his attempt to work critically and democratically in an adult Freshman composition class teaching writing through the analysis of race, class and gender in contemporary America (Cale, 2001, Cale and Huber, 2001). Despite his giving lectures critiquing the concept of meritocracy and outlining capitalism's deliberate creation of an underclass, Cale notes that "once I allowed the 'common sense' of the dominant ideology to be voiced, nothing could disarm it" (Cale and Huber, 2001, p. 16). It did not matter that a disproportionately large amount of time was spent in criticism of this ideology. As long as Cale allowed his white students (the majority in the class) to voice their own opinions regarding racism – opinions based on their own experiences as adults – the focus was continually shifted away from white privilege and toward discussions of reverse discrimination and Black 'problems'. Cale refreshingly and courageously admits that his past efforts to work democratically by respecting all voices and encouraging the equal participation of all learners "has in many cases actually helped to silence some of my students, to reinforce the dominance of the status quo, and to diminish my own ability to combat racism, sexism, and classism" (ibid.). He concludes that his use of 'democratic' discussion achieved little effect other than to provide "opportunities for students to attack and silence oppositional thinkers, including myself" (ibid., p. 17).

In Marcuse's view the only way to break the sort of logjam Cale confronted is to practice liberating tolerance. The educator must try to "break the established universe of meaning (and the practice enclosed within this universe)" so that people are "freed from the prevailing indoctrination (which is no longer recognized as indoctrination)" (Marcuse, 1965, pp.98-99). In a society living under false consciousness people "are indoctrinated by the conditions under which they live and think and which they do not transcend" (p. 98). They need to realize that truth is manipulated, that the 'facts' "are established, mediated, by those who made them" (p. 99). They need to shed the tolerance for multiple truths, each of which are presumed to have their own integrity and internal validity, and realize instead that "there *is* an objective truth which can be discovered, ascertained only in learning and comprehending that which is and that which can be and

ought to be done for the sake of improving the lot of mankind” (p. 88). This objective truth is a liberatory truth concerning the need to overthrow the dominant ideology of capitalism and white supremacy and it must always take precedence over a supposedly respectful, but ultimately repressive, tolerance of all viewpoints. To Marcuse “tolerance cannot be indiscriminate and equal ... it cannot protect false words and wrong deeds which demonstrate that they contradict and counteract the possibilities of liberation” (1965, p. 88). If tolerance allows dominant perspectives to be considered alongside radical ones, it leads to the kind of co-option of radical practice and alternative perspectives outlined by Baptiste (1998, 2000), Cunningham (2001) and Smith and Colin (2001) amongst others.

The key point for Marcuse is that a necessary rupture with the appearance of facts and truth “cannot be accomplished within the established framework of abstract tolerance and spurious objectivity because these are precisely the factors which precondition the mind *against* the rupture” (1965, p. 99). Providing a smorgasbord of alternative perspectives in the name of a pluralist tolerance of diversity only ensures that the radical ones are marginalized by the dominant consciousness. The only way to break with the face of spurious impartiality is to immerse adults fully and exclusively in a radically different perspective that challenges mainstream ideology and confronts the learner with “information slanted in the opposite direction” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 99). After all, “unless the student learns to think in the opposite direction, he will be inclined to place the facts into the predominant framework of values” (p. 113). This rupture with mainstream reality will inevitably be castigated as undemocratic censorship, but this criticism is to be expected as the predictable response of organized repression and indoctrination; “the ways should not be blocked on which a subversive majority could develop, and if they are blocked by organized repression and indoctrination, their reopening may require apparently undemocratic means” (p. 100).

Here Marcuse is proposing a kind of community sponsored intellectual affirmative action in favor of subjugated discourses and leftist perspectives; “withdrawal of tolerance from regressive movements, and discriminating tolerance in favor of progressive tendencies would be tantamount to the ‘official’ promotion of subversion” (p. 107). For him the end of learners’ access to objective, liberatory truth justifies the means of censorship of dominant, mainstream ideas and of discrimination in favor of outlawed knowledge. Realizing the objective of tolerance calls “for intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, opinions, and the extension of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions which are outlawed or suppressed” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 81). In line with his contention that “critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis” (Marcuse, 1968, p. 156) adult educators who read Marcuse are forced to re-examine some practices that they might have thought were beyond reproach.

References will be supplied on request. E mail me at sdbrookfield@stthomas.edu