Political Grace and Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy

Antonia Darder, Loyola Marymount University

Political grace insists on an ethic of radical risk because the times require it, because the divine plane of creation that offers life is at risk itself from the holocaust of global plunder.

Wes Rehberg (2012)

The risk of global plunder is evident around the globe, as corporations exert their rule over the material world, poverty intensifies, and complicit governments justify the denial of social welfare to oppressed populations. We live in an era where neoliberalism has made kowtowing to the interests of the wealthy and powerful above reproach and few courageous oppositional forces have garnered the means or public will to persist in campaigns of public protest. In many instances, the lethal combination of oppressive neoliberal policies and the veneration of technology have effectively ushered in the disposability of a lion share of the working class. No longer are the liberating promises of the enlightenment project, which sought to overcome the tyrannies of autocratic rule and incontrovertible abuses of professed Divine authority able to interrupt the ravages of capitalism at any level. Ecologically, the planet is suffering from what may well be irreparable colonization of the life's sphere, with its unmerciful and heedless destruction of forests, wildlife, soil potency, and water supplies. This ravaging of the earth, indeed, only echoes the violent estrangement and domestication of our own colonization, as the cultures and languages of subaltern populations are rapidly disappearing.

It is in the midst of grave economic exploitation and rampant disregard for the lives of the many that Freirian educators, scholars, and activists are called to risk a liberating praxis that embodies a new sense of revolutionary subjecthood and challenges our domesticated tolerances for societal injustice and human oppression. Simultaneously, emancipatory objectives of our pedagogical labor call for building a political solidarity that acknowledges the spiritual oneness of our humanity, while embracing the cultural differences in our expressions, as necessary biodiversity for our human survival and evolution. This entails that, rather than

falling into us/them binaries that demonize and segment, we seek to retain the dialectical tensions that forever persist between the universalism of our humanity and the particularisms born from the survival of distinct cultural communities within different histories, material conditions, gendered and racialized relations, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations—all that deeply influence our various spiritual expressions and political sensibilities. Moreover, emancipatory struggles that affirm life necessitate we work to dismantle reified ideologies of capital, born of a mind that objectifies human spirituality, converting religious dogma into an instrument of exploitation and oppression.

As critical educators working to create pedagogical spaces for learning within what Paulo Freire (1998a) termed *unity within diversity*, we are obliged to create those necessary conditions within schools and society for communal openness, compassion, faith, and visionary hope that allow us to rethink spirituality, in our quest for freedom. For it is, indeed, within a politically thoughtful and compassionate arena of struggle that solidarity can unfold and liberating practices within schools and communities become possible. In essence, this signals recognition of a collective spiritual dimension that must manifest and unfold within our pedagogical and political praxis of community, if we are to genuinely extend our criticality beyond limiting and narrow allegiance to Western precepts of rationality. Herein then lies the extraordinary function of political grace as an integral spiritual force within the commons that can serve to better propel revolutionary movements for a more just world.

Political Grace: A Communal Dance of Revolution

If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.

Emma Goldman (1931)

Emma Goldman's often-repeated phrase serves as a useful metaphor for conceptualizing political grace as a revolutionary process that emerges precisely from a communal dance of people yearning for freedom. McLaren draws also on the power of this metaphor when he writes, "Knowing is a type of dance, a movement, but a self-conscious one. Criticality is not a line stretching into eternity, but rather it is a circle. In other words, knowing can be the object of our knowing, it can be self-reflective, and it is something in which we can make an intervention (McLaren,

2008, p. 476).” There is no question that in our world today, there exists the pedagogical and political imperative for this communal dance, for this intervention, as a means for exercising the committed political interventions of radically motivated human beings who embody the class consciousness, liberatory spirituality, and critical praxis necessary to contend with the messiness, multiplicity, uncertainty, and ambiguity of our contemporary existence. At a time when so many people are historically disaffiliated from any emancipatory ethics of social struggles or have been usurped into a virtualized world that not only deceptively imprisons their sensibilities and manufactures their desires, grounded emancipatory political formation among teachers and students is urgently needed—a formation that recognizes the undemocratic fusion of transnational state interests with the transnational capitalist class (Robinson, 2014).

In Freire’s writings, he repeatedly insisted that education is not only an essential political project for our liberation, but education must first and foremost serve as a humanizing endeavor, if just ideals are to be materialized. With this in mind, critical educators are compelled to labor with students and communities in integral ways that support the formation of consciously loving and engaged citizens—citizens who can challenge and transgress the asymmetrical relations of power and debilitating institutional structures in schools and communities that threaten democratic life. This signals an emancipatory educational process that prepares students, particularly from oppressed communities, for the expression of voice, participation in civil society, and ethical decision-making in all aspects of their life. A central political aim of this humanizing endeavor is to support the evolution of class consciousness with an explicit aim toward the establishment of a more harmonious and peaceful world. In this evolution of class consciousness, the communal spiritual dimension cannot be negated or ignored, given its constitutive potential to initiate and sustain committed revolutionary action.

This spiritual dimension of political grace is conceived here as a deeply multidimensional human phenomenon that counters the limiting ontological (beingness) and epistemological (knowingness) values at the heart of Western psychology, theology, and pedagogy interrogating the “normative premises upon which knowledge judgments are made” (Bekerman & Zemblayas, 2014, 53). It also “involves a larger epistemological fight against neoliberal and imperial common sense, and a grounding of our critical pedagogy in a concrete universal that can welcome diverse and particular social formations joined in class struggle (McLaren, 2016, p. 37). This also draws on Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ (2007) critique of the

abyssal divide—where the cultural ways of knowing and the languages of "the other" are rendered irrelevant or outside the boundaries of legitimate rationality. Of this, Santos writes, "What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus *the impossibility*(italics added) of the co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence" (1). So, whereas positivist psychology as well as the banking model of education (Freire 1970) reduces the individual to an atomized object to be filled, fixed, or controlled, a critical pedagogical translation of political grace is rooted instead in the dialectic of the human being, as always *both* individual and communal entity, integrally immersed (as part of the human condition) within an evolving spirituality of both the individual and the world, simultaneously.

As such, political grace defies Calvinistic notions of monastic self-abnegation, that demand from the individual transcendence from the flesh—in that "the children of God are shut with the prison of this mortal body" (Boer, 2009; 102). In contrast, a critical pedagogical understanding of political grace does not theorized human spirituality as either passive or depoliticized phenomenon, devoid of the flesh and its connection to the material world. Nor is the emergence of political grace dependent on official structures of organized religion, per se, although this view of spirituality may exist within such contexts if grounded in a communal liberatory intent (i.e. Liberation theology). However, this argument should not be mistakenly interpreted along the line of today's New Age obsession with eastern meditation, for example, that attempts to make distinctions between religion and spirituality, as Slavoj Žižek (2011) warns.

Spiritual meditation in its abstraction from institutionalized religion, appears today as the zero-level undistorted core of religion: the complex institutional and dogmatic edifice which sustains every particular religion is dismissed as a contingent secondary coating of this core. The reason for this shift of accent from religious institution to the intimacy of spiritual experience is that such a meditation is the ideological form that best fits today's global capitalism (28)."

With this in mind, what is proposed here is a pedagogical understanding of spirituality that cannot be separated, objectified, or dehumanized, in that it exists as an integral force of humanity, enacted upon the world through communal engagement. This to say, an emancipatory expression of spirituality, as conceived

here, eschews the notion that somewhere is found “a pure, universal core of ‘undistorted’ spirituality” (Anderson, 2013), but rather categorizes spirituality comparable to intellect or emotion—a human interactive faculty with the potential to express itself across the dialectical continuum of oppression and liberation. Hence, in this discussion of political grace, spirituality is grounded to a communal exercise of justice, which intrinsically seeks to counter what Žižek calls the “mad dance” of capitalism, the monstrosity of the globalized infrastructure of capitalist greed, and the deliberate destruction of the commons.

Perhaps more to the point, revolutionary social transformations are impossible without the active and organic participation of the people, who generate together, through their collective yearnings, labors, and struggles, the political force that ultimately makes possible the reinvention of the world. This can result, however, as much from a process of thoughtful deliberation as it can occur from a spontaneous communal response to the unbearable pressure of brutal repression over time. Political sociologist, George Katsiaficas (2013, 1989), terms this phenomenon *the Eros effect* in his study of social movements, where he draws on the work of Herbert Marcuse to define the underlying dialectical intent of his theory of Eros: “to reintegrate the emotional and the rational at a level on which emotional and irrational are not synonymous in their usages nor derogatory in their characterizations. I seek to affirm the emotional content of social movements as erotic action, action which may be considered collective liberatory sublimation—a rational way of clearing collective psychological blockages” (Katsiaficas, 1989, p. 2 – 3). This call for integration of the emotional and rational echoes Freire’s (1993) insistence that educators acknowledge and contend with the totality of the human being; in that we come to know and *read the world* not only through the faculty of the mind, but also through the vital discernments of the heart, body, and spirit. To subjugate any of these dynamic human faculties can result in deeply flawed pedagogical and political efforts that will fail to grapple with the oppressor/oppressed contradiction, leaving the underlying structures of oppression unchanged.

More importantly, in the struggle for our liberation, critical pedagogical formation must support the ability to engage the complexity of our existence beyond the restrictive hegemonic arbitrations of the good/ bad or positive/negative splits. This is particularly so, in that major historical changes have seldom resulted without counterhegemonic acts of resistance and dissent being judged by the powerful as vulgar, wrongheaded, impulsive, violent, deceitful, and evil. Hence, to promote a

concept of spirituality promulgated on an ontological dualism of good/bad humanity, wittingly or unwittingly, smothers the very fire necessary for democratic life. The consequence is a hegemonic political culture that infantilizes humanity, squelches dissent, and narrows rationality in ways that veils the wretched inequalities that persist in every aspect of our lives—whether these are linked to racism, class privilege, gendered relations, sexual politics, disablism, and so forth.

So whether one speaks of political grace or the Eros effect, both constructs are philosophical attempts to counter transcendental notions that objectify and individuate the power of love and binarize the relationship between matter and spirit, while exteriorizing the phenomenon of spirituality as something that exists separate and apart of the body, to which one must either surrender or master. Consequently, rather than to comprehend love as the inherent force of life generated through our shared oneness (or spirituality), the communal understanding or manifestation of love remains shrouded in a discourse of individual yearnings and ego-driven aspirations of the Western imaginary. In contrast, it is precisely when the spiritual solidarity of a people is asserted organically in response to collective suffering and in the name of revolutionary action—breaking down the barriers of our atomized domestication—that political grace unfolds to support acts of resistance and dissent. About this, Rehberg (2012) writes in *Political Grace: The Gift of Resistance*:

Political grace suffuses and infuses both person and community, relationally and individually together, thus ethically and in transintuitive and transreflexive ways, especially in conditions of extreme estrangement, and estrangement that results from radical suffering. It helps empower persons and communities to respond to the conditions which cause suffering, via resistance and revolutionary transformation…(p.31).

This dance of political grace constitutes then a collective human phenomenon that counters the “civilizing” and colonizing intent of the hegemonic order, defying paradigms of oppression—across class, gender, race, sex, religion, and bodily ableness —which brutally objectify, pacify, and ravage subaltern populations around the world with an ideologically pretentious and opportunistic rhetoric of progress and profit. In response to such conditions, the communal dance of political grace, engendered by criticality, openness, faith, and humility, is generated through the loving interaction of communities immersed in the materiality of the body and their

organic relationships in the world.

And, thus, it is political grace that emerges from and through emancipatory communal life, where *love as a political force* (Darder 2015) makes possible genuine transformative acts by those who on the surface might seem independent, neutralized, or disaffiliated.

Love as a Political Force

I have a right to love and to express my love to the world and to use it as a motivational foundation for struggle.

—Paulo Freire (1998a)

In his writings, Freire made references to the political nature of love and its significance to the revolutionary project. He elucidated on this love born of collective consciousness that emerges from our shared curiosity, creativity, and imagination, and that extends meaning to our resistance and counterhegemonic practices in schools and communities. This love is conceived as a powerful motivational foundation for revolutionary struggle, from which we as educators and cultural workers gain the courage to risk uncertainty, welcome our unfinishedness, and embrace indescribable possibilities as markers of liberatory life. Comprehending love as a political force is also essential to understanding Freire's revolutionary vision of consciousness and transformation (Darder, 2015). The inseparability with which he theorized the political significance of love in the evolution of consciousness and political empowerment is key here to grasping the meaning of political grace.

Drawing from Eric Fromm's (1956, 1964) contribution to this question, expressed so formidably in his book *The Art of Loving,* love is catapulted beyond mere sentimental exchanges between individuals, but rather constitutes an intentional spiritual force and act of consciousness, with the potential to emerge and mature through our social and material practices, as we work to live, learn, labor, and transform the world together. This critical communal view of love as both political and spiritual is, unfortunately, often ignored, maligned and glossed over, even on the left, by the very people who most need to comprehend its humanizing and transformative potential. Moreover, in contexts where we are forced to counter

daily institutional structures and practices that repress our humanity, this revolutionary, spiritual, and communal sense of love can act as a profoundly humanizing force in our lives, despite the difficulties we face.

Freire wrote of the politics of love by engaging foremost with the pedagogical exchanges he considered important to relationships between teachers and students. In particular, he sought to articulate indispensable qualities of teaching (Freire, 1998b), anchored in our humanity, that worked to cultivate greater intimacy with self, others, and the world, believing that "living with [democracy] and deepening it so it has real meaning in people's everyday lives" (Carnoy, 1987, p.12) had to be a significant political concern of educators committed to overcoming injustice in the world. Critical democracy and the solidarity necessary for its evolution are made possible through a liberatory pedagogy fortified by a universal regard for the dignity and humanity of all people, no matter their differences or circumstances. The view of love as a dialectical force simultaneously unites and respects difference, while it supports a revolutionary sense of lived kinship, vital to our political efforts if we are to effectively transform the social and material conditions of inequality and disaffiliation that are the hallmark of capitalism.

Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy

[Revolutionary] critical pedagogy is a reading and an acting upon the social totality by turning abstract "things" into a material force for liberation, by helping abstract thought lead to praxis, to revolutionary praxis, to the bringing about of a social universe that is not based on the value form of labor and financial gain but based on human need.

Peter McLaren (2016)

Inherent to revolutionary praxis is a pedagogical commitment to critically engage the deceptive domestication of the hidden curriculum—that begins in preschool with fairy tales, progresses to college readiness discourse in high school, and extends to the careerism of university formation—and unveil with students the prevailing injustices that have become normalized in their psyches. For McLaren, this impels critical educators "to challenge this natural attitude of capitalist schooling and its moralizing machinery by climbing out of our spiritually dehydrated skin and re-birthing ourselves into relations of solidarity and [community]" (2016, p.19). This, in

essence, delimits, in brief, the meaning of political grace, as discussed throughout this essay.

A revolutionary critical pedagogy imbued with political grace also heralds a radically human understanding of oppression and transformation, capable of witnessing and contending with the most tragic human circumstances and, yet, not fall prey to helplessness and despair. Given our labor within school and community conditions wrought in the impoverishment and violence of social inequalities and human exploitation, we cannot avoid seek to avoid pain and suffering nor the impact of oppression upon our own lives and the lives of students, their parents, and communities. For suffering, in a revolutionary sense, can only be transfigured through an open and honest praxis that, without condoning, seeks the underlying possibilities or "roses in the concrete" (Andrade, 2009) that might be garnered from our collective tragedies and suffering—even if only as an impetus to break free from the confines of our suffering.

At the heart of a revolutionary critical pedagogy sits an uncompromising commitment to fight with the oppressed not only for transcending those "dehumanizing conditions of human life under capitalism but also going beyond the given to create the conditions of possibility for individuals to shape their own destiny (McLaren, 2016, p. 30). This entails merging our communal yearning for freedom, the power of our criticality to reimagine the world, and the spiritual force of political grace to fight together in ways that will reinvigorate— *across our differences*—the unrealized potential of socialist class consciousness.

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