Robert Jenkins

Eng 891

Donna LeCourt

11.12.07

Position paper #2

During the height of the high modernist period, Count Harry Kessler wrote in his diaries “[a]ll education is violence, just as every state is.” We can assume that he was referring to violence done to the individual in the form of coercion, regulated conformity, and systematic destruction of the will. This view is apparently accepted by writers such as Althusser, Foucault, and Gramsci as they seek to describe mechanisms, forces, and structures that tie the two objects of Kessler’s aphorism together causally. For them, education is an institutional tool of the state that uses violence to achieve its ends; survival and self-replication, and these are ensured by the state through ideological interpellation/indoctrination/subject positioning. The subject is required to either have the distortions of ideology removed by external agency or an alternate subject position of resistance within discourse occupied to achieve any degree of agency. The act of violence that education does is in limiting the agency with which a subject can act, replacing the freedom to act with the acceptance of social reality.

Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* believes that this limiting function is located socially, that there is a class of oppressors who possess the ability to do this violence. The dehumanizing function of education achieves two goals: first, it enforces the ideological position of the student as object, “turn[ing] them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (72), thus limiting if not excluding agency, and; second, it allows propaganda to operate unimpeded by disallowing inquiry into its mechanizations, thus preventing “the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to become more fully human” (55) from being realized. Freire attributes this barrier to the oppressor class, and education is the means to its end. Freire proposes a pedagogy that has as its goal the reversal of the dehumanizing effects of the oppressor which branches from the idea that there are good and bad educations, disagreeing with Kessler.

Freire believes that good education is the product of humanizing pedagogical processes that lead from educators’ “commitment” to humanize. This commitment is the result of the educator’s own critical thinking. “Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very conditions of existence: critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be ‘in a situation.’ Only as this situation ceases to present itself as a dense, enveloping reality or a tormenting blind alley, and they can come to perceive it as an objective-problematic situation – only then can commitment exist” (109). Bad education would then be that which intentionally or not creates or replicates conditions of oppression.

Petruzzi argues “that academic discourse is not causally linked to critical consciousness” (309), that is to say that the transitory state of being that recognizes what Freire labels (after Jasper, but not by interpreting truth, which Jasper coined the term to facilitate, in the same way) “limit-situations” that exist in “objective reality” and consequently provides subjects with the ability to transcend them is not a direct result of higher education. He does believe that academic discourse has the ability to attain this state, but, other than by in effect rewording Freire by including terminology from Heidegger (Da-sein, which means being human – a category that Freire mostly covered already) that may or may not be particularly helpful, he doesn’t describe how as such. His contention is that it is through limit-situations that academic discourse can arrive at critical consciousness by overcoming them by means of a processual and disclosive concept of truth (unlike Jasper’s).

The accusation of methodology is what in large part Freire’s supporters object to. They make the distinction between good and bad in much the same way as Freire does; procedural pedagogy results in oppression, whereas processual doesn’t. The difference for Petruzzi is that “[f]or Freire, truth has a concomitant event structure which occurs in the moment when incarnated discourse, upon its articulation in a narrative form, becomes transformed into embodied discourse…, the projective disclosure of truth is not an object; it is the event of affective self-finding within the sets of social practices, one discloses ways to let oneself and others and new possibilities for existing to oneself and others [sic]” (317). When one has achieved through reflection and action, or praxis, critical consciousness, the disclosure of truth is different from the presentation of truth as objective, static, foundational. It’s not satisfactorily explained how it’s different; it’s tautologically explained in the same terms Freire uses. Methods that are used by oppressors are oppressive, while methods that are used by liberators are liberatory.

The obvious problem with this is that ideology has a pernicious way of hiding itself where it is most ardently argued that it doesn’t exist. It will find a way to influence discourse, particularly when discourse elevates itself beyond its reach. Petruzzi positions himself as an advocate of liberatory pedagogy: “Obviously, like Bizzell, I think that it is important to have ‘a liberatory educational project’” (317). The assumption guiding his argument is that higher education in the US can be liberatory, that students are victims of oppression, that educators are mediators who have the power to, through enlightened pedagogy, free their students. It would perhaps be unfair to say that this assumption is ridiculous, as a great deal of good has come from applying it as metaphor to understand pedagogy, but taken literally, it simply misses far to many possible objections.

If critical consciousness is required to educate, and consequently liberate economically oppressed peasants, does it follow that it will liberate economically privileged, middle class students? And from what? If an educator were to view a classroom as a separate culture, research the issues that students face in their daily lives, the forces that work against them, and the problems they face, would the resulting themes be generative? Would they be sufficiently different from the educators’ to foreground processes by which oppression can be disclosed? These are just a couple of problems that arise when trying to translate Freire into academic pedagogy.

Student centered pedagogy is what the vast majority of middle to upper class students are educated with from the beginning. This is part of the system of social reproduction of the ruling classes. Pedagogies utilized in other neighborhoods tend to mirror the class base of those neighborhoods. It is a function of ideology to miss the inconsistency between teaching rich kids with the same philosophical purpose as Freire taught the poor in Brazil, and teaching our poor to follow instructions. It is terribly tempting to see oneself as a liberator, but the evidence leans more towards higher education being an engine of stasis than of change.