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DISCOURSES OF OPPOSITION AND RESISTANCE IN EDUCATION

Alternative Spaces for a Militant Pedagogy

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Introduction

Education is a battlefield, a contested terrain where reactionary capitalist, ultra-conservative forces are seeking to establish their hegemony once and for all. What we are witnessing is not war waged by students against teachers and the schooling process, but rather an all-out assault against public schooling. This war on public schooling is part and parcel of a capitalist educational agenda where education is for sale and schools have become more commodified and militarized than ever. Conservatives’ idea of education has always been a dystopian one. If current trends in the United States are any indication, we are moving, even further, to a market-driven, militarized, authoritarian, punitive model that holds firm capitalist values, where middle- and, particularly, working-class students and students of color are taught obedience, compliance, and conformity. The gradual takeover of education, as one of the few public goods left, by the private sector sets the grounds for a different educational model: a model where students have lost any and all autonomy and control over their bodies and their minds; a model where, as consumers of knowledge (or rather, information) they can buy their living by selling their skills; an education where teachers are perceived as state functionaries who have lost any
and all autonomy and control over curricula and the teaching process and operate more like enforcers of policies and discipline.

Ideas, notions, and perceptions about schooling as the great social equalizer have exhibited a stubborn persistence in the literature, the educational and mainstream discourses on the value of education, and the collective subconscious. Schools have often been promoted as neutral knowledge temples where students who work hard and play by the rules will be rewarded with cushy jobs, social mobility, and a “better future” regardless of their class, race, gender, etc. This persistent myth is not only dangerous; it shapes and defines school curricula, student–teacher relationships, knowledge structure and value, and so forth. There is, all the while, ample empirical evidence that, in the capitalist context, schools have never acted as “a social leveler” (Knopp, 2012; Freire & Shor, 1987). Public education is not in place to open the doors of social mobility, individual development, and political and economic power to disadvantaged and oppressed students:

It would be tremendously naive to ask the ruling class in power to put into practice a kind of education which can work against it . . . from the point of view of the ruling class, of those in power, the main task for systematic education is to reproduce the dominant ideology.  

(Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 36)

In this antagonistic ideological context, where too many hopes are placed on the schooling process, while capitalism adds daily thousands of people in the ranks of poor, unemployed, low-waged exploited workers, it is important to reopen the discussion on the concept of “resistance.” There are different manifestations of resistance in the educational context. In this chapter, I will briefly review the educational literature on student resistance and attempt to recast it in the context of authoritarian capitalism. Finally, I will propose a pedagogy of resistance and disobedience with specific goals and political content.

Resistance in the Literature

Student resistance in inner city schools has been one of the largest sustained guerilla warfare campaigns since the advent of mass literacy.  


Resistance has been a trending word in the educational literature, used to describe, define, or name a variety of actions, situations, and events and it “has been addressed across a broad continuum of research and policy” (Moss and Osborn, 2010, p. 1). The term first gained recognition in the educational context as student resistance in Paul Willis’s now-classic critical ethnographic study, Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs (Willis, 1977). Learning to Labor was a departure from earlier theories of social reproduction and schooling in that it brought out issues of oppositional behavior that were tied to student agency, and
it disrupted existing totalizing schooling accounts (Morrow, 2014; Giroux, 1983; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985) and brought a break with social and cultural reproduction theories as illustrated in the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), respectively. According to these earlier accounts, schools reproduce social norms, legitimize particular kinds of knowledge and cultural capital, and encourage specific types of socialization so that students end up occupying predetermined positions in the labor force and, thus, in social stratification. After Paul Willis’s critical ethnography, two important studies in North America explored the connection of schooling and social stratification: Jean Anyon’s (1980) *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum* and Angela McRobbie’s (1978) gender role reproduction in *Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity*.

In an interesting article that examines class-based theories of resistance, Ken McGrew (2011) has reviewed 580 articles and 85 books and book chapters exploring the notion of resistance in education, in an attempt not only to map the range of understandings of class-based student resistance theories contributing to or resulting from the influence of *Learning to Labor* but also to estimate how influential each position is, as reflected in the number of authors expressing one perspective or another in the literature. McGrew concludes that resistance theory was not an entirely original conception in Willis’s work but rather its seeds existed in studies before 1977. McGrew claims that, in essence, resistance theory developed in Willis’s work was “a reappropriation of earlier literatures on subculture formation, school failure, and delinquency” (p. 240). These earlier accounts contained “fully formed notions of resistance and human agency almost identical to Willis” (p. 242).

Drawing on Willis’s work, Henry Giroux first elaborates on the concept of resistance in a critical theory of education framework, in a piece published in the *Harvard Educational Review* titled “Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis” and later in his seminal book *Theory and Resistance in Education*, first published in 1983. In it, he analyzes resistance as a “valuable theoretical and ideological construct that provides an important focus for analyzing the relationship between school and the wider society” (2001, p. 107). His analysis proposes to reframe school failure and oppositional behavior away from functionalism and mainstream educational psychology to political analysis. In his view, oppositional behavior “has little to do with the logic of deviance, individual pathology, learned helplessness and a great deal to do, thought not exhaustively, with the logic of moral and political indignation” (p. 107). Giroux considers the concept of resistance fundamental as it challenges deep-seated assumptions about schooling in that: (1) It highlights a notion of human agency, where domination is “neither a static process nor one that is ever complete.” Intentionality, consciousness, the meaning of common sense, and the nature and value of non-discursive behavior are at the core of this conception. (2) It recasts Foucault’s notion of power as less totalizing and more multidimensional: “it is exercised not only as a mode of domination but also as an act of resistance.” (3) it showcases the element of hope as central to this resistance. (4) Emancipation is the guiding force and principle behind resistance (p. 109). In conclusion, for Giroux,
“the value of the resistance construct lies in its critical function, in its potential to speak to the radical possibilities embedded in its own logic” (p. 109).

Later, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) revisit together the notion of resistance in the context of the capitalist apparatus and critique radical educators who, in articulating reproduction theories, have downplayed the notion of human agency and resistance. They stress that school knowledge is instrumental for the reproduction of capitalist social relations where “students are prepared for subordination because they view themselves as possessors of ‘free will’ ” (p. 4).

Similarly, Peter McLaren in Schooling as Ritual Performance (1993) defines “resistance” as the oppositional student behavior that “has both symbolic historical and ‘lived’ meaning and which contests the legitimacy, power and significance of school culture in general and instruction in particular (e.g. the overt and hidden curriculum)” (p. 146). McLaren claims that teachers are “faced daily with a spectrum of resistances and reprisals to their instruction—a series of ineluctable acts of ritualized disjunction and reritualization . . . designed to rupture and erode the authority of the teacher” (p. 146).

Summing up, the use of the term “resistance” in the work of critical pedagogy theorists in its early conceptualizations “restores the critical notion of agency” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). Along these lines, schools represent contested terrains marked not only by structural and ideological contradictions but also by collectively informed student resistance. In other words, schools are social sites characterized by overt and hidden curricula, tracking, dominant and subordinant cultures, and competing class ideologies.

(p. 71)

In the educational bibliography starting in the late seventies and early eighties, resistance has been used to describe opposition, oppositional behavior, school-refusal, disengagement from the schooling process, noncompliance, and apathy (Hendrickson, 2012). This is quite a large range of behaviors, acts, and meanings that raises questions about the use of the specific word. Ortner (1995) notes that resistance was “a relatively unambiguous category,” simply one part of the binary “domination versus resistance.” Domination:

was a relatively fixed and institutionalized form of power; resistance was essentially organized opposition to power institutionalized in this way. The problem with the use of resistance in educational literature is that it is used to talk about anything oppositional, regardless of where it is coming from. Anything remotely oppositional is read by the researcher as resistance. There is not enough political theorization and analysis behind this term.

(p. 174)
Ortner makes here an important point. This is an issue that was initially brought up in 1983 by Giroux, who correctly stressed that not every oppositional behavior is an act of resistance. However, many acts of opposition are interpreted as acts of resistance, making the category large enough, ambiguous, and open. A relevant problem is the appropriation of the word “resistance” rather as a catchphrase or a slogan and less as a concept filled with particular meanings or a political/educational project. For instance, in recent work in the field of critical pedagogy, calls for resistance without specific content abound, where resistance is a static, empty concept.

Given the variation of meanings and understandings, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) in their review of the literature on resistance attempt a typology, where they identify two core elements: (1) a sense of action—“resistance is not a quality of an actor or a state of being, but involves some active behavior, whether verbal, cognitive or physical”—and (2) a sense of opposition (p. 538). Along with these two core elements, Hollander and Einwohner also bring in additional considerations such as “recognition,” that is, the visibility of the resistant act by an audience (everyday acts of resistance that may go unnoticed). They stress that an oppositional act be “readily apparent to others” (p. 539). Finally, they propose that “intent,” that is, individual consciousness of the actor who needs to be aware that he or she is resisting some exercise of power, is an equally important factor.

**Capitalist Authoritarianism: Trump’s Dystopian Education Vision**

In order to talk about resistance, it is important to talk about complacency and obedience, its two dialectical opposites and the ways they articulate in the context of capitalist schooling. We build schools with drumbeats of “freedom” and “effectiveness” to cover the noise from the chains we drag: ideological chains that kill imagination and view teachers and students as things. The neoliberal order has turned education into a thing, an object, a commodity, and through particular policies it slowly strips it from its humanistic character. In the name of more “freedom,” students and educators become more unfree. *Authoritarianism* and *commodification* seem to be currently among the leading ideologies shaping education, particularly the educational vision of the Trump administration with the appointment of Betsy DeVos, a multi-millionaire, second-generation, religious right funder, as Secretary of Education. DeVos and her children have only ever attended Christian private schools, and she and her husband have donated almost $8.6 million in recent years to Christian schooling organizations. Her educational agenda is shaped by her idea of what God wants for the world. DeVos has already postponed and proposed rewriting two key rules designed to protect students of predatory, for-profit college and unfulfilled gainful employment promises. She has also already scaled back protections of gay and transgender students. Alongside Trump’s political agenda, she is repurposing billions of dollars from public school programs, in favor of school choice. DeVos is a
staunch supporter of privately run, publicly funded charter schools and voucher programs that allow families to take tax dollars from the public education system to private schools. Under her leadership, the Trump administration wants to expand privatization to include vouchers, virtual schools, cyberschools, homeschooling, and every other possible alternative to public education. Her racism, elitism, and ignorance were amply demonstrated during her confirmation hearings but this did not prevent her from securing her nomination in the new cabinet. DeVos has said that public education is a “dead end,” and that “government sucks” (Straus, 2016), but maybe it does not suck so much when you are part of it and getting paid by it.

**Resistance and Body Politics**

How can we rethink the concept of resistance in light of the new authoritarian capitalism that sets the rules for an educational and social order of complacency and obedience? Body politics seem to play an important role (Darder, 2009; 2016) as bodies are contained and controlled. In authoritarian conditions the body is criminalized, especially the body of color, the “different” body. It needs to be contained, controlled, and required to constantly comply to specific norms. Students’ bodies, already subject to control, are then contained behind desks, nailed in chairs for hours, then contained in recess in small school yards, or in cafeterias, where order is the word of the day. We put children through authoritarian schooling only to take away their freedom to be, to think and to move, to reform them and put their thinking into small boxes and their bodies crumbled in small desks that gradually get bigger as their bodies grow. If “bodies are maps of power and identity” (Haraway, cited in Darder, 2009, p. 219) then teachers must work to:

engage students’ physical realities more substantively, in an effort to forge an emancipatory practice of education. It is not enough to rely on abstract learning processes, where only the analysis of words and texts are privileged in the construction of knowledge. Such educational process of estrangement functions to alienate students from the world around them, from themselves, and from each other.

(Darder 2009, p. 219)

For examples of body control in the schooling process, we shall look no further than the recent case of two black female students attending a charter school in Massachusetts who were kicked off their sports teams and prohibited from attending a prom after two weeks of daily detention for refusing to take down their hair braids. Their charter school in Malden, Massachusetts, enforces a strict dress code preventing students from wearing their hair in any “unnatural” way, which includes braids (Williams, 2017). Only after the intervention of the Massachusetts Attorney General was these students’ status reinstated and they were allowed to keep their braids. Or the example of Yosio Lopez, a special needs student who suffers from
attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and who was handcuffed, Tasered, and bruised by Dallas Independent School District Police after the boy started banging his head against a wall in class (Moshtaghian, 2017).

This increased authoritarianism finds a particularly fertile ground in charter schools, where the more recent disciplinary trend is called the “no-excuses” policy. According to this policy, schools impose a strict school uniform, a rigid disciplinary code, involving a strict system of consequences for rule-breaking: lateness and uniform violation are usually automatic detentions, while cursing in a class is an in-school suspension. At the same time, they have elaborate rewards for high-performing and hard-working students. These include camping trips, skiing trips, ice-cream and pizza parties, special events with students’ favorite teachers, and even multiday visits to foreign countries. Charter schools implementing a no-excuses policy have an extended school day and school year, less recess time, and Saturday and after-school tutoring (Bean, 2013).

Summer Duskin’s experience at Carver Collegiate Academy in New Orleans is telling: There were rules governing how she talked. She had to say “thank you” constantly, including when she was given the “opportunity”—as the school handbook put it—to answer questions in class. And she had to communicate using “scholar talk,” which the school defined as complete, grammatical sentences with conventional vocabulary. When students lapsed, they were corrected by a teacher and asked to repeat the amended statement. Teachers issued demerits when students leaned against a wall or placed their heads on their desks: The penalty for falling asleep was ten demerits, which triggered a detention; skipping detention could warrant a suspension. Teachers praised students for shaking hands firmly, sitting up straight, and “tracking” the designated speaker with their eyes. The fifty-one-page handbook encouraged students to twist in their chairs or whip their necks around to follow whichever classmate or teacher held the floor. Closed eyes carried a penalty of two demerits (Carr, 2014).

The no-excuses approach borrows heavily from the older “zero-tolerance” policing ideology that emphasized cracking down on minor offenses, including by searching the pockets of teenagers living in low-income neighborhoods for drugs and weapons, to prevent major crimes such as drug dealing down the road (Long, 2014). Minor infractions of school rules were criminalized, while police had a free pass whenever there was a disciplinary issue that should be handled inside the school. The “zero-tolerance” discipline resulted in black students facing disproportionately harsher punishment than white students in public schools. While black students only make up 16 percent of public school enrollment, they account for 42 percent of all students who have been suspended multiple times. Millions of students are removed from their classrooms every year and they are more likely to fall behind, drop out, and eventually land in the juvenile justice system, becoming part of the “school to prison pipeline” (ACLU, School-to-Prison Pipeline Report). These are also disproportionately students of color, students with disabilities, or students who identify as LGBTQ. Along these lines, education is becoming the threshold to either prison or forced labor and is an extension of a generalized social
war and culture of punishment. The examples are anecdotal yet startling: a fourteen-year-old student arrested for texting in class; three middle school–aged boys in Florida thrown to the ground by police officers wielding rifles, who then arrested them for goofing off on the roof of the school; a nine-year-old boy suspended for allegedly pointing a toy at a classmate and saying “bang, bang”; two six-year-old students in Maryland suspended for using their fingers as imaginary guns in a schoolyard game of cops and robbers; a twelve-year-old New York student hauled out of school in handcuffs for doodling on her desk with an erasable marker; an eight-year-old boy suspended for making his hand into the shape of a gun, in violation of the school district’s policy prohibiting “playing with invisible guns.”

What we are witnessing is the absolute militarization of the classroom with loss of student and teacher autonomy, freedom, and individuality. Schools require a kind of what Fromm (1981) calls heteronomous obedience that translates to submission: “it implies the abdication of my autonomy and the acceptance of a foreign will or judgment in place of my own” (p. 5).

For a Militant Pedagogy of Disobedience and Resistance

The outer chains have simply been put inside of man. The desires and thoughts that the suggestion apparatus of society fills him with, chain him more thoroughly than outer chains. This is so because man can at least be aware of outer chains but be unaware of inner chains, carrying them with the illusion that he is free. He can try to overthrow the outer chains, but how can he rid himself of chains of whose existence he is unaware.

(Fromm 1992, p. 7)

The increasing authoritarianism and militarization in public education force us to rethink a pedagogy of resistance, where resistance is a collective goal and project among students, teachers, and other educational stakeholders and not a simple act of opposition. Resistance must be distinguished from rebelliousness as reaction without clear political meaning. With educational policies taking an alarming turn worldwide, it is important to rethink the notion of resistance in situated and concrete ways. The ongoing mechanization, automation, and quantification of the educational process are imposing a new oppressive order. The tendency to quantification, as well as the obsession with effectiveness and measurable goals, clearly do not aim at improving public education. By functioning more and more like prisons or factories, schools gradually turn into dead zones (Giroux, 2007), where the imagination, creativity, and free thinking of students and educators are killed.

In what might look like a totalitarian educational landscape, realizing what our chains are made of is an important first step. As Fromm clearly notes in the passage above, in order to resist, to disobey, one needs to be aware of what s/he is resisting against. Resistance must be conscious, intentional, and targeted. This is the only way to enact one’s agency and negotiate constraints and possibilities. It is not
resistance that pushes us to agency positions, but rather a conscious sense of agency that pushes people to resist.

Given the greed and the aggression with which neoliberal policies are currently implemented toward achieving a capitalist restructuring, fear and power are used to preserve obedience and consent. Obedience and consent are unfortunately visible in the ranks of educators, who often become complicit in their own dehumanization because their obedience makes them feel safe and secure: “my obedience makes me part of the power I worship and hence makes me strong. I can make no error since it decided for me” (Fromm 1981, 8).

Resistance with a clear political content can function on many levels of education and public life because it:

is not primarily an attitude directed against something, but for something: for man’s [sic] capacity to see, to say what he sees, and to refuse to say what he does not see. To do so he does not need to be aggressive or rebellious; he needs to have his eyes open, to be fully awake, and willing to take the responsibility to open the eyes of those who are in danger of perishing because they are half asleep.

(Fromm 1981, p. 24)

It is important for students to understand their condition, identify its sources, and be able to recognize that there are ways this could change if hope acquires meaning, content, and actions. Or, as Fromm (1973) notes,

to have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible. . . . This hope is not passive and it is not patient; on the contrary, it is impatient and active, looking for every possibility of action within the realm of real possibilities.

(p. 485)

Unfortunately, the official school curriculum is depriving students from the ability to wonder, to question, the need to try to understand. We are gradually losing the revolutionary nature of our thinking. As Bertrand Russell (in Fromm, 1981) so accurately notes, humans are afraid of thinking more than anything in the world:

Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habits; thought is anarchic and lawless, indifferent to authority, careless to the well-tried wisdom of ages. Thought looks to the pit of hell and is not afraid. It sees man, a feeble speck, surrounded by unfathomable depths of silence; yet bears itself proudly, as unmoved as if it were lord of the universe. Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man.

(p. 26)
A Militant Pedagogy

Paraphrasing Zygmunt Bauman, here I would say that education is not a collection of gifts but rather a collection of struggles. Lenin, in his Lecture on the 1905 Revolution (1917), insists that:

The real education of the masses can never be separated from their independent political, and especially revolutionary, struggle. Only struggle educates the exploited class. Only struggle discloses to it the magnitude of its own power, widens its horizon, enhances its abilities, clarifies its mind, forges its will.

We have a war waging. Public education, as we know it, has been under attack and our pedagogy should be tailored to the conditions of war. I want therefore to argue for a “militant pedagogy” not as another trendy term. A militant pedagogy is, first of all, real. It is anchored in reality, in everyday life, in the daily struggles of educators, students, parents, and communities to fight the conservative authoritarian and racist backlash. It resonates with the reality on the ground. Under capitalism, dominant anti-pedagogy permeates all aspects of public and private life and blocks any conditions for human agency. Pierre Bourdieu points out that political action is only “possible because agents, who are part of the social world, have knowledge of this world and because one can act on the social world by acting on their knowledge of this world” (cited in Giroux, 2010). It is the knowledge of this world that the current administration in the United States is trying to rewrite.

We live in a world that is painful, violent, aggressive, and most often than not unbearable. Our daily realities are flooded with sickness, terror, death, despair, hopelessness. We witness violence on immigrants, women, children, students, the poor, people of color, minorities, the ill, the unfortunate, the wretched. How do we avoid becoming cynical? How do we prevent ourselves from getting used to the terror? How do we negotiate knowledge and feelings that have edges and cut like razors? This is too much to handle and it is easy to retreat to a place where one either becomes cynical or loses their mental equilibrium. We know that we cannot simply go on teaching our curricula, grade our students’ papers, and go home as if this is just another job. We have a political and ethical responsibility to do more, to get involved, to get engaged, to be enraged. And, while schools and their stakeholders, students, educators, administrators and parents cannot change society on their own, they can be an important force in the fight against capitalism. Our critical, militant pedagogy, therefore, should be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. Militant pedagogy must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation. Any truly critical militant pedagogy, paraphrasing Max Horkheimer, “has as its object
human beings (students) as producers of their own historical form of life” (Horkheimer, 1993).

Some more concrete propositions for a militant pedagogy include:

1. Rebuild the teacher labor movement and create alliances with other movements. To this end, politicize and/or repoliticize the unions and take them out of their managerial rut and internal fights.
2. Connect the university with schools, break the walls of the ivory tower, and connect our battles and fights. Conferences that include academics, educators, and activists who join their voices and their forces are good starting places for discussion and planning action.
3. Repoliticize people, work on abolishing fear, particularly the fear to think: we can do this at schools and universities.
4. The recently deceased Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe wrote that “If you don’t like someone’s story, write your own.” It is not enough to resist, as resistance is inherently defensive, according to African American scholar and activist Michelle Alexander: You resist something that’s already there. We need to think beyond resistance, articulate our plan, write our own stories. These stories are not just written in ink. These stories are written collectively in struggle and on the streets. It is exactly the Gramscian “optimism of the will.”
5. Capitalize on the lessons from anti-pedagogy. Create our counter pedagogies with courage, honesty, humility, and commitment.
6. Finally, develop an honest, consistent, humble radicalism, or, as Freire (2005) notes:

   The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty’ within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.

   (Freire 2005, p. 39)

Note


