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¡Adelante!: Sowing the Seeds of The New School of Liberation

The average American student spends a total of 1,170 hours in school every year (“School Day”). Teachers spend a national average of 52.7 hours a week in their jobs, often for subpar salaries that do not match their professional education (“Full-Time”). Students and teachers alike spend hundreds and thousands of hours in schools, working for environments that are often characterized as ineffective, disempowering, despair-inducing, and irrelevant; governed by tedious procedures and domineering agencies and boards that are completely disconnected from the day-to-day activities of the school. In my personal experience, as a student representative on the New Haven Board of Education, it seems like everyone around me, even those who are in charge, have no idea what’s going on. There are simply too many processes, mandates, and regulations for a group of humans to efficiently and adequately run a school district of 19,000+. Instead of making proactive plans to revitalize and transform New Haven Public Schools, we are stuck merely responding to a stream of endless policies to review and rubber stamp. The bureaucrats and “leaders” helping these systems run are blinded by their books. Seldom do they leave their desks and offices; seldom do they humbly step into the spaces where their subordinates work to do anything other than criticize. It would be hilarious to believe that the interests and concrete ideas of students and teachers are genuinely listened to. There are too many degrees of separation between what policymakers enact and the material realities of teachers and pupils. Our politics and systems are performative. They are nothing more than theater, and our public schools are the punchline. The bureaucracy falls into an interesting duality: it is both inefficient (perceptually and practically) and effective. The American

kafkaesque bureaucracy succeeds precisely because it *is* kafkaesque. It is difficult to get involved in, there are too many people to report to, and there is no definitive process or will to revolutionize anything. It merely exists, and succeeds in, solidifying the status quo.

Yet, even in the face of a rigid bureaucracy that only exists to perpetuate itself, we see students, teachers, and workers take their rank in the struggle for liberation. In May 2022, approximately 700 students walked out of their classrooms in New Haven, Connecticut to demand more school funding, the removal of police officers from school buildings, and greater investment in critical physical and psychiatric health services (“Walkout”). More recently, hundreds of teachers mobilized, via emails and delivered testimonies, to demand fairer labor contracts (“Shortage”). This is taking place amidst the backdrop of a new, cross-industry, labor movement that hasn’t been seen since the 1930s (Kochan et al).

Liberation tends to be an abstract ideal that progressives, socialists, and community organizers preach about. However, it’s dangerous to engage in battles over an ideal that is not well-defined, for it can easily fall prey to power-hungry demagogues.

Liberation includes not only *freedom to* but also *freedom from*. Freedom from feeling small and powerless. Freedom from hunger, angst, needless pain, and the frigid winds of the night. Freedom from limitations in your creativity, limitations in building lively relationships, limitations in engaging in your favorite hobbies, or watching a movie with your family by the window on a rainy day.

In order to achieve liberation, to lead good lives, we must kill the deep ugly roots of the American education system and its capitalistic motivations. We must eliminate the ideological conditioning that occurs in school buildings that serve to maintain and perpetuate the rule of capital and its subsequent injustices. It’s obvious that this conditioning is failing anyway. The people are weary. The people are angry. The people are ready.

The people sing and yearn for a new world.

Student leaders, teachers, radicals, and workers have an incredible opportunity to strike at these roots during this new era. The classroom is the most important battleground for the struggle toward liberation, for it is a vessel of cultural, historical, and political heritage. And only we, *us*, the people who spend our lives in these classrooms, have the power to do what must be done:

The old school must be abolished. And the seeds of the New School must be planted!

The New School must incorporate two things: (1) healthy consensus democracy based on the lived experiences and necessities of students, teachers, workers, and community members, and (2) the faithful implementation of liberatory pedagogy that cultivates a “critical consciousness” (Freire). This is a socialist vision. This is a necessary vision. The New School will serve as the epicenter of cultural and historical transformation and revolution, not only for the betterment of all “Americans,” but for the betterment of all peoples.

In order to realize the New School, we must answer the question of how we will run it. Building a new system of governance is not a question that can be easily answered. There will be plenty of trial and error and many mistakes. The first step is to *accept* that mistakes will be made. Humans are incapable of perfection. Once we are comfortable with that, everything else comes easy. Consensus democracy is our roadmap out of the old school of grief and hurt. There is no room for blame and shame in consensus democracy, for its main aim is to find *solutions* to the problems the community faces. Self-determination is the precursor to a rich cultural life. Why would we expect students to achieve their fullest potential, respect the community’s property; to care for each other when we remove their ability to express their grievances in a way that matters?

Popular assemblies composed of students, faculty workers, teachers, paraprofessionals, and families will be created to thoroughly discuss solutions and implementations to our troubles. These assemblies must embrace healthy conflict, be based on grounded, patient, unified, egalitarian, and respectful dialogue, as well as the full embodiment of camaraderie in order to be legitimate.

The difference between popular assemblies and bureaucratic processes like Board of Education meetings is that there is no distinguishable hierarchy between anyone; everyone who participates ultimately has the *power* to talk about, vote on, and implement decisions based on their perspectives and experiences. For example, if a student or teacher had a problem with a fellow companion or with the curriculum, they could bring their concerns to the popular assembly and work towards a resolution. This is in stark contrast to contemporary “problem-solving” processes and administrative remedies where one is automatically on the defensive and where people are pitted against each other when bringing up their grievances. In a consensus democracy, there would be problems to be solved in lieu of crises. Facilitators in lieu of bosses. Restorations in lieu of expulsions. Accountability in lieu of punishment.

Consensus democracy has its challenges. But it is one of the only ways where power can be returned to the people; one of the only ways in which a nourishing education, profession, and cultural transformation can thrive.

This, and only this, will be the launchpad toward a new education, a healthy citizenry, and a liberated society.

Once the foundation of the New School has been built, revolutionary leaders, educators, and scholars in the popular assembly must rethink and reorient the purpose of the education system. Liberatory education is not buying new smartboards and teaching “*21st-century skills*” (which is just a euphemism for training a new generation of laborers to exploit). We must unlearn and move beyond the educational, sociological, and psychological paradigms of existing economic, political, and social orders. As Paulo Freire states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “*The solution is not to integrate them [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’*” (Freire 74).

In an interview with Sonia Sementilli, an 11th grader at Wilbur Cross High School, there is a very visible and widely-shared sentiment of minimization and detachment from the learning process:

“[on learning about social issues in school] *I don't think I've learned anything about gun safety and bodily autonomy, it's only mentioned if a big event happens and the teacher will only bring it up if they care or if it affects them [. . .] I usually don't feel very respected or a part of my school and learning because a lot of teachers have a very hierarchical view of their job and don't pay attention to the results of their lessons and work [. . .]*” (Sementilli).

When the school teaches that student voice does not matter; that they will never amount to anything; and that they cannot transform the world, they will come to believe it: “*Education is suffering from narration sickness. The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable*” (Freire 44). Disaffected youth become disaffected adults who merely put up with the status quo; adults who work and live for themselves, sheltered from the possibilities of a new world; adults who are either apathetic or even outright defend the horrid crimes of the social order under the hope that maybe one day they could reap the benefits of said social order if they defend their oppressors.

In response to this. Freire poses an essential question: how can education combat fatalism and serve to humanize, empower, and liberate the oppressed? We must co-create a pedagogy that is made by and for the oppressed; an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to liberate through developing critical consciousness.

The main premise of liberatory pedagogy is that it's collective and egalitarian. It cannot be done by a special class of professionals and teachers *for* students or *for* the oppressed. It's a process that must involve everyone; a process where teachers and students enter into communion with each other. Furthermore, liberatory pedagogy removes the harmful teacher-student dialectical relationship

in the classroom, that is, the belief that the teacher knows all and that the student knows nothing; that the teacher is to command, and the student is to obey.

A liberatory pedagogy assumes that both teacher and student have something valuable to say and learn. Instead of a top-down relationship in the classroom, teachers and students work as co-investigators in a search for truth in an unpredictable and dynamic world. Although political in nature, liberatory pedagogy is fundamentally different from propaganda and indoctrination because it rejects paternalism, hierarchies, and the staticization of the world (as is present in the current education system).

Achieving critical consciousness means achieving responsibility and autonomy because only at that point will no one, regardless of their supposed authority, be able to tell you what is and isn't true. No one can lie to you about what a written sentence says and means. No one can overwrite your experiences or tell you that it's not true, that you misunderstand, that you're crazy, or that you're ungrateful. No one can tell you that the world is at peace, that it is just, that everything is fine the way things are when it simply is not.

Practically, liberatory pedagogy will be implemented through cooperative inquiry, intersectional investigations of social issues, and a humble and democratic dialogue and analysis about those issues, how they can be solved, and how one can mobilize toward those solutions. As cliché as it may sound, liberatory pedagogy makes anything possible, because it directly confronts and makes social ills more approachable and solvable, instead of large and looming: "*A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible of transformation*" (Freire 58)

It was Mark Fisher who said that "*It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.*" (Fisher 1) With that, please do not mistake fear, hesitation, worry, or confusion with "rational pragmatism." What's pragmatic about continuing to blame teachers and students while 12

million children, in the richest country in the world, wonder where they will find their next plate of food or where they will lay their heads down to rest (Stebbins)? What's pragmatic about letting colonization and injustice fester within the lifeline of our society; our collective memories? What's pragmatic about compromising between freedom and imprisonment?

It will take a village; a coalition of radical student organizations, teachers and workers' unions, and parent-community associations who are unafraid of seizing the tools to build the foundation of the New School. However, it's important never to forget the primary driving force behind this struggle for liberation: joy and a profound love for life. Similar to what I've said previously in a speech: Revolution in the way we do things is a manifestation of resilience, love, and joy. This is not a blind love, it's not a naive joy, nor is it a passive resilience, it's for our destiny, for our common goal: our liberation, our humanization, our right to live without fear and oppression (Cruz-Bustamante).

Perhaps we will not see the beautiful fruits of our labor within our lifetime, but that's not what we do it for. Teachers continue to teach, knowing that they will probably never see the results of all the concern, attention, and work put into their students once they walk out the door. Mothers, fathers, and parents comfort their children, even when the future is scary and uncertain. It is not enough to merely write, ponder, discuss, and theorize a new education system; a new world. We have the duty to put them into practice.

We have the obligation of engaging in a labor of love to overcome our world of grief.

We have the burden of sowing the seeds for the future, we must do so with enthusiasm, critical love, in camaraderie with one another, even if we die only seeing a hopeful sprout of green quietly poke out from the ruins.

Can you hear it? Can you see it? The people march for an end to oppression. They sing for the struggle to end. Perhaps one day, they will be able to hug the end of their struggle; write about it

with their pencils; to smell it in their books. Perhaps one day, the children of the future will sleep comfortably at night, and be able to feed their minds, for they cannot conceptualize subjugation and limitation. Their imaginations live on, rising from the ruins they've never seen.

In this world, the young vanguard lights the path with their wisdom. "¡Adelante!" They say, "Onwards to the abundant forest of freedom!" They reach out their arms, shoulder to shoulder, book in hand, to honor the original farmers of this beautiful forest; to embrace this new world in a way that we never could.

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