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Social Imagination Amid Neoliberal Times

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With beautiful irony, Maxine Greene (1995) writes in the first chapter of *Releasing the Imagination* that we are caught by seeing things small and by seeing things big. Small, she describes, is to see the world from a distance, as trends, patterns, and systems of ordered representation. Big, by contrast, is to illuminate the singular uniqueness of the human being, to regard the individual as something glorious and significant. Although she authored this book over twenty years ago, her concerns over the “small” condition of schooling are woefully familiar. Small are the lenses of seemingly-benevolent policy-making that trend toward test scores, management procedures, racial percentages, and accountability measures. Small, she argues, is the disregard for the dehumanizing ways in which best practices, external standards, and the language of the learning sciences, breaks the teacher and student from the emotive and deeply subjective experience of teaching and learning.

All of the articles in this issue of *Theory, Research, and Action in Urban Education* (TRAUE) describe a state of education similar to that critiqued by Maxine. Using the dominant economic ideology of neoliberalism, these authors demonstrate how the unquestioned intrusion of market solutions to major social and political decisions have exacerbated income inequalities across the nation with devastating impacts on communities of color. Dr. Jeremy Benson’s article, *Constructing an enemy within: Race, literacy and school knowledge in the transition to neoliberal capitalism*, speaks aptly to the “small” ways (Maxine’s term) in which cultural technologies serve to divert attention away from structural, capitalist-driven racism to the pathologizing of working class, poor, and families of color as culprits in their own misfortune. Benson analyzes the *A Nation at Risk* report and the literacy crisis of the 1980s to show how these “not only protected the race and class hierarchies that were threatened by the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but also enabled the further neoliberalization of federal education policy,” including today’s *Race to the Top* and, most recently, the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. He expands on Jodi Melamed’s (2006) concept of neoliberal multiculturalism to show how the state uses “economic, ideological, cultural, and religious distinctions to produce lesser personhoods” while at the same time defining itself as an antiracist state that gives every citizen equal opportunity through the market and thus can “justify inequality for some as fair or neutral” (p. 14). In the end, “the anxiety-provoking narratives of the literacy crisis and *A Nation at Risk* pinned insecurity to a problem population, and called for a profound policing of education by the state in the form of the tightened curricular and pedagogical controls, high stakes testing, accountability, and school choice” leading to “the development of a repressive educational apparatus” that the majority of low-income students of color confront today. Such poli-
cies are dehistoricized and unethical; they beg return to the perennial questions of for whom, by whom, to what cause, at what expense.

One function of this uptake, it would seem, is to sustain large scale social division for fear of solidarity and power, while at the same time, splitting our psychical capacity to reconstitute the wholeness of our being. In the sphere of civil society, distinct yet contingent upon public and imaginary spaces, we increasingly find globally interconnected associations among technology companies, corporate enterprise, and state entities that colonize national and regional educational systems in order to assert power-for-profit. One such example is in the country of Chile. With the U.S.-supported rise of free-market oriented dictator General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), Chile went from an essentially “free quality education” to a more centralized approach with the state controlling almost every facet of education including finance, teacher salaries, privatization, and curricular standards, and developing a three-tiered university system that diminished access to a great number of Chilean middle-class and poor (O'Malley, 2016). These policies work upon teachers and students as they encounter one another in the classroom, but they also solidify market driven ideologies that are global, far-reaching, and colonial.

There are other examples, as in the article, Ghettos and Gated Communities in the City University of New York: Is Democratic, Multi-Racial Access and Labor Justice Possible in Times of Shrinking Resources and Austerity Budgets?, where Chet Jordan and Chloe Asselin expose the free-market oriented reforms at the City University of New York (CUNY) which are “prompted by the clamor for national prestige” and “enmeshed with the systematic corporatization of the American university at large.” They illustrate how this drive for recognition has stratified CUNY along racial and class fault lines. While the University mission is about affordability and access, answering Lois Weis and Michelle Fine's (2012) call for critical bifocality, Jordan and Asselin highlight the larger structural challenges facing CUNY and use an analysis of CUNY history, CUNY policies, and student and faculty interviews “to examine the ways in which CUNY reproduces inequality within an increasingly stratified system and how students and faculty currently experience and resist this inequality.” They find that “the Black and Latinx students overwhelmingly located in the lower tiers of the CUNY system are more likely to be taught by overworked and underpaid professors...CUNY is dispossessing a subset of its students' access to an excellent education and faculty to just working conditions.” Jordan and Asselin call for a radical transformation of the University that roots educational reform in movements for economic, political, and social justice.

These are grim material portraits on the realities of neoliberal reform, ones that dishearten and pain. In this new millennium, the growing inequality created by economic globalization must also be seen as in relation to, or even a result of, new nationalisms and fundamentalisms that spur hatred through ethnic cleansing, religious fanaticism, and an exacerbated East/West divide. Therefore, how we understand these global shifts are complicated by the ways in which national peoples represent themselves as a “we” and the individual yet collective identity that nations continue to produce under the global gaze. The coupling of civil society with nationalism requires further examination into new modernities...
that recognize the distinctiveness of each nation as producing its own outlooks and arrangements and the enduring residues of historical colonialization and imperialism which in its most noticeable iteration has come to be called neoliberalism.

Disillusioned by the determinism of some Marxist theory and the disregard for people as world-making collectives, Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), in his influential book *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, began his life long foray into the idea of the social imaginary. Since then notions of civil society have been upended to include the nurturance of common concerns as they spilled out and into the public sphere. Understanding the ways that knowledge and power challenge the deterministic or functionalist modes of discourse and politics is key to shifting from the identification of external labels of oppression to an understanding of the process of subjectification that is made possible (Bhabha, 1997). Social movements, such as the one highlighted in *United Bronx Parents and the Struggle for Educational Equality in the 1960s* by Laura Kaplan, are powerful examples that begin in coffee shops, behind closed doors, and on the streets of the bustling urban metropolis. They invite an interruption to the ideological construction of self and other as fixed currency or determined outcome.

By drawing upon Paulo Friere (2000), Kaplan pays tribute to the subjective experiences that drive one to courageously speak and act against the looming and powerful externalities that marginalize and discriminate. Evelina López Antonetty and the United Bronx Parents (UBP) fought tirelessly from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s to empower Puerto Rican parents to “evaluate their schools and ultimately advocate on behalf of their children. ... UBP’s training explicitly emphasized changing the locus of blame from the parents to the educational power structure in the city.” Parents learned “facts and statistics to back their critiques of the school system,” their legal rights as public school parents, about inequality in New York City neighborhoods and the consequences of poverty, and how to confront and evaluate school principals. Kaplan’s historical account of Puerto Rican parents in District 7 of the South Bronx shows how “a grassroots group of determined people can demand accountability even for the poorest and most disenfranchised citizens.” This shift toward narrative draws attention to new subjectivities that not only exemplify the embodied relationship between institutional force and the individual, but are necessary examples of how we are to understand our place and personhood in the world, as both citizens and human beings.

Let us never forget the ways in which power circulates and the histories that are made in its wake. In 2006 and 2011, an estimated 800,000 young people filled the streets of Santiago, Chile to demand better public education, more social justice, and equal opportunities (Cabalin, 2012). They rejected the free-market fundamentalism in education that has generated segregation, stratification and inequalities. With great influence, students have become critical political actors not only in rejecting privatization and forcing a re-evaluation of educational policies, but for enacting a new social imaginary that literally, ideologically, and psychically inspired a different form of education to be possible.

Therefore, we need more social imaginaries—a concept we’d like to turn the rest of this introduction to-
wards—to provide the conceptual grounds upon which to, in the words of Maxine (1995), “work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). Imagination, she continues, may be the first step in acting toward the belief that change is possible. “Social imagination is the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society, in the streets where we live and our schools. Social imagination not only suggests but also requires that one take action to repair or renew” (p. 5). It represents on a very practical level the ontological meaning of natality (Arendt, 1998), or the fundamental space of freedom that precedes any initiation into the social world. For Hannah Arendt, freedom does not mean the ability choose, but rather the capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected, to introduce novelty into the world. This is a kind of freedom that is endowed to all human beings by virtue of their birth.

In her book review of *Peace and Pedagogy*, Tricia Herbert shows how the author, Molly Quinn (2014) draws inspiration from both Arendt and Freire to “dialogically re-imagine peace or to see peace anew first in our lives and then with others.” Herbert describes how Quinn “uses natality to show that the responsibility and capacity to begin anew for the purpose of peace is an act of the human subject or self. The prominence of the ‘I’ or self to seek peace coupled with [Freire’s concept of] conscientization or the task of becoming aware of one’s own ‘biographic and existential situation’ (p.18) forms the book’s quest to make peace an ongoing inquiry.” While Maxine’s work is not explicitly mentioned in Herbert’s review, the social imagination and seeing things big to celebrate the individual seem to envelope all aspects of peace pedagogies.

In many ways, this “big” world (Maxine’s term) of humanity is fractured and fracturing. In *Politics of Experience*, R.D. Laing (1967) mourns a waning sense of the individual, where humanity is rendered incapable of freedom and subjected, wholly exhausted, by tirelessly oppressive mechanisms of conformity, most of which happens without notice. The system of schooling, alongside military and police forces, social services and legal systems constitute a widely influential network of institutional structures that undeniably hold sway over our sense of self. *The Urban Between Your Ears* by Maria Tope Akinyele hints to this hegemonic entrapment as she unexpectedly encounters an elderly man with chalk who ruptures the urban landscape with his own poetics. Throughout, she takes up the challenge of the imagination to create an urban imagery that is both figured and materially responsive to the present condition of schooling. Building on the works of Antonio Gramsci, Akinyele attempts to “create a space for reflecting on the ways in which neoliberalism has become common sense, how the educational community participates in the co-construction of this common sense, and how we can potentially subvert this system by being aware of the hegemonic process.” She then puts Gramsci in conversation with the theories of Arjun Appadurai to explore how “ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of everyday lives.” The elderly man with chalk becomes the means by which Akinyele shows how the subaltern can disrupt our common understanding of education to actualize change. We open up this issue with this article, a representation that builds on Gramsci’s “potential energy” (Crehan, 2002).
Unfortunately, as Akinyele hints, our options are not limitless. As we struggle to negotiate the flurry of reforms that have broken through our doorways, one cannot just be or do as they want. Rather, as described by Judith Butler (1997), we are constantly affirmed and produced as a subject within conditions of possibility that are not only shaped by cultural norms and practices, but also susceptible to constitutive acts of subversion. The idea of being a subject in the word requires us to acknowledge both the reality of the work that we do while staying afloat upon the imagination necessary to do things differently. This is different than theories of resistance and power that are structurally framed. In a Foucauldian sense, this pays allowance to the never ending self-creating and self-instituting inauguration of new ontological forms as well as those in the civil, public, and imaginary spheres. We are reminded here of the Mark Strand poem, *Keeping Things Whole*:

In a field  
I am the absence  
of field.  
This is  
always the case.  
Wherever I am  
I am what is missing.

It takes imagination then to conceive of something outside the illusion of certainty, to interrupt the barriers of classification, to see the world beyond neoclassical economies that commodify, discriminate, and fragment. In fact, it is this reflective pause from the material world that provides imagination its interventionary possibility. These are not acts of naïve optimism, but rather a disciplined attention to the ways in which multiple moving spheres and different orders of constraint ripple out into the human condition. Social imaginaries illuminate the ceaseless creation of new dimensions of society, whether that be intellectual endeavors that move discourse or moments of agency that produce revolution and protest. It does so with very serious consideration for the injustices brought through institution and political forces and with respect to the distinct ways these are embedded into the habitus of a population. Social imaginaries, then, recognize the political, the social, the subjective and the psychic, as they are bound together in constant formation, always becoming towards futurities and modernities yet-to-come.

While Benson and Jordan and Asselin’s articles are examples of the dangers of seeing things small and from a distance in education, Akinyele, Kaplan, and Herbert show the difficulties of seeing things big in the face of oppressive systems. All explore the radical possibilities that arise in education and in society when social imagination enables us to envision and take action to create a different world filled with hope, love, peace, and justice. In the words of Maxine Greene (2008), “Imagination, as Emily Dickinson wrote, ‘lights the slow fuse of possibility.’ It opens to what might be, to alternatives. It suggests what might follow a train of thought.”
References


