

Commentary:

Transformation of the Self: Pedagogies from the Margin¹

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A central theme of our panel has been the reclaiming of certain marginalized social theorists as theorists. Charles Cooley and Georg Simmel, essayists with a literary bent, have been deemed insufficiently “serious.” Oliver Cox has been considered either too Black or too radical to be included in the pantheon of social theorists. Octavio Paz, classified as a “writer,” a “man of letters,” has seldom been recognized as a social scientist. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a lesbian socialist, found it so difficult to be taken seriously as a theorist that she turned to writing novels, a choice of medium of expression that has further contributed to her marginalization as a social theorist. G. I. Gurdjieff, an eastern mystic, and Jelalludin Rumi, a Sufi “ecstatic” poet, have presumably had nothing to offer “rational” Western science. Freire himself, although the standard in some circles, is far from that in mainstream academic discourse.

There is another meaning to the “margin” in the title of our panel. It not only refers to the marginalization (i.e., invisibility or illegitimate status) imposed on certain theorists, against which imposition our panelists are responding. The margin is also a social site within which one experiences the world and from which one views the world--in sum, a perspective. A perspective “from the margin,” what Salinas describes in reference to Gilman as a degree of alienation from society, can be crucial to being able to analyze it. Most of the theorists discussed by our panelists can be seen in one way or another as residing on the margin. Freire, for example, can be seen as working from the margin because of the constituency he addressed, the collective and dialogistic nature of his pedagogy, and the radicalism of his vision.

And to conceptualize a perspective “from the margin,” is to posit multiple perspectives, multiple realities. Thus, for example, Simmel writes:

We obtain different pictures of an object when we see it at a distance of two, or five, or of ten yards. At each distance, however, the picture is “correct” in its particular way and only in this way...All we can say is that a view gained at certain distance whatever has its own justification. It cannot be replaced or corrected by any other view emerging at another distance. (as quoted by Capetillo-Ponce, p.5).

While having multiple perspectives is sometimes conceptualized as differences in social distance, it is at other times and by other theorists seen as a function of the fragmented character of reality. And if reality is fragmented, might not that reality be best captured in some non-expository form of writing? Thus, Jacobs writes in reference to the essay form favored by Cooley:

The essay is a genre of fragmentary writing which is...polysemic, or plurally constituted, so that a multiplicity

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of meanings decenters the critical-intellectual vantage point. (Jacobs, p.3).

And when Capetillo-Ponce describes the essays of Paz and Simmel as “structurally open and discrete analyses that cannot easily be integrated into a whole” (Capetillo-Ponce, p.3), he is not echoing criticisms made of Paz’ work as “imprecise” and “badly digested” (p.1). Instead, he is claiming that this kind of analysis best captures the nature of reality.

Once multiple perspectives, varying social distances, and fragmentation are deemed core components of social reality, then not only might essays be as appropriate as exposition as writing form, but literature and art of all kinds might be as effective in communicating some aspect of reality as academic text. Thus, Jacobs refers to Cooley’s “literary approach in analyzing society and the self” (p.2) and his “aesthetically based sociology.” (p.30). If Jacobs in Cooley sees the sociologist as artist, Capetillo-Ponce in Paz sees the artist as sociologist. In fact Capetillo-Ponce is reclaiming both Paz and Simmel as social theorists, and in Simmel, just as in Paz, he sees the artist as sociologist. Salinas explains that one of the reasons Gilman wrote novels was because it was a more acceptable feminine writing form at the time. Nevertheless, her novels constitute a literary take on social reality and social theory through fiction. Tamdgidi’s “meeting” between Freire and Gurdjieff and Rumi presupposes of course that a social theorist has something to learn from a mystic and a poet, and, more radically, that a mystic and a poet can be social theorists. He ends his presentation with a poem by Rumi, claiming the poem as a “theoretical construct” and “its recitation as an exercise in learning, teaching and advancing social theory in applied settings”(p.31).

Our theorists favored modes of expression, whether journal, essay, novel or poetry, and their tendency to see the world as artists and life as art all suggest the centrality of the personal in their theoretical work. In fact most of our panelists have argued that “their” theorists have seen the self as an object of social scientific reflection and the transformation of the self as part of a liberation equation. This claim is most explicit in the papers by Jacobs and Tamdgidi. Jacobs writes that Charles Cooley was “devoted to the process of inner work and self-observation.” (Jacobs, p.2). Tamdgidi, writing about Gurdjieff, states: “Each person...is empowered in the Gurdjieffian pedagogy to seek liberatory self-knowledge and change as a fundamental precondition and prelude towards the liberation of others--to whatever extent possible” (Tamdgidi, p.21).

Capetillo-Ponce, in his work on Georg Simmel’s influence on Octavio Paz, claims that the two theorists both conceptualize alienation in cultural terms, and for Paz at least the most extreme alienation leads to solitude (a personal disconnect from the culture that Capetillo-Ponce likens to Durkheim’s anomie) (Capetillo-Ponce, p.4). The way out of such alienation, again for both theorists, lies in the personal creative act (Capetillo-Ponce, pp.4 and 13). In other words, according to Capetillo-Ponce, the personal unit of analysis is of key importance to Simmel and Paz, and personal actions are essential to escaping alienation. For Margulies, it is not some particular theorist, but she herself, who makes the self an object of reflection. She draws on a wide range of theorists to address the personal question of why she smokes. In other words, she sees herself as a legitimate object of social scientific reflection and sees social theory as a means of understanding and perhaps changing the self.

It’s less clear to me whether Butts or Salinas are claiming that “their” theorists make of the self (or the personal) an object of reflection and see the transformation of the self as part of any liberation equation. It is possible to make a case, however, that there is an intersection of these themes and Gilman’s and Cox’s concerns, as presented by Salinas and Butts respectively. Gilman is an early feminist theoretician, whose interest is in the social status of women as a group and in women’s rights. However, her analysis of women’s issues is sometimes pursued autobiographically, as in her “Yellow Wall Paper,” a work that seems tailor-made to illustrate the feminist creed of the 1970s that the “personal is political.” Cox, as Gilman, was primarily interested in group rights. And as Butts points out, the contemporary movement to ignore group (specifically, race) identity in favor of a “color blindness” that presumably moves us beyond race and back to the individual, is really only a means to hide inequalities along race lines. However, if officially ignoring racial differences is a prescription today for ignoring racial inequality, the historical construction of racial categories and of a race line in the U.S. did, according to Butts, undermine “the development of identity or personhood” (Butts, p.1) among those Americans deemed Black. While the road back to full personhood lies in the recognition of group inequalities and in group mobilization, there is a clear link in Cox’ thinking between group and personal liberation.

And where does self-reflection fit into Paulo Freire’s thinking? According to Jacobs, Freire understood self-reflection as a distinguishing human characteristic. Jacobs quotes Freire describing human beings as: “the only one [among “uncompleted beings”] to treat not only his actions but his very self as the object of his reflection” (Jacobs, p.2). Did Freire believe that the transformation of the self is a necessary part of any liberation process? The answer is yes, according to Tamdgidi. Freire argued that the process by which people become “fully human” is the same process

by which they become “co-authors of their common world-history.” (Tamdgidi, p.4).

However, there are real differences in Freire’s understanding of self-reflection and transformation of the self and that of the theorists considered by our panelists. For Freire, according to Tamdgidi, personal and social liberation were to be achieved by reintegrating “critical reflection and practical action,” both across “separate human organisms” and within each of us. This reintegration was to emerge out of “dialogic, cultural interaction” between radical leaders (bearers of the critical-reflective dimension of human nature) and the oppressed masses (bearers of the practical-action dimension of human nature). The liberatory experience was, according to Tamdgidi, “a continual, openly shared, problem-posing, problem-researching and problem-solving process.” (Tamdgidi, p.8). He quotes Freire in asserting that liberation is “not a self-achievement, but a mutual process.” (as quoted in Tamdgidi, p.22).

Jacobs claims that Cooley was committed to self-reflection and personal change in a way that we rarely find evidence of in Freire’s work. Jacobs speculates that the reason for Freire’s lack of attention here reflects the habitual response of an activist, afraid of being immobilized by too much “navel gazing” (my expression). Cooley was more engaged in knowing and interacting with people than in co-authoring change with them. According to Jacobs, Cooley was no activist. But Jacobs claims his approach was “exemplary,” for “how can we effect social change if we do not know and change ourselves?” (Jacobs, p.2)

Gurdjieff, too, according to Tamdgidi, was focused on the development of individual self-knowledge and change. And, in similar fashion to Cooley, while no activist, Gurdjieff was committed to doing the work on himself in engagement with, and not in retreat from, the world (Tamdgidi, p.11). On the basis of what Capetillo-Ponce has to say about Simmel, there appear to be parallels between him, too, and both Gurdjieff and Cooley. First, although not an activist, Simmel was deeply engaged in the social world. Indeed, he believed that understanding of things can only occur through engagement with them (p.4). And second, although Capetillo-Ponce does not describe Simmel and Paz engaging in self-reflection per se, he does claim they share a “psychologistic concept of society” (p.4) and both pay significant attention to personal alienation and “the struggle in life for self identity” (p.13).

Another difference in Freire’s concept of self and that of the other theorists is in Freire’s lack of attention to the subconscious. Tamdgidi contrasts Gurdjieff’s recognition of the human subconscious--specifically, the “force of subconsciously conditioned habits” in Tamdgidi’s words, to subvert critical awareness--with Freire’s binary of consciousness and unconsciousness (Tamdgidi, p.12). Jacobs draws our attention to Cooley’s work on the “looking-glass self,” which Jacobs defines as a “preoccupation with others’ views and judgements,” and which he compares to Gurdjieff’s notion of “considering” (Jacobs, pp12, 13). Capetillo-Ponce underlines the important influence of Freudian psychoanalytic theory on Paz (Capetillo-Ponce, pp.4, 10). Butts points out that it is subconscious racism (along with institutionalized racism) that subverts the intention of a color-blind race policy. Awareness of habituated patterns of racism is an essential aspect of struggling against racism at the personal level.

Freire’s understanding of human nature is in a sense pre-Freudian, as is much Marxist thinking. In a related way, Freire seems to leave out the emotional and physical-sensuous dimensions of human beings, focusing almost exclusively on their intellectual dimension (Tamdgidi, p.16). Gurdjieff, according to Tamdgidi, insists that liberation requires addressing all three dimensions (pp.15, 16). Margulies, in her study of why she smokes, clearly felt the need to understand her habit at multiple levels, the least of which being the rational. In her attention to the subconscious and the emotional, as well as in her self-reflexivity, Margulies seems thoroughly modern (or more precisely, post-modern). In fact what characterizes many of the common themes in the panelists’ presentations and in the theorists they’ve chosen to study, is postmodernism. Capetillo-Ponce, writing about Paz and Simmel in particular, writes:

The emergence of postmodernism in recent decades, however, has brought the more qualitative approach favored by Paz and Simmel back into favor, and has allowed us to see that the ‘method’ used by both men is even more akin to ‘style’ in art than it is to ‘analysis’ or ‘inquiry’ in science. (Capetillo-Ponce, p.8).

Self-reflection, multiple perspectives, rejection of genre distinctions, collapse of the divide between art and science, fragmentation in thought and presentation, attention to the subconscious, relational nature of reality--it’s all post-modern. In this sense we might interpret our panel as a post-modern conversation with Freire.

There are other interpretations. The belief that transformation of the self must be a necessary part of any wider liberation and that attention must be paid to what we carry subconsciously and act out in interpersonal relations can be seen, at least on the left, as a reaction to the practice within “revolutionary” organizations of the sixties and seventies. That lesson was first formulated by feminists, who insisted that the “personal is political,” and criticized the sexism within all those organizations.

Perhaps the most radical break with the Freireian pedagogy is that implicit in the work of Gurdjieff. For Freire, according to Tamdgidi, relations of oppression are always interpersonal. That is why Freire pays so little attention to personal self-knowledge and change. Interpersonal oppression implies collective liberation. Gurdjieff asserts that oppression does not only come from without, but can also be intra-personal, and in consequence that the struggle against oppression needs to be carried out at both the (personal) self and collective levels (Tamdgidi, p.22). Tamdgidi sees in Gurdjieff's liberatory pedagogy a "quantal sociological imagination" as opposed to Freire's "Newtonian sociological imagination."

A quantal sociological imagination does not necessarily negate the notion that only the oppressed need and seek to liberate themselves; the difference here is that those agencies are no longer assumed to be mechanically separable across bodies, but are found to be intricately criss-crossing one another across and through social bodies of divided, multiple, selfhoods. (Tamdgidi, p.25)

However, Tamdgidi's aim is not to choose one pedagogy over another but to forge a synthesis of the two (p.26), a "pedagogy of the oppressed and oppressing selves" (p.1). And this aim is consistent with the broader aim of the panel, most explicitly formulated by Tamdgidi, to follow Freire's counsel to "reinvent" him for a new era, maintaining a Freireian "critical edge not just towards the world but also towards his own words" (p.3).