



**For Educational Iconoclasm**

# For Education

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*Explication is the annihilation of one mind by another...whoever teaches without emancipating, stultifies.*

—Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*

Professors in the humanities view themselves as fostering crucial human capacities. These capacities, deemed necessary not merely for our flourishing, but for our very survival as a species, include: sound reasoning, critical thinking, engaged dialogue, creativity and innovation, analytical acumen, broad cultural knowledge, and empathic understanding of diverse worldviews. This statement from the Stanford University Humanities Center on "Why the Humanities Matter" is indicative of the general spirit:

Today, humanistic knowledge continues to provide the ideal foundation for exploring and understanding the human experience. Investigating a branch of philosophy might get you thinking about ethical questions. Learning another language might help you gain an appreciation for the similarities in different cultures. Contemplating a sculpture might make you think about how an artist's life affected her creative decisions. Reading a book from another region of the world, might help you think about the meaning of democracy. Listening to a history course might

help you better understand the past, while at the same time offer you a clearer picture of the future.<sup>1</sup>

In this *Item*, I would like to explore that *might*. For, I believe that the very nature of humanistic pedagogy—its very success or failure—hinges on which *side* of that *might* an instructor operates. I will state at the outset that I believe that a “taking sides” metaphor is valuable because it evokes the political consequences that, I further hold, are at stake. Thus, in brief, on the *right side* of the *might* divide lies a liberal-conservative-right politics; on the left side lies a libertarian-socialist-left politics. By far the greatest issue at stake in negotiating this *might*, and in humanities education generally, however, is what results from manifesting these two (largely implicit) politicized orientations in the classroom: the cultivation of actual human subjects—students, people, citizens—in the real world. We must, of course, include the professor here, for that role is formed in the same institutional apparatus as that of “student.” So, to convey the sense of what I intend by this right-left divide, it will be useful to explore it briefly in terms of the kinds of implied subjects embedded therein.

### *On the right*

To the right of the *might* is a subject who assumes the inevitability of the current institutional, and, by extension, social-economic, status quo. Below is a statement to that effect from a professor at a liberal arts college. (We’ll call this person “Professor X.”) It comes from a recent Facebook discussion on the limits of critique in teaching religious studies in relation to the ostensibly much more beneficial project of fostering “meaning-making” among the students. (Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://shc.stanford.edu/why-do-humanities-matter>.

this critique/meaning-making divide is a contentious issue that has animated humanities pedagogy virtually from its inception.) The statement I wish to highlight is in response to this statement (slightly emended to eliminate extraneous references):

An instructor who engages in the “meaning-making” that seems to be called for in this thread (affirmative, unmolested by excess critique, spiritualized) is serving the perpetuation of the kinds of social formations that some of us are strenuously countering in the classroom: inequality, domination, paternalism, elitism, authoritarianism, and the tyranny of positivity.

I will return in a moment to the fact that that statement operates on the left side of the *might*. First, here is the (emended) response from Professor X on the right:

I probably don't disagree with you on most of your critique of the university. However, the unspoken premises of my original post include: (a) that I want to keep my job, and learn to do it better; (b) that I don't expect massive changes will suddenly be made to the university system in my lifetime; (c) that I am likely to continue to encounter the same general student demographic as I currently am, at least for the foreseeable future; and (d) that I will have to continue to meet, at least for the most part, assessment metrics and pedagogical expectations set by the institution. For better or worse, I'm looking for solutions and best practices within the context of this bounded field of contemporary academic [religious studies].

Why is that a response from the *right*? I imagine the reader thinking, *all of that seems reasonable enough*. I, however, contend that Professor X's statement exemplifies the first condition of the ultimate *failure* of the humanities; namely, a professor and a student body operating firmly ensconced within the status-quo. Professor X's statement is, in fact, an excellent illustration of how an Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus functions: Society is run through with alienating values and relations (inequality, authoritarianism, elitism, etc.); the university as institution absorbs those values and replicates those relations via, for instance, "assessment metrics," "pedagogical expectations," and a none-too-subtle compulsion for professors to remain within the "bounded field" of their discipline; professors, wishing to keep their jobs (i.e, who have been successfully "interpellated" by the economic "law"), obediently accept that this is just the way it is, and so reflexively embody the values and reinforce the alienating relations in the classroom *vis à vis* flesh and blood students; these students exit the university as properly inculcated citizens, ready to carry it all forward still further via their relations to one another and to society at large.

In the most basic sense, the statement augurs the defeat of the humanities in that it creates *a subject as spectator*. The institution is a kind of immutable theater of action wherein professor and students enact a drama of learning that has been *prescribed*, to a decisive extent, by "assessment metrics and pedagogical expectations set by the institution" and by the "bounded field" of our "disciplines" (an apt metaphor). It is an institution, we are further asked to believe, that will not be fundamentally changing any time soon. It is crucial to note that the construction of these metrics and fields themselves is driven by the demands of a social-economic system that is in turn driven, not

by the personal interests of the professors or students per se,<sup>2</sup> nor by “the public interest,” but by that of the primary “stakeholders” in that system: the wealthy ruling class.<sup>3</sup> (Hence, the inexorable rise of STEM along with the pervasive hand-wringing about “the death of the humanities.”) Professor and student are not active *agents* in such an institution; they are quite literally its passive *subjects*, absorbing, reinforcing, and replicating the dominant ideology. The university is thus a static *spectacle* that demands of its subjects only that they adequately perform their duties as *spectators*. As this indicates, the spectacle is primarily a *social relation*, it is a machinic regulation of human power dynamics and hierarchies that are mediated by the *already given* image of the university.

This concept of *spectacle* originated with Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. It is certainly not irrelevant to my argument that the student occupation at Paris University Nanterre on March 22, 1968, was directly inspired by this text and its warnings to the passive spectator. That occupation, driven by resistance to the issues mentioned in the quote above (inequality, paternalism, etc.), in turn, fueled the insurrection of May 1968. Debord’s Thesis 16 is one of many examples of how this idea of the spectacle is useful to my argument: “The spectacle subjugates living people to itself to the extent that the economy has totally subjugated *them*. It is no more than the economy developing for *itself*. It is the true reflection of the production of things, and the false objectification of the producers.”<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence that item *a* in the rationale for Professor X’s stance is “I

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<sup>2</sup> Katerina Kolozova writing about Marx’s notion of workers’ interest, notes that interest “is not an idea in the sense of ‘*causa finalis*.’ It is not a purpose. It does not have a ‘meaning’ *per se*. It does not require ‘wisdom,’ ‘superior knowledge,’ or education to know what one’s interest is.” See Katerina Kolozova, *Toward a Radical Metaphysics of Socialism: Marx and Laruelle* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015), 3.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, *Salon*, “The Interests of the Wealthy: How the rich control politicians—even more than you think.” Political scientist Michael Jay Barber, discussing his research into the issue, says: “What we found, when we looked senator-by-senator, was that the opinions of donors and the behavior of senators are very closely aligned, whereas the opinions of the typical voter in a senator’s state were not nearly as closely connected.” <https://tinyurl.com/y8cyw7s3>.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Emphases added for clarity. <https://tinyurl.com/pv4k9nq>.

want to keep my job.” Again, while this desire is understandable, it is not as *self-evidently justifiable* as it is apparently intended to be. It is only obviously justifiable if Professor X, as “producer” in the economy of the university, quite consciously determines to acquiesce to the capitalist logic at work therein. Otherwise, short of conscious allegiance to the economic system that arguably creates the very conditions of that which the humanities aims to countervene (authoritarianism, elitism, racism, etc.), item *a*, far from a self-evident justification, only reveals the extreme power of economic capture at work in the formation of the university professor subject. Professor X’s item *a* is a confession of the deep embodiment of that logic at work as a subjugating force in the life of the university. Taken in context with the additional items, furthermore, it reads as a confession to the “false objectification” of Professor X as an alienated producer in the machinery of the economic Golem that is modern day capitalism. Without belaboring the point, it should not be difficult to see that the student is equally such a “producer,” in that “student” indexes yet another location of “the economy developing for *itself*.” Indeed, the very language around studentship is run through with capitalist logic, placed unabashedly front and center for all to see.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The most basic function of capitalist logic is of course the creation of a *commodity* out of either concrete or abstract entities. “Education” is a human abstraction that can only be packaged and sold for a massive profit when materialized as, for instance, a college or university. Within this context, we can see many other functions of capitalist logic at work (terms in quote actual commerce- and finance-oriented higher ed verbiage): the student as “customer” whose “business” must be earned through the college’s “delivering” of a stylized “student experience” and “retained” (tuition paid,) until completion of the “credential” (degree); “business plans” and “strategic plans” compiled by the college’s various “stakeholders;” celebration of perpetual “expansion,” as in the construction of new buildings, parking lots, student housing, gyms, stadiums, bookstores, cafes, etc; constant innovation, such as the creation of new programs, certificates, courses, and of mostly unnecessary changes in learning management systems, email providers, and the interminable and mostly unnecessary updates of computers, phones, and other technology; the selling of “credits” tied to time “employed” in the classroom (the “credit hour,” “extra credit,” “points earned” and “points deducted”); the system of rewards and punishments known as “grading” (ranking, *classifying*, distinguishing) ensuing from “competition” with other students; the presence of a factory-like taskmaster (the professor) setting the “terms” of the course via a “contract” (the prospectus-like “agreement” called a syllabus), and incessantly inspecting, probing, assessing, and evaluating student “performance” through “tests;” college rankings, viewed by “buyers” (potential students and their parents) as indicative of an institution’s “stock value.” I am just skimming the surface here, and could continue. But let’s finally mention the most blatant form of economic subjugation bearing on the

So, the first salvo from right of the *might* is acceptance—tacit or overt—of the current status quo. I consider this a move from the political right because such acceptance is a key feature of the liberal-conservative political-economic nexus known as *neoliberalism*. One of neoliberalism’s founding slogans, popularized by Conservative British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s is TINA—There Is No Alternative! Since no better system of production and exchange than market capitalism exists, there will certainly be, as Professor X prophesizes, “no massive changes” to the institutions that circulate within that marketplace, including the university. Hence, the neoliberal logic continues, we must fashion for ourselves meaning-making narratives that enable us mere spectators to retain our ability to function, indeed, even come to thrive, within the inevitable state of the situation. To be truly effective, such narratives should be woven with the threads (and tell-tale signs) of neoliberal subjectivity: vulnerability, resilience, adaptivity, self-help, feigned positivity.

It will be useful to explore this link to neoliberalism more closely. The orthodox definition of *neoliberalism* sees it as “a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can be advanced by the development of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade.”<sup>6</sup> If you are privileged and wealthy, all that probably sounds quite fine to you. If

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student: debt. As Noam Chomsky says: “Students who acquire large debts putting themselves through school are unlikely to think about changing society. When you trap people in a system of debt . they can’t afford the time to think. Tuition fee increases are a ‘disciplinary technique,’ and, by the time students graduate, they are not only loaded with debt, but have also internalized the ‘disciplinarian culture.’ This makes them efficient components of the consumer economy.” See also “Noam Chomsky on Student Debt and Education,” <https://chomsky.info/20130227>. For more on the concept of capitalist logic, see, Ronald Edsforth, “On the Definition of Capitalism and Its Implications for the Current Global Political-Economic Crisis,” <https://tinyurl.com/yagcctvd>.

<sup>6</sup> David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 2. There is ample literature on how the university fits into this theory. See, for instance, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, “The Neo-Liberal University,” *New Labor Forum*, no. 6 (Spring-Summer, 2000): 73-79.

you are neither particularly privileged nor wealthy, you are more likely to agree with critics of neoliberalism, who argue that it is nothing less than “the ideology at the root of all our problems”<sup>7</sup>—massive financial inequality, poverty, entrenched patriarchy and misogyny, institutional racism and bigotry, authoritarianism, environmental degradation, international strife and warfare. Be all that as it may, for our purposes a more salient approach to the topic is to consider neoliberalism as “a theory and practice of subjectivity.” For:

we cannot understand how neoliberalism is able to function as a socioeconomic program...without addressing how it problematizes human subjectivity. It is the interpretive capacities through which human beings reflect upon the nature of their world, their relations with themselves, each other, and their environments that are seen as being of crucial issue for the legitimization of neoliberal practices of government.<sup>8</sup>

How, then does neoliberalism, and the acquiescence to it as the status-quo, problematize human subjectivity? And, directly to our purpose, what role does the university play in perpetuating neoliberal ideology by aiding in the creation of its subject? In brief, the subject “inculcated through neoliberal discourses” and university participation is a “resilient, humble, and disempowered being that lives a life of permanent ignorance and insecurity.” This plight follows from embodied acceptance of the *unchangeability* of the institution and of the *unknowability* of the very conditions for that change. It should be clear that this position entails humility and powerlessness, or humility *in the face of* powerlessness. That being the case, our only

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<sup>7</sup> George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism—the ideology at the root of all our problems,” *The Guardian*, <https://tinyurl.com/hkbom5x>.

<sup>8</sup> *The Neoliberal Subject*, 2.

recourse is to develop *resilience*, the ability to *keep going*, and, in doing so, to keep *it* going.

Estragon: I can't go on like this.

Vladimir: That's what you think...We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment [with the status quo]. How many people can boast as much?

Estragon: Billions.<sup>9</sup>

We are, furthermore, seeing here a subject who has come to denigrate the “hubris of ideals of autonomy.” This is perhaps the most damning disposition of status-quoist subjectivity. It is damning not because it belies what is perhaps the very defining tenet of the humanities—belief in the individual as an autonomous, eminently rational *agent*—but because it entails a defeatist cynicism bordering on a kind of gaslighting abusiveness toward arguments for real change. Such arguments are dismissed by the status-quoist as “unrealistic,” “too idealistic,” “too radical,” and, most common of all, “impossible!” (I will return to this feature of the argument later.) Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this is “not a subject that can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility.” Rather, it sees as its only hope the necessity of adapting as effectively as possible to the unchanging *way things are*.

In the following section, I will present an alternative approach—the one from the *left*—to that of the university professor who is “looking for solutions and best practices *within the context*” just described—a context embedded in a liberal-conservative-right politics. And in the final section, I will present a teaching model that aligns with that alternative. In this section, I have argued that we can

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. <https://tinyurl.com/ybb9wxsw>.

never avoid the political in the classroom (or indeed in our scholarship). That is, how and what we teach, our negotiation of authority *vis à vis* our students, our relationship to the very institution of higher education, and so on, always extrapolates out into a politicized social formation. The formation outlined thus far is that of a *spectacle* arising spectre-like out the demands of a capitalist logic that insists on profit over people, and on *its* and its shareholders' interests before that of "the public," much less that of diverse individuals. The extrapolated consequences suggested here, I believe, point toward a dangerous complicity with the prevailing, profoundly dehumanizing, status quo.

### *On the left*

To the left of the *might* is "a subject capable of conceiving the transformation of its world and the power relations it finds itself subject to."<sup>10</sup> As I hope to have shown, it is this very failure of the imagination to conceive of alternatives to the current state of the situation that marks the liberal-conservative-right side of our divide. A major hindrance is the seeming incapacity of the status-quoist subject to conceive of anything but *macro* transformation. If, like Professor X, you "don't expect [that] massive changes will suddenly be made to the university system in [your] lifetime," then what choice do you have but to "look for solutions and best practices within the context" of your currently "bounded field"? The left side of the divide extrapolates out into a libertarian-socialist-left formation precisely because it refuses to adhere to these boundaries, whether disciplinary, institutional, or indeed worldly. It, furthermore, adamantly rejects the status-quoist dogma that only once "massive changes" to the institution, or indeed to the world at large, have occurred can meaningful collective

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<sup>10</sup> *The Neoliberal Subject*, 4.

transformation take shape. As I will show in the following section, the key to such change lies in a practice called *prefiguration*, or the direct, viable, immediately lived *micro* realization of a classroom, university, and world envisioned by the humanities. First, it will be necessary to be more specific about what I assume the humanities necessarily to be.

Etymologists tell us that the word “education” stems from two Latin roots: *educare*, to train, to, mold; and *educere*, to draw out, to lead out.<sup>11</sup> The former suggest a regime, whereby the learner is fashioned into a quite specific social subject, one predetermined by a given ideological formation. Pedagogically, this view suggests exercises like passive listening to lectures, memorization of data, and displays of successful inculcation via tests. Significantly, as we will see in the next section, it entails operating within a particular “bounded field” or scholarly discipline. The term *educere* suggests rather an inherently emancipatory practice, whereby the learner is being *led out* of, for instance, precisely such restrictive formations. Pedagogically, this practice entails fostering the development of critical and analytical skills. It also entails the eschewal of bounded fields. I imagine it goes without saying that I hold the latter version to describe what happens on the left side of our *might*, while the former version describes what counts as “education” on the right side (though I will suggest a better term for it in the final section). I will say more in the following section about actual pedagogy. Here, I want to briefly sketch a view of the humanities that would *necessarily* foster this practice of *educere*.

Returning to the Stanford University Humanities Center, we find what can serve as a sine qua non definition of the humanities: “Through exploration of the humanities we learn how to think creatively and critically, to reason, and to ask questions.”<sup>12</sup> This definition assumes the Enlightenment values that, in fact, gave rise to

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Randall V. Bass and J. W. Good, “*Educare* and *Educere*: Is a Balance Possible in the Educational System?” *The Educational Forum*, Volume 68, Number 2, Winter 2004: 161-168.

<sup>12</sup> <http://shc.stanford.edu/why-do-humanities-matter>.

the modern university. That is, it assumes what, prior to the spread of the Enlightenment, were three radical—indeed, impossible!—ideas. First, people are capable of *reasoning*. This means that we are no longer dependent on priests, masters, kings—or professors—to determine what is best for us. Second, if we are capable of reasoned thought about what to do and how to live, then we are capable of *action* based on that thinking. This means that we are no longer dependent on priests, masters, kings—or professors—to determine how we should act. Third, if we are capable of sound reasoning and of action based on that reasoning, then we are capable of *fashioning* a better world (institution, situation, etc.) than the one we currently inhabit. We are no longer dependent on the prescript of the *spectacle* to dictate the terms of a state of affairs.<sup>13</sup> This is the view of education promoted by actual libertarian-socialists, such as Noam Chomsky, who argues that “The highest goal in life is to inquire and create. The purpose of education from that point of view is just to help people to learn on their own.”<sup>14</sup> It is not difficult to intuit the danger to the status quo lurking in such a view. For, if critique and creativity are the lifeblood of the humanities, then an education in that vein creates a subject at odds with the indoctrinational impulse of *educare*. And if, as Chomsky says, the parameters of what constitutes an education is determined by the individual, then the very concept of a “bounded field” must be dispensed with. How, then, should we proceed? With this question, we can turn to a specific example of how the reader might realize such an emancipatory education, even *within* the neoliberal classroom. The example involves the libertarian-socialist, or specifically anarchist, idea of *prefiguration*. This idea in turn assumes deeply counter-intuitive images of the teacher or professor, the learner or student, the “field” or subject of study, and the very purpose of education. The general example that I will provide is that of

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<sup>13</sup> See Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and its Aspiration* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/ydex2vzd>.

“unlearning.” Specifically, in the final section, I will discuss Jacques Rancière’s concept of “intellectual emancipation,” first articulated in his 1987 book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

### *The ethics of prefiguration*

The first appearance of the concept of prefiguration that I intend here is found in André Gorz’s 1968 *New Left Review* article “The Way Forward.”<sup>15</sup> Not insignificantly, Gorz’s piece was published just after the Situationist-inspired Paris insurrection referred to earlier. With visions of imminent revolution dancing in their heads, activists and intellectuals alike were asking how best to prepare for the looming new state of the situation. Gorz suggested a strategy in which the most committed revolutionary figures—the “vanguard party” in Leninist parlance—“prefigures the proletarian State, and reflects for the working class its capacity to be a ruling class.” Such “reflection” is precisely the educative strategy of prefiguration because it *mirrors*, at the immediate micro level of revolutionary association, the very forms and relations it desires to see manifested in society at large. This idea is in fact a central strategy of libertarian-socialist thought going back to the First International. Again, it figures in a manner that is not insignificant to my argument. I am referring to the famous falling out between the “authoritarian” wing comprised of the supporters of Karl Marx, and the “libertarian” wing of Mikhail Bakunin’s supporters at the London conference in 1871. We glimpse the nature of the divide from a comment by Bakunin:

[Society] can and should reorganize itself, not from the top down according to an ideal plan dressed up by wise men or

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<sup>15</sup> Uri Gordon, “Prefigurative Politics between Ethical Practice and Empty Promise,” *Political Studies* 2018, Vol. 66(2), 526.

scholars nor by decrees promulgated by some dictatorial power or even by a national assembly...[but] from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers.<sup>16</sup>

Like the professors on the right of our *might* divide, Marx and his followers reflexively assumed the necessity of a paternalistic approach to leadership, which further assumed that certain guru-like figures are best equipped to determine the way forward for all involved. Bakunin rightly predicted that Marx's eventual "dictatorship of the proletariat," if ever realized, would end with tyrannical new masters, the "red bourgeoisie," merely replacing the tyrannical old masters. For Bakunin, this outcome was *prefigured* not only in Marx's theory of revolution, but in his very demeanor: "the instinct of liberty is lacking in him; he remains, from head to foot, an authoritarian."<sup>17</sup> An obvious question that arises here is: on what grounds should we expect a free society to arise out of hierarchical process? Indeed, this was precisely the question posed in the circular written by the Bakunin camp in the aftermath of the split with the "authoritarian" socialists:

How could one expect an egalitarian and free society to emerge out of an authoritarian organisation! It is impossible. The International, embryo of the future human society, must be, from now on, the faithful image of our principles of liberty and federation, and must reject from within any principle tending toward authority, toward dictatorship.<sup>18</sup>

Risking what may seem like overreach to some readers, I use these examples from revolutionary politics for several reasons. The most

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon, "Prefigurative Politics," 529.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, "Reflections on Marx and Engels." <https://tinyurl.com/y9q2ette>.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, "Prefigurative Politics," 529.

basic reason, as I mentioned earlier, is that I hope to convince the reader that there are real, potentially large scale, social implications to what occurs in the seemingly inconsequential and ostensibly apolitical environment of the college classroom. Indeed, I can rephrase to my purpose this crucial statement from the 1871 circular: “The future society should be nothing else than the universalization of the organization that the classroom forms for itself. We must therefore strive to make this organization as close as possible to our ideal.”<sup>19</sup> Do we desire a *society* that has realized equality, that rejects unjustified institutionalized power and authority, that is anti-racist, that is feminist, pro-LGBTQ, environmentally friendly, and more? If so, we must use the *classroom* as a mirror of this society. We must create “an ethically consistent relationship between the means and ends,” in Cindy Milstein’s words, wherein our values align to our practice and our practice to “the new society before it is fully in place.”<sup>20</sup>

As we learn from the division between the two leading figures of socialism at the First International, Marx and Bakunin, however, this prefigured ideal will meet resistance from actors who appear to be our logical allies. Paternalistic professors, even left-leaning ones, will insist that students simply are not yet capable of such an approach. Hence, the necessity of an intervention that is both *radical* and *ethical*. It is radical because it realizes “the new society” at its very root—in the unfolding interactions of lived human associations; in our case, in the university classroom. This approach is in distinction to one that uses the levers of university governance to achieve its aim. Again, a political correspondence suggests itself. One of the most definitive differences between leftist and liberal approaches to change is captured in Bakunin’s strategy calling for “direct economical struggle against capitalism, without interfering in the political parliamentary

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon, “Prefigurative Politics,” 528-529. The original reads: “The future society should be nothing else than the universalization of the organisation that the International has formed for itself. We must therefore strive to make this organisation as close as possible to our ideal.”

<sup>20</sup> Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and its Aspirations* (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), 68.

agitation."<sup>21</sup> Presumably, Professor X says “I don’t expect massive changes will suddenly be made to the university system in my lifetime” because the professor is all-too-aware of the absurdly slow movement of the college’s manager-heavy bureaucratic machinery, as well as the “seemingly endemic cowardice and personally petty antipathies” operating therein.<sup>22</sup> And yet, apart from leaving academia, there is no alternative for those on the liberal-conservative-right of the *might* than to work within the “parliamentary” system of the institution—its faculty senate, its committees, its strategic plan, its top-heavy leadership hierarchy, and so forth. This is, in fact, a defining feature of liberal-conservative-right politics, namely, the strategy of *reform from within*. Actors on the libertarian-socialist-left adamantly reject this strategy as ineffectual, status-quoist, accommodationist, and hence ultimately futile. In its place it injects precisely an immediate, lived, *prefigurative* practice—direct educational struggle against the neoliberal university. This strategy, as Milstein tells us, is *ethical*, because we enact our classroom practice *even if*, I would hasten to add, “the new society” has no realistic chance of ever coming into place. That is, the driving imperative behind my prefigurative classroom is simply that I hold it to be right and just; hence, ethics demands that I enact it *whether or not* it ultimately “contains within it the forward surge of an achievement which can be anticipated” in society at large.<sup>23</sup> This uncertainty of ultimate outcome tempers any claim to a necessarily “successful” or even affirmative prefiguration. It entails rather a cleared-eyed ethics that does not flinch from the undead ghoul that is the political-economic catastrophe haunting the university. It is an ethics rooted as deeply in anxiety, hopelessness,

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Kropotkin in his seminal article, “Anarchism,” *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1910.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/kropotkin-peter/1910/britannica.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> L.O. Aranye Fradenburg and Eileen A. Joy, “Unlearning: A Duologue,” in Aiden Seary and Éamonn Dunne, *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2016), 172. The quote is from Joy’s section of the “duologue.”

<sup>23</sup> This is Ernst Bloch discussing his quite relevant concept of “concrete utopia;” in Gordon, “Prefigurative Politics,” 533.

impossibility, and mourning as it is in justice, passion, insistence, and utopian yearning.

## *Unlearning*

So, what might such a prefigurative classroom look like? In this final section, I would like to present what I believe is a realizable example of an “emancipated” classroom. The broad concept with which I am working, derived from radical education theory, is called “unlearning.” We can get a rough sense of the spirit of unlearning by returning to the statement with which I opened this essay: “Contemplating a sculpture *might* make you think about how an artist's life affected her creative decisions;” *but not if the terms of that contemplation have been predetermined by the fields of “Art,” “Aesthetics,” or “Art History.”* “Listening to a history course *might* help you better understand the past;” *but not if that history is bounded by “History.”* And so on. The claim here is that what takes place on the right of the *might* is a *regimen of learning*. It will become clear as I proceed that “learning” is *educare*, something wholly distinct from “education,” which is *educere*. Learning occurs within what Professor X refers to as a “bounded field.” It has as its goal the replication and perpetuation of a predetermined program of “knowledge.” This bounded field is permeated by “disciplinary” procedures and judgements concerning, for example, standards, rigor, interpretation, skills, and, most crucially, explication. Explication is the very life blood of learning. It is the conduit of the life-giving cells of an aptly termed *corpus*, or “body of knowledge.” Explication is also, I contend, the pedagogical ally of a liberal-conservative-right worldview and politics. Not least of all, it is the death of education. Hence, the necessity of *unlearning*.

Jacques Rancière's concept of "intellectual emancipation," first articulated in his 1987 book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, is an exemplary strategy for, negatively, countering learning, and for, positively, implementing education. Rancière expresses the issue at the heart of the matter when he writes: "Explication is the annihilation of one mind by another...whoever teaches without emancipating, stultifies." This statement presents a starkly divided pathway, one that will likely strike many readers as based on a ridiculous overstatement. It claims that if you, as teacher, employ the very tactic that constitutes our very notion of what it is to teach—explanation—then you are engaged in the destruction of your students' intelligence. The statement claims that every time you open your mouth to *explain the contents of your bounded field*, you are expanding your students' capacity for stupidity. In political terms, the statement suggests that explicative teaching supports the creation of a passive subject content to engage the spectacle, while emancipatory teaching encourages a courageous subject fit for resistance and creative innovation. All of this obviously suggests a practice that calls for a drastically, indeed radically, different vision of education from the one circulating in our current institutions of higher education. Because it assumes that the classroom must prefigure—must itself manifest, reveal, and actualize—a world devoid of neoliberal detritus (inequality, patriarchy, poverty, racism, etc.)—such a classroom obviously has no need for an instructor-who-is-supposed-to-know, that guru-like figure who possess the requisite wisdom for professing before the unschooled student body, and leading them to the "meaning" encoded within the guru's "bounded field." Indeed, the emancipatory instructor in a prefigurative classroom will be unrecognizable to anyone who is able to function contentedly as a "professor" (an explicator) in higher education.

What, then, is emancipatory teaching? First of all, this model contains within it what I imagine to be an insurmountably objectionable feature to many readers: elimination of the *master explicator*. Why such a drastic move? Because the explicator is constituted through the *logic of two intelligences*: inferior vs. superior, ignorant vs. knowing, professor vs. student. Readers may be asking themselves: And what's wrong with that? Some people *are* more intelligent and better educated than others. Professors have doctorates after all! So, why shouldn't they determine the shape of the bounded field?

I will now tell a wholly implausible—but true!—story. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière relates the tale of one Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840). In 1818, Jacotot had been invited by the King of the Netherlands to lecture in French literature at Louvain. Thinking it would amount to a protracted vacation after the tumult surrounding the return of the Bourbons to power (Jacotot had been a minister under the Convention), he accepted. What he found instead of rest and relaxation, however, was an exhilarating intellectual adventure. For, Jacotot knew no Flemish and his students knew no French. Determined to engage the students nonetheless, Jacotot gave careful thought to the matter. He concluded that, in the first instance, “the minimal link of a *thing in common* had to be established between himself and them.”<sup>24</sup> It just so happened that a French-Flemish bilingual edition of Fénelon's *Télémaque* was coming out in nearby Belgium. This would do. He had the book delivered to his students, and, through an interpreter, asked them to refer to the Flemish text only as a means to understand the French. He had them work hard at it. He provided the environment for education, but *they* did all the work. Those students who had the self-motivation to persist to the end were then asked to write, *in French*, a detailed account of *Télémaque*.

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford University Press, 1991 [1987]), 2.

Given the counter-intuitive nature of the experiment, its seemingly obvious fate as abject failure, the results were nearly impossible to grasp. Rancière quotes an early commentator on the experiment:

[Jacotot] expected horrendous barbarisms, or maybe a complete inability to perform. How could these young people, deprived of explanation, understand and resolve the difficulties of a language entirely new to them? No matter! He had to find out where the route opened by chance had taken them, what had been the results of that desperate empiricism. And how surprised he was to discover that the students, left to themselves, managed this difficult step as well as many French could have done! Was *wanting* all that was necessary for *doing*? Were all people virtually capable of understanding what others had done and understood?<sup>25</sup>

*Deprived of explanation. Left to themselves.* These are keys to understanding what Jacotot would come to call his method of “universal education.” Specifically, Rancière identifies two mechanisms of explicative teaching which, when removed, entail the emancipated intelligence that is an accompanying goal of the method. The two mechanisms are *extensiveness* and *progressiveness*. I will detail them in a moment. First, a few more words to highlight the professor-figure whom, I believe, represents the biggest obstacle to implementing this pedagogy. Am I, along with Rancière, justified in considering this figure an agent of stupidity, a *stultifying explicator*?

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<sup>25</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 2.

Look at this account from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and see if you don't recognize a familiar figure.

The stultifier is not an aged obtuse master who crams his students' skulls full of poorly digested knowledge, or a malignant character mouthing half-truths in order to shore up his power and the social order. On the contrary, he is all the more efficacious because he is knowledgeable, enlightened, and of good faith. The more he knows, the more evident to him is the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant ones. The more he is enlightened, the more evident he finds the difference between groping blindly and searching methodically, the more he will insist on substituting the spirit of the letter, the clarity of explications for the authority of the book. Above all, he will say, the student must understand, and for that we must explain better. Such is the concern of the enlightened pedagogue: does the little one understand? He doesn't understand. I will find new ways to explain it to him, ways more rigorous in principle, more attractive in form—and I will verify that he has understood.<sup>26</sup>

The master explicator operates by deploying the countless *examples* derived from the the “bounded field” of tradition, typically as recorded in authoritative books—historical texts, canonical works, scripture and commentary, contemporary textbooks and scholarly tomes—books from which the professor-explicator offers no escape. In any case, the crucial point is this: the explication, derived as it is from the master's superior knowledge, wisdom, and experience, always prevails over the insights of the inferior intelligence: that of the student. For Rancière,

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<sup>26</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 7-8.

something vile and pernicious is seething beneath this stupid-making practice of prioritizing one intelligence over another: the perpetuation of social inequality. For inequality operates within, and thereby strengthens and perpetuates, “the very framework within which we get educated and acquire knowledge.” The explicative classroom is the very place where “our intellectual capacity comes into agreement with the inequality of the social order.”<sup>27</sup>

This framework can be dismantled through application of the following formula: *Everything is in everything; learn something and relate it to all the rest.*<sup>28</sup> Here’s how that works. The ray of light that kills the intelligence-sucking vampire of explication is precisely that *something*. The logic of two intelligences lives and breathes in the shared delusion that the student *cannot* learn *something*.

As long as you are before “something,” you are before an opaque particularity which has its reason outside itself. You are before an opaque fragment of an unknown totality. You cannot learn anything unless you understand its connection to the whole of which it is a fragment.<sup>29</sup>

The logic of two intelligences holds that any given conceptual *something* is only a minute fragment of a greater “totality.” This totality is nothing other than what Professor X calls “the bounded field.” The bounded field represents a hermeneutic circle, the whole of which is known only to the professor-as-explicator. It is within this circle that the professor derives power, for there is virtually no end to the totality of a bounded field. The student cannot understand *something* without knowing how it connects to the whole of the bounded field. Only the professor knows how to link the part to the

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<sup>27</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 26.

<sup>28</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 27.

<sup>29</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 27.

whole. A crucial element in this logic is the fact that the whole of the bounded field is itself “unpresentable,” and therefore “must be presupposed as inherent to the power of making the links, to the capacity of those who know how to know.”<sup>30</sup> It is here that inequality, in both its pedagogical and social forms, shows its distorted face. For, the capacity to know the whole can only be demonstrated before an unequal intelligence. The professor’s intelligence ranges exultant over the transparent space of the bounded field. The student’s intelligence shrivels cramped, “enclosed in the relation of a private—idiotic—mind to particular things.”<sup>31</sup> This is the principle of *extensiveness*.

Contained within the principle of extensiveness is another feature that many readers, I imagine, will recognize as a self-evident necessity for learning to occur: *progressiveness*. The principle of extensiveness holds that the professor’s knowledge will always range far distant from the student’s. Might it be possible for the student to close this distance? Yes. But it takes *time*. The time it takes is bound to a quite particular *progression*, the specific steps of which only the professor-explicator has knowledge. The logic of the principle of *progressiveness* is this: learn *this* something, then *this* something, then *this* something. The bounded field may be *knowledgeably* traversed only in a definite progression, a progression determined *ad aeterno* by the bounded field and divined exclusively by its professor-explicator agent. Where *extensiveness* operates spatially, *progressiveness* operates temporally: the bounded field may be finally circumnavigated only once the proper time has unfolded. Thus, the professor not only has command over the full range of proper connections to be made within the hermeneutic circle of the bounded field, but also “knowledge of the progression according to which the

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<sup>30</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 27.

<sup>31</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 27. Rancière is playing on the ancient Greek sense of the word *idiōtēs*, which simply denoted “a private person.” Later Latin usage extends the meaning to “ignorant, uneducated.”

ignoramus is able to make this or that step in his travels,” extending over a protracted period of “learning.”<sup>32</sup>

So the logic of explication calls for the principle of a regression *ad infinitum*: there is no reason for the redoubling of reasonings ever to stop. What brings an end to the regression and gives the system its foundation is simply that the explicator is the sole judge of the point when the explication is itself explicated. He is the sole judge of that, in itself, dizzying question: has the student understood the reasonings that teach him to understand the reasonings?...The master’s secret is to know how to recognize the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed, the distance also between learning and understanding. The explicator sets up and abolishes this distance—deploys it and reabsorbs it in the fullness of his speech.<sup>33</sup>

I said that the framework of inequality can be dismantled through application of the emancipatory formula *Everything is in everything; learn something and relate it to all the rest*. I am also arguing that the exercise of this formula in the classroom enables a prefiguration of a just world. Entailed in these claims are the additional ones that the formula disables the hypnotic seduction of the spectacle and, in so doing, strikes a blow against the capture of education by the prevailing system of dehumanizing neoliberal values. Most importantly, all of this allows to emerge the lineaments of a subject creative enough to imagine, and courageous enough to act toward, a just society. So, now

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<sup>32</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 28.

<sup>33</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 4-5.

we must ask: what is the right way forward that is revealed by the non-explicative professor?

Immediately, Jacotot retorts, *there is no right way forward!* Proclamations of a *right* method merely replicate the logic of two intelligences at work in the pedagogy of explication within a bounded field. All attempts at formulating a right way “boast of knowing how to know.”<sup>34</sup> Since there is no right way of knowing, there can be neither accredited explicator nor stultified student. *Everything is in everything; learn something and relate it to all the rest.* Each “bounded field” is an illusion. It is an hallucination conjured up by medieval scholastics to defend their precious religious dogma against the rising tide of secular pluralism, and perpetuated by the petty departmental politics of the modern managerial university. Against the “bounded field” the emancipatory classroom facilitator assumes that *everything is in everything*, the whole is everywhere. This very essay before your eyes or in your hands is:

a whole from which you can discover your own capacity of making an infinite number of connections, hence your capacity of making links and wholes in general. The only condition of those operations is an “opinion:” the opinion of the equality of intelligence: the opinion that there is only one intelligence and that the master and the student are only two speaking beings, two travellers weaving their path in the forest of things and signs.<sup>35</sup>

Can not every one of us gather ample evidence that no explicator, no professor, no writer or speaker, can control the connections and links made in the process of another’s hearing or reading or thinking? Why, then, the charade of order, of correctness and control? Why, then, the

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<sup>34</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 29.

<sup>35</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 29.

insistence on the proper negotiation of extensiveness and progressiveness within a bounded field? Why, then—even with all of the current celebration of *interdisciplinarity*—the perpetuation of the pedagogical fetish fantasizing the value, meaning, and wisdom of departmentalized humanities fields? In short, why the epistemological *discipline* on the right of our *might*, that of liberal-conservative-right learning, rather than the epistemological *anarchism* of libertarian-socialist-left education?<sup>36</sup> A greater question presents itself: why would an *educator* even *desire* such control, entailing as it does the shrivelling of imagination and the proscription of potentially idiosyncratic insight? And finally the looming question: why would an educator choose to function as an agent of the dehumanizing, debilitating yet seemingly unchallenged *opinion* known as inequality?

Un-explaining in general means undoing the opinion of inequality. Undoing it means undoing the links that it has tightened everywhere between the perceptible and the thinkable. On the one hand, the un-explanatory method unties the stitches of the veil that the explanatory system has spread on everything; it restores the things that this system caught in its nets to their singularity and makes them available to the perception and the intelligence of anybody. On the other hand it returns their opacity, their lack of evidence, to the modes of presentation and argumentation which were supposed to cast light on them. By so doing it substitutes a community of equal speaking beings for the distribution of the positions opposing the learned to the ignoramuses.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> On “epistemological anarchism,” see Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1993 [1975]).

<sup>37</sup> Rancière, “Un-What?” 35.