

Critical pedagogy in the face of capitalist realism: Theorising some students' resistance to capitalism in a time of crisis (0223)

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A growing number of academics are turning to critical pedagogy as a strategy for engaging university students in learning (see, for example, Amsler et al 2010, Darder et al 2002, Mohanty 2003). Critical pedagogy's problem-posing model views teaching as a dialogical process in which the lecturer, rather than depositing their knowledge in students, facilitates students' conversations with one another and the lecturer so that students might shift their understandings from Gramscian 'common sense' to 'good sense', the latter with an emancipatory orientation. Academics' recent investment in critical pedagogy is often expressed as being at least partly a response to several crises in higher education. First, higher education is being restructured on a profit-making basis, eroding its distinctiveness as an institution of learning, teaching and research (Ibid, Canaan and Shumar 2008, Thorpe 2008). The rationale given for this restructuring is that higher education institutions (HEIs), like other public sector organisations, are overly bureaucratic, costly and inefficient (both economically and bureaucratically) and therefore require reinvention as quasi- or pseudo-marketised entities that can compete for quasi-customers (such as students) (Shore and Wright 2000). The result has been the creation of structures (such as the Quality Assurance Agency), processes (like the Research Assessment Exercise) and discourses (likening institutions and people and the practices of both to goods and services production) that have resulted in the re-invention of higher education (Ibid, Davies 2005). This re-invention has been secured through practices of audit and new managerialism that discipline academics, requiring their compliance with structures, processes and discourses that continuously change and that introduce greater surveillance of, and accountability for, more aspects of academics' work. Academics have consequently experienced greater work intensification and ontological insecurity (Ball 2003) as, like other professionals, they are urged to 'Do More With Less' (Bosquet 2010:75) whilst being judged by their future potential rather than their experience-informed responses to prior actions (Sennett 2006).

Alongside this radical restructuring, disciplining, work-intensification and -insecurity, has been a programme of progressive and, since the September 2008 economic crisis, drastic, cuts in state education budgets that further threaten higher education's future. Analysts suggest that the recent G20 global policy agreement requiring nations across the globe to halve their deficits by 2013 can only be accomplished by cutting 'social-safety-net programs' and privatising public sector institutions (Jay 2010, Klein 2010). This process occurred in post-Katrina New Orleans where, within weeks of the disaster, the state education system was replaced by a largely privately funded education system taught by non-unionised teachers (Sanchez 2010). Similar 'shock doctrine' processes are now taking place in other, apparently 'failing' school systems (Chicago and Detroit) (Ibid, Klein 2007) and at the tertiary level. For example, in the California university system, student fees have risen by more than 30% with programmes being cutback and academics' salaries have been cut as they face worsening conditions. In the UK, Higher Education, the coalition government may introduce higher university fees or graduate taxes and of job losses of more than 20,000 (Rossiter and Ashley 2010) and of the closure of some state funded universities are threatened —with their possible replacement by privately funded universities (White 2010).

It is hardly surprising that students brought up in these neoliberal times often assume what Mark Fisher calls a 'capitalist realism' logic. Capitalist realism assumes that 'there is no alternative' to the current order, a perspective produced largely through the 'pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes' to fit "a 'business ontology' in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including . . . education, should be run as a business" (2009: 13,16). Education is thus seen as supporting individual and national

economic growth as students are encouraged to view degrees as providing skills training enabling them to gain higher earnings than non-graduates (Ibid; Ainley and Allen 2010). Further, most (young) students come to university after experiencing an educational testing system that fostered means/ends attitudes to learning (Ibid,) rather than being encouraged to view education as intrinsically interesting. They often approach learning with 'boredom, apathy and resentment' (Harney 2009:8), hardly surprising given that many of them are post-literate, finding virtual media, with their fluidity and ambiguity, more compelling than books and reading (Deleuze (1992), Fisher (2009), Negri (1989)).

Progressive lecturers' growing utilisation of critical pedagogy can thus be seen as a response to the neoliberal re-configuration of the university and its students. For critical pedagogy offers an alternative way to support students against the banking model of teaching that marketisation promotes and against the growing emphasis on skills training rather than learning that government policies encourage. Yet how successful can these lecturers be in utilising a pedagogy encouraging critique with students largely alienated from the learning process?

This paper, framed within these contexts of crisis and heightened student disengagement, examines data from several interviews I conducted with four students after they completed their studies who took up positions of resistance relative to others who did not in a module I taught using critical pedagogy. These students claimed to be interpolated by: critical pedagogy utilised in and outside class; a concomitant encouragement to relate autobiographically to sociological insights; module ideas on social identities that spoke to their marginalised locations in processes of racialisation, class-ification, gender/sexuality and as mature, international students; their investment in learning for its own sake and in reading and writing relative to younger colleagues purportedly more invested in instrumental learning and virtual communicative networks. These students' insights suggest that critical pedagogy has more immediate potential for marginalised students than for those aspiring to dominance or already dominant. But is it enough to use critical pedagogy to politicise only such marginalised students especially at present when higher education is undergoing a double crisis? The paper considers the significance of these students' responses in the contexts of wider student disengagement and multiple crises.

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