**Notes on Pedagogy**

*What are the best ways to engage intellectually with poor and working class people nowadays (night classes, online classes, tutorial websites, etc.)*

We might start by trying to understand what we know about how people go about learning what they really want to learn--for example, cooking, music, sports? By way of example, are people learning from all the cooking shows on TV?

It’s very important to remember that many people have lots of painful memories from their formal education (I’m reminded of a post a couple of years ago by Tyler Zimmerman on his own webpage); in some communities, generations of people within families have had bad experiences with schooling. Those legacies matter a great deal.

It is important to keep in mind that there is a distinction between formal institutional learning (which has an important place) and cultural learning; cultural learning applies to matters such as learning to speak a language, learning how to play (except in the hyper-organized middle classes), learning how to cook (but not to be a chef), learning how to maintain the household. In cultural learning, learners do it alongside their parents, older brothers and sisters, other family members; often enough, they effectively just pick it up--albeit in distinctive ways that are shaped by their families’ place in particular neighborhoods or communities but also by the distinctive traditions and customs of the families themselves.

It’s really important not to underestimate what people know or what they aspire to some; in this regard, it might be helpful to look at some of the work that Hal Adams, a member of STO, who initiated the publication of *The Journal of Ordinary Thought* in Chicago. The *Journal* developed from a writing project intended to allow adult working-class folks in Chicago to develop and expand their writing skills, but it was couched inside Hal’s conviction of a Gramscian notion that every individual was a philosopher.

I believe that most individuals are going to need a significant amount of social interaction and intentional support to acquire the skills and knowledge that would eventually enable them to individually take advantage of online forms of learning. That does not mean that we shouldn’t be situating some of the learning within online contexts from the beginning.

*What is the place of the University in society today, in contrast to the late 19th early 20 centuries, and how does it either provide opportunities for working-class people and revolutionaries/revolutionary ideas to mix or prevent this from happening?*

I would suggest that there is an all but complete orientation of current higher education towards professional preparation for careers. It’s hard to imagine that not that long ago more than a few people went to college without a clue about what it was they were preparing to do or, perhaps more significantly, intentionally didn’t want to prepare for anything. You might be interested in reading a really fine memoir by Vivian Gornick, titled *Fierce Attachments*,where she describes her intellectually-charged experiences at City College in the early 1950s. She’s recently written a biography of Emma Goldman.

Throughout the 60s and early 70s, there was a relatively broad egalitarian spirit across the full range of higher education institutions across the country. While the elite institutions were, of course, somewhat selective, they did not exhaust the supply of intellectually curious and accomplished students and they admitted lots of legacy slackers. In any case, there was a not insignificant group of intellectually and creatively curious students spread out across a broad cross-section of US colleges and universities who, as best as I can recall, were not completely preoccupied with the possibility or likelihood that their educational achievement would lead to a job. In retrospect, that may have had a lot to do with the fact that there still were “good jobs” that one could get without a college credential—until they started disappearing. This combination of circumstances had, I believe, a good deal to do with the emergence of the mass student movements of that era.

(As an aside, I don’t know that anyone has attempted to research and report on the print form and content of the distinctive popular radical publications that were emblematic of the times. I’m thinking of publications as varied as (the early) *Studies on the Left*, the pamphlets from SDS’s Radical Education Project, *Radical America*, (the short-lived) *Socialist Revolution*, (the Maoist flagship) *The Guardian*, the *East Village Other*, *Off Our Backs*, *Liberation*, the weekly packets from Liberation News Service, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, as well as underground newspapers of all sorts.)

As I wrote this, I realized that it hardly suffices as an adequate description of the state of affairs experienced by black young adults in those years. But, at the same time, I don’t think it was entirely different. Keep in mind that the modern sit-ins were launched by four students from the [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Carolina_Agricultural_and_Technical_State_University) who sat down at the [lunch counter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunch_counter) inside the [Woolworth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._W._Woolworth_Company) store in Greensboro, North Carolina. (I believe that they had decided to so so the night before while talking in one of their dorm rooms). The next day, more than twenty African American students who had been recruited from other campus groups came to the store to join the sit-in. Students from [Bennett College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bennett_College), a college for African American women in Greensboro, joined the protest. On the third day, more than 60 people came to the Woolworth store. More than 300 people took part on the fourth day. Organizers agreed to spread the sit-in protests to include the lunch counter at Greensboro's [Kress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S._H._Kress_%26_Co.) store.As early as one week after the Greensboro sit-in had begun, students in other North Carolina towns launched their own sit-ins. Demonstrations spread to towns near Greensboro, including Winston-Salem, Durham, Raleigh, and Charlotte. Out-of-state towns like [Lexington, Kentucky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._W._Woolworth_Building_%28Lexington,_Kentucky%29) also saw protests. The movement then spread to other Southern cities including [Richmond, Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richmond,_Virginia), and [Nashville, Tennessee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nashville,_Tennessee).

David Graeber has some really provocative things to say about what happened subsequently:

What followed (the student protests) could be seen as a kind of settlement. Campus radicals were reabsorbed into the university but set to work largely at training children of the elite. As the cost of education has skyrocketed, financial aid has been cut back, and the prospect of social mobility through education–above all liberal arts education–has been rapidly diminished. The number of working-class students in major universities, which steadily grew until the Seventies, has now been declining for decades. The matter was further complicated by the fact that this overall decline of accessibility happened at almost exactly the same time that many who had previously been excluded (the G.I. Bill of Rights, after all, had applied basically to white males) were finally being welcomed. These were the identities celebrated in the campus “identity politics” of the Eighties and Nineties–an inclusiveness that notably did not extend to, say, Baptists or “rednecks.” Unsurprisingly, many focused their rage not on government or on university administrations but on minorities, queers, and feminists.

Campus radicals set out to create a new society that destroyed the distinction between egoism and altruism, value and values. It did not work out, but they were, effectively, offered a kind of compensation: the privilege to use the university system to create lives that did so, in their own little way, to be supported in one’s material needs while pursuing virtue, truth, and beauty, and, above all, to pass that privilege on to their own children. **One cannot blame them for accepting the offer. But neither can one blame the rest of the country for hating them for it.** This poses the question of just what kind of radicals they really were—Loren has written about that.

The “settlement” also included the “recovery” of urban areas, such as Park Slope in Brooklyn, as places that would be fit for the cultivation of all sorts of interests and talents and the raising of children, in ways that would make their access into the whole array of privileged institutions appear to be simply the result of the knowledge and skills those children had acquired through their own efforts. Among the first of the eventual gentrifiers were ex-SDS members.

There has been a profound and continuing bifurcation of American higher education institutions into a relative handful of elite institutions and the rest. The elites prepare their students for positions on Wall Street and the elite professions. The rest of the institutions prepare their students for everything else—at least at the beginning; there continues to be slippage—nothing is perfect.

It may be helpful to think of the university today as a manager of social conflicts. I’m taken, for example, by the central role that affirmative action debates have played in the last couple of decades-- in spite of the fact that the benefits of those programs have been so meager. We should be aware of the fact that affirmative action is usually structured so that it poses the least threat to the admissibility of the most advantaged of applicants—affirmative action comes to play when decisions are being made about the admissibility of students at the lowest range of the admissible students—those just above or just below some arbitrary cut-point. Those far above are completely unaffected.

A very different proposal by Guinier and Sturm to draw a line above which students were almost certain to success and conduct a lottery gained no support because it would discriminate against the students with higher test scores.

Education and, more specifically, higher education is the vehicle by which the society re-works class conflict into almost anything else but class conflict. It does this primarily, of course, by highlighting the centrality of individual effort and individual achievement at the expense of, or least to the diminution, of any kind of collective sensibility around the central issues of life.

The majority of individuals who enroll at an institution of higher education, all things included, do not graduate. There’s a really good book about community colleges titled *The College Fear Factor* that captures the confusions and terrors of many college students who are desperately hoping that they might hit upon something that will work for them. Meanwhile, they are getting very little of what we might consider to be an education.

*What might a new university look like?*

Let’s keep in mind that a university will never exist for the purposes of preparing revolutionaries. That doesn’t mean that it cannot or will not do other very worthwhile things.

It would be interesting to see what a student movement that was about something other than tuition increases or things of that sort might do.

I think the university can still provide a place for the cultivation and of historical possibilities and the exploration of provocative ideas. In other words, I don’t think that universities are closed systems where there are no possibilities. In the years before the end of apartheid in South Africa, a great revolutionary and impassioned educator, Neville Alexander wrote: “No government on earth can control the process of schooling completely. The beginnings of trouble in any modern society usually make themselves felt in the schools before they become evident in other institutions precisely because it is so difficult in a modern state to control this process completely.”

Students, he thought, could be taught “in such a way that students know exactly what is true, what is half-true, what is simply false, what has been omitted.”

Some part of what we need to address is the ever-increasing need, in this miserable society or the new free one, for very advanced scientific-technical knowledge—to manage the production (including matters such as health care, education, housing and transportation) that we have, to protect us from its numerous adverse products, to transform it into a process that is far less destructive, and to insure that people are the beneficiaries of the most consistent ethical treatment. To bore you, Marx wrote that:

Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself. …. No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing [i.e. a tool—my insert] between the object and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body—it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth.

The “social individual” is the very well educated individual. Marx anticipated that the kind of advanced education that had been and, to a great extent, remains available only to a minority would become something available to all individuals--once people had access to the free time which would be made possible by automated production. The German critical theorist, Iring Fetscher, attempted to articulate, in very broad terms, what might be the essential dimensions of the kind of knowledge individuals would need:

1. As many members of society as possible must become familiar with science; and
2. An end must be put to the isolation of individuals from the creative collective subject which alone is capable of coming to dominate the material conditions of human existence, rather than being dominated by them in the form of a totality subsumed by capital.