Towards Deep Liberation: A Gadamerian Correction to Critical Pedagogy

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According to Henry Giroux, neither liberal nor conservative educational theories consider teacher authority to be a problem. He finds this position to be problematic in itself, as the unreflective authority of teachers is one of the means by which schools reproduce social structures and inculcate youth into ideologies that serve to perpetuate systems of injustice.[1] In response, Giroux has rightfully noted that the solution to the problem of authority is not to reject authority as a whole, as he claims many radical educators have done. Rather, authority must be intentionally re-conceptualized as something "rooted in community life," an authority that "points to a theory of representative democracy, workers' democracy, and civil and human rights."[2] As such, authority becomes emancipatory, and critical pedagogy, as conceived by Giroux, can truly be a practice of liberation.

There are two problems with his view, which I believe require a correction to the object and direction of liberation. First is the problem of professional authority vis-à-vis the role of a public school teacher. Giroux's conceptualization of the emancipatory authority of the teacher grants the teacher too much authority over the ends of education, an authority I believe should not supersede or supplant the authority of the public. Second, Giroux's reconceptualization of authority merely relocates power and ideology and, in so doing, reconstitutes the same form of domination it seeks to escape. I believe this occurs because of the particular ontological view of authority that regulates his reconceptualization. By substituting this ontology of authority with Gadamer's authority of tradition, the reconstitution of domination is avoided, the overreach of teacher authority on the aims of education is no longer necessitated, and the aims of a more comprehensive liberatory pedagogy - one I will call "deep liberation pedagogy" - can be sketched out. I will further turn briefly to Plato's *Meno* to offer an illustrative example of such liberation.

Giroux's critique of current conceptualizations of authority rightfully points out that teachers are becoming deskilled and deprofessionalized. Yet Giroux's reconceptualization of teacher authority doesn't stop at the mere restructuring of work "so as to both dignify the nature of their work and allow them to act in a creative and responsible fashion."[3] The rehabilitation of the professional status of teachers involves a rehabilitation of their authority, from one based on the technological methods of teaching to one in which teachers are empowered to determine both the methods *and* direction of education. Moreover, he wants to set out the direction in which the teacher must be creative and responsible in advance: teachers "need to define themselves" with a political role that has a "wider sphere of intervention,"[4] whereby they "join together in a wider social movement dedicated to restructuring the ideological and material conditions that work both within and outside of schooling."[5] More specifically, the concept of authority in radical pedagogy means that

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"the purpose of schooling now becomes fashioned around two questions: What kind of society do educators want to live in and what kind of teachers and pedagogy can be both informed and legitimated by such a view of authority that takes democracy and citizenship seriously?"[6]

In making these moves, Giroux places the question of the purpose of education squarely in the hands of educators, as a group, and ties that purpose to *a priori* notions of democracy and citizenship. The move to provide greater control over education to educators might make sense if we think of other professions in which the members of the profession control the profession itself, such as law and medicine. For example, no one would find a physician outside of his authority in organizing communities to engage in healthier behaviors or advocating for opportunities for greater health in their communities, whatever those might be. No profession, in the United States at least, appears to come as close to such a misalignment as we have in our schooling system between, on the one hand, the members of the profession, i.e., educators who we might expect to exercise professional judgment about teaching, and on the other hand, the control of the aims of the profession, i.e., the control of our schools by lawmakers who often have less substantive authority on pedagogical matters.

Yet this analogy between other professions and teaching becomes strained when we look more closely at the aims of the professions rather than their practices. Physicians have authority over the practice of medicine, which takes as its aim an incontrovertible end of maintaining biological health. Lawyers have authority over the practice of law, which has the incontrovertible aim of winning cases for those they represent. If we could be certain that the teaching profession would reflect the public's sentiment at any given time, the analogy between these former professions and education might be an easy one to hold onto. However, debates about aims among individual policy makers, political parties, and professional teachers associations paint a different, more contentious picture. Granting full professional authority to teachers, in the way Giroux believes, means granting more than pedagogical authority to teachers; it means granting *political* authority to teachers such that one specific subset of the public - public school teachers - would disproportionately determine in what ways an institution such as school should *create* the public.[7] To be clear, I agree with Giroux that teachers should recognize the political nature of the curriculum, and that they should take a stand on it. I also agree that teachers should be involved - to an extent - in shaping the direction of schools. However, the authority on the ends of education he wishes to grant them should not supersede or supplant the authority of any member of the public.

The fact that Giroux would grant teachers undue authority over the aims of education is problematic regardless of the ideological commitments of teachers. What makes the problem even more concerning is that to grant teachers political authority in educational matters, in the way Giroux conceptualizes it, would mean that educational aims must be radical. Such a conceptualization of teaching cannot "point to a theory of representative democracy," but rather militates against it by granting teachers, as a vanguard of radical ideology, political authority otherwise granted to representatives of a democratic government. Ultimately, in this case,

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the public must abdicate responsibility for its own survival, handing control of its destiny over to a minority of its constituents, who are not elected representatives, but teachers, whose training is not in politics but in pedagogy.

One might argue that I have raised a straw man, and Giroux's position merely aims to make teachers agents of empowerment to students. As such, radical teachers are radical only in so far as they are leading students to critique the curricular materials they are given. Rather than create citizens that merely accept the way the world is, or the way the teacher believes they should see it, students can shape the world in the ways they believe it best to be. Giroux does state that "regardless of how politically or ideologically correct a teacher may be, his or her voice can be destructive if it is imposed on them or if it is used to silence them."[8]

Nonetheless, critical pedagogy operates under certain cultural, ideological, and philosophical assumptions, and enacting them with students in the name of liberation merely allows them to operate more covertly as forces of domination. Take, for example, Paulo Freire's claim that "for the problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education … is the organized, systematized, and developed re-presentation to individuals of things about which they want to know more."[9] To make this claim, Freire quotes Mao Tse-tung: "you know I've proclaimed for a long time: we must teach the masses clearly what we have received from them confusedly." He argues that "[Mao's] affirmation contains an entire dialogic theory of how to construct the program content of education, which cannot be elaborated according to what the *educator* thinks best for the *students*."[10] A charitable read would take this to mean that the specific content of the curriculum cannot be set forth by the teacher for the student, as a curriculum that presents a specific set of truths. Rather, the teacher starts with what the students bring with them - their problems and experiences -and the teacher merely acts as a clarifying mirror for those.

Yet by making the stand for teaching the masses a clarification of what they have seen confusedly, the content and worldview of the educator is already present in the interpretation of the themes fed back to students as a problem. In fact, what is presented to the students as a problem is always already a problem *for the educator*. There are always the "politically or ideologically correct" means, conceptual frameworks, and intellectual traditions that radical teachers will assume in generating their analysis, finding themes, and ordering student problems. Matt Jackson astutely points out the inherent contradiction in Giroux's conceptualization of emancipatory authority when he says that the "troublesome assumption" of Giroux's position is that "as long as forms of authority remain under the rubric of criticism and dialogue – encompassed in the economy of my self-reflexive reason – they are inherently ethical."[11]

In this way, the analysis provided by the critical pedagogue is already the attempt to supplant one ideology for another. In clarifying the problems of the student, the critical pedagogue uses his authority to plant particular conceptions of what oppression, and by extension, liberation entails. As such, the practice is not so much liberatory in any strong sense, but rather is transformative of the student's consciousness into the worldview of the critical pedagogue, a world that is necessarily already constituted by *a priori* conceptualizations of oppression and liberation, disempowerment and

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empowerment. The purported leveling of the student-teacher and teacher-student in critical pedagogy is thus an unwitting veil for the power asymmetry implicit in clarifying, what is considered to be, the confusion of the oppressed.

The point of this initial discussion is to point out the two problems with Giroux's reconceptualization of teacher authority: the first is the assumption that teachers ought to have political authority over the aims of education; the second, which largely rests on the first, is that, in having such political power, the pedagogue ought to have the right understanding and exercise of his or her authority. These errors lead Giroux's reconceptualization of authority to reclaim authority in the name of emancipation and, at the same time, to do so by excluding or attempting to colonize any mind that does not already perceive the ideological and political problematics of the critical pedagogue's world. At best, Giroux's reconceptualization of authority relocates the problem of authority but does not escape it. If today's critical voices are not to become what they detest in such a case - another dogma or *idée fixe* - then teacher authority on the aims of education should not be privileged over the general public; and the object of liberatory pedagogy, if there is one at all, should not be to swap the chains of one ideology for the chains of another, but rather to liberate from the power of ideology altogether.

While Jackson's critique points out the inherent contradiction of Giroux's concept of emancipatory authority, I believe, even further, that this contradiction is inescapable because of a fundamental ontological error Giroux makes in conceptualizing authority. This error can be illuminated by Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the authority of tradition. The authority of tradition in Gadamer's view is not something wholly distinct from our understanding but is part-and-parcel of it. The primary reason for the inextricability of tradition from our understanding is the universality of the hermeneutic experience, in which "that which comes into language is not something pre-given before language; rather the word gives it its own determinateness."[12] In other words, tradition makes things intelligible to us in the first place, and, as such, carries implicit power to shape our perceptions and interpretations. Contrary to Giroux's position that authority is inherently ethical if it follows certain criteria, and thus the task of radical educators is to seek out the most ethical conceptualization of authority, Gadamer's description of authority, broadly, is that it is always already present in an inextricable relation to tradition. In other words, whereas Giroux takes authority as a concept and a "historical construction shaped by diverse traditions that contain their own values and views of the world,"[13] on Gadamer's view, authority is always already operating beyond any reach of objective analysis. Thus, it cannot be willfully extricated from its historical construction, held apart from the consciousness that sees it, reshaped, and then placed back into the temporal stream of experience.

Giroux sees authority as something one has or does not have and as an object of consciousness that can stand apart from it - an ontology of authority that is accepted uncritically. And uncritically accepting this ontology of authority renders invisible the binding power of the authority of tradition that bears on critical pedagogy itself. In other words, the intellectual works that frame Giroux's questions and make his analysis intelligible are impossible to transcend by virtue of it being intelligible; the

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intelligibility of the question and the analysis require a tradition of works, ideas, and shared understandings in order to be comprehensible in the first place.

Taking seriously the authority of tradition does not mean that one uncritically accepts the claims of tradition, however. Gadamer remarks that:

> Every encounter with others therefore means the 'suspension' of one's own prejudices, whether this involves another person through whom one learns one's own nature and limits, or an encounter with art, or a text…[The encounter] requires a readiness to recognize the other as potentially right and to let him or it prevail against me …. It is a grave misunderstanding to assume that emphasis on the essential factor of tradition which enters into all understanding implies an uncritical acceptance of tradition and sociopolitical conservatism. In truth, the confrontation of our historical tradition is always a critical challenge of this tradition. Such confrontation does not occur in the workshop of the philologist or historian or in the eagerness of bourgeois cultural institutions to impart historical education. Every experience is such a confrontation.[14]

It is important to understand here that the prejudices Gadamer speaks of are the unseen productive assumptions that allow us to make sense of things and to speak and act without consciously cognizing every step; and they cannot be willed into the foreground. Again, this points to the inextricability of tradition from any analysis. These prejudices are provoked into the foreground by something that is beyond the totality of our understanding. Gadamer says:

> Foregrounding (*abheben*) a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment. How then can we foreground it? It is impossible to make ourselves aware of prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked…For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own validity.[15]

The kind of authority Giroux is working with is incapable of allowing for an experience of understanding so conceived, because it demands that central to the social project of education is the critique of ideology and power.[16] By privileging the "primacy of the political" and demanding that radical pedagogy be a "form of cultural politics," particular theoretical assumptions of radical pedagogy are set aside as sacred. The educational experience is thereby constrained to the analysis of power and privilege and, in the end, the student's own experience is forced into a limited set of meanings constrained by radical pedagogy.

Given that this article works to correct the ontology of authority used in Giroux's critical pedagogy to that of Gadamer's authority of tradition, it is important to note that Gadamer saw pedagogy - the means of bringing the student to a predetermined conclusion about the object under study, even if the object of study is oppression - as an inescapable form of domination. This claim is made within a discussion of the conditions of understanding and the modes of relating that undermine it, the teacher-pupil relationship being one of them. This relationship is one of domination because it is considered to be "an authoritative form of welfare work," by which Gadamer means a relationship in which one claims to know what the other needs, or to understand the other - over and above the other's claims - and thus it "functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance."[17] In this relationship, "one claims to know the other's claim from his point of view and even to understand the other better than the other understands himself."[18] As such, the student is robbed of any

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power to make a claim to truth about herself or her world. This form of domination is necessary when, for example, students are required to master certain knowledge or competencies. Nonetheless, Gadamer clearly separates the authority of the teacher within the pedagogical relationship from the authority of tradition. The authority he places in texts is not a justification for a warranted type of authority to be employed in pedagogical relationships, such is the kind of justification Giroux attempts in his project; rather, it denotes the conditions already operating under any form of teacher authority within the pedagogical relationship.

Gadamer's description of the authority of tradition refines the argument on the place of authority in any kind of liberation pedagogy by more comprehensively conceptualizing authority itself, not as something employed as a means of liberation but rather as something from which one cannot wholly extricate oneself. That said, correcting the ontology of authority to that of tradition does not resolve the primary problem of a liberatory pedagogy. The authority of tradition is inescapable and, as such, impossible to be liberated from. From this view, it would appear that speaking of any kind of liberation pedagogy would be pointless, as one cannot be liberated from the authority of tradition.

However, set against the failures of Giroux's emancipatory authority, the liberation sought after in deep liberation pedagogy is the liberation from ideology, and we can find clues on the possibility of speaking of liberation within the context of authority of tradition in Gadamer's use of the negative experience. To Gadamer, understanding is a negative process, and "[e]xperience is the experience of human finitude … In it all dogmatism, which proceeds from the soaring desires of the human heart, reaches an absolute barrier."[19] When we bump up against this barrier of our finitude, we feel "pulled up short."[20] Gadamer says that in being pulled up short, we are met with a claim that "does not yield any meaning at all or is not compatible with what we had expected."[21] While being pulled up short describes the experience from the point of view of the experiencer, from the perspective of deep liberation pedagogy, the experience is a *fissure in the authority of tradition*. From this point of view, the principle thrust of deep liberation pedagogy must be, then, the disruption of belief, whatever it might be - conservative, liberal, or radical, in Giroux's framework - not for the sake of supplanting it with another ideology but rather solely for its own sake. For the remainder of this article I will then attempt to sketch out a picture of what deep liberation pedagogy, centered on challenging the authority of tradition and of liberation from ideology, might look like. To do so, I start with the assumption that a critique of tradition always implies a critique of ideology, as tradition is always already constitutive of any ideology.

Work has already begun in this direction, if not under these terms. Deborah Kerdeman explores the potential challenges of making the experience of being pulled up short a pedagogical aim, pointing to the fact that mere pedagogical skill and technique is not sufficient in creating such an experience. Rather, it requires a certain lack of control of the teacher to determine the student experience.[22] Kerdeman also compares the experience of being pulled up short to that of cognitive surprise. She says:

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> Cognitive surprise [which changes thinking alone] assumes we can function, even when our beliefs are mistaken. When we are pulled up short, our sense of who we are and what we can do is derailed on a more fundamental level. We may *think* we are open to unforeseen events; being pulled up short exposes us to ways of being open we cannot fathom on our own.[23]

While being pulled up short is constitutive of the kind of experience I am describing, it does not, in itself, describe the magnitude of the experience required for deep liberation, because being pulled up short, in the way Kerdeman describes, does not necessarily lead one to a fissure of tradition's authority. Rather, it speaks to the inherent unpredictability and uncontrollability of such an experience, and to the finitude of human understanding.

To get a better sense of being pulled up short in such a strong sense that we see a fissure in tradition, we can look to Socrates' provocative encounter with Meno. This is most clear in Meno's description of Socrates and his experience of the encounter:

> … you are exactly like the flat sting-ray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes into contact with it, it numbs him, and that is the sort of thing that you seem to be doing to me now. My mind and my lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to reply to you. Yet I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well, too, or so I thought. Now I can't even say what it is.[24]

Meno here is clearly describing an experience and not an idea, and note what he chooses to describe: Meno's mind is numb. He cannot get his mind moving. Not only that, he can barely speak except to say that he cannot speak. Taken together, he cannot even say what virtue is, even though he has spoken at great length on the subject in front of large audiences. His ability to "hold forth" on the subject demonstrates his acumen in maneuvering within the ideological assumptions of his audience, but now he has no anchor - even for himself. He is, so to speak, ideologically groundless. Todd Rowan characterizes the space Meno is in as awe, which exists in between disruption and transformation.[25] The space between disruption and transformation brought about in this aporetic moment is also a space of freedom, not only from oppression and from oppressors, but also from the very dialectic of oppressor and oppressed. This sting-ray-like aporetic experience generates awe within the moment before ideology is regenerated and outside of the ideology that previously existed. It completely ruptures, if only momentarily, the authority of tradition.

The final point to make is on the value of creating moments when we are briefly liberated from the authority of tradition, beyond the mere act of being liberated, for just a moment, from the authority of tradition. I can only start to answer this question within this article, and the beginning can be found by returning one last time to Meno. Meno's first description of his aporetic moment is not of the effect of awe but of Socrates' role in creating it, like a sting-ray in the sea. Socrates' reputation was known to Meno, and Meno thought he knew what he was in for when he engaged with Socrates. Yet Meno still found himself in a state of awe, completely taken by surprise by the Socrates he met in that exchange. Meno enters the dialogue ostensibly to hear Socrates' opinion on whether virtue can be taught, but Socrates quickly turns the tables and asks Meno for a definition of virtue, because Meno believes there is no difficulty in saying what virtue is.[26] Meno answers Socrates quickly and with confidence. At each turn, when Socrates finds a problem with one definition, Meno

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offers another, clearly unaware of the shock to come. Throughout the first section of the dialogue, Meno remains confident of his expertise. Yet once Meno returns from his aporetic moment and settles back into the dialogue, we see that he has released any pretense of expertise on the matter, and he is ready to hear what Socrates has to say. At one point, he explicitly asks Socrates to teach him what he knows.[27] Put the other way around, Meno was ready to inquire into that which he did not know only after being shocked into comporting himself toward the unknown in a radically open way. Socrates is not there to convert Meno to his point of view, though because, as Socrates says: "It isn't that, knowing the answers, I perplex other people. The truth is rather I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself."[28]

Ultimately, Meno's experience goes beyond just seeing something from a different point of view or encountering the finitude of his understanding. Certainly, with Meno's training as a sophist, being pulled up short or seeing another point of view are experiences he has had. What is unique in the exchange with Socrates is that the experience is so beyond comprehension that Meno says Socrates might be "arrested as a wizard" if he ever lived abroad.[29]

What can be learned from Meno's encounter is that to be fully unmoored from tradition requires one to be shaken out of one's frame of mind, completely exhausting the answers one has about what things are, and abandoning any expertise about what things are. In rupturing the authority of tradition, one is suspended, however briefly, in a space of fundamental liberation. Here, one sees the world not from one ideology or another but from the space in between them - from an entirely new vista altogether.

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1. Henry A. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 119-37.

2. Ibid., 101.

3. Ibid., 107.

4. Ibid., 112.

5. Ibid., 143.

6. Ibid., 101.

7. Neil Postman stated that schools do not serve the public as much as they create the public. See Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1995).

8. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 142.

9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 93.

10. Ibid., 93 f.7.

11. Matt Jackson, "Bordering on Violence: A Levinasian Critique of Ontology and Ethics in Giroux's Critical Pedaogy," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006), 311. Jackson is responding here specifically to Giroux's statement that: "I have no trouble at all in exercising my authority as long as I am constantly self-critical about the limits of my own knowledge" made in Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 11.

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd Revised ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 470.

13. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 97.

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979),

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108. I wish to thank Prof. Chris Higgins for bringing my attention to this passage.

15. *Truth and Method*, 298.

16. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 132.

17. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 354.

18. Ibid., 353.

19. Ibid., 351.

20. Ibid., 270.

21. Ibid.

22. Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308.

23. Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled up Short: Challenges for Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 213.

24..Plato, "Meno," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 80A-C.

25. Todd B. Rowen, "A Retrieval of Awe: Examining Disruption and Apprehension in Transformative Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006), 216-19.

26. Plato, "Meno," 71D.

27. Ibid., 81E.

28. Ibid., 80C.

29. Ibid., 80B.

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