

9-2013

# Toward a Broader Dialectic: Joining Marxism with Mailer to Forge a Multilectics that Advances Teaching and Learning

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## Recommended Citation

Fellner, Gene, "Toward a Broader Dialectic: Joining Marxism with Mailer to Forge a Multilectics that Advances Teaching and Learning" (2013). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
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For published version see:

International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 2014

Vol. 27, No. 10, 1262–1284, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.825346>

**Toward a broader dialectic: The need to infuse Marx and Marcuse with  
Mailer in order to understand social life, improve teaching and learning, and  
perceive the world multilectically.**

Gene Fellner

**Abstract**

The author contrasts the lenses that Norman Mailer, Herbert Marcuse and Karl Marx bring to their analyses of social life, exploring the contributions and limits of their respective approaches. He then proposes what he calls a ‘multilectical’ theoretical lens that encompasses the strengths of all three and leans on the insights of post-Marxist theorists. The multilectical lens is then applied to an event that transpired in a severely underperforming middle school.

**Keywords:** dialectics; pedagogy; emotions; socio-cultural theory; Marx

Everything was shades of brown. One poverty after another. Even the icebox was brown.

It was the shade of gloom which would not lift. The color of clay. Nothing could grow.

Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, (1979) p 487.

Knowledge begins when philosophy destroys the experience of daily life.

Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, (1960) p 103.

### **Norman Mailer's lens on social life**

Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, a book about Gary Gilmore, executed in January of 1977 after a long national hiatus on legal executions in the United States, highlights the complex and intertwining relationships that comprise social life. At times Gilmore, who brutally slaughtered two strangers in Utah, is the book's most sympathetic character. As I read about him and his crime, I was baffled by my own empathy for him. It was one I shared with many of Gilmore's contemporaries whom Mailer paints so well, even as they are horrified by what he has done. In Mailer's text, these men and women are all multi-dimensional human beings whose inner voices often battle one another as they try to navigate the worlds they live in and make sense of them. Mailer reveals their dialogs with themselves and their dialogs with others, and these help us become privy to the different ways in which the world opens itself up to them depending on the vantage point from which they see and interpret the world. During this process of revelation, Mailer peers into their family histories, their relationships, and their lives made spectacle on the national and international scales. All of these layers, saturated with emotion, are connected together by the constraining but elastic glue of collective life; they intermingle, overlay, and, unpredictably, transform one another.

Socratic thought teaches that "the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it" (Arendt 2004, 433), but in his tireless campaign to engage others in reflexive dialog, Socrates implied not only that the world opened up differently to every individual, but that it opened up differently to each of the multiple identities that every individual simultaneously encompassed. Indeed it is these multiple identities that allow us to talk to ourselves, to engage in the very type of reflexive dialog that Socrates became famous for. Arendt

argued that when Socrates talked to himself, and when he tirelessly urged others to discover the conflict between their various selves that didn't see eye to eye, it was in order to dissolve internal disunity and to forge one undivided self that embodied truth and reason. It was Socrates' belief that there was only one truth regardless of where one was positioned, and that the passions in which earthy inter-personal relationships were immersed were distractions from the path towards wisdom even though he, himself, relished sexual banter and the beauty of the (male) body.

Holland et al. (1998) also tackle the dialogic nature of men and women. They write, "Humans are both blessed and cursed by their dialogic nature—their tendency to encompass a number of views in virtual simultaneity and tension, regardless of their logical compatibility" (Holland et al. 1998, 15). According to their theoretical framework, that has much in common with Bourdieu's concept of "fields" as sites of struggle and the Hegelian notion of an "infinite of relations" (Marcuse 1970, 68) in which we are all immersed, we do not have the option to become one unified self as Socrates would have it; the different hats we wear simultaneously and at different times prohibit that possibility. It is not, then, illogical thinking that leads us to be internally conflicted as Socrates believed.

Rather, we are each many selves because the different social positions that we fill each demand different logics, stimulate different perceptions, and mediate a different opening up of the world. Emotions that Socrates entertained so lustily in his life but gave little importance to in his logic saturate the multi-logical perceptions that these different positions mediate precisely because each of us is "a bundle of emotions, desires, concerns and fears all of which play out through social activities and actions" (Harvey 2000, 234). From this perspective, it is foolhardy to separate emotions from intellect, the lives of students within classrooms from their lives on the outside, inner dialog from public speech, academic achievement from the many other

achievements that build upon each other throughout a day, and the individual life from the different social settings that serve as context for enacting culture.

Mailer doesn't analyze the conditions that affect how and why we talk to ourselves or the many stances from which our many selves interact and enact with the selves of others. Still, his characters, all self-reflective and thoughtful in their own ways, and all animated by contradictory emotions, illustrate and embody, in their daily lives, the concepts about which Arendt, Bourdieu, Holland and Harvey theorize. And so Gilmore's lover, though mostly steadfast in her passion for Gilmore, is simultaneously fickle in her sexual appetites and thus conflicted in her sense of loyalty. Gilmore's relatives, loving him, are anguished by their betrayal of him while simultaneously aghast at his slaughter of two innocent men. They are bound to him by family ties but they are also bound to their community by engrained societal values. These two positions- that of relative and that of citizen—conflict; they can't reconcile their love for Gilmore with their sense of justice. Friends and acquaintances who witness Gilmore's aberrant ways are torn between their religious sense of charity, of giving every individual a chance to redeem him/herself, with their gut sense that their generosity will be used to reap horror; they are caught between two moral compasses. As for the journalists and lawyers who swarm about Gilmore in search of the scoop and the attending prestige, they discover that their professional ethics and the moral codes they profess often conflict with their ambitions and vibrate uneasily across boundaries that they can't easily delineate.

Meanwhile, the families of Gilmore's victims cannot make sense of the time, money, and devotion showered on the murderer while they themselves are left devastated and isolated by what Gilmore has wrought. For them, a world which is supposed to be coherent, to make sense, has suddenly turned their lives topsy-turvy. They suffer a catastrophe of scale: the national

crusade for or against the death penalty with its ethical pronouncements cannot address their personal loss, their own need for a moral response to their grief and a national recognition of their pain. They feel abandoned by their own community, sundered from the very fabric that bore them. They, like the others in Mailer's book, find themselves tangled between the many roles they play and the many perspectives they juggle, and they do not have the tools to make the world right. Only Gilmore is able to make sense out of the non-sense of his world. Though he dialogs with himself, his selves seem to be the most unified of all of Mailer's cast. It is certainly not, however, the same unity of self that Socrates sought when he spoke about truth, wisdom and justice, for the ending of *The Executioner's Song* is messy and ambiguous, leaving behind no clear consensus on right or wrong, good or bad, justice or injustice. Indeed these dichotomies don't begin to define the experience of living, an experience that hovers more often in the nuanced in-betweens than at any port of clarity.

### ***Researching experience***

That Mailer can bring us such a full and complex picture of the human condition is a testament to his artistic creativity, his ear for language, his eye for detail and his skill as a listener and researcher. It is also a reflection of his unstated ontological stance in which truth is multiple, constantly in flux and saturated with emotion. Reading the text, we hear the thoughts and words of Gilmore and those he interacts with recursively spinning as we observe their gestural and facial language, hear the caliber of their voices, and understand—however fleetingly and uncertainly—what it might be like to be in their shoes and to comprehend how the world opens itself up to them.

But just as each of Mailer's "characters" views the world through the multiple lenses of his/her own experiences, Mailer—like any researcher and author—can't avoid the prism of his

own perspective. Like any scholar, he chooses the data he provides to us and organizes them as he wishes. Moreover, Mailer's masterpiece of writing and research melds official documents, court transcripts, and actual interviews conducted with the individuals mentioned in the book with imaginary scenarios, thus creating a smooth, invisible mesh of "reality" and "fantasy." The reader, searching for the seam that neatly knits one to the other, cannot locate the frontier between them. Vygotsky wrote, "There is a double, mutual dependence between imagination and experience. If, in the first case, imagination is based on experience, in the second case experience is based on imagination" (2004, 17) and every telling of an experience is not only already mixed with fantasy but also selectively reported in order to emphasize and to exclude. Robespierre said simply, in his letter of December 21, 1792, "*L'histoire est un roman,*" or "History is fiction" (*Robespierre 1792*). Maybe, however, it is more accurate to say that every account of human action is a slice of fact and fiction woven together, and a semblance of how life may really be can only be constructed by a vast number of slices jaggedly and yet seamlessly joined—as close as we can get to seeing our world in its fullness, messiness and transmutability. And yet that world does hold together, and Mailer's stunning, metaphoric prose is the vehicle that shapes the story into a coherent whole. He guides us through the complexity of a historical moment (or accumulation of moments) and helps us to illuminate the dialectical nature of our lives.

### **Marx, Marcuse and dialectical thinking**

It just so happens that at the same time as I was immersed in *The Executioner's Song*, I was reading Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* (1970). I had not read it since my undergraduate days, but it was the book that introduced me to Marxist dialectics and laid the groundwork that made *Capital* and the earlier writings of the young Marx accessible to me. It paved my way towards the construction of the theoretical lens through which I would see the

world over at least the following decade. Admittedly, my early understanding of Marx was naïve and colored by the excitement and the fury of the early '70s and the devastation caused by US forces around the world, but I have never since felt as empowered by theory as I did back then, as fully permeated by the knowledge-sense that history was purposefully surging in the direction of the liberation of humankind and that a new world was indeed possible, one in which we would be more at one with ourselves and others, a world in which inner and outer conflict would be radically diminished.

Looking back at that time now, the idea that Marxism could lead us towards utopia, that I could even desire such a world, seems incomprehensible; clearly the collective euphoria that I contributed to and that contributed to me overwhelmed the other senses that I brought to analytical thought. Still, I felt enormously lucky to be among those pushing the world forward on its inevitable, revolutionary and triumphant path. Theory was serving what I then saw as its preeminent purpose. It provided a framework, part crystal ball and part rigorous analysis, through which I could understand my world while at the same time following a political route that had to some extent already been mapped. I felt that as I engaged in political activity, I was literally embodying the theory|practice dialectic, the two, inseparably together, guiding me on my way.

Though my adherence to many aspects of Marxist thought has dissipated over the last few decades, dialectical thinking still remains my primary lens through which to understand the world and to change it. It is the kernel of my ontological stance: We exist for and through one another; the world is always in flux and, in that respect, it is false; and contradictions saturate all aspects of social life and are the engine of the continuous transformative forces that characterize existence. Marxist dialectical thinking also anchors my axiological (ethical) stance that is bound

with my ontological one: The purpose of theory is to liberate humankind from want and oppression both of which contradict reason; the world as it could be and as it ought to be (what we can conceive) should always drive transformation of the world as it is.

### *Negative thinking*

Marcuse explains that the key to Marxist dialectics, its foundation, lies in the process of “negative thinking” that was introduced by Hegel. In English at least, the term “negative thinking” has unfortunate connotations. It brings to mind fatalism and nay saying; to be negative is to be a downer, a bore and a depressive. It appears to be the categorical opposite of “positive thinking,” which brings to mind optimism, hope, and a can-do attitude. Ironically, in philosophical terms, the reverse is true, a reflection of the flexibility of language and of how the power of words is subject to contextual and conceptual conditions. Philosophically, the power of negative thinking is found in the “confrontation of the given facts with that which they exclude” (Marcuse 1970, x). A negative thinker “begins with the recognition that the facts do not correspond to the concepts imposed by common sense and scientific reason—in short with the refusal to accept them” (1970, vi). From a Marxist perspective, the facts are unacceptable, unreasonable and thus negated by reason because they condemn the masses of human beings to intolerable conditions. Therefore, negative thought is dangerous, a threat to the powerful and to all those content with the status quo. It is also infused with imaginative exuberance, hope, and vision.

Marx explains the dialectical dynamic of negative thinking in his preface to the second edition of *Capital* (1990):

...it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed

form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary. (103)

The process through which dialectics negates existing conditions is a dynamic “fluid” process of continually becoming, in which the interactions between things define their essence and their evolution. With every second that passes and transforms the second that preceded it, with every turn of the head, with every re-consideration, the reality we perceive and the possibilities before us are transformed. For Marx, opposites confront and mediate each other as thesis and antithesis, creating a synthesis that again separates and confronts anew. When writing about the seemingly opposed relationship between exchange and acquisition, Marx writes in *Capital* (1990),

To say that these mutually independent and antithetical processes form an internal unity is to say also that their internal unity moves forward through external antitheses. These two processes lack internal independence because they complement each other. ... There is an antithesis immanent ... between private labor which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labour... between the conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things... (p. 209)

A positivist, in contrast to a negative thinker, accepts the world “as is” to be true and fixed. In the spirit of Comte, he believes that “imagination,” is “subordinated” to observation (Marcuse 1970, 341) and that what is observed is governed by immutable laws. To be “positive” in attitude towards what exists is to support existing inequalities and obfuscate potentialities. Though positivists claim the mantle of practicality and truth, to be a positivist is to be blind to the constant dialectical interplay of contradictions. Positivists see the world as variable-driven, logical, and controllable.

A dialectical view of reality conflicts not only with the positivist ontology associated with Comte but also with the commonly held Cartesian view that understands the world as dualistic and mechanistic (Jardine 2006). Descartes wrote, “A substance is that which requires nothing except itself in order to exist” (p. 274). He thought that the only way to understand something was to isolate it from its context, the reverse of what a dialectician believes. When the world is seen through a Cartesian lens, what is being examined becomes “the problem,” shorn from interaction with the multiplicity of conditions that mediate its identity. Educational methodologies still tend to be based on scientific ontologies influenced by the positivism of Comte and the scientific methods of Descartes. Merleau-Ponty (1964) writes:

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. It makes its own limited model of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. Science is and always has been that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use.

(1964, 159)

Such a view disputes the ontological position essential to dialectical thinking: that we are formed by relationships and, most emphatically, by our relationships with each other.

Marx was a dialectic *materialist*, not merely a thinker with his head in the clouds concerned with ideas as metaphysical concepts that floated in the breeze. He did not spin his theories from thin air, but derived them from the daily grind of working people as they struggled to exist. He hoped that the dialectic process he outlined and bolstered with historical analysis would mediate the actual daily lives of men and women, to empower them with understanding and guide them to revolutionary activity. Theory and practice were continually and dialectically interacting; they

presupposed each other, tested each other, and transformed, continually, the shape and direction of their evolution.

Integral to the materialism that suffuses Marx's dialectic is the ontological stance that you can't transform what doesn't exist. This important concept separates Marx from those who think that the past can be made irrelevant in one fell swoop and that change can be spun out of nothing. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte*, Marx writes, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (1971, 245). And when writing about the Paris Commune "They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant" (1977, 76).

Reading Marcuse's explanation of dialectical thinking again now, I was struck by how, with all its insight, intellectual thrill and revolutionary force, *Reason and Revolution* made no room for the messiness of social life that reverberates with emotional energy and that is so meticulously painted by Mailer. Even though Marcuse's investigation of Hegelian and Marxist dialectical thought is one of the clearest and most incisive examinations of dialectic thinking that I have read, I was struck by the absence of real human beings in the text, human beings consumed by passions and acting in ways not always predictable or class-determined. The emotions of social actors, that Vygotsky postulates as being inseparable from cognition (2004) is absent in the theoretical framework that Marcuse (explicating Hegel and Marx) presents, thus facilitating a confident (and mostly dry) teleological view of history unimpeded by emotion-mediated acts and goals that might derail it. I was likewise aware that the *Logic*, so concisely

argued, made no notice of the contingent nature of so much that takes place in social life because a recognition of contingency would sabotage the certainty of revolutionary success.

### ***Structure and agency***

It would be wrong to blame Marcuse for this lack of flesh and blood in his analysis since there is an aspect of Marxist thought that is powerfully deterministic, one in which men and women are merely tools of the macro structures in which they act, one in which their “feelings” are inconsequential. Similar mechanistic theories in which human agency is seen as a weak force in contrast to the strong predictive forces of class and culture also seep through much of the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. This is not surprising since the purpose, after all, of the concept of structures, as Sewell (2005, 15) points out, is to be reproductive. Indeed Holland and Sewell also acknowledge the formidable nature of structures even as they recognize the power of humans to transform them under optimal conditions. It is why Harvey calls these structures “permanences” (1996). Sewell writes, however, that “Structures are at risk, at least to some extent, in all of the social encounters they shape—because structures are multiple and intersecting, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably” (1992, 19). “What tends to get lost in the language of structure,” he emphasizes, “is the efficacy of human action” (p. 2). What is dismissed by Marx, and by many Marxist philosophers who believe in dialectical thinking and revolutionary goals, is the polysemicity of social life, the multi-dimensionality of social actors, and the many interlocking worlds that we all take part in. It is precisely this aspect of what it means to be human that Mailer captures and that Marcuse, in his role as an explainer in *Reason and Revolution*, logically omits. It is a contributing aspect to what makes *Reason and Revolution* inaccessible to readers who are not dedicated to theoretical reading.

Though the members of Marx's working classes may be flat and predictable, and though Marx understood structural transformation as mechanical, largely unidirectional and inevitable, he nevertheless acknowledged, by the very act of writing if not in the actual text of his work, the importance of emotions in human activity and their potential to destroy economic and class structures. As formidable as Marx saw these structures, he also understood that theory and agitation could move the masses to transform them. The purpose, after all, of the Communist Manifesto was to catalyze and direct human passion in order to bring about revolutionary change. Marx also knew the power of expressive writing, and though he was not a novelist, he could spin words as well as Mailer. He understood that theory tied to and reflecting the lives of working men and women, written incisively and with passion, could inspire. His documentation in *Capital* of how the masses lived and died reads as fiction, as an account of irrationality gone wild as in a novel by Dickens or Zola. Volume 1 includes an almost 80-page chapter entitled "The Working Day" that documents the travails of working men, women and children. Gleaned from government reports and newspaper documents that he meticulously copied by hand as he sat in the British Museum, it makes transparent the brutality under which workers labored. Abstract concepts are not left floating around in the clouds but are mirrored in the concrete existences of those who eked out a minimum survival when they were lucky. Marx explains how the daily grind of the working day infiltrated with its brutality family life and affected the common sense attitudes of the oppressed creating turmoil in the relationships between husbands and wives, children and parents. Though Marx doesn't examine the emotions that influence history and human action, and though his working classes are without nuance, his most passionate writing rumbles with the consciousness of human misery: "For 'protection' against the serpent of their agonies," Marx writes at the conclusion of the chapter:

...the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at last makes clear 'when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins. (1990, 1:416)

### **Marcuse, Mailer and how we view the world**

If Marcuse presents us with a cogent analysis of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics based on negative thinking, Mailer makes real for us the human beings that together, even if not consciously, engage in the dialectical practices that create social life. His historical novel breathes with the passions that animate the "common" person, and it illustrates how those passions interact with thought and deed. Mailer's characters also complicate the category of class as it intertwines with religion, professional allegiance, geography, history and contingency, each layer vibrating with the others, sometimes in synchrony and other times in contradiction. As a consequence, no end is predetermined and every end is just a marker on a road still under construction.

Of course, Marcuse's goal in *Reason and Revolution* is to explain the Hegelian dialectic and its subsequent life through Marxist thought not to delve into what the Marxist dialectic omitted that was theoretically vital to its revolutionary mission of transforming economic and social systems. And it is not Marcuse's fault that theoretical works don't easily capture the myriad of passions, ideas, and unforeseen events that animate any given slice of time or their chronological and non-chronological joining. Meanwhile, Mailer's *Executioner's Song* makes no attempt to transform the world, and he is not bound by the ideal types and categorical rigidities that make

revolutionary theory so convincingly captivating, empowering, and certain. Mailer, author of a historical novel without a revolutionary agenda, is able to allow human character to overflow stereotypical boundaries as they do in real life. And indeed I think that it is Mailer's focus on human beings in their "irrationalism," and his rejection, here, of political analysis, that makes *The Executioner's Song* so much more accessible than Marcuse's philosophical *Reason and Revolution* and so more wrenching to the reader's state of equilibrium. The language Mailer uses is sophisticated but not specialized, and the passions to which he gives voice can reverberate through a common reader's sensibilities in a way that intellectual explications rarely do. Hence, though Marx remains the backbone of revolutionary theory today, few actually read his major works because of the dense content of most of his texts and the difficulty of locating within them human beings similar to the multi-dimensional ones with whom we are familiar. Marcuse's text on dialectics, much like stereotypical theoretical writing, is dense and difficult and lacks the humanity of Mailer's novel even as it inspires those for whom theory provides the security for action and the possibility for liberation. For these reasons, Marcuse's text is heavy going, whereas I read Mailer's work rapidly and voraciously though, at over one thousand pages, it is twice as long as that of Marcuse's.

But if I seem to be favoring Mailer over Marcuse, I should immediately add that my intent is not to favor one over the other, but to value them both as offering different and necessary clues on how to disseminate theory that mediates action, how to develop an understanding of what makes the world tick, and on how to design research methodologies that will help us move the world in the direction of justice and reason. As enthralling as Mailer's writing is, the *Executioner's Song* normalizes unreason and leaves the reader to ponder an enduring and unalterable permanence of irrationality and suffering. Though richly creative, the book makes no

claim to the revolutionary aspirations of constructing a world without want or injustice. Gilmore, his girlfriend and his relatives and acquaintances are not Marx's class-conscious factory workers; they are wage workers or small-time owners without much ideological direction who are just trying to get by; intellectuals in a quandary over the callings of justice; or hacks of all varieties just trying to serve themselves. Even for the few who seek justice, their quests fall short of radical change. That transformative goal is still central to those who take seriously the Marxist call to not merely interpret the world, but to change it (Marx 2002). While Marcuse may be less accessible than Mailer, in *Reason and Revolution* he helps us decipher a path towards becoming via the dialectic process whereas Mailer leaves us in a Beckettian world, hopeful and intent on persevering and moving on while mired for eternity in the same un-reasonable and un-revolutionary place.

What is needed then is a dialectic that is broader and more flexible than the one Marx elucidated. We need a dialectic that recognizes the multiple and nuanced worlds in which we live and rejects dichotomies in favor of multiple interacting conditions of social life that. Such multiplicity complicates negative thinking, but it allows for the fullness of who we are in all our contradictory polysemicity. We also need theorists who can elaborate the power, hope, and perceptive acuity that thinking dialectically can harness in language that is riveting without being dogmatic or simplistic.

### **Towards a broader dialectic**

In volume two of his *Science of Logic*, Hegel writes, "Consequently the Real Possibility of a case is the existing multiplicity of circumstances which are related to it" (1929, 2:189), and it is precisely the neglect of these "multiplicity of circumstances," that leads policymakers to identify single solutions to complicated problems. Bourdieu's theorizing of borderless fields as sites of

struggle and Holland's "figured worlds" build upon the concept of multiple interactive conditions. They bring us a *multilectics* rather than a *dialectics*, an amplified vision of negative thinking that moves beyond the rigid class borders that are associated with Marx, or the dichotomous thinking that characterizes dominant thinking. Such a multilectics recognizes that no single categorization encompasses the complexity of human identity within collective life.

Sewell (2005) writes:

The multiplicity of structures means that the knowledgeable social actors whose practices constitute a society are far more versatile than Bourdieu's account of a universally homologous habitus would imply: social actors are capable of applying a wide range of different and even incompatible schemas and have access to heterogeneous arrays of resources. (2005, 140)

And Sewell, like Lefebvre (1974), recognizes that one's role within the system of production does not by itself define who we are and how we act, but that "laughter," "play," and the awareness of death" or "residence" (p. 165) might have as much to do with who we are as our position on the economic wheel. Sewell's *Logic of History* (2005) not only theorizes about dialectical change, but guides us through perceiving specific historical moments in a dialectical way to make vivid the human role in constructing history and creating social space. He recognizes the importance of emotions in social transformation, and the need to intertwine theoretical writing with critical and accessible analysis.

If Bourdieu, Sewell and Holland have abandoned the notion of rigid categories and ideal types and, by so doing, have given us tools to perceive the dynamics of a more complex world, it has not been without the loss of the exhilarating notion that justice, freedom, and pleasure are ours if we only persevere. Instead we see a world in a blur of movement, always changing but not necessarily in the direction we desire despite our efforts. Hard and carefully as we look,

sophisticated as our tools and theoretical lenses may be, it is not apparent if we are moving toward the vision that negative thinking inspires. This loss of clarity is only exacerbated by the grim accounts of the revolutionary movements that claimed Marxism as their guiding light. Nevertheless, the failure of Marxism thus far does not diminish the fundamental power of dialectics to help us understand the world and develop methodologies that promote the practice of transformative thinking in social interactions. Nor does it alter the fundamental role of liberatory philosophy to facilitate paths of perception that point us in the direction of freedom. Thayer-Bacon (2006) writes that philosophical arguments:

...don't try to make the case for what is (that's science); they try to make the case for *what should be ideally*. Philosophical arguments try to make the case for what is the best, the right, the good, the beautiful, the fair and just, the true. These are arguments that are warranted by reasons, using logic to make their case. (p. 143)

Dialectical thinking, senseless without the rejection of that which is and without the imaginative leap of perception that declares a better world possible, remains at the core of transformative methodologies; it is the life flow of philosophy.

### **Multilectics in the classroom**

I do not know when the sixth-grade classroom in this all-black middle school erupted into chaos, but as I entered students were screaming, spitballs were flying through the air and the laughter was loud and continuous. I was at the school in my capacity as a university-based mentor to language arts teachers. The teacher of this class explained to me that she had smelled smoke and was certain one of the students had lit a match, "I'm going to pull them out in the hall one by one until I find the one who did it," she told me as she left the room with a suspect tagging behind her, "You can do anything you want with them." I stood in the center of the class

and stared out at the chaos, not knowing what to do. One student, Ashley, began running wildly in circles around the room. She was howling as she passed in front of me and then laughed raucously, her teeth glimmering, her eyes staring fully into mine. A classmate said something I couldn't hear to her and she stopped in her path to slap him on top of his head. I walked up to her and quietly said, "You can't be hitting people on the head." She looked down at me for a second, and then she lightly slapped me on the top of my cranium. In the long pause that followed, we both stared at each other and said nothing. I'm not sure which of us was more surprised by what had taken place. I walked away as the chaos continued around me. But as the minutes passed by, I pondered on what had occurred; I was troubled less by her slap than by my walking away and my puzzlement about what to do. I guessed by her startled expression at the instant of contact between her hand and my head, by the aghast drop of her jaw and by the lightness of the slap that she was as confused as I, that she had reacted impulsively, that she had not intended any harm. I suspected that she knew she had crossed some line of admissible conduct but that there had not been enough time or sufficient distance between us to retract her hand in mid flight and alter the conversation's direction. All this, though unspoken, was clear in the sizzling silence that hovered over us in the seconds that followed, in the momentary silence between slap and walk as we stared at each other in disbelief, locked together by the intensity of recognition, waiting for what would happen next. As Roland Barthes reminds us, "Silence speaks" (Barthes 1985, 259), and now, as the seconds passed, I felt that if I didn't somehow revisit the event with Ashley, respond to the intimacy of that silence, that I would never be able to gain her respect, respect myself, or continue the dialog that had begun so clumsily but yet had ended with some type of mutual recognition.

Revisiting that moment now, I don't think I said to myself that it was time to put on my philosophical glasses and analyze, according to post-Marxist dialects, what was going on. Still, I was conscious of the many layers of interactions that were taking place and the many vantage points from which analysis was possible. Most apparent from the outside was the macro layer of race that had so much to do with her sitting in this underperforming school and living in a dangerous and impoverished community while I came from the outside, from the university, as an "expert" in literacy pedagogy. I was one white face in a sea of black faces with the connotations of power and privilege that whiteness in the United States represents. But yet, here in the classroom, I was a minority and a stranger who was clearly not empowered. Even with all the official resources at my disposal, it was not at all certain who was in control. Though race was a systemically and culturally imposed divisive category that both Ashley and I were born into, I felt the color divide rumble throughout my entire body-space; it generated anxiety and discomfort. I also felt it conceptually. I was consciously burdened and puzzled by the weight of family, cultural and community codes that could not separate whiteness from power, the act of slapping with disrespect for my position and walking away with surrender. The final silence that wound around the encounter, that seemed to suffocate a trapped living thing, signaled to me an inadmissible lack of resolution. Yet I also felt something else going on, a contradictory dynamic that multilectical thinking proposes. Ashley and I had experienced what Chalmers (1995) called "a state of experience," an emotionally packed stream-of-consciousness that, "like the sound of a clarinet or the smell of mothballs" (1995, para. 8) could not be measured or positivistically made sense of because it had no fixed position but, being socially imbued, was fluid and transformable. That final silence could be theorized, then, as a temporary and porous stage in a process that was still dynamic rather than as a static moment, over and done with, that was detached in Newtonian

space. Seen multilectically, open to embracing thought, language, emotion and positionality as part of the puzzle, I was thus able to seek meaning in the voiceless but eloquent expression in Ashley's eyes that reverberated in the silence following her assault, a silence that though brief was at least twice as long as the flick of her hand on my head. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) says that the "intensity of an experience is more important for intimacy with space than the extensity of the experience" (1977, 184–5), and now I chose to interpret the intensity of that momentary silence as part of our dialog, as a reflective spark, a reconsideration of sorts that transcended the color of our faces and the imbalance that age, gender, class, officialdom and our very different spots in the web of social life that defined the space we shared. It reached deeply inside to some core that bound us together, however momentarily. My instant microanalysis of her gaze and her body language complicated the mandated punishment that is the automatic response when a student strikes a teacher. I did not know what Ashley carried with her to school that day, what "bundle of emotions, desires, concerns and fears" played out in her "social activities and actions" (Harvey 2000, 234) and caused her to strike me. I hoped, however, that if I could continue our encounter, we could break through into new possibilities, produce a space in which we could both creatively and fruitfully encounter one another using dialog as the dialectical method at hand. Such dialog would include "radical" listening, defined by Kenneth Tobin as "trying to give the same meaning to the words that the speaker does and to understand where that speaker is situated" (Ali Khan 2009). Doreen Massey (1993), building on Marx's definition of space as defined by interrelationships writes, "It is not that the interrelations between objects occur *in* space and time; it is these relationships themselves which *create/define* space and time" (p. 154). Using multilectical methodologies, Ashley and I had the possibility of redefining the space we jointly created.

### *Multilectical space*

In her book on the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross (2008) writes:

Our tendency is to think of space as an abstract, metaphysical context, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we help create. The difficulty is also one of vocabulary, for while words like “historical” and “political” convey a dynamic of intentionality, vitality and human motivation, “spatial,” on the other hand, connotes stasis, neutrality, and passivity. But the analysis of social space, far from being reactionary or technocratic, is rather a symptom of a strategic thought and of what Rista Tzara, speaking of Rimbaud, called an “ethics of combat,” one that poses space as the terrain of political practice. (p. 8)

It may seem obvious but yet it needs to be emphasized that what produces social space is the interactions between human beings. Because spaces are socially produced, they can also be socially transformed. Human beings can alter the nature of the spaces they share despite the fact that they are always imbued by ideology (Lefebvre 1974), because “contexts, while they are productive of interpretation, are also the products of interpretation” (Fish 1982, 708). It was up to Ashley, and especially up to me as a teacher in the Vygotskian and/or Freireian sense, to turn the space of the classroom that we shared and produced together into one that served us both.

Vygotsky offers the metaphor of teacher as a guide who accompanies students through stages of reflection and re-evaluation by constantly building on existing knowledge. Freire (and in some ways Socrates) proposes reflexive dialog as the method of reaching self-understanding.

Understood this way, the space in which Ashley and I were in together would be defined by what we did and did not do together. We had to negotiate the “fresh actions” (Lefebvre 1974, 73) that our past activities had made possible. We had to become agentic, to “exert some degree of control over the social relations” in which we were “enmeshed” (Sewell, Jr. 1992, 20). The

methodology I appropriated to help us to do so reflected the dialectic potentialities of the dialogic method and embraced the full gamut of the languages we use to communicate with one another. It also embraced the axiological Marxist demand that theory serve the liberation of the underserved and develop self-consciousness rather than be the fount of punitive remedies that more macro structures tended to impose.

A few minutes passed. The class was still chaotic. I walked slowly up to Ashley who was standing by her desk now and said in a voice barely above a whisper, “we have to talk.” She looked at me directly, sat down in her seat and said without argument, “ok.” With that brief exchange, the silence of before became a mere stepping-stone to understanding, respect and trust rather than a dismal finality. Though it was the slap that brought us to the table, I don’t think we ever talked about it. I remember that Ashley surprised me by telling me how much she loved the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and that she loved poetry. “I come from a good family,” she said, “not like a lot of these kids” and her arm swept across the room. “I hate being here,” she added, “it’s a waste of time.” I asked her if she wanted to come with me, the following period, to an eighth grade language arts class that I was teaching. She nodded. I went and asked the school literacy coach if that was doable. The literacy coach replied, “Well, she has science then. I’ll ask the science teacher if it’s ok.” She came back and told me, “He told me you should take her every week, that she’s a troublemaker. He can’t imagine why anybody would want her in their class.” Ashley and I walked upstairs and down the hall and into the senior language arts class. I introduced her to the students and to the teacher and asked them to make Ashley welcome. Ashley sat at the back of the room. She listened attentively, asked good questions, contributed to the conversations. When the class was over she queried, “Can we do this again next week?” “Yes,” I assured her, “yes.”

The following week I brought with me one volume of short stories by Poe, copies of poetry by Langston Hughes and a copy of Maya Angelou's "I know why a caged birds sings." I asked the school literacy coach if I could read some of these texts in her office with Ashley during what would normally be Ashley's language arts class. The literacy coach said she would request permission from her sixth grade teacher to do so. She came back and told me, "Ms. Braddock says you must have the wrong girl; nobody would want to talk with Ashley." I assured the literacy coach that Ashley was the student I wanted and, within minutes, she and I were reading Angelou's poem and talking and writing together. Again, I took her with me to the eighth grade class, and gave her the book of Poe stories to take home with her.

The following week when I went to look for Ashley she was gone. The literacy coach told me she had been transferred to another school without explanation. I made some inquiries, discovered the school she was now in (though not why she had been transferred), and wrote her a letter that I gave to a regional coordinator from the Board of Education who, after reading the letter, assured me that Ashley would get it. I never heard from Ashley again, and my colleagues advised me not to pursue the issue because people would think I was a "pervert" chasing after an 11-year-old girl.

The story of Ashley is a story about the power of negative thinking—the refusal to accept the normative "is" and to seek the "ought-to-be"s and the "could be"s. It is a story about dialogic relationships, one in which Ashley and I were able to transform our relationship in a way that facilitated teaching and learning in shared spaces that are often so damaged that no escape seems possible. It is a story of transformative methods emerging from multilectical thinking—the search for contradictions and the effort to resolve them. It is a recognition that words and actions

can be easily misinterpreted and that if we look at what is usually ignored, and listen to the silences as well as to the spoken, we will have more data on which to proceed.

Ashley's story is also one about methodologies that emerge from the recognition of multiple and interconnected layers of experience saturated with emotions, in this case Ashley's and my own, that could not be easily defined, isolated or measured. We had to negotiate to create a space enabling the emergence of new possibilities-- what the geographer Edward Soja might call a "thirdspace," or Homi Bhabha a space of "hybridity." It is a story of "radical listening," and it is a story of trust, both Ashley and I trusting our mutually good intentions and mediating a world that would open itself up differently to us than it did before.

Finally, Ashley's story is one that is imbued with irrationality, with un-reason: an eleven-year-old girl filled with rage; a school with inadequately educated teachers and few supplies; a disempowered and disenfranchised parental community; an impoverished neighborhood a few miles away from one of the nation's richest metropolises; a city government, state government and federal government that focus on finding scapegoats to fault for the bleak possibilities these students face rather than tackling the issues of poverty, racism, and joblessness that haunt poor localities of color.

Like Gary Gilmore and Mailer's cast of characters, the individuals that populate Ashley's story can be viewed as part of a perpetual loop of dysfunction that will never change, "one poverty after another," as Mailer wrote, "A shade of gloom that would not lift. ...Nothing could grow." Yet because of luck, desire and will, and because we understood ways of perception that forefronted the interrelational quality of human communication, Ashley and I were, together, able to alter the structures that normally predetermined the consequences of misbehavior in public schools. We were able to think negatively together and thus to create a new space of

possibility. For a moment at least, as Marcuse writes, we were able to “destroy the experience of daily life.”

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