

PEDAGOGY OF THE (LESS) OPPRESSED
SECOND THOUGHTS ON THE CRISIS IN HISTORY TEACHING

Ronald E. Butchart
SUNY--College at Cortland

Few history teachers today can remain ignorant of the widespread movement to improve the teaching of history--although doubtlessly many have remained unaffected by the movement. Unfortunately, the impetus behind the history teaching movement may have less to do with the concern to develop critical, self-actualizing, thoughtful young people than with alarm over declining enrollments that threaten the loss of faculty lines, a thought that would warm the hearts of vulgar economic determinists. But whatever the motivation, the movement is alive and well, supported by committees within the major historians' organizations, by independent and affiliated committees on national, regional, and state levels, and by journals and newsletters dedicated to sharing new or refurbished ideas aimed at revitalizing the history classroom.

All of this frenetic activity is important. But in watching and participating in the movement for the last few years, I have been struck by the fact that most, if not all, of the attention given the question of history pedagogy focuses on methodology. While few writers want to claim to have found a panacea, most clearly feel that through this or that modification in the methods whereby students are presented with historical data or historical problems, much of the crisis in history teaching will disappear. Indeed, even the title of this journal affirms the methodological orientation of the movement--Teaching History: A Journal of Methods.

I am becoming increasingly convinced, however, that the root of our crisis is only partially, and perhaps secondarily, methodological. While I would not for a minute defend the traditional means of teaching history, I shall argue here that merely tinkering with methods misses the depth of the problem we, and many other humane disciplines, are facing today. If our students were merely turned off, bored, or unchallenged by the classroom, then cosmetic changes in the classroom would be clearly in order. But my own experience convinces me that they are not merely turned off, bored, or unchallenged. They are, fundamentally and increasingly, alienated. That alienation is not simply an alienation from history courses (or English or philosophy or any other specific discipline); rather, they are profoundly alienated from knowledge in its broad, critical, reflexive connotations, from love in its sense of community and connectedness, and, at base, from work in its intrinsically rewarding, socially reproductive meanings.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, March 10, 1978.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The publication of this essay is a departure for Teaching History from the usual emphasis on methodology and in-class approaches. But we regard the essay as very important for our readers, because it calls into question the basic assumptions that most of us are acting upon. Any rethinking of our settled thoughts is a healthy activity: we need to consider the real possibility that the crisis in history--or at least a large part of the crisis' origins--lies beyond the classroom. Often we admit this, but too seldom do we face the problem. This essay will bring the problem before us from one historian's perspective.

Because of the nature of this essay, we have asked John Anthony Scott of Rutgers University and the Committee on History in the Classroom to offer a response. And Professor Butchart has been given an opportunity to comment on Professor Scott's ideas.

I wish to suggest, in other words, that out of our preoccupation with the objective conditions of teaching and learning, we have overlooked the subjective--the condition of the learner before s/he even enters our classroom. We have, heretofore, assumed a Lockean (and naively idealist) tabula rasa. According to this assumption, students come to us blank, ready for imprinting--or perhaps as a tablet only moderately defaced. Improving the means of imprinting would improve history teaching. Our understanding of the subjective side of the learning situation, I find, has been wholly inadequate.

My contention is that the subjective condition of the contemporary learner is a condition of oppression and alienation.¹ That condition is reflected in declining interest in historical studies. It is also reflected in eroding SAT and other standardized scores, in an expanding vocationalization of higher education, in a functional illiteracy that affects even college students, and in a near collapse in verbal communication skills.² Our students' alienation--their subjective condition--extends to all aspects of their existence, and profoundly, inexorably affects their relations with the world, including their orientation toward history.

Alienation describes a subjective condition, but it is important to note that it is not merely a psychological, internal condition abstracted from the concrete world. The alienated, oppressed condition itself has a history--a history to which, incidentally, students are largely denied access in most history classes. In the arena of productive labor, they have been alienated from meaningful roles throughout their dependency. The extension and deepening of that dependency in the last century or more has itself been an alienating experience, progressively removing youth further and further from economically significant, productive roles within the family, from adult society and culture, and from themselves. For most of their dependent years they also were alienated from the intrinsically motivated search for knowledge. Instead, an alien knowledge was imposed upon them. Further, with decreasing exceptions, they can look forward to economic activity into which they enter only as sellers of their labor power, i.e., as individuals who must alienate themselves. Their capacity to perform creative work, stunted by a decade and a half of schooling, will be distorted further by the relations of production they will be entering. Their alienation is compounded by their subsequent alienation as consumers attempting to satiate, through products created by others, the "permanent and meretricious dissatisfactions" created by commodity production.³ Finally, all of this takes place within a setting whose social and economic dynamic has resulted in what Russell Jacoby labels "social amnesia--memory driven out of the mind." In other words, the "psychic commodity of a commodity society" is nothing less than the alienation from memory, from history.⁴

That insight takes us to the heart of our discussion. If one aspect of alienation is essentially a loss of memory (or, to use the terminology of social psychiatry, a "radically shortened time perspective"),⁵ it follows that the alienated individual would find historical studies irrelevant, the mere collecting of antiques. Similarly, the alienated have been described in terms of their sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and disconnectedness,⁶ terms that are perhaps subsumed in the Reichian sense of an alienation from love. If an immersion in the study of human history--or of any of the social sciences and humanities--requires an ability to love, an ability to comprehend and seek community and connectedness, the alienated personality will find history incomprehensible. The alienation from knowledge which flows from the estrangement from work and love results in a growing tendency for the alienated to treat knowledge as a commodity to be consumed for its extrinsic rather than intrinsic value, for its exchange value rather than its use value.⁷

These manifestations of alienation point back to its economic base while simultaneously clarifying the devastating impact of alienation on such humane studies as history. The alienation from knowledge underlies the vocationalization of higher education and renders otiose (at least subjectively) learning that transcends the vocational focus. As Ernest Mandel has summarized the process:

We live in a society based on commodity production and a social division of labor pushed to the limits of overspecialization. As a result, people in a particular job or doing a certain type of activity for a living will incline to have an extremely narrow horizon. They will be prisoners of their trade, seeing only the problems and preoccupations of their speciality. They will also tend to have a restricted social and political awareness because of this limitation.⁸

Likewise, the modern pervasive narcissism so brilliantly analyzed by Christopher Lasch,⁹ and understood in the notion of an alienation from love, indicates the enervating impact of a process that ultimately teaches us to reduce human relations to things or to property relations, and further undermines historical studies. For historical studies cannot connect with the narcissistic concerns of the individual.

Finally, the sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness, the feeling that one is an object, not a subject, in Freire's terminology, will also have consequences for history teaching. If one is an object, something acted upon rather than someone who acts, history, as the story of human action, is alien, irrelevant.

Concerning the history classroom, two further observations can be made. First, a program of historical studies that does not take into account the personal perceptions of the student can, quite unconsciously, confirm those negative perceptions, thereby deepening the alienation and further estranging the student from himself and from history. If, in our teaching and in the books we assign, the mass of women and men are missing, if the historical actors appear to be a handful of white men and their tokenist agents who act freely upon a passive, unimportant, undifferentiated mass, if the historical nature and implications of the actions of that elite remain unanalyzed, if no insights can be gained to help us grasp the root of our estrangement and oppression, then our teaching, no matter the method, is not part of the solution--it is part of the problem.

The second observation flows out of the first. An alienated and alienating history program contributes to dominant class hegemony. In the marketplace of ideas, particularly as that marketplace comes to be monopolized by the vast cultural machinery of advanced capitalism, the culture and ideas of the dominant class are portrayed as superior, those of other groups as inferior and even immoral. As that assault on the dignity and autonomy of alternative cultures is carried out, the putative inferiority and immorality of the target communities is internalized. The deepest psychological lesson to be extrapolated from the implicit messages of hegemony may well be that, not only is the heritage and culture of non-elite groups inferior, but, by extension, they themselves are inferior, while conversely not only are the ideas and culture of the elite superior, but the carriers of those ideas and that culture also embody superiority. Once crippled in this way, and living continually in a media-saturated environment that plays seemingly endless changes on the same theme, it becomes exceedingly difficult to defend traditional world views, much less imagine alternative social orders.

The concept of hegemony, as Jerome Karabel points out, "denotes more than a superficial influence on the passing political views of the masses; it encompasses their entire way of conceiving the world and of interpreting everyday experience."¹⁰ Importantly, the "cultural imperialism" played out in establishing hegemony provides yet another dimension of alienation. Conversely, the passivity, anomie and non-reflexivity implicit in alienation contributes mightily to the imposition, maintenance, and extension of hegemony. The point here is that traditional history courses, with their uncritical focus on the ideas, ideals, and heroes of the dominant class, further submerge students in the consciousness of that class and deny them access to alternative ways of understanding their world. In short, our history courses are all too often uncritically hegemonic, and thus by their very nature are both alienated and alienating.¹¹

We find, then, that the subjective condition of the student is one that itself may contribute a great deal to the crisis in teaching. Focusing exclusively on the objective teaching conditions not only ignores the source of much of the crisis, but can in fact deepen the alienation itself, thereby compounding the crisis. But a close observation of the aspects of alienation and oppression we have rehearsed suggests more than a mechanical connection between alienated students and a consequent decline in the study of history. Indeed, I argue that while the growing alienation and oppression of modern capitalism contributes to the enervation of history courses, history courses can, dialectically, react back on the alienated to begin to liberate them from their oppression. If, for instance, one perceives oneself as powerless, an object of history, not a subject, one may conclude that history is irrelevant; but one may potentially see instead that the original perception of objectivization and powerlessness was mistaken. For that to happen, however, requires more than serendipitous tinkering with methods. It requires, first, a careful and conscious reevaluation of course content, followed by a thoughtful reorientation of course methods.

While we have not space here to detail those changes in content and method, the principal content question can be indicated: whose history are we teaching? Is it a history which can truly speak to the day-to-day, subjective lives of our students, a history which can clearly provide them with a handle with which to grasp their lives? Is it a history that will--to borrow Paulo Freire's words--help them "name" their world?¹² Or is it a history in which they are again reified as objects rather than as subjects, a history which operates hegemonically to mystify the nature and logic of their position, a history which denies them "the conceptual tools, the 'clear theoretical consciousness,' which would enable them effectively to comprehend and act on their discontent . . .?"¹³

Undoubtedly, this analysis causes a good deal of discomfort for some. In the first place it moves the focus of our attention from the classroom (a medium we can largely manipulate) to the students' consciousness (a medium largely beyond our control). The analysis further suggests, it seems to me, that if we ignore the subjective side of the equation, we will end up with reforms that are either irrelevant, inasmuch as they do not alter the subjective state that created the need for change in the first place, or reforms that stand a good chance of feeding the alienation by bolstering hegemony or by degenerating into shallow imitations of the entertainment industry whose own mindlessness is symptomatic of the alienation and social amnesia about which we have been talking.¹⁴

On the other hand, to reject this analysis leaves us with an uncomfortable lack of a theory to explain the crisis. We have the clear fact of declining interest in historical study. While there never was a Golden Age of the History Department, the field, and others like it, has obviously

fallen on hard times, a fall only partially accounted for by changing graduation requirements (indeed, those changes are themselves an effect of the deeper malaise, not the original cause). We have also the fact of declining student ability generally. If we do not locate much of the problem within the student and within the social forces which s/he internalizes, we must then locate it in the classroom and within the teacher. To do so, however, would require proving a massive degeneration in teaching skills in the last two decades, a proposition that is as patently absurd as it is odious.

Some of the discomfort with this analysis doubtlessly comes, too, from the apparent call for the politicization of history and history teaching. This analysis does not merge politics and teaching, however; they have always been merged. As Socrates knew long ago, teaching is now, has been, and will continue to be, quintessentially political. History teaching specifically is among the most political acts. Whether we wish it so or not, we will either reaffirm hegemony, or we will render its ideas problematic. Either act is political.

Most educators hope to foster students who are independent, critical, thoughtful, and sensitive. If my observations are accurate, however, those adjectives are increasingly inappropriate for modern students. From around the country my colleagues seem to agree that too many students are simply apathetic. But as Professor Genovese has remarked, "Apathy . . . is not necessarily a product of fear, much less of indifference to discomfort and oppression; it may flow from a failure to identify the source of the discomfort and oppression. Every organ of civil society labors to cloud the issue, to misdirect the anger and to produce resignation."¹⁵ It is the purpose of historical studies, I submit, to assist, rather, in identifying the "source of discomfort and oppression;" it is the task of teachers--the political and humanistic task of teachers--to clarify the issue, to redirect the anger, and to end the resignation.

My analysis holds out no panacea. It does hold out the hope that through the recognition of the deformities our society has wrought upon its children, of the dehumanization inevitable under even presumably benign oppression, we can begin to engage ourselves and our students in our ontological vocation of becoming more human. To do less is to consign them and us to the dead-end solipsism of the recent popular song that assures us,

Don't know nothin' about the Middle Ages,
 Look at the pictures and I turn the pages;
 Don't know nothin' 'bout no Rise and Fall,
 Don't know nothin' 'bout nothin' at all. . . .¹⁶

NOTES

¹It may offend the sensibilities of some to suggest that the average college student of the 1970s is oppressed. As expensive clothes and fast cars reappear on campuses, as fraternities and sororities enjoy a resurgence, as costly drugs are passed freely among students in the world's most affluent society, can we seriously speak of oppression?

While our students are obviously less immiserated than the world's masses whom we usually associate with the words, "the oppressed," on a subjective level I hold they are only somewhat less oppressed. Beyond the measure of relative poverty, most of the intellectual and personal aspects of oppression that Paulo Freire describes are as true of American college students as of Brazilian peasants. The affluence of the former only masks the oppression and alienation that in fact links both groups. Many of the ideas developed in this essay come from my reflections on Freire; hence, the

title of this essay. See Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York, 1970), passim.

² It should be borne in mind throughout this essay that I in no way intend this analysis to be an attack on students or teachers. It is specifically my argument that the subjective state about which I am speaking arises in the objective and external world. The unconscious internalization of that world is not more the fault of students than the equally unconscious internalization of, for instance, male supremacist values. To blame the students for their alienation would amount to victim-blaming. My argument follows the insight of critical theorists that "the psyche itself [is] the distillation of history." (Russell Jacoby, Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology from Adler to Laing [Boston, 1975], xiv.)

³ Ernest Mandel, "The Causes of Alienation," in Ernest Mandel and George Novack, The Marxist Theory of Alienation (New York, 1970).

⁴ Jacoby, Social Amnesia, 4, 5.

⁵ Jerome Braun, "Alienation as a Social Psychiatric Concept," International Journal of Social Psychiatry, XXII (Spring, 1976), esp. 13.

⁶ Ibid., 9-18.

⁷ This is one of the points at which increasing alienation intersects with the growing vocationalization of education. As the individual becomes estranged and isolated, s/he comes to look at knowledge primarily in terms of its purely utilitarian value in a vocation. A few academic courses will have direct vocational utility; others are of value not for their content per se, but rather for the credit hours and grades that can be accumulated to exchange for other commodities--a diploma, a job, graduate school. It is crucial to note that this narrowing view of the value of education is being carried on at the same time that work itself is becoming increasingly alienating, meaningless, and parasitic. The alienation of the workplace accelerates the alienation from knowledge, which results in educational programs more narrowly focused on preparing the student for work.

⁸ Mandel, "The Causes of Alienation," 25.

⁹ Christopher Lasch, "The Narcissist Society," New York Review of Books, XXII (September 30, 1976); see also Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged (New York, 1977), esp. 134-189.

¹⁰ Jerome Karabel, "Revolutionary Contradictions: Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Intellectuals," Politics and Society, VI (1976), 157. See also Randall Collins, "Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification," American Sociological Review, XXXVI (December, 1971), 1002-1018; Martin Carnoy, Education and Cultural Imperialism (New York, 1974); and Philip G. Altbach and Gail P. Kelly, eds., Education and Colonialism (New York, 1978).

¹¹ Or to put the argument another way, Antonio Gramsci and others have noted that the oppressed have two contradictory consciousnesses of the world. On the one hand they exhibit an allegiance to the value system and images that define the dominant world view. On the other hand, they exhibit in much of their practical behavior and through their subjective insights an orientation toward the world which contradicts the dominant world view. This second but submerged consciousness does not arise from the hegemonically induced or imposed view of the world but from practical reality and

participation in the world. Yet the imposition of an alien and false consciousness stands in the way of and alienates from this consciousness arising from the perceived world. See Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks (New York, 1971), esp. 333-334; Karabel, "Revolutionary Contradictions," 123-172; Joseph Femia, "Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci," Political Studies, XXIII (March, 1975), 29-48; Eugene D. Genovese, "On Antonio Gramsci," in James Weinstein and David W. Eakins, eds., For A New America (New York, 1970), 284-316.

12. "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men transform the world. To exist humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection." Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 76, emphasis in original.

Freire's essay is suggestive of components of a revised content and method in historical studies. At the same time he points toward yet another way in which the very structure of formal education as we know it serves to foster the very alienation that emerges as the root of the learning crisis. For the curriculum (the "generative themes" in Freire's schema) as well as much that is said within that curriculum is established by the teacher. Facts and ideas are "deposited" in the students, much as one deposits funds in a bank. That makes the facts and ideas alien, not a product of the students' own productive mind-labor and reflection on their world. As Freire notes, "to say the true word . . . is to transform the world, [but] saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone--nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words." Ibid., 76; see also esp. 47-74. The problems of class size and the time constraints imposed by the inflexible school schedule may make many of Freire's ideas extremely difficult to realize in the modern school.

13. Femia, "Hegemony and Consciousness," 33.

14. The entertainment industry is much more than a mere symptom, of course. As a major component of the cultural apparatus of the society, it is in fact a major instrument of hegemony, and is therefore not simply a symptom but also a generator of alienation. Conceivably, classroom reforms which attempt to counter student apathy by using the methods and technology of modern entertainment will simply confound the apathy, for such reforms seek to utilize an essentially oppressive mechanism to overcome oppression.

15. Genovese, "On Antonio Gramsci," 30.

16. S. Cooke, H. Alpert, and L. Alder, "(What a) Wonderful World."