

Published in The Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology, T. Teo (Ed.), Springer, 2013.

Emancipation

Carl Ratner

<http://www.sonic.net/~cr2>

Introduction

Emancipation is a distinctive way of conceptualizing the causes of problems as well as a solution to them. To say we need emancipation to solve problems implies their causation in oppression; they are not merely accidents, mistakes, or technical problems that stem from and can be resolved by addressing tax policy, monetary policy, mediation/negotiation, conventional education, or psychological interventions regarding risk strategies, open-mindedness, or communication strategies of listening skills and expressiveness. Emancipation explains crises and conflicts in terms of oppression by a power structure. An intransigent power structure benefits from crises and has no interest in solving them, and fights against reforms for correcting them. This is why emancipation from the oppressive power structure is necessary to solve the crises. If social problems

were accidents or technical failures, there would be no need to call for emancipation.

In what follows, I outline a concept of emancipation that can help achieve it.

Definition: Emancipation Is The Dialectical Opposite of Oppression

Emancipation is of course freedom from oppression. Consequently, emancipation requires understanding its dialectical opposite, oppression (Boltanski, 2011). To formulate a thorough, viable, concrete negation of oppression, people must understand oppression's specific characteristics, modus operandi, origins/basis, and what a comprehensive, specific, viable alternative praxis consists of.

Emancipation is historical in that it must eradicate a particular form of oppression that exists at a particular time in a particular social system that affords particular paths of emancipation. The emancipation of American slaves in the 19th century could only be achieved by defeating the slave system via a civil war, and then accepting ex-slaves to work and reside in the capitalist socioeconomic system of the time. No greater changes in capitalism were possible. The emancipation of the American underclass today can only be achieved by different political and economic programs -- to develop a non-

capitalist socioeconomic system that is collective, communal, and democratic.

This is possible in today's conditions.

Emancipation of Saudi people today must take yet other political, social, and economic transformations that are historically possible at this time. For instance, Saudi emancipation must end the slavish gender apartheid, and its disastrous psychological effects on Saudi women and men. This condition does not exist in America and need not be addressed in the emancipation of women (and men). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has no political institutions or processes by which the people could construct a new society. Emancipation requires constructing these, which is not necessary for emancipation in Great Britain, for example.

Emancipation is not an abstract act such as “respecting human rights” or “allowing people to construct their own societies,” or “women’s liberation” because these are not concrete historical, political, social, economic programs.

Keywords

Oppression, political economy, social transformation, false consciousness, unified struggle

History

This conception of oppression was articulated by Marx. He demonstrated that oppression is rooted in the political economy, or the mode of production. The mode of production is thus a mode of oppression. Other elements such as religion, education, health, and government are spawned and shaped by the political economy and bear its fundamental character, while having their own distinctive characteristics that reciprocally act back on the political economy. A social system is not reducible to the political economy but it is structured by it. The entire social system is historical, including its mode of oppression (Ratner, 2012c). Its historical character is what makes oppression eradicable by transforming the political economy and corollary institutions. A cultural system that includes oppression may be analogized to a cone or a funnel. Deep, basic, central features at the stem are the source of diverse features along the rim.

Marx explained this as follows:

The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus-labor is pumped out of direct producers determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It

is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers – a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labor and thereby its social productivity – which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. This does not prevent the same economic basis – the same from the standpoint of its main conditions – due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc., from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance... (Marx, 1962, p. 772).

Marx's systemic (conical) conception of oppression as fundamental to the political economy of class society, points to the origins of social oppression in its diverse manifestations. Thus, the particular form of oppression in Saudi Arabia stems ultimately from its historical political economy, while the oppression of women in Romania stems from its historical political economy. This is Marx's point in his 1844 essay, "On The Jewish Question." "All human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all types of servitude are only

modifications or consequences of this relation” (Marx, 1964, p. 132-133). The exploitation of women and ethnic groups, for example, ultimately derive from economic motives to enrich and empower the ruling class by exploiting labor in particular, historical ways. Super-exploitation of particular groups derives from general exploitation of the population. Eradicating the former therefore requires eradicating the latter.

Eradicating core oppression as pivotal for eradicating any of the particular forms of social oppression. Eradicating any of them requires eradicating all of them because they are all rooted in a common core. None of them can be eradicated individually without eradicating the core, which then eradicates the other expressions of the core.

Critical Debates

There are, of course, diverse conceptions of emancipation. Because they have immense practical importance for guiding action, they warrant vigorous debate. Marx & Engels engaged in this sort of analysis in The Communist Manifesto where they critiqued various conceptions of socialism.

The macro cultural psychological approach to emancipation is grounded in real conditions, restrictions and transformative potential of oppression. This

makes emancipation a concrete negation of the impediments to it. Hegel and Adorno called this an “immanent critique.”

Immanent critique contrasts with other approaches to emancipation that have no analysis of capitalism, no viable, alternative social organization to replace capitalism, and no analysis of the groups that are most and least susceptible to developing transformative consciousness and militancy, as Engels and Marx analyzed. We will analyze four inadequate approaches to emancipation (“pseudo emancipation”): 1) “transcendental critique” that imports and imposes external ideals of emancipation as the direction to follow; 2) “reformist critique” that works within existing macro cultural factors to introduce small, marginal improvements in them; 3) personal and interpersonal forms of emancipation; 4) spontaneous, unorganized efforts to oppose oppression.

1) “Transcendental critique” imports and imposes external ideals of emancipation as the direction to follow. These external ideals may be metaphysical ideals of justice, or they may be idealized historical praxes. These external ideals are not viable because they do not grow out of real conditions, restrictions, and possibilities that are currently in effect.

The fallacy of trying to move forward, beyond capitalism, by adopting pre-capitalist praxes is manifest in conservative religious movements, such as fundamentalist Christianity or Islam. Fundamentalist Islam in Saudi Arabia, for example, has completely handicapped the country in intellectual, scientific, and

cultural achievements (see my chapter on false consciousness for further discussion).

Fanon cites Marx's statement in The Eighteenth Brumaire: "The social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past (Fanon 2008, p. 198). The process of opposing oppression and becoming fulfilled must break with oppressive tradition, not identify with it. "In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past." "I am not the prisoner of history. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction" (ibid., pp. 201, 204). Fanon fights so that the oppressive past of his people will never be repeated (p. 202). "The struggle does not give back to the national culture its former values and shapes; this struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men cannot leave intact either the form or content of the people's culture" (Fanon, 1968, p. 243).

It is irresponsible and suicidal for democracies to accept reactionary religious praxes under the banner of multiculturalism. For these praxes seek to destroy democracy and negate emancipation. They oppress women, oppose birth control and abortion for women, they are anti-scientific and oppose teaching of evolution

and biological science, they promote irrational, dogmatic thinking. Giving them free reign opposes freedom.

Freedom is only the freedom to be free of oppression; it is not the freedom to choose oppression. Freedom is not indiscriminate choice that includes unfree activities. Freedom to choose drug addiction or obsessive consumerism is not freedom, just as the freedom to choose depersonalizing, isolating naqib is not freedom. Freedom requires suppressing unfreedom –as it required militarily defeating the Naziis, slaveowners, monarchs, theocrats, and imperialists. Suppressing the Church’s oppression of women is emancipatory, not oppressive. Emancipation depends upon the content of an action, not the abstract capacity to choose any content whatsoever. Emancipation requires critical evaluation of action, not uncritical acceptance of all choices.

2) “Reformist critique” that works within existing macro cultural factors to introduce small, marginal improvements in them.

Civil rights. One example is civil rights. Civil rights are conservative in this sense that they only demand equal participation of all groups in mainstream society; they never challenge mainstream society. Civil rights allow minorities and women and homosexuals to join the military or corporations or the electoral process, but they do not challenge the imperialist character of the military, or the exploitive character of corporations, or the corrupt electoral process.

Civil rights grants equality to minorities and majority people, but it does not grant equality to workers and capitalists. Civil rights prohibits discrimination against minorities, but it allows employers and managers to exclude workers from their ranks, their meetings, and their decisions. Civil rights prohibits capitalists from selectively reducing the work force along ethnic or sexual lines, however it allows capitalists to reduce the work force in general by cutting the jobs of all sub-groups. Civil rights allows general exploitation of the populace, i.e., equal exploitation; it only prohibits unequal exploitation.

Civil rights for marginalized people have no potential for full emancipation of the populace because they do not attack the general exploitation that befalls all people outside the ruling class. This is true for the "women's movement" as well as the black movement. The very names "women's movement" and "black movement" are apolitical, for they refer to physical features of people rather than social structural issues. Womanhood is a biological attribute, not a cultural or political one. Women can be rich or poor, exploitive or exploited. "Woman" lumps all women together despite political differences and interests. Woman is not a social position within a class structure. Women can be members of the capitalist class, or aristocracy, who defend these structures and benefit from them. "Woman" transcends social class and exploitation. Rights for women must therefore also circumvent social class, because women's rights must pertain to all

women, not simply women exploited by capitalism or feudalism. "Women's rights" includes the rights of capitalist and aristocratic women who are just as female as working women. These rights will necessarily deflect attention away from social class and exploitation. Women's rights refer to gender equality with men, and this includes being equally exploitive or equally exploited as men; it has nothing to do with eradicating general exploitation or social class.

Worker, on the other hand, is a political-social attribute that refers to a subaltern class position within a social system. Class exploitation is endemic to the worker role. The worker role calls for analysis and transformation of the class system that makes someone a worker. The worker role calls for eliminating that role. None of this is true for "woman." Being a woman does not call for eliminating womanhood; nor does it call for eliminating class society. Being a woman is not inherently exploitive the way that being a worker is. A woman may live comfortably as a woman if she is a member of the ruling class. A worker cannot belong to the upper class, because he works for it and is exploited by it. There is an inherent contradiction between worker and upper class that does not exist for women and upper class. Pressing for worker rights necessarily requires transforming class society, whereas women's rights for gender equality do not. Gender equality can be achieved within class society if women are exploited equally with men. Gender equality does not oppose exploitation, it means equality

of exploitation, within exploitation.

Only the struggle to eliminate class society can lead to general emancipation of the entire population. This struggle is only central to the working class, broadly defined, because social class constitutes the worker as a necessary victim of social class. Women and blacks are not so constituted because they may occupy any social position. In addition, women and blacks define liberation as parity with men and whites, respectively, not as free of exploitation in general. Only when marginalized people identify with this general struggle of the working class against social class structure, will they achieve emancipation. As long as they insist on struggling for particular civil rights, they will lose sight of the broader problem and struggle.

Civil rights for women, minorities, and homosexuals are acceptable to the ruling class while deeper, general demands for reforming central pervasive, political-economic policies are resisted. Civil rights do not include worker rights because the latter challenge the class structure of workers and capitalists.

This contrast is evident in the mainstream treatment of Martin Luther King's political evolution. While King struggled for civil rights, per se, he was accepted by many mainstream politicians, as well as the populace. However, politicians and the populace turned against him from 1965 when he began assailing the American invasion of Vietnam, and more general issues such as exploitation,

imperialism, materialism, and class structure that could not be alleviated within the parameters of capitalism. They require the transformation of capitalism, which civil rights refrains from doing. King's speech, "Beyond Vietnam" on April 4, 1967 criticized the materialist, exploitive basis of the war, to gain profits through military conquest. He railed at the contradiction of spending money to invade a defenseless people while depriving poor Americans of funds for social services. He linked the war to deep-seated flaws in the American system and psyche. This evolution from civil rights to anti-imperialism and anti-class hierarchy earned him the enmity of mainstream media and the populace. It even led the National Association for The Advancement of Colored People, and blacks in general, to criticize him for linking together "extraneous" issues -- war, racism, and poverty into a broad critique of the social system. After King's Vietnam speech, 55% of black people disapproved of him. They feared that indicting American foreign policy and political economy would jeopardize mainstream support for black issues.

Activity theory. A second example of reformism is interventions proposed by "activity theorists" who claim to be carrying on the work of Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev. Sannino (2011, p. 580) states that "Throughout this history, activity theory stands as an activist theory of development of practices, which may be traced back to Marx's idea of revolutionary practice, emphasizing that theory is

not only meant to analyze and explain the world but also to generate new practices and promote change.” This statement is troublesome because it fails to specify what kinds of new practices and what kinds of change should be pursued. Marx’s revolutionary practice specifically attacked the capitalist mode of production and its entire social system, and sought to replace it by a socialist mode of production and social system, as depicted in figure one. Calling for indefinite new practices does not qualify as revolutionary, for they could include new forms of exploitation or superficial liberal reforms. Abstract statements about culture, history, and society by activity theorists are thus not emancipatory. They obfuscate and protect the political economic basis of oppression that needs to be transformed (Ratner, 2012c, pp. 239-240; Ratner, 2012d).

Sannino’s statement is additionally troublesome because it implies that contemporary activity theory is inspired and informed by Marxism. However, activity theorists have long abandoned Marxism. They do not engage in a detailed critique of capitalist society utilizing Marxist socio-economic-political constructs. (The leading journal of activity theory, Mind, Culture, and Activity has only mentioned the words capitalism and neo-liberalism a few times in all the articles in its entire history.) Activity theorists rarely pursue radical critiques of capitalism,

social science, or culture that are offered by scholars in anthropology, geography, sociology, political science, and political economics.

The refusal to analyze concrete forms of oppression and their social basis, renders activity theorists incapable of conceiving revolutionary alternative practice. Their interventions are limited to liberal reforms. (See Theory & Psychology, 21, 5, 2011 for articles on activity theory as an interventionist approach.)

For instance, Engestrom (2011) used conventional methods to bring together a hospital staff in order to express and resolve some work problems they were having. Staff comments at the intervention included:

- . *Senior anesthesiologist:* So you have no control over your own work and you cannot plan it beforehand...
- . *Senior anesthesiologist:* Nobody ever thanks you, the work remains unfinished, you leave, and everything is unfinished, your shift ends and you leave; you never see the reward for the hard work, so that ... Surely one thing that should be developed is that really you would feel that the work is rewarding. So that you would really feel that you do your job well and that the patients get well and stay alive.

Doctors, nurses, and staff attributed their mundane problems to the large size of their work unit, and they recommended dividing it into sub-units. Engestrom accepted their conventional analysis and solution that simply address the size of the work unit, not its social relations and institutional constraints. Engestrom did not attempt to deepen these analyses in line with Marx's deep structural analysis and practice (on which activity theory is supposedly based) that I have outlined in figure one.

Engestrom did not trace the staff's mundane problems to the social relations of the hospital (not simply the number of staff in a unit). Nor did he root these social relations in core aspects of the political economy, such as ownership and management of the hospital, profit considerations that affect working conditions and budgets, commodification of services, alienation of market relations that govern physicians' treatment of patients, and so on. Nor did Engestrom suggest reorganizing any of these in order to improve work. Engestrom seeks minor improvements in unit size within the existing political-economic system (see Ratner, 2012c, pp. 240-246 for critique of Engestrom's related research).

Similarly, activity theorists who work in the field of education fail to explore the neoliberal structuring of education that this author explains in the chapter on macro cultural factors in this Encyclopedia. Nor do activity theorists consider

Althusser's (2001, pp. 155-156) sweeping political critique of education as the dominant ideological apparatus of capitalism:

Besides techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is 'destined' for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination.

In other words, the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'. All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the 'professionals of ideology' (Marx), must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously' – the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), of the exploiters (the capitalists), of the

exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its 'functionaries'), etc.

Ignoring this cultural-historical-political context that informs activity, allows the given culture to persist and influence behavior via cultural factors as well as via habituses within individuals' consciousness/psychologies. These powerful, well-organized, entrenched social trends of predatory capitalism overwhelm the limited, isolated, apolitical agenda of activity theorists. Entrenched social trends threaten the survival and educational gains of programs such Cole's "Fifth Dimension" after-school educational program that has a spotty record of survival (Downing-Wilson, Lecusay, and Cole, 2011, p. 661).

To be emancipatory, interventions must revolutionize macro cultural factors and consciousness. Freire called the latter "conscientization" (the term originally derives from [Frantz Fanon](#)'s coinage of a French term, *conscienciser*, in his 1952 book, *Black Skins, White Masks*). Interventions must deepen peoples' understanding of the way their society is organized, its power structure, dynamics, and ideology; how the organization of social relations affects their individual work, and how oppressive social factors can be circumvented and transformed. Freire, for example, railed against neoliberalism in his pedagogical critiques. To qualify as successful, interventions must demonstrate that they achieve conscientization.

Simply encouraging students to become more involved in their studies (taking more interest, participating more actively, expressing themselves more often, getting along with peers and teachers, or improving test scores and knowledge retention of standard curricula) does not challenge the content and structure of education or the students' habituses. Nor does it motivate students to work for viable, concrete social transformation that is necessary for emancipation.

3) Personal and interpersonal forms of emancipation.

Agency, and the individual-society dialectic. A popular view is that the individual continuously negotiates culture and reforms it in individual, mundane acts. Simply interacting with society necessarily reforms it. The individual is considered to be an independent agent that is other to society, inherently in dialectical tension with society, and therefore inherently and continuously transforming society.

This view is abstract. It ignores any content to the dialectic of what kind of changes an individual might introduce into society. An adolescent deciding to purchase Pepsi rather than Coca Cola qualifies as a dialectic of individual agency negotiating with cultural factors and affecting corporate success and failure. The dialectic also includes individuals exacerbating exploitation by capitalism, for here, again, the individual is contributing something to culture and changing it. These

dialectics are hardly emancipatory. Agency, per se, does not generate emancipation, nor does the individual-society dialectic.

Furthermore, championing the individual-culture dialectic does not recognize that individual psychology, agency, consciousness, and subjectivity are culturally formed to reflect and reproduce society. Vygotsky and his colleagues emphasized this – as did role theorists, and sociologists such as Bourdieu. From this perspective, the individual is not substantively in tension with society; rather the individual is typically a social functionary – as in purchasing Pepsi or promoting neoliberalism.

A meaningful, emancipatory dialectic is one in which individuals struggle to transform existing culture in concrete ways that enhance cooperation, democracy, freedom, and fulfillment. This meaningful dialectic between culture and individuals must be created by developing a critical praxis (consciousness and action). This is not inherent in individual psychology, agency, or subjectivity. Only certain politically informed psychology, agency, subjectivity, and behavior comprise a meaningful dialectical tension with society that is emancipatory (Ratner, 2013).

Contact theory. Another micro level strategy for emancipation is contact theory. Pioneered by Allport, it claims that deep-seated, historical, ethnic antagonisms can be overcome by allowing groups to have interpersonal contact.

This interpersonal experience will show them that their antagonist is human, and that there is no reason to fear or hate the antagonist. Hammack (2011, chap. 6) refutes contact theory. He found that it did not work with Palestinian and Israeli Jewish youth. Historical, political, social, and military animosity had so shaped the habituses of both groups, that interpersonal interactions did not overcome them (see Ratner, 2011, 2012b). Hammack (2011, p. 354) says, “In focusing primarily on the promotion of individual change, practitioners of intergroup contact have typically overlooked the reality of structural relations among groups and the political needs those relations achieve. They traditionally fail to consider the ways in which intergroup conflict is connected to the reproduction of a particular social order, with a particular power dynamic.” [Unfortunately, Hammack does not carry this pregnant thought through to its logical conclusion, which is that interpersonal change requires political-economic change. Instead, Hammack falls back to an apolitical, individualistic, subjective view of emancipation, as he concludes “It is perhaps the rich ability to make meaning, even in settings of injustice, that defeats tyranny” (ibid., p. 367).]

4) Spontaneous, unorganized efforts to oppose oppression. This is exemplified by mass protests recently known as the Occupy movement. These protests are praised for their lack of structure, history, leadership, and programs.

From the perspective outlined in this chapter, such spontaneity is naïve and unworkable. It is not steeped in a specific social philosophy or political-economic thinking that provides intellectual coherence or guidance about the sources of oppression and the transformation that is necessary to eradicate it. It does not draw upon the history of struggles for social reform. It simply complains about problems such as inequality, greed, militarism, pollution, and corporate corruption, without understanding their dynamics or a viable, concrete alternative political economy. The movement also lacks a viable structure and leadership that can provide coherence. It is easily fragmented into factions, and easily infiltrated by police spies and saboteurs.

This is why the Occupy movement has not accomplished anything transformative in its year of existence. It has prevented a handful of housing foreclosures by embarrassing the banks that were pursuing them. This did nothing to transform the institutions at the heart of the cascading crises, nor did it help the millions of Americans who have been permanently debilitated by them.

An endorsement of the first anniversary of the Occupy movement by several activists and supporters, hosted by “Democracy Now” Sept. 17, 2012, counted as indicators of its success: “activists formed close bonds for the future,” “the movement is in the process of brainstorming about how to proceed,” “some students refused to pay student loans,” and “some tenants refused to pay rent

and they organized a work day to clean up garbage in the basement of a rental.” After an entire year of meeting, organizing, and exchanging ideas, these actions fall far short of understanding and solving social crises.

In comparison, the anti-war movement of the 1960s galvanized a broad political-intellectual movement known as the New Left that developed a deep intellectual analysis of the origins of the war in the capitalist political-economy. This analysis was grounded in a study of Marxism, anarchism, and radical sociology, anthropology, and geography. The New Left transformed the intellectual landscape of the United States for decades. It effected major transformations of university curricula and pedagogy. That movement marshaled popular opinion against the war in a way that successfully shortened it and prevented more deaths and destruction. It also agitated for the Great Society Programs of the 1960s that included curbing government abuses such as spying on citizens. The New Left also transformed culture by introducing critical social content into music, movies, literature, and social science. “Occupy” has accomplished nothing comparable.

Ironically, the New Left made greater reforms during a period of prosperity in the U.S., than the Occupy movement has made (and will make) in a period of social-economic-political crisis.

Progressive spokespeople who praise Occupy for its lack of doctrine, lack of a program, and lack of organization, contribute to the impotence of this movement.

Practical Relevance

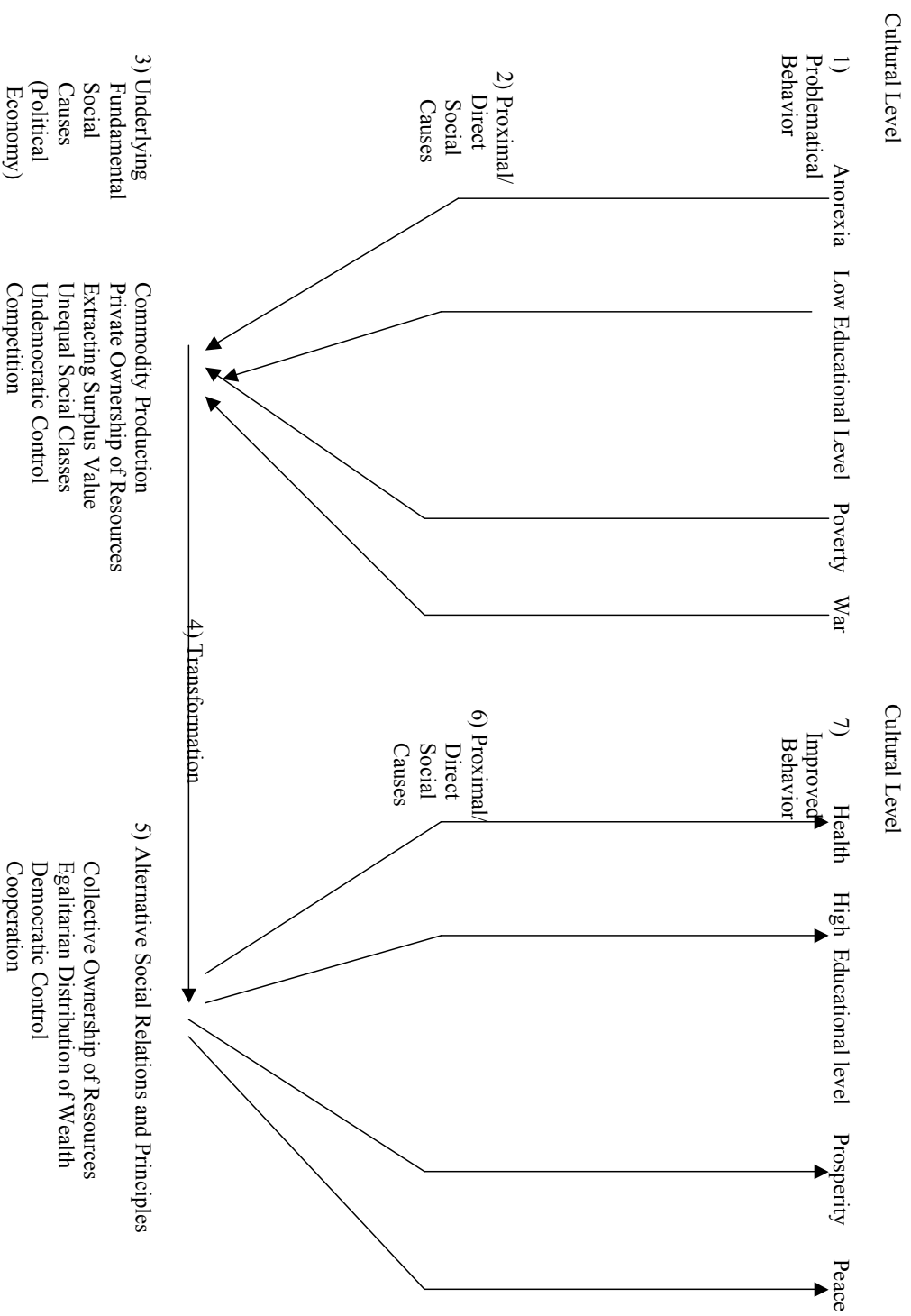
Emancipation requires transforming the oppressive social core to a democratic, collective one

The core oppression must be transformed to eradicate all particular forms of oppression. This may not always be historically possible given the state of development of oppositional forces vis a vis the ruling class, and given the state of development of political and economic institutions that would be necessary for a structural transformation. Narrower forms of emancipation might need to precede and prepare more complete structural transformation. This was the case with abolishing slavery and struggling for civil rights in the United States. Structural transformation of capitalism was impossible in the 19th century, however necessary it might have been. The present stage of capitalism affords more possibility of reorganizing the political economy along cooperative, democratic lines. It is always important, in all oppressive societies, to work toward this transformation as the means of thoroughly eradicating oppression. The process is depicted in my figure one.

Figure One

Deep-Structural Social Analysis & Reform

Deep-Structural Social-Psychological Reform



The need to transform the political economic base of oppression gains credence from failures to eradicate oppression without such transformation. The American civil rights struggle prohibited discrimination against blacks, but it did not challenge the political economic core of capitalism that profits from exploiting minorities. Consequently, the economic incentives to exploit blacks persist and they undermine the legal mandates to treat blacks as equal to whites. Persisting racial inequality is evident in downward social mobility: 60% of blacks born to parents in the top half of income distribution wind up in the bottom half, compared to only 36% of whites. 45% of black children with middle-class parents end up in the bottom 1/5 of income, while only 16% of comparable white middle class children end up in the bottom 1/5 of income. Conversely, 68% of all white people eventually achieve middle class status compared to only 38% of blacks (Wall St. Journal, Sept. 20, 2012, p. A6).

Political economy is more powerful than laws, as Marx explained.

The culture of exploitation

An important aspect of exploitation that emancipation must address is the way it becomes normative, taken-for-granted, habitualized, and accepted by its victims as the chapter on psychology of oppression in this Encyclopedia

emphasizes. Emancipation must therefore challenge people's most ingrained, habitual, acceptable forms of behavior to ascertain exploitive features that escape notice. Consequently, we are more oppressed than we realize. And we have far more to change than we realize, if we are to emancipate ourselves.

Since much of the consciousness of many people is oppressed and mystified, we cannot depend upon people's given consciousness to comprehend and resist their oppression and mystification. Thomas (2009, p. 18) explains this clearly: "There are limits to self-knowledge because the self is fundamentally socially informed and founded...As Butler puts it, the identifications used to recognize – and to be recognizable – are not 'ours'. In a sense then, one's body is also not one's 'own' – and the discomfort, pain, and hurt feelings of the girls point to that... Paradoxically, subjectivity, that highly personal experience of being a self, is achieved only by entering into fundamentally social spaces of difference, although the origins of those founding moments are lost to the subject."

The psychology of oppression must be re-educated before people can correctly understand and struggle for what their emancipation consists in. "Education for liberation strives to effect a fundamental change in the native's consciousness and self-knowledge; confronting the 'internalized' oppressor" (Gibson, 1999, p. 358).

This does not make us elitist or demagogic, any more than any educator or educated professional is elitist in explaining to people her informed conclusions. Our analysis would be subject to debate as all others are.

While emancipation must address limits imposed by the status quo, it must also apprehend emancipatory potential that the oppressive status quo affords.

The potential for emancipation depends upon the conditions of oppression

Engels (1847) explained how groups that are exploited in particular ways have different potential for developing transformative consciousness that will thoroughly comprehend and challenge exploitation. Engels explains how the exploitation imposed on wage earners actually provides more potential for transformative consciousness than the exploitation imposed on slaves:

“The slave is sold once and for all, the proletarian has to sell himself by the day and by the hour. The slave is the property of one master and for that very reason has a guaranteed subsistence, however wretched it may be. The proletarian is, so to speak, the slave of the entire bourgeois class, not of one master, and therefore has no guaranteed subsistence, since nobody buys his labour if he does not need it...The slave frees himself by becoming a proletarian, abolishing from the totality of property relationships only the relationship of slavery. The proletarian can free himself only by abolishing property in general.”

This is a pregnant statement because it says that the proletariat has more radical need and more radical potential for abolishing private property altogether than slaves do. This is counter-intuitive because most people assume the brutalized slave has the greatest need to abolish exploitation and private property. Engels shows that the extraordinary brutality of slavery leads to focusing on overcoming it without overcoming the ordinary exploitation of the proletariat -- the banality of exploitation, so to speak. Super-exploitation, or extraordinary exploitation actually militates against comprehending and challenging the ordinary, general exploitation that pervades society. This is what happened after the American Civil War. The ex-slaves felt free by entering the capitalist labor force and failed to comprehend that they were subject to the ordinary exploitation of wage labor (or wage slavery as Marx & Engels called it).

Today, homosexuals and women feel free, vindicated, and validated when they are entitled to join the military in contrast to their former segregation from it. The military is reciprocally validated for admitting them. In this celebration of emancipatory civil rights, the oppressive, imperialist agenda of the military is ignored.

The more specific, extraordinary, and excessive the exploitation, the greater the tendency to denounce it in particular, as exceptional, and to ignore

general, banal oppression that is more pervasive and more insidious precisely because it is “normal.”

It is only the oppressed group that is already freed of all particular, extraordinary exploitation/discrimination, and is subject to the most general, ordinary form of exploitation that has the pressing need to abolish general, normal exploitation.

This analysis contradicts the theory of super-oppressed groups having the most potential for revolution. It means that super-exploited women and minorities have less potential for transformative consciousness and action than working class people in general because they are more inclined to demand civil rights to join mainstream, exploitive society (Critical Sociology, 2011, vol. 37, issue 5).

The political economy of oppression can unify the struggle for emancipation

The structure of oppression in the form of a cone that is rooted in a political-economy, affords important possibilities for emancipatory action in the form of solidarity among oppressed groups. The conical structure means that diverse forms of oppression emanate from a common source of oppression (political economic oppression). This means that all victims of various kinds of oppression

(workers, blacks, Latinos, environmentalists, women, Indians, homosexuals, cancer patients, mental patients, immigrants, social critics) must work to transform the political economy in order to emancipate themselves from their particular oppression. This means that seemingly diverse struggles to eradicate particular forms of oppression, are objectively united in a common struggle to transform the single issue of the political economy. Particular oppressed groups may not realize this, but it is the objective telos and requirement for their emancipation. No group can achieve emancipation by challenging its own particular form of oppression. Each constituency must go beyond its own oppression to transform the core. This unifies all victims in a common struggle (Ratner, 2009).

Treating particular oppressions as disparate, different, and separate, prevents truly understanding the basis and characteristics of each, which lie in the common social core. Fragmenting the struggle for liberation into disparate, self-centered struggles (which Marx explained in “On The Jewish Question”) also excludes potential allies who are necessary for strengthening the struggle; and it impedes solidarity and cooperation that are the emancipatory alternative to capitalism.

Future Directions

The future of emancipatory praxis depends upon a dialectical posture that examines the present with a view to elucidating possibilities for an improved future, and examines the future as grounded in the present -- i.e., grounded in negating the present causes of oppression and drawing upon possibilities that the present holds. If the future is envisioned without a thorough understanding of the present problems and possibilities, the emancipatory movement will be utopian. Conversely, trying to solve current problems within the parameters of the status quo, without transforming its structure in a qualitatively new organization, will be conservative and ineffective (see Kowalik, 2012 for a current example).

This chapter directs a future viable, effective emancipatory movement to unite the myriad oppressed groups in a collectively struggle to identify and transform their common core exploitation in the political economy. Particular struggles must be distinctive moments in the common, general struggle against the core exploitation of the political economy. This will bring the collective weight of all oppressed people to transform the central, general exploitation that is their common, objective enemy (Ratner, 2009, 2013).

This may be difficult for particular super-exploited groups to fathom because their exploitation appears to be more distinct and egregious than general exploitation. However, this is a misperception. It is general exploitation that is broader and deeper and affords the broadest basis of unified, thorough,

substantive social improvement.

References

Althusser, L. (2001). Lenin and philosophy and other essays. N.Y.: Monthly Review Press.

Boltanski, L. (2011). On critique: A sociology of emancipation. London: Polity.

Downing-Wilson, D., Lecusay, R., and Cole, M. (2011). Design experimentation and mutual appropriation: Two strategies for university/ community collaborative after-school interventions. Theory and Psychology, 21, 656-680.

Engels, F. (1847). Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith.
(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/06/09.htm>)

Engeström, Y. (2011). From design experiments to formative interventions.

Theory and Psychology, 21, 598-628.

Fanon, F. (2008). Black skin white masks. New York: Grove. (Originally published 1952).

Fanon, F. (1968). The wretched of the earth. New York: Grove.

Gibson, N. (1999). Beyond Manicheanism: Dialectics in the thought of Frantz Fanon. Journal of Political Ideologies, 4 (3), 337-364.

Hammack, P. (2011). Narrative and the politics of identity: The Cultural psychology of Israeli and Palestinian youth. N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

Kowalik, T. (2012). The restoration of capitalism in Poland. N.Y.: Monthly Review.

Marx, K. (1962). Capital, vol. 3. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishers.
(Originally published 1894)

Marx, K. (1964). Karl Marx, early writings. New York: McGraw Hill.

Ratner, C. (2009). Cooperativism: A Social, Economic, and Political Alternative to Capitalism. Capitalism, Nature, Socialism, 20, 2, 44-73.

[Ratner](#), C. (2011). Macro cultural psychology, the psychology of oppression, and cultural-psychological enrichment. In P. Portes & S. Salas (Eds.), Vygotsky in 21st Century Society: Advances in cultural historical theory and praxis with non-dominant communities (chap. 5). NY: Peter Lang.

Ratner, C. (2012a). Macro Cultural Psychology. In Jaan Valsiner (Ed.), Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology (chap. 10). Oxford University Press. 2011.

Ratner, C. (2012b). Macro cultural psychology: Its development, concerns, politics, and direction. In M. Gelfand, C. Chiu, Y. Hong (Eds.), Advances in culture and psychology (vol. 3). N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

Ratner, C. (2012c). Macro cultural psychology: A political philosophy of mind. Oxford University Press.

Ratner, C. (2012d). Cultural psychology. In R. Rieber (Ed.), Encyclopedia of the history of psychological theories (Chapter 28). New York: Springer.

Ratner, C. (2013). Cooperation, community, and co-ops in a global age. N.Y.: Springer.

Sannino, A. (2011). Activity theory as an activist and interventionist theory. Theory and Psychology, 21, 571-597.

Thomas, M. (2009). The identity politics of school life: Territoriality and the racial subjectivity of teenage girls in LA. Children's Geographies, 7, 7-19.