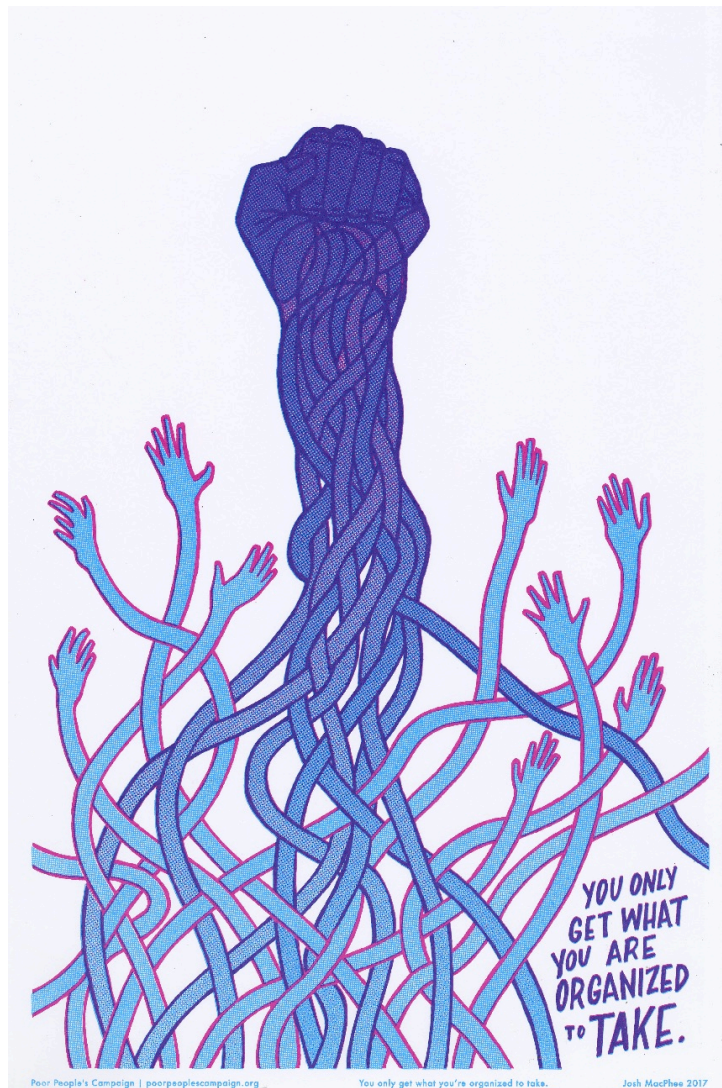


RADICAL TEACHER

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

Totally Radical

by Michael Bennett



YOU ONLY GET WHAT YOU ARE ORGANIZED TO TAKE, JOSH MACPHEE, 2017 VIA JUSTSEEDS

We at *Radical Teacher* are sometimes asked, and sometimes ask ourselves, what we mean by “radical.” Our usual response to queries from potential authors is that the meaning of our title is encapsulated in our subtitle: “a socialist, feminist, and anti-racist journal on the theory and practice of teaching.” In short, our version of radicalism is based in a left analysis of how classism, sexism, homophobia, and racism are intertwined and thus require a systematic critique and dismantling. We expect an analysis that is socialist, but not class reductionist; anti-racist, but not focused exclusively on race; feminist, but not just liberal feminist. I guess you could say that we are anti-racist and anti-ableist feminist eco-socialists, but I think it’s easier to say that we believe in intersectionality.

The utility of the term “intersectionality” is that it sums up in one word what I just tried to describe in a rather convoluted paragraph. I believe that this term more accurately describes our analysis because it comes out of a Black feminist tradition rather than the line of dead white males who launched a flotilla of sectarian organizations bearing their names: Trotskyite, Leninist, Shachtmanite, Many of us who are resolutely anti-sectarian embrace The Combahee River Collective’s 1977 “A Black Feminist Statement” for what it described, but did not name, as intersectionality: “The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives” (312). Later, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins labeled this analysis as intersectionality, which Collins defines as “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (1).

In theory, this definition explicates the kind of radical analysis we have in mind. In practice, however, the word “radical” is subject to debates at our editorial board meetings, within the Left generally, and definitely between the Left and the Center/Right. During my fifteen or so years on the editorial board, we have had very productive conversations on this topic, and I have learned a lot about radicalism through the political discussions with which we end (almost) every board meeting and through reading hundreds of submissions to the magazine. Once I retired from teaching English, I devoted my post-retirement career to radical/socialist education, becoming Manuscript Co-Editor and eventually Managing Editor of this journal and Chair of the Board of the Democratic Socialists of America Fund. Now, it’s part of my “job” to articulate a political position by combining the theoretical and practical knowledge gleaned from *Radical Teacher* with my years of experience as an educator and activist involved with the anti-apartheid movement; women’s and LGBT marches and protests; union leadership and labor strikes; the anti-war movement;

The title of this essay and this issue, “Totally Radical,” simultaneously points to how difficult it has been to find a

totally satisfactory (though not totalizing) understanding of radicalism and to the ways in which the term “Radical,” starting in the 1980s or earlier, was often drained of its political content. As so often happens with words and concepts in a capitalist culture, “Radical” became a marketing tool. Radical politics became “totally radical” style or the even more diminutive “rad,” with “totally” reduced to “totes.” In “A Brief History of the Word ‘Rad,’” Aaron Gilbreath writes about this omnivorous quality of American capitalism (without labelling it as such—he refers to “the mechanisms behind the regurgitating cow stomach that is American pop culture”) that enacts this literal and figurative truncation. It was frustrating to be a nascent radical coming of age in the 1980s, when most of my peers thought of “Radical” as stylistic rather than political. This is what happens when, rather than just opposing anti-capitalist movements (which would involve having to name them), corporate capital co-opts them, markets them, and attempts to drain them of political meaning.

When I floated the idea of calling this issue “Totally Radical” at a *Radical Teacher* board meeting and suggested that we might further lighten the tone of the issue by infusing it with 80s style graphics, most of my comrades were not amused. Not in the way that the right depicts humorless “snowflake” leftists, but in the well-established left spirit of self-criticism. People felt that such graphics might trivialize the issue, erasing the sociopolitical roots of radicalism in the very way that I was trying to critique. I heard and appreciated this critique, and we have kept the “Totally Rad” graphics to a minimum, though I have worked with our Production Editor to sneak in a couple for irony’s sake. (Thanks, Chris!)

I guess you could say that we are anti-racist and anti-ableist feminist eco-socialists, but I think it’s easier to say that we believe in intersectionality.

Another reason I chose to label this issue “Totally Radical” is the stunning political similarities between the 1980s and the era of Trumpism. When faced with the choice between a tepid neoliberal politician and a right-wing populist outsider, the electorate chose the latter and ushered in a vicious form of authoritarianism, if not neo-fascism (though Trump’s victory should also be traced to virulent misogyny). Each resulting administration was marked by corrupt cronyism, toxic militarism, unhinged corporatism, and an all-out assault on unions and social movements. Dog-whistle racism gave way to its unvarnished counterpart, white nationalism. Reagan and Trump both turned their backs on pandemics that, at least initially, targeted constituencies they not only didn’t care about but actively disliked. Reagan famously didn’t devote a speech to AIDS until the very end of his second term, seven years into the pandemic, because, as his own Surgeon General C. Everett Koop noted, the President’s advisers “took the stand, ‘They [homosexuals and drug users] are only getting what they justly deserve!’” (White). Adam Serwer argues that under COVID, Trump created a new

version of the racial contract by which “The lives of disproportionately black and brown workers [were] sacrificed to fuel the engine of a faltering economy, by a president who disdains them.” Others have suggested that the Trump administration delayed a federal response to the pandemic because if “it was going to be relegated to Democratic states ... they could blame those governors, and that would be an effective political strategy” (Eban). As a result of their actions and inactions, Reagan and Trump were directly responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands.

And just as corporate culture of the 1980s downplayed radical resistance to the Radical Right, transmuting it into “rad” products, Pepsi famously attempted in 2017 to turn radical protest into a marketing campaign. In the “Live for Now” ad campaign, Kendall Jenner takes time out from a photo shoot to join an unspecified protest (though its soft-core confrontation with police sharply contrasts with hard-core police violence during Black Lives Matter demonstrations). Kendall diffuses the mildly tense situation by offering a Pepsi to one of the officers, transforming his light glower into a slight smile, which the protestors (for some reason) celebrate as a victory (www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfCiV6ysngU). Perhaps there is no better emblem of the continuities between the 1980s and the 2020s marketing of the “totally rad” than the resurfacing of 1982 film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* as a 2020 Zoom table read of the script, under the leadership of Sean Penn, who played the “raddest” character of them all (Spicoli) in the original film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaZsPh6uyWg>).

The ability of corporate capital to channel political movements into marketing slogans calls upon us to reinfuse those ideas with political content: to transform “totally rad” advertising into a movement that is totally radical. The contexts of the 2020’s ads just mentioned give us some hope. Unlike the popular transformation of “The Me Generation” into “The Pepsi Generation” or the multicultural peace movement into the faux hippie ad “I’d like to buy the world a Coke,” the Kendall Jenner appropriation of radical resistance was protested by everyone from Black Lives Matter to Piers Morgan; the ad was a resounding failure, pulled within twenty-four hours and since labelled “the worst ad of all time” (Nicholson). And the table read of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* organized by Sean Penn was used by Penn as a fundraiser for CORE, an organization he founded that provides Community Organized Relief Efforts primarily in Haiti, but also across the Caribbean and in Puerto Rico and the U.S. More importantly, the radical potential of the early 2020s seems more promising than did that of the early 1980s. While Trump never won the popular vote and lost his re-election bid, Reagan was incomprehensibly popular and won re-election by a landslide. The political landscape in 2020 featured an avowed Democratic Socialist as a viable candidate for President and a democratic socialist movement that is far larger than it was in the 1980s. The largest socialist organization in the U.S., Democratic Socialists of America, was founded in 1982 with roughly 6,000 members. In 2021, membership is approaching 100,000. In 2020,

Black Lives Matters became arguably the largest protest movement in U.S. history (Buchanan, et al.).

Though the depoliticizing “totally rad” marketing spawned in the twentieth century continues in the twenty-first, intersectional movements have had some success in creating a political climate in 2021 that is totally radical in the way defined by the subtitle of *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist Journal on the Theory and Practice of Teaching*. Each strand of this radical DNA is encoded in this issue of *RT*. Jakob Feinig and Diren Valayden’s “Pedagogy of the Job Guarantee” explores a central component of socialism: democratic control over socio-economic life. The Job Guarantee (JG), a part of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), makes a claim for a legally guaranteed and publicly financed right to productive work with benefits. Feinig and Valayden had students engage with readings, conduct interviews, and participate in other class activities to teach them about how and why JG framing sees unemployed people as an asset not a burden. A particularly important branch of socialism, eco-socialism, is on display in Allison L. Ricket’s “Teaching Land as an Extension of Self: The Role of Ecopsychology in Disrupting Capitalist Narratives of Land and Resource Exploitation.” Ricket offers an ecopedagogy that rejects traditional pedagogical approaches to environmental curriculum for reinforcing perceived helplessness in the face of capitalist forces that identify land only as exploitable other. Ecosocialism also appears to underlie Sari Edelstein’s teaching note on “Teaching *Moby Dick* in the Anthropocene,” which lays out ways to make this nineteenth-century novel relevant for contemporary students by focusing on issues Melville raises about the consequences of economic exploitation of the environment.

One of the tasks of socialist feminism is to challenge (neo)liberal feminism’s failure to engage in intersectional work by retreating into privatized modes of “corporate girl boss” feminism (Leonard). As Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser put it in the second thesis of their *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto*, “Liberal feminism is bankrupt. It’s time to get over it.” They argue that liberal feminism “supplies the perfect alibi for neoliberalism” (12) and, in response:

Our answer to *lean-in* feminism is *kick-back* feminism. We have no interest in breaking the glass ceiling while leaving the vast majority to clean up the shards. Far from celebrating women CEOs who occupy corner offices, we want to get rid of CEOs and corner offices (13).

In this spirit, Carrie E. Hart and Sarah E. Colonna’s “Feminist Space Invaders: Killjoy Conversations in Neoliberal Universities” challenges the normative practices of neoliberal universities that create a cordon sanitaire around privatized feminism. Hart and Colonna brought together cross-campus dialogue between their classes from different universities because intersectional feminist theory is a dynamic practice of study in which communicating across difference is imperative. Another task of socialist feminism is, as Arruzza, et al. put it in their fifth thesis, to recognize that “gender oppression in capitalist societies is rooted in the subordination of social reproduction to

production for profit”; in response, socialist feminists “want to turn thing right side up” (20). Althea Eannace Lazzaro, Julia Ismael, and Brianna Ishihara address the role of social reproduction, particularly what has been called “care work,” in their essay “It Takes Heart: The Experiences and Working Conditions of Caring Educators.” They argue that care for students, while it can be deeply satisfying for the educator, takes considerable work and skill, and providing care for a wage (especially not a livable one, especially if you are a woman of color in a predominantly white institution, especially if you are working an unwaged double-shift) can lead to crisis. The authors conducted a series of talking circles with colleagues to build solidarity, knowledge, and mutual aid in response to this crisis of care.

Intersectional feminism is not only socialist; it also incorporates analysis of race, colonialism, sexuality, and other factors. As the title suggests, Awino Okech’s teaching note “Screening *Winnie* and African Feminist Herstories” reflects on the screening of *Winnie*, an autobiographical documentary about the life of South African freedom fighter Winnie Mandela, as part of recovering an African feminist tradition that combatted *apartheid* and continues the struggle for decolonization within the neoliberal university. Jessica Ann Vooris’s teaching note “When Did You Know You Were Straight? Teaching with the Heterosexual Questionnaire” describes how students confronted heterosexism and heterosexual privilege in responding to the Heterosexual Questionnaire designed by Martin Rochlin.

One of the central insights of intersectional anti-racist work is that “All politics is identity politics” (Fraser). In her book *The Purpose of Power*, Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza devotes a chapter to “The Power of Identity Politics.” She traces the term back to the same Combahee River Collective manifesto that gave rise to the theory of intersectionality. Garza argues that in describing and theorizing how “their life experiences were shaped by what they called ‘interlocking oppressions’” (188), the Combahee River Collective provided insights that helped shape the strategy and success of Black Lives Matter in the 2020s. In this issue of *RT*, John Conley’s essay “To Teach the University is to Teach Reparations: A Class Project” discusses one component of contemporary anti-racist struggles, the reparations movement, in the context of the school where he teaches. By discussing a course project that looks into his own university’s history, Conley models one strategy for educators to normalize the discussion of reparations as well as expand its reach to encompass more recent and ongoing injuries to African American communities. It’s not always easy for intersectional work on race to reach across racial difference. Jay Gillen’s review of Victoria Theisen-Homer’s book *Learning to Connect: Relationships, Race, and Teacher Education* emphasizes the importance of building anti-authoritarian relationships between teachers and students, especially when those relationships attempt to cross racial boundaries.

Of course, the title of this journal is not “Totally Radical,” but *Radical Teacher*. Each of the essays described thus far uses intersectional analysis in service of the theory and practice of teaching. The final two essays in this issue

focus directly on pedagogical praxis. Aaron Stoller’s “Traditional and Critical Mentoring” is in our tradition of publishing articles about different forms of radical pedagogy. Stoller focuses on the need for critical theories of mentorship to replace traditional “value-free” theories. William Terrell Wright’s “Reality check: How adolescents use TikTok as a digital backchanneling medium to speak back against institutional discourses of school(ing)” reflects *RT*’s interest in the radical potential of alternative media for student activism. Wright hopes that teachers won’t simply dismiss or discipline students who use TikTok to speak back to educational authorities but rather engage these moments of rupture and feelings of dissonance to open up opportunities for understanding and dialogue.

Though this introduction to the issue “Totally Radical” can’t help but fail to describe the totality of what we mean by “radical,” it does provide one editor’s insight into what I’ve learned about the parameters of radical teaching from reading manuscripts for every issue of *Radical Teacher* from #75 to the current #119. And I’ve learned as much, if not more, by interacting with friends/colleagues who have been part of the editorial collective from when the magazine was founded in 1975 to those who joined well after I did. As someone who came of age in the 1980s and felt despair when the first two elections I could vote in saddled us with Ronald Reagan, I remember being disheartened when it seemed like more people were familiar with the meaning of “totally rad” than they were with the long history of political radicalism. Seeking refuge, I joined Democratic Socialists of America in the 1980s, back when it had about 10,000 members, and now I can’t help but be heartened by watching DSA grow to ten times that size. Likewise, I remember reading the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement” when I was in grad school, not imagining that it would shape the analysis of the largest protest movement in U.S. history: Black Lives Matter. I don’t underestimate the threat of Trumpism and the global neo-fascist movement of which it is a part, but I feel radical hope over these political developments I could not have imagined in the totally rad 1980s. That hope grows every time we publish an issue of *Radical Teacher* filled with essays and teaching notes and poetry and reviews that are totally radical.

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