

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

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Teaching in Bad Times

by Richard Ohmann



ARTWORK BY MOLLY COSTELLO, "REPAIR", DE-MIL-I-TA-RISE DISSIDENTS PORTFOLIO VIA JUST SEEDS

The thought behind this issue of *Radical Teacher* was vague and simple. We editors* and most of our contributors do political battle and daily work as if in the "long march through institutions" (Gramsci), on the way to a better world -- or maybe not, but we keep slogging. Even back in 1975, not many of *RT*'s founders hung on to 1960s dreams of revolution, or even of a united movement towards it. But we retained the same goals, the same allies, the same enemies: "a socialist, feminist and anti-racist journal," our cover says. Suppose, on the other hand -- and the other hand was shaking its fist at us editors pretty insistently -- suppose the long march reaches some really different terrain. Capitalism could run out of oil or water. The polar ice caps could melt, sinking the Maldives and Bangladesh like Atlantis. The United States could squander what is left of its wealth in endless wars. Casino capitalism's house of derivatives could come crashing down. What would the long march be like if it fell into a monstrous pothole, we asked? Since we do not know the answer, why not do an issue of *RT* on teaching in bad times, and reflect on what radical teaching might and should be if there are historical eruptions and discontinuities in our near future. That was the vague but simple thought.

Well, surprise. Casino capitalism did crash, while we were in an early stage of planning; and naturally, the crash of 2008 influenced our development of this issue. Here are the questions we posed in our call:

- how are hard economic times affecting students' economic choices?
- how are they affecting the educational system as a whole?
- how can progressives in K-12 and higher education promote radical understandings of the depression?
- can we teach better and more directly about capitalism as a system?
- can we better dismantle the ideologies of patriotism, masculinity, markets, and individual choice that are so stupefying now?
- does the crisis call for new courses, curricula, or pedagogies?
- does it call for new kinds of activism in and around education, given the crisis of funding that faces us?

At the end of the call, we added, "And if you would rather discuss teaching about the other crises -- war, oil, climate, and so on -- please feel free." But our economically based questions were given added emphasis by the harsh realities of 2008-09, and most of the proposals and manuscripts that came to us were about those realities. My aim in this introduction, therefore, is to repackage some other looming crises with economic collapse, in an attempt to flesh out the "what if?" question that prompted us to do a bad times issue.

So: what if apocalypse comes at us in the guise of economic depression, to be sure, but also of peak oil, or peak water, or rapid and freakish climate change, or

ecological crisis, global economic depression, further immiseration of poor people and poor regions, failure of the imperial wars to which our new administration is as committed as was the old, failure of states and social systems, resistance movements far larger than Al Qaeda, or the use of a few nuclear bombs. Some of these scenarios seem to me unlikely, some all but certain. My aim is not to argue for any of them: although I confess a personal attraction to doomsday scenarios, I can also appreciate the silliness latent in a list such as this:

For instance, you go off to your 9:00 class one Wednesday having heard on National Public Radio (NPR) that South Florida is under water; that the Cuban government is rounding up "yacht people" and sending them back to Miami; that southern Arizona is being evacuated because of no water; that gas cost on average \$20.00 a gallon at the pump last week; that the official unemployment rate hit 25%; and that the Taliban have established martial law throughout Pakistan. Will you arrange the chairs in a circle and teach the class you had prepared on subordinate clauses or feminist readings of *The Scarlet Letter*, improvise a debate on catastrophism, cancel class and organize a teach-in, or head for Canada?

What is silly about this is not the fake news items themselves -- each one is vaguely plausible -- but yanking them out of the historical process and stirring them together in one dystopian brew. Can collapse have become the new normal while you were looking the other way and your school or college was doing business as usual? That is worse than silly, it is undialectical. So are some forecasts by people I take quite seriously. For instance, Mike Davis. At the end of a chilling article on the end of the Holocene epoch ("Welcome to the Next Epoch," posted 6/28/08 on *Tom Dispatch*) and the advent of its successor -- the "Earth epoch," in which industrial society becomes a "geological force" -- he suggests that "chaos . . . could soon grow exponentially from the convergence of resource depletion, intractable inequality, and climate change," presenting a "real danger . . . that human solidarity. . . will suddenly fracture and shatter into a thousand shards."

The trouble I see here is with "exponentially" and "suddenly." Chaos, if it comes, will more likely slither into our lives, than explode there. Human solidarity, if it fractures, will do so unevenly and with new alliances, movements, fightbacks, victories, and losses. Between now and that fearsome then, people will have many chances at historical agency. Teachers will not just wake up to flux and disaster one Wednesday, but, like everyone else, will be repeatedly provoked, frightened, confused, and challenged, by everything from heavier workloads to right wing efforts at mobilizing education in the service of some new jingoism or religious millenarianism. And by the way, we should acknowledge that leftists have been sighting the approach of capitalism's Big Crisis, at least since Marx and Engels announced the specter that was haunting Europe; and we should remember that capitalism is resilient. So far. Maybe the bailouts and stimuli will put Humpty Dumpty back together this time. Maybe some kind of market magic will bring us workable schemes of renewable energy before the cost of oil stops the gears of production, and before the substitution of coal hastens global warming to the point of

social chaos. Maybe fusion power will forestall disaster. And so on.

All that said, it seems a little timid, if not dangerously evasive, for people in and around education not to be entertaining dire thoughts about the challenges it may face and its future, given the specters that haunt capitalism today. I do not hear such thoughts among progressives, beyond worry and anger about continuing trends: privatization of this public good; casualizing of labor; severe funding cuts as states and localities struggle with big deficits; the relentless march of high-stakes tests. To be sure, our national leaders are not thinking in fresh ways, either. For 25 years, officialdom has framed educational issues solely in terms of corporate interests and job training: we need better schooling to help U.S. capital compete in world markets and raise GDP; kids need schooling to become better workers. Those premises underwrite the regime of accountability we have now, and I do not hear politicians questioning them, even in the name of education for citizenship, much less of education for the decline of our social order. Well, what would one expect from the Arne Duncans and Barack Obamas who are tending the education store on behalf of their corporate masters? I do expect more from educational workers on the left -- more than our usual plans to raise consciousness in individual classrooms and fight rear guard actions against deteriorating conditions of labor. So here goes, with a framework for the conversation I would value, and a few general topics.

What have we radicals learned, through the 1960s and after, about how education works in, for, and sometimes against societies like this one? First, that it plays a big role in the reproduction of labor, sorting out, through its structurally refined institutions, degrees, and programs, who will be the corporate leaders, who the power elite, who the professionals and managers, who the technicians, who the specialized service workers, and of course who, not having gone to college, or having dropped out, will do minimum wage labor or join the reserve army of the unemployed. Scandalized indictments of the high school dropout rate or the low quality of education, on grounds that the U.S. workforce is undereducated for necessary work, ignore the nice fit between the highly unequal educations our youth receive and what the actual needs of capital are.

A second, overlapping task of higher education is to reproduce the class system. No need to elaborate, for RT readers. A third is to produce much of the knowledge that capital needs for its project of accumulation, plus what the professions need in order to secure their market havens. Fourth, the university has a major role, alongside the media, in maintaining and adjusting dominant ideology and the system of culture. Fifth, and in partial contradiction to the other four tasks, schools and colleges open a way out of poverty for some new aspirants to well-paid mental labor, and thus help sustain the impression of equal opportunity and social mobility -- we are all one big middle class. There are more tasks, of course, including the ever-receding ideal of producing critical citizens and wise or happy people, but these five strike me as key observations of sixties movements and the new left.

How might one or more of the crises I have mentioned scramble the university's articulation with U.S. society as a

whole? The economic collapse of 2008-09 has already accelerated the strangulation of funding initiated forty years ago in the turn toward neo-liberalism. As I was starting this introduction, news arrived that the number of college job openings in English and foreign languages has declined by more than 50% in two years, and has fallen at a similar pace in neighboring fields, giving us a dismal glimpse of what can happen with the bursting of just one bubble. Should the economy convalesce, through the desperate measures our leaders took last year, do not expect a doubling of academic jobs, restoring them to previous levels any more than you can expect most of the non-academic jobs lost in the depression to come back. Economic setbacks have enabled structural adjustments for decades, and will continue to do so. Outsourcing, speedup, privatization.

Toss into the hypothetical mix something like peak oil and fast climate change, and what happens to the work that schooling in capitalist America does? We are in conjecture land. Here are a few of mine. Pressures on the reproduction of labor will change dramatically: more energy engineers, social planners, security guards; fewer professionals of most sorts, not just teachers; schooling privatized and vocationalized at all levels. Reproduction of the social order? Tectonic shifts, as the rich get richer, coercion trumps hegemony, and the country becomes a gated dystopia with elite schools and universities minding the gates. The making of knowledge for corporations trying to commodify disaster and hang onto global control? I can hardly imagine, but it will be nasty. Ideology and culture? Still worse strains here, as pain, deprivation, and disorder deepen, and angry populist movements arise on both left and right, to challenge competitive individualism and social complacency. Seeming to offer social mobility? Another area of profound dissatisfaction and potential revolt. Severely bad times, if they come, will throw our familiar arrangements for education into chaos, along with everything else. But with such disruptions will also come openings for the renewal of radical movements, in and around schools and colleges. Here are four and a half conjectures about that possibility.

First, the near future will be dense with teachable moments. The possibility of volcanic change is alive in popular imagination. It is driven less by scary future-talk, right now, than by daily troubles: from disappearance of the jobs that graduating students and their families had taken for granted, to declines in comfort, to deepening insecurity about health and retirement. When people are frightened or angry (e.g., at "Wall Street"), some will retreat into simple dogma, closing their minds to novel threats, and some will look for racial or international enemies to scapegoat. But many will want to learn more about who makes historically significant choices in this kind of society, for what reasons, and through what mechanisms and processes. They will perhaps find less comfort than before in the shallow understandings of political economy that pass as common sense for most Americans. If so, they will come unmoored from old certainties in a way analogous to what male students vulnerable to the military draft felt around 1967. It is sensible then, if a little condescending, for us teachers to speak of "radicalizing" students -- not indoctrinating them, but putting their anger and insight into conversation with broader analysis. This will be a great time to teach about

capitalism in school, in the media, in every public forum. How can lefties get together in a plan for doing so?

Second, the near future will be dense with organizing moments, too. College students will not only find their expectations of prosperity in exchange for hard work and earned credentials whacked by unfolding reality, but, in community colleges and public universities, will suffer a painful decline in public support of their learning, manifested in bigger classes, less interaction with teachers, cuts in funding for libraries and technology, and so on, coupled with large increases in tuition and reductions in financial aid. K-12 teachers will also be pressured to do more with less. These deprivations will for many coincide with family hardships that require students as well as parents to work longer hours for pay, drop out for a while, or just quit. A student squeezed in such ways may be ready to think about them not just as a series of personal defeats but as a shutdown on social mobility and a hardening of class injustice. Students will share many grievances with teachers. Left teachers can help clarify what is behind environmental catastrophe, what is making the economy creak and falter, and help push frustration and anger beyond protests against higher tuition and other local miseries, toward more durable organization than is common in campus politics, and into militant alliance with other groups fighting the erosion of public goods. The term "class" has reentered political talk, in a big way. What can we do to frame the economic and ecological breakdown as intrinsic to class struggle?

Third, this will be a good time to rework our understandings of crisis and change, in concert with strong political movements. The old Marxian concepts, for instance, allow us to understand even crashes like those of 1929 or 2008 as ordinary episodes in the history of capitalism, and to bring forward the structure of class antagonism beneath social disaster. But toss in such contradictions as the socializing of catastrophe for the sake of profit while capital drains the earth of oil and water, or the creation of a new geological epoch through climate change, and we are a long way from the labor theory of value or the falling rate of profit. Marxism has been grounded in a continuity of forces and relations: social formations come and go, but the laws of motion remain constant. I am not sure this (largely tacit) belief will hold up as the system reaches new kinds of limit. On the other hand, while some non-Marxian prophets of catastrophe write as if vengeful nature will invalidate all previous laws of social process, I see no reason, in global warming or in attrition of the resources on which industrial capitalism gorged itself, for scrapping historical materialism or the centrality of labor or class. We should be ready for ruthless critique of these prophecies, but also of our own premises. Movements are good places to rethink the world; students, teachers, and workers of all kinds are good people to rethink with.

Fourth, and more specifically: if some rocky decades are coming, teachers can band together as educators to teach what people most need to know. The needs are manifold.

College economics prepares students very badly to understand contradiction, discontinuity, and crisis; high school economics is extremely thin and biased. Both need reconnection to politics, power, and justice. The curriculum needs to be freed up from its fixation on the United States. Environmental studies and biology belong in an integrated curriculum. Crises, if they come, will point to many such needs. How about an alliance of progressives from many different sites and organizations to devise and share strategies for critical teaching and for getting disaster curricula into colleges and schools? In turbulent times, for instance the late sixties and early seventies, ideological "common sense" loses plausibility, schooling's reproductive tasks become hollow, and ways of understanding that integrate fragmented experience can get a hearing. The left should be finding spaces for such hearing and acting. We can be sure the capitalists will be trying to colonize them.

That points to a last half-thought: this will be a teachable moment not only for radicals, but for racists, skinheads, fascist groupings, religious sects including especially those expecting the rapture, and of course for purveyors of crackpot realism such as the American Enterprise Institute. Radical teaching in bad times, more than in good, is bound to be teaching against opposition from many sides. I try not to dramatize teacherly work too much, but it is probably healthy to imagine it now as a form of struggle.

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