

Liberal Education? A Critical Reflection on Classrooms as Apolitical and Ideologically Ambiguous Spaces

Ali E. Erol

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.

hooks (1994, p. 10)

This article challenges the educational space of a growing paradigm within liberal education by critiquing two salient arguments within liberal education today: *i. Classrooms should be apolitical spaces*; and, *ii. educators need to occupy an ideologically ambiguous stance in the classroom*. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's influential work, the article argues that the role of education should transcend the idea of education as a process of mere knowledge acquisition, aiming instead to ignite transformative liberation in both students and educators. By returning to the historically located context of higher education within the United States of America, this article argues for the inherently political nature of educational spaces, emphasizing the historical context that shapes our classrooms and the systemic power imbalances. By arguing for, as well as offering concrete strategies of resistance, the article delves into the significance of a historicized curriculum and syllabus, working towards dismantling oppressive systems and ideologies and centering marginalized voices. This article subsequently emphasizes the need to understand and approach liberation in the context of higher education as a space that requires fostering a sense of solidarity and community with our students.

Introduction

Nathaniel Eaton and zeal of Harvard College

During the harsh winter of 1638, one of the chief complaints of the students who were enrolled in the first college program in North America was that the wife of Nathaniel Eaton, the first Harvard College President, did not serve an adequate amount of beef and beer to satiate the needs of a student population totaled at ten—then there was also the issue of the regular whippings by Eaton himself (Geiger 2014, 1). But, for the mission of promoting and spreading orthodox Puritanism, perhaps it was all worth it. The kind of zeal promoted by Eaton at Harvard College held a special place in the heart of at least one student who enrolled in 1651, Increase Mather. Thankfully, by the time of his enrollment, there was a Brew House to the west of Harvard, and, reportedly, students drank beer in the place of a meal every day (Hall & Hall 1988, 34). One imagines this to have been an important detail for Mather, who ended up becoming the first receiver of a doctorate from Harvard as well as the seventh president until 1688 (Quincy 1840, 60–75). His son, Cotton Mather, despite also being one of the presidents of Harvard during the early 1700s, grew disappointed at the increasing liberalization of Harvard faculty as an emergent consequence of the Enlightenment philosophy in Europe. Prompted by an unsettling sense of defeat, he moved to Connecticut and convinced an English businessman, Elihu Yale, to fund his efforts to open a new college that would do a better job at preserving the orthodox Puritanism that seemed to have gone awry at Harvard (Silverman 2001, 298–300). These brief series of events established the basis of higher education in North America as an adaptation of the model they left behind in England.

However, the model of higher education in North America was not a mere adaptation of religious zeal for the sake of faith or conviction. Puritans occupied a special role in the establishment and advancement of settler colonialism. Perhaps the best example is the way in which Puritan settlements aggravated and agitated the Pequot tribe into Pequot-Puritan conflict (1636–1638) and then completely eliminated the tribe to the extent that John Mason, who

witnessed the war, wrote “Pequots were then bound by the covenant, that none should inhabit their native country, nor should any of them be called Pequots any more” (Mason 1736, 18). Indeed, the Pequot population was already reduced from 13,000 to 3,000 during the early contact period (Freeman, 1995, 286), then following the Pequot war, they were completely eliminated. Another example of how instrumental Puritans were to the mission of settler colonialism was evident in the establishment of *praying towns*. These towns were small settlements made by the Puritans to serve as proto-reservations for Native Americans, where they could be indoctrinated into Christianity—to the extent that they would participate in the massacres of their own tribes in the name of supporting the Puritan mission (Rubin 2013, 20-25). In other words: higher education was a tool and a resource for the preservation, promotion, and reproduction of orthodox Puritan values and of individuals who would enforce those values for the survival and advancement of the settler colonial project.

The intricate weave of historical events that gave rise to North American higher education is strongly entangled with colonial and imperial ambitions as well as other structures of violence. Since the mid-1600s, the commitment of higher education to supporting imperialism has changed in form and became sinisterly embedded in the bureaucratic abyss of grants, projects, promotions, awards, in the abstraction of theory from lived experience, and in teaching political and imperialist orthodoxies in the guise of scientific discourse that admires ideological vagueness as a virtue of a truly mature scholar. While U.S. academia undeniably stands as a testament to intellectual fervor and growth, it's impossible to overlook its deep-seated bonds to colonial pursuits and systems of oppression.

Reflecting on liberal education – A point of departure

This article seeks to navigate these historically located, as well as nuanced waters, highlighting not just the challenges faced but also the pockets of resistance that exist in higher education. To carry this out, I center and scrutinize two important pedagogical

arguments presented by the proponents of liberal education today: *i. Classrooms should be apolitical spaces; and ii. educators need to occupy an ideologically ambiguous stance in the classroom.* In other words, the classroom should be a metapolitical and ideologically ambiguous space to foster free exchange within the market of ideas, otherwise, that is not true education. Facing these trends, I argue that critical pedagogy historically has adopted various strategies, and those strategies today need to be revised and revitalized: *i.* starting with the acknowledgment of the fact that educational spaces are political in nature; *ii.* seeing the content and the structure of education in a thorough historical examination, actively acknowledging higher education's participation in colonial and imperialist projects; *iii.* working towards dismantling existing oppressive systems and ideologies through the curriculum and syllabus design, as opposed to maintaining a 'neutral' stance; *iv.* centering the voices and histories of marginalized groups; and, *v.* fostering a sense of solidarity and community with students, as opposed to abstract, detached analysis using the tropes of *scientific* rhetoric.

To make these points, I start the article by scrutinizing the definition of liberal education, from organizations and authors that advocate for it and that establish the basis of what we understand to be liberal education today. Then I present and analyze the two aforementioned arguments that occupy a salient space within the understanding of contemporary liberal education. Following, I present five strategies of critical pedagogy that we can use as critical educators to transform our classrooms into subversive spaces within institutions of liberal education. I demonstrate these points by pointing to the use of HeLa cells, the emergence and critique of women's and gender studies, and the bonds of solidarity forged during the spirited activism of students and faculty.

A genealogy of liberal education

"The sustained engagement of a free people"

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), founded in 1915 and representing over 1,000-member higher education institutions, is one of the oldest and most widely recognized membership organizations in the United States. AAC&U is significant for its self-definition as 'A Voice and a Force for Liberal Education' (aacu.org) and its publication of the journal '*Liberal Education*,' making it a prominent advocate for liberal education. In their 'Vision Statement,' they define liberal education as:

LIBERAL EDUCATION IS THE FORM OF EDUCATION APPROPRIATE TO DEMOCRACY. Democracy is not self-sustaining; rather, it depends on the sustained engagement of a free people who are united in their commitment to the fundamental principles it is intended to preserve and advance—justice, liberty, human dignity, equality of persons. The task of an education allied to democracy is not simply to help students gain knowledge and skills, but in so doing also to form the habits of heart and mind that liberate them and that equip them for, and dispose them to, civic involvement and the creation of a more just and inclusive society. (AAC&U 2020)

While, at first glance, this paragraph associates education with values that seem to sound good, a closer look might complicate the picture. For example, we can start by asking who the 'free people' are under systemic capitalism, particularly given the demands of full-time wage labor that many students are subjected to, not only during their education but also immediately upon graduation. This raises the question of whether an education process primarily driven by the demands of a labor market can genuinely be considered 'free.' As we examine how students often restrict their educational choices or select specific majors solely based on potential income, or how universities close programs that do not generate revenue, thus limiting access to a broader range of education options, the answer becomes increasingly apparent.

Furthermore, we should question whether Black 'free people' can fully engage in democracy while their voting rights are being systematically restricted state-by-state. Can Queer 'free people' participate in democracy when they face disproportionately high rates of violence compared to other groups (U.S. Department of Justice 2022)? Similarly, can immigrant 'free people' exercise democracy under constant threats of deportation and violence or do they exist solely for labor extraction instead of becoming a part of democracy? Moreover, the construction of abstract and vague notions of democracy, often equating it with institutional processes and 'civic involvement,' conceals the fact that these institutions and the extent to which they allow civic involvement, as well as the definitions and lived experiences of these terms in daily life, are the outcomes of historical processes marked by domination and subjugation.

Compiling vague and idealistic terms that do not, in fact, add up to a meaningful pedagogy and are disconnected from the social processes that formed them is the result of the history of liberalism itself, which emerged as a reaction to the tumbling monarchies of Europe during the Enlightenment. While the history of liberalism is beyond the scope of this work, what is worth revisiting is the ways in which liberal thinkers theorized education and established the basis of liberal education today. Proponents (Axelrod et al. 2001, Caton 2015, Gupta 2013, Hilliard 1955, Schaub 2002) argue that the most fundamental ideas of how we understand liberal education today harken back to “the philosophers and teaching practices of Ancient Greece and, arguably, continue to embrace certain core values from that era” (Axelrod et al, 2001, 50). The authors might be referring to the ways in which a particular form of self-governance in Ancient Greece was idolized by liberals that formed the ideological basis of liberal education. What they keep omitting, however, is the fact that the means of production in Ancient Greece was based on slave labor and those who were able to participate in education and democracy were slave owners—in other words, those who owned the means of production (Sack 1962, Vlassopoulos 2023). AAC&U's emphasis on “free people” is ironic from this perspective since those who can truly pursue what they desire today are also the ones who are least impacted by the

demands of wage labor. In that sense, indeed, liberal education carries components from Ancient Greece, but those are not the components today's liberals would like to confront.

Ignoring the ways in which institutions and social practices are influenced by dynamics of power and means of production is on par with how liberal education presents itself in its contemporary iteration. In the following section, I analyze the two different but related arguments that liberal education defends today; namely, that *classrooms are apolitical spaces* and *professors should occupy an ideologically ambiguous position* in the classroom under the guise of scientific discourse, impartiality, and to maximize student appeal. Not only these arguments do not hold any substance in the face of actual history, but also they perpetuate the power discrepancies that deny access to education for groups and individuals who are pushed to the margins of society, as well as the imperialist project that spurred higher education in the United States.

The apolitical classroom

The first argument I scrutinize is the assumption that classrooms are apolitical spaces. Propagation of this assumption also perpetuates oppressive as well as violent social structures. Robert P. George, for example, Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program at Princeton University, published an article in the Atlantic right after the Supreme Court in the US eliminated the constitutional right to abortion in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case. His article is titled "Universities Shouldn't be Ideological Churches" and argues that professors should not take stances on such politically controversial issues and make students feel left out if they do not happen to agree with the expressed opinion (George 2023). Of course, not having to suffer the consequences of such a decision on one's body while having an entire state apparatus supporting one's perspective has its advantages when it comes to arguing who should be able to express their stances in what kinds of spaces.

George is not alone in his failure to grasp how power dynamics favor those who already hold positions of privilege due to his disconnectedness from the lived experiences of many individuals affected by such decisions. There is a strong current of conservative and liberal thought that aligns with the point that taking a stance on social issues in the classroom is wrong and is an obstacle to the true purpose of higher education. This narrative, historically, has been mobilized to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie and the state apparatus. The logic that follows is classrooms only *become* political when those who participate in those spaces acknowledge they have never been devoid of politics. However, delving into the history of the classroom's political implications reveals a more complex and often troubling story.

The political status of the classroom has a long and decorated history in justifying various imperialist and colonialist projects under the guise of different types of research. One example is Saarljita Baartman's capture from South Africa to be displayed in Europe as scientific proof of the inferiority, therefore conquerability, of Africans in the early 1800s. The colonial project was given scientific legitimacy through the institutions and rhetorics of higher education and was presented through the guise of scientific objectivism (McKittrick, 2010, 177). Similar studies emerged later on, most famously of Morton, that measured and compared skull sizes to justify the subjugation and outright oppression of Indigenous and African peoples (Weisberg, 2014, 168). During the McCarthyism that followed World War 2, academics who were either member of the communist party or held sympathizing views lost their jobs or were blacklisted or imprisoned (Schrecker, 1999). Even during the Vietnam War, a war that is equally associated with the popular movement that formed against it, antiwar academics who supported the emergent New Left were shunned by their communities, followed by the FBI, fired, denied promotions, and bludgeoned to death (Seager, 1995, 12). Even in the last two decades—especially by mobilizing '*love it or leave it*' rhetoric as an indispensable part of self-righteous comparisons to autocratic regimes—we are pushed and prodded to believe that we live in the freest of all free countries that have the most amount of free speech. However, during the war on terror period, we witnessed a different

reality. Some academics were busy concocting legal arguments to support and justify the war efforts (Margulies & Metcalf, 2010, 436) that sustained the imperialist reflex of finding a group to blame and destroy in a time of crisis. It was also around this time that Dick Cheney declared that criticizing the war was un-American and Ann Coulter suggested anti-war liberals should be exterminated in an open hunting season without a bag limit (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2011, xi) and David Horowitz announced in the 2005 Republican National Convention that “Universities are a base of the left. Universities are a base for terrorism” (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2011, 93). Today the legacy lives in dangerous professor watchlists (professorwatchlist.org) and calls from the FBI to survey academics (Feng, 2019).

It is important to note that, in addition to sticks, classrooms were kept political also using carrots. According to the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, in 2020 alone, the Department of Defense gave 47 million dollars as higher education grants, especially in the areas of biotechnology (National Defense Education Program, 2021). During the war on terror, Human Terrain Systems, established as a part of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, trained, and recruited social scientists to study the invaded populations in the Middle East, to report on weak and strong social ties that can be exploited to support US operations (Sims, 2015).

Exclusionary politics, policies, and social mechanisms that affect higher education work in tandem with funneling money to particular disciplines and projects that support the military-industrial complex, the carceral state, and the imperialist foreign policy. Consequently, *the apolitical classroom* is a mere myth that only works to sustain explicit as well as implicit ways in which imperialism has been recruiting classrooms for its own goals. These goals, in turn, determine whose voice gets to occupy academic debates and the spaces of public intellectual discussions and discourses.

The ideologically ambiguous educator

The second argument I examine is the professional discourse that advocates for professors to adopt an ideologically ambiguous and vague position within the classroom. This perspective finds support for various reasons. First, there exists a genre of discourse within the profession outlining the ideal conduct of educators in a university setting, often using scientific literature to assert objectivity. Secondly, the discourse of liberal education frequently employs vague and seemingly idealistic language to describe and define itself, which ultimately leads to educators who believe they can disassociate themselves from ideology and politics if they avoid socially controversial issues or if they do not take a stance. They do so by leveraging the scientific discourse, embracing ambiguous and popular terminology, demonstrating enthusiasm for all theories discussed in the classroom, and grounding learning in theories stripped of historical context. This inclination is, in part, a consequence of the pervasive influence of capitalist marketplace logic in our daily experiences. Notably, it's not uncommon to encounter scholarship within the domain of liberal education that adopts market metaphors to refine pedagogical approaches (Garnett, 2009). In essence, what this scholarly support achieves is the widespread diffusion of vague abstractions, echoing the rhetoric associated with liberal education.

There is a genre of academic literature (Giersch 2019, Liebertz & Giersch 2021, Liebertz, et al. 2021, Liebertz 2023, Linvill & Havice 2011) that openly *prescribes* such ambiguity as a strategy to draw the maximum number of students and be a popular professor. Giersch (2019), for example, in his article "Professors' Politics and Their Appeal as Instructors" concludes that "Compared to professor descriptions that were partisan, political neutrality was associated with an increase in participants' interest. Among partisan participants, an ideological match with a professor did not increase interest over the politically neutral control condition, but a mismatch significantly reduced interest" (p. 283). Linvill & Havice (2011), in their studies titled "Political Bias on Campus: Understanding the Student Experience," conclude that the purpose of the educator is to "improve the students' college experience" (p.

496). Notice how the title of the article mobilizes the “objective” rhetoric of merely “understanding” the student experience—as if their conclusions are scientific and free of the taint of ideology. However, their conclusion just so happens to align with the neoliberal logic of education.

Despite being published in professional journals, these articles further reinforce the disciplining power of *professional discourse* juxtaposed with the *discourse of objective research*. By harnessing the authority of scientific discourse, involving terms like “experiments,” “control groups,” and “statistical analyses,” these studies project a facade of reliability. Nevertheless, their outcomes consistently promote the ideological tenets of liberalism and neoliberalism. Essentially, within the realm of academic literature, this genre prescribes ideological ambiguity in the classroom as a form of professional guidance. This advice is presented as a prescription for achieving likability and popularity. If this genre of pedagogical advice is pervasive in the literature, it only implies that such professional advice and guidance has missed the fundamental purpose of education. The pursuit of attracting the maximum number of students and becoming the most favored among peers is a manifestation of market-driven logic deeply ingrained in the pedagogical epistemologies of liberal education.

Moreover, there is the ambiguous rhetoric of liberal education itself. AAC&U’s definition of liberal education assembled vague and ideal-sounding concepts that do not have pedagogical substance. This seems to be a trend in the discourse of proponents of liberal education. Michael S. Roth, in his book *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, writes “[l]iberal education... refers to the combination of the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of how one learns as a whole person. In contemporary higher education, the philosophical tradition has resulted in an emphasis on inquiry and critical thinking—learning to develop as an autonomous person by shedding illusions and acquiring knowledge through research” (Roth, 2014, 4-5). The immediate ambiguity in this definition, the very fact that “traditions of how one person learns as a whole person” is merely a vague assemblage of words that point to neither an actual tradition nor to a grounded

epistemological orientation is, perhaps the best example of how this commitment towards liberal education ends up supporting structural violence. Liberal reflex does not find it troubling to give affirming platforms to neo-fascists under the guise of free speech and civility; to use ideological ambiguity as virtue signaling; and to judge the violence of the oppressed and the violence of the oppressor as *the same thing* (Calabrese, 2015, 542). Furthermore, the focus on individual student learning instead of community building; failing to recognize historical, social, and epistemic power structures that limit which “philosophical and rhetorical traditions” make it to the classrooms and which ones do not; lack of recognition of the higher education institution itself as a historical and ideological construction, outline some of the main problems that the contemporary commitment to liberal education brings forth today.

The gatekeepers of maturity within the realms of scholarship, the professions, and higher education employ a dual approach, combining scientific and ambiguous discourses. Disregarding ambiguity only serves to perpetuate the existing social inequalities within both higher education and society at large (Cate et al., 2022). Within professional discourse, there is an emphasis on the need to be critical without committing to a specific ideology. This approach posits that individuals should adopt a sufficiently abstract position that allows for questioning from every possible perspective. Simultaneously, they should have the ability to retreat into the shelter of theoretical criticism, divorced from historical realities to the extent that historical relationships become irrelevant. This is seen as a strategy to deflect accusations of depoliticization or perpetuating systems of oppression. It is no wonder, then, in his 2021 book *Let's be Reasonable: Conservative Case for Liberal Education*, Jonathan Marks first argues that existing alignment with the left undermines possibilities of reasoned discourse, while later in the book complains that students, somehow, are against free speech—implying, perhaps unknowingly, that he positions himself as the gatekeeper of what free and reasoned speech should be (Marks, 2021, 114-116). This is a rather recent example of the widespread pitfalls of liberalism and the shadow it casts on pedagogy.

Pockets of resistance

Five key components

What might be the role of critical pedagogy, today, in the face of such mobilized rhetorics, the power discourse of science on the one hand and weaponized ambiguity on the other? How can we conceptualize our role in the classroom today, when we are faced with the demands that we should, somehow, a-politicize our classrooms under the guise of professional and peer-reviewed advice? In this section, I start by defining critical pedagogy and suggest five ways in which we can approach these trends in liberal education today.

First, however, it is important to note that while liberal education is the dominant ideological discourse in higher education that aligns with the class interests of the bourgeoisie as well as with the state apparatus, there have been and still are *pockets of resistance*. Every system of oppression and structure of violence bears its own seeds of resistance. These pockets range from the organization of the Black Liberation Movement on college campuses and on HBCUs to the establishment of academic programs that consistently challenge and question structures and discourses of power such as the Women and Gender Studies programs, to disciplines such as Environmental Studies that produce vital scholarship on climate change, to attempts of atonement, such as Harvard's recent report on the legacy of slavery and Harvard.

There are pedagogical reasons to revisit these moments in history. Amnesia works for the empire. In Milan Kundera's words, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera, 1999). Therefore, remembering as well as documenting the politically charged history of the classroom and the campus, remembering such pockets of resistance constitute a *pedagogy of hope*, if I were to borrow from Freire, for ourselves as well as for our students. Critical pedagogy cannot exist without building historical and political consciousness. For that reason, it is vital to avoid presenting the history of higher education as a monolith with no possible exit or resistance. Talking about Freire,

his approach to critical pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, perhaps, is one of the primary theoretical compasses we can use to reorient ourselves in our hope to understand the direction critical pedagogy can take in our current complicated and difficult social and political terrain. In his words, critical pedagogy is:

A pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle, this pedagogy will be made and remade. (Freire, 2000, 48)

According to Freire, the point of education is not to get the maximum number of students, to be popular among peers, or to make sure the student-customer experiences a comfortable ride across their college experience. Rather, education, both as moments of experience and as spaces of experience, should be transformative of the student as well as of the educator—*a transformation towards restoring humanity in a struggle for liberation*. The direction of this struggle for liberation is simultaneously from the existing systems of epistemological as well as structural violence, as well as from the shadows those systems cast in our collective and individual psyches. Giroux explains this as “technocratic rationality” that stripped away the possibilities of human connection and solidarity that can emerge in the classroom (Giroux, 1988, 12). Against this technocratic rationality and within the process of transformation, the educator cannot remain detached from the student’s experience. In fact, when an educator positions themselves as a metapolitical and ideologically ambiguous entity, they eliminate the possibilities of potential bonds of solidarity that can be the basis of processes of transformation.

In the following paragraphs, I propose five key components of critical pedagogy that is informed by Freire’s definition as well as from my own experiences teaching courses in topics such as Feminism, Queer Theory, History and Rhetoric of Fascism, Multiculturalism, and Consumerism & Capitalism. These

components are *i.* acknowledging the fact that educational spaces are already political; *ii.* seeing the content and the structure of education in history; *iii.* working towards dismantling existing oppressive systems and ideologies through the curriculum and syllabus design, as opposed to maintaining a 'neutral' stance; *iv.* centering the voices and histories of marginalized groups; and *v.* fostering a sense of solidarity and community with students.

i. Classrooms are always already a political space

As I document throughout the article, classrooms have been established as political spaces and higher education does play an important role in the normalization and advancement of oppressive systems and structures of violence. In other words, classrooms are already political spaces regardless of our perceptions of them, regardless of how we behave in them. As educators who align with critical pedagogy, if we are interested in challenging or scrutinizing systems of power and oppression, we simply cannot ignore this fact. As Howard Zinn (1994) titled his memoir, “You can’t be neutral on a moving train.” In other words, if we are educators who align with the ideas of critical pedagogy, we do have a pedagogical responsibility to engage with controversial and important issues of our time and take a stand. If we do choose to ignore the sociopolitical context that not only has shaped the classroom so far but also that seeps into the classroom every day, then we are merely aligning ourselves with those oppressive and violent forces.

Written and unwritten rules in academia have directly determined whose voices were heard in educational spaces, who got to be hired, and whose publications were read and disseminated—in other words, whose epistemology has been accepted as knowledge, and whose epistemology got dismissed as “politics.” The point is, obviously, every epistemology is political in nature, whether we like it or accept it or not. This has been one of the main points of critique of subaltern studies, especially those scholars who are located in Latin America. As Alcoff (2007) notes, “many Latin American philosophers—from Leopoldo Zea to Enrique Dussel to

Mignolo and others—have pointed out the hierarchical patterns of epistemic judgment under colonial systems” (p. 81). Mignolo, for example, argues that there is no gap between the colonialist project, its current iteration as *modernity*, and the ways in which that project spurred particular epistemologies that we accept as true in academia (Mignolo 1995). In short, we do need to step into the classroom, prepare our lectures, and think about our syllabi and curriculum with this knowledge in mind—that classrooms are political and our presence in a particular room in a particular institution is the result of a historical process that predates our birth and will survive our death as individual educators. Turning away from or suppressing this fact only helps to perpetuate systems of oppression.

ii. Historicizing curricula & syllabi

Stratifying epistemologies on a hierarchical scale has material consequences. There is a long history of exclusion of particular epistemologies from academia on the grounds of *being political*—women, LGBTQ individuals, people of color, disabled people, people who are poor or first-generation college students—of people who otherwise had to overcome difficult material conditions, internalized senses of inferiority, social stigmas, and other difficulties to find themselves a place in higher education. In order to be able to write their own histories, with their own voices, and have the knowledge as well as the epistemic power to define the world as they see fit, these individuals had to overcome all of those obstacles that were not faced by mainstream academics, who had the time, the space, and the power structures to determine what counts as knowledge, success, and who gets to define those concepts.

This history is significant in the light of the current trend in conservative thought that understands itself through a mirror of never-ending victimhood (Frum, 2021) and sees the true lack of diversity in academia as the supposed dwindling of conservative voices (Feulner, 2005, 61-64). To quote Chinua Achebe, “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always

glorify the hunter” (Achebe, 1994). In other words, acknowledging that classrooms and educational institutions are political spaces also necessitates acknowledgment of the tandem history of sociopolitical forces that shaped those spaces. Presenting a topic in a way that is detached from the history of its knowledge production keeps the power dynamics of that knowledge production concealed and, therefore, protected. On the other hand, acknowledging and narrating the history of knowledge production of a topic as we present it highlights and exposes whose voices were heard and whose voices were silenced in the process of that knowledge production. This has immense pedagogical significance because this way students can locate themselves, their institution, the courses they take, and their professors within the history of knowledge production.

iii. Troubling oppressive systems

What follows from acknowledging the political nature of the classroom and the history of knowledge production is the critique of those systems that have created and still sustain structures of violence and systems of power. These critiques can range from pointing to the narrative of faux-meritocracy that underlies whose epistemologies are accepted and whose are not to detailed studies of violent social and political structures that are still in place.

What is important, however, is to avoid the trap of content-induced apathy. It is far too convenient to suggest that, somehow, our particular course of study or the classes we teach are not touched or formed by systems of power—especially if we teach in sciences or in engineering. But that is simply not the case. Take, for example, HeLa cells—a line of human cells derived from a tissue sample taken from Henrietta Lacks, a poor Black woman who had cervical cancer treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital. These cells, still in use today for everything from medical research to drug testing, were obtained from Henrietta Lacks without her consent. However, it is ethically impermissible to publish this genomic data without the explicit consent of the Lacks family due to the potential privacy and health implications (Anekwe 2014). If we happen to teach biology or

medicine and either use or talk about HeLa cells in our classrooms, we do, in fact, have an obligation to bring up their origin, how they were obtained, and how we can ensure procedures of informed consent. Sweeping this part of the issue under the rug is merely perpetuating the system of violence that did not acknowledge who she was. These stories exist in every field and in every topic of study and it is our responsibility, as educators, to be cognizant of these histories, to bring them up in our classrooms, and to critique them.

iv. Centering marginalized voices

When we do engage with the content of our courses from a critical lens, we do end up centering those who have been pushed to the margins—at least that is one of the vital outcomes of this process. There is just so much critique a Eurocentric scholar can levy towards Eurocentrism—and that critique will remain ignorant of its own spatiotemporal locality (Mignolo, 2007). As Lorde succinctly put it, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984). As she explains in that essay, a white feminist critique of patriarchy will not see its own racial location and forces that formed it. Whatever the topic at hand, its history will necessarily include whose epistemologies were pushed to the margins and cast as mere opinions or *politics*.

The development of Women and Gender Studies programs is an important example of this issue. Borne out of activism, the first Women’s Studies was founded at San Diego State University in 1970 (Boxer 1998; Howe 2000). It is important to note the robust scholarship as well as activism Women’s Studies Programs have produced over the years. The critiques of patriarchy and patriarchal systems that stemmed from these programs could not have been possible without the spaces of engagement and opportunities these programs have provided. However, these programs remained largely white and heteronormative. However, it took almost another twenty years and the scholarship of a Black woman to coin the term intersectionality. In her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory

and Antiracist Politics” Crenshaw (1989) explained that systems of oppression and violence work in intersections and not paying attention to those intersections make us vulnerable to perpetuating the ones we ignore.

v. Community and solidarity with students

Our role as educators is often cast as machines that dump information unto willing—and sometimes unwilling—minds, and if a student is *too lazy* or *too uninterested* in the process, it has nothing to do with us and they receive a bad grade as a consequence. Certainly, the professional advice prescribed in professional journals that cast the aim of the educator as gaining the maximum number of students, being popular, or enhancing students’ college experience does not help and cannot lead us to forge bonds of solidarity and community with the students. The rhetoric of liberal education sees the aim of education as similar to a capitalist production process: maximize the output with minimal input while keeping the client as happy as possible—those who cannot keep up are punished or penalized. This approach to education, however, is neither transformative nor critical.

For instance, there is no possible way to measure or adequately evaluate the impact Herbert Marcuse had on the protest movements of 1968. Angela Davis, who was his student in graduate school at UC San Diego writes:

[W]e all benefited both from his deep knowledge of European philosophical traditions and from the fearless way he manifested his solidarity with movements challenging military aggression, academic repression, and pervasive racism. Marcuse counseled us always to acknowledge the important differences between the realms of philosophy and political activism, as well as the complex relation between theory and radical social transformation... Shortly before the death of his longtime Frankfurt School colleague Theodor W. Adorno, Marcuse urgently debated with him the significance of the student movement. The focal point of their sometimes intense exchange was Adorno’s justification of the fact

that the police were called in response to a student occupation of the Institute for Social Research. In criticizing this reliance on the police, Marcuse insisted that “if the alternative is the police or left-wing students, then I am with the students. . . . I still believe that our cause . . . is better taken up by the rebellious students than by the police. (Davis 2019).

Marcuse’s pedagogical approach enabled him to forge such bonds of solidarity with his students, and those bonds were transformative. Because it was not only the knowledge of “European philosophical traditions” that the students took away from those bonds. They learned how to relate to others in such moments, how to use one’s own position to rouse a movement, how to apply the critiques one learns in the classroom to the complexities of living and breathing life, how to forge networks and solidarities of their own, and the confidence to challenge and question institutions and systems of oppression and violence that hold so much power over students who live their lives on the margins of the capitalist mode of production.

Closing discussion

On the need for solidarity

Unlike what liberal education would like us to believe, the classroom is not a marketplace of ideas open for free debate where the teacher assumes the role of a passionate vendor who is arguing to sell each idea to the student—leaving the choice up to the student, as if that choice means liberation or freedom or, indeed, an actual choice. Critiquing the discourses and the impact of liberal education on higher education and in our classrooms is vital as we face various social and global crises: economic and psychological effects of catastrophes such as climate change and COVID-19, the rise of neo-fascism in the US, widespread use of guns and mass shootings, rising hate crimes based on the latest social issue—just to name a few. Not only a reasoned debate that discusses the arguments and counter-arguments in favor as well as in opposition to fascism or colonialism or responses to climate change or sexual harassment is epistemologically oppressive, but it also assumes the

luxury of having the time to conduct a well-rounded and reasoned debate. The epistemological oppression in holding critical theories to abstract scrutiny, instead of understanding the historical context as well as the necessity of the lived experience that brought about such theorizing, in addition to legitimizing oppressive ideas and theories under the guise of *rationaly debating valid opinions* should be self-evident.

However, not having time might be less so. Not only do aforementioned problems require urgency on the part of those who want to address them, but also students, as well as faculty and indeed society, are facing an increased frequency of social and natural crises due to the neoliberal reflex of steamrolling through the inherent contradictions of capitalism at the expense of nature, workers, the youth, and indeed any possibilities of democracy under the guise of enlightened centrist politics (Brown, 2017, 17-20). Britney Cooper, in her now-viral Ted Talk, *The Racial Politics of Time*, argues that time, having time is a consequence of racial privilege, where people of color had and still have to deal with the temporal constraints of fulfilling the demands of a system that never stopped harassing them through varied bureaucratic loops of citizenship and of carceral state (Cooper, 2017). In higher education, the demands of deadlines, projects, and indeed, spending class time to consider varied abstract theoretical concerns from an ideologically vague position instead of building solidarity with students and discussing courses of action or different possibilities for the future *is* a matter of sustaining layers of social privileges that exist in society. Consequently, our choices, as educators, in how we align with the existing historical moment and every moment after that is a reflection of how we relate to emergent political and social demands *of* and *with* our time. While an experienced educator can use the rhetoric of *critical thinking* and *self-reflection* to talk about how they scrutinize every theory in the classroom, especially when talking about social issues, if such examination does not lead to solidarity and connection in a common mission to dismantle the systems of oppression, then that approach also suffers from the pitfalls of liberal education.

If the classroom is not a free market of ideas and if the educator is not a cynical idea salesman, then how should we, as educators, orient ourselves to the classroom? The nervous liberal reflex asks if we should start banning books or restricting what can or cannot be said in a classroom. Because the liberal gaze sees the world in terms of commodities and consumption, *not* presenting theories and ideas as abstractions competing in a free market becomes confusing for an educator committed to the ideals of liberal education—and the fear of censorship starts looming while the actual censorship is already taking place against critical education. However, the problem is not what we read or topics we cover in the classroom—indeed, we should definitely read pieces that defend oppression as well as those that are indifferent to it, along with ones that seek to dismantle different systems of oppression. But how we relate to these readings and topics within our classrooms, within ourselves, and with the examples and history we choose to highlight determines where we stand. In *Living a Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed writes that “citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (Ahmed, 2017). Therefore, practices such as indexing or pointing to the kind of scholarship and history that openly critiques systems of oppression as more correct than the ones that defend it, purposefully centering the voices of the marginalized, and not abstracting theory away from lived experience and the material conditions that formed it are some of the ways in which we can engage with different and competing ideas. Not that we should *not* read certain authors or *not* debate certain topics—we should just be clear about the ways in which different ideas and scholars stood on what side of history and if or how they caused harm by justifying genocide, colonialism, capitalism, and other forms of oppression. Building better futures does not depend on raising ideologically ambiguous and uncommitted citizens who go into the workforce without having the necessary tools to deconstruct the dynamics in which they find themselves. It does, however, depend on educating in a way that acknowledges our students today are also our comrades in our struggles for liberation to claim the means of knowledge production and definition.

Indeed, this might be the first time that many students end up being exposed to critical ideas and historical examples that run counter to the history and worldview they have been taught thus far in their lives. But that is only because those particular students had the privilege, and perhaps the bliss, of living a life that allowed them to either not recognize or consciously or otherwise turn a blind eye to their own, and others, oppression. For some, however, remaining apolitical was not a choice because the illusion of apoliticality depended on the marginalization of others. If you were a person of color, if you were openly Queer, if you were a woman in a male-dominated discipline, for instance, your body was already politicized and deemed unworthy to occupy that space. Uniting, organizing, and trying to have a voice was a natural consequence of the oppression people faced on a daily basis. Today, this understanding should be the basis of critical pedagogy—the classroom has been and continues to be a political space. How we orient ourselves along with our students to the dynamics of historical moments we live in determines the politics we implicitly or explicitly support in our classrooms.

In other words, the Eurocentrism that used higher education to disseminate colonialism, genocide, and slavery during the 1600s, is the same Eurocentrism that uses the rhetoric of liberal education to impose a pedagogy stripped away from history and consequently from the knowledge that different epistemes do not occupy the same power position due to historical and social forces. That is to say, the institution of higher education, and by extension the classroom, has always been and currently is a space of political contestation that historically leans in support of imperialism and existing social and political orthodoxies as well as structures of oppression and violence. Therefore, the question for critical pedagogy today is not if we should have political or difficult or brave conversations in our classrooms—rather it is about how our conversations build solidarity with students to contest, challenge, scrutinize existing power structures, and ultimately build worlds that transcend the one in which we live today.

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Ali E. Erol is an associate professor of the practice in the Department of Communication at Boston College, specializes in intercultural communication, globalization, gender & sexuality, and environmental communication.

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