

Why the Occupy Movement Should Address the Need for Educational Reforms

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A major step in healing the injustices being challenged by the Occupy Movement is to understand that the conceptual roots of today's injustices can be traced to the long tradition of mis-education that has dominated the West since the rise of the Industrial Revolution. Sustaining life in the face of the major injustices—which range from the growing gap between the super rich and the growing number of poor, the increasing control of corporations and the military in promoting legislation that furthers their special interests, and the efforts to create a global economy that reduces the need for workers while at the same time undermining the government's safety nets—is especially challenging. The immediate difficulty facing a large percentage of the population is meeting the bare necessities of obtaining shelter, health care, and food. Added to this scenario of injustice are the people being forced out of the middle class as a result of the market liberal ideology that promotes replacing workers with computer-driven machines, and by the swelling ranks of students who face a huge burden of debt with little prospect for repaying it. In addition to forcing today's students into, what for many, will become a lifetime of debt, there is also a growing awareness that public schools and universities continue to reinforce the patterns of thinking and values that fail to take account of the cultural roots of the ecological crisis and the community-centered alternatives to a consumer-dependent lifestyle. I suggest that the Occupy Movement needs a strategy for promoting radically different educational reforms: that is, reforms that promote a greater awareness of the intergenerationally connected community-centered lifestyles that represent alternatives to the industrial and consumer-dependent culture that enriches the few while impoverishing the many.

As the increasing number of social groups, including the elites promoting the anti-democratic interests of corporations, the military establishment, and right-wing ideologues, are also calling for educational reforms, it is essential that the reform agenda of the Occupy Movement be clearly understood. This will require avoiding the trap of embracing the current educational reform agendas of various so-called progressive thinkers who are unaware that they share many of the same deep cultural assumptions

that underlie the market liberal ideology now being globalized. Specific progressive reforms that need to be questioned and hopefully avoided include the following: (1) The progressive ideas that supposedly foster greater individual autonomy (which corporations require in order to have a consumer-dependent and easily manipulated population of consumers); (2) The continual questioning and overturning of traditions as well as a greater reliance upon computer mediated learning (both of which foster the growing condition of cultural amnesia—including a state of ignorance about the foundations of our civil liberties such as habeas corpus); (3) The promotion of what progressive educators refer to as “transformational learning” (which is already reinforced by the free market system that has no moral limits on what can be monetized and turned into consumer products). These progressive educational reforms will continue to undermine the forms of local knowledge and community-centered systems of mutual support that the Occupy Movement is now promoting, and that the industrial system of production and consumption have been working to undermine for the last 300 or so years.

The dominant assumption of progressive educational reformers continues to represent the primary purpose of education as leading to new ideas, technologies, and the greater empowerment of the individual—with the latter being interpreted by market liberals as being able to move higher on the consumer pyramid. Recognizing the human impact of social injustices is far easier than recognizing their conceptual origins—especially when the educational process has failed to examine the silences and taken for granted patterns of thinking of the early liberal theorists.

Today’s progressive ideas that have been promoted for decades in public schools and universities were derived from theorists who were addressing the injustices of their times, but who were also writers who ignored how the printed text marginalizes awareness of the historical and cultural contexts. For readers unaware of how printed texts marginalize awareness of the diversity of local cultural contexts, the ideas of the liberal theorists took on the standing of universal truths. These early sources of liberal and progressive thinking—John Locke, Adam Smith, Rene Descartes (who announced that traditional knowledge is an obstacle to the exercise of rational thought), John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and more recent liberal theorists such as John Dewey—were not only ethnocentric thinkers but also deeply influenced by the cultural assumptions of their

times. These assumptions included the idea of individualism (though Dewey gave it a different spin), that critical thinking (when it does not become muddled by thinking about what needs to be conserved and intergenerationally renewed) leads to progress, that this is a human-centered world that needs to be brought under control by reliance upon science, technology and the forces of the market place, and that the rational process and the scientific approach to introducing the toxic chemicals into the environment are free of cultural influences. What was shared by these early liberal theorists, and by today's market liberals, was a lack of awareness of the importance of the cultural commons of their communities, and of the threat of a consumer-dependent lifestyle to the environmental commons.

The challenge for those in the Occupy Movement who turn their attention to the short and long-term task of introducing educational reforms that no longer support the current sources of power and privilege is that they will need to recognize the many ways they have been socialized to take for granted the progressive educational agenda of emancipation from all traditions, which was and still is the primary agenda of global capitalism. They also need to be alert to the many ways in which current approaches to educational reform, including the increased reliance upon computer-mediated learning, reinforce the misconception of being an autonomous individual as well as the acceptance of abstract thinking reinforced by the higher status given to print-based cultural storage and ideas. The latter is especially problematic as it marginalizes awareness of local contexts, and the wealth of intergenerational information that sustains the cultural commons, and of the forces of enclosure.

Revitalizing the Local Cultural Commons as the Only Real Alternative to the Industrial System of Production and Consumption

Thinking about educational reforms should start with the basics, such as making explicit the forms of knowledge and values associated with community self-sufficiency and systems of mutual support, local democratic decision making, providing opportunities for members of the community to discover their talents and develop their skills, mentoring relationships, and learning how to live a less consumer-dependent lifestyle that has a smaller ecological footprint. The language necessary for articulating the importance of these aspects of community should no longer replicate the language of

the liberal political theorists and today's progressive educators who are unaware of how their good intentions hide the linguistic colonization that undermines the non-monetized traditions of different ethnic groups. An example of the linguistic colonization that supports the spread of the industrial/consumer-dependent culture can be seen in how current educational reforms pursued by both progressive educators and the advocates of preparing students for their role as 21st century workers in a global economy is the way both groups promote the Enlightenment legacy of representing all traditions as sources of backwardness or of special privilege. Preparation for a life as a worker who is under constant threat of being made redundant by the further automation of the workplace requires being socialized to accept a life of constant change, and to being free of memories of craft knowledge, worker solidarity, and the gains of the labor and other social justice movements. And if one gives close attention to the assumptions and silences that underlie today's progressive educators who urge that critical thinking be made the primary goal it will become clear that they always assume that it will lead to positive change. Seldom if ever do they recognize that critical thinking is essential to identifying which traditions need to be intergenerationally renewed and carried forward. This comment may appear as reactionary thinking until the nature of the cultural and environmental commons are fully recognized

The Occupy Movement's focus on restoring local community traditions of mutual support and decision making should lead to fundamental changes in the language privileged by progressive thinkers. For example, the current use of the word "community" falls short of bringing into focus the deeper changes that are now required, as well as the many ways the consumer-dependent lifestyle is reinforced. The cultural commons is the phrase that best brings to our attention the non-monetized traditions and ways of understanding relationships that go back to first humans walking through the grasslands and forests of Africa. While there is now a vast literature on the nature of the environmental commons (Google the Digital Library of the Commons), the phrase the "cultural commons" is less understood. Indeed, if this phrase is used in the presence of most public school teachers, academics across the disciplines, and former graduates socialized by professors who largely reproduce the silences and misconceptions of their professors who were unaware of the cultural roots of the emerging ecological crisis, the

reaction will either be a blank stare and a quick change in the conversation or the comment that taking seriously the cultural commons means going back to a 15th century existence

What does the phrase cultural commons help clarify that is marginalized by the current use of “community”? To put it as briefly as possible, the cultural commons encompasses the intergenerational knowledge, skills, and patterns of mutual support that still exist in every community and have not yet been monetized—though they are under constant threat of being viewed as new market opportunities and thus being “enclosed.” These two metaphors, the cultural commons and enclosure, help to set the idea of the commons off from the more general understanding of community where the only oppositional term is individualism—which many people have been educated to associate with becoming emancipated from the constraints of community traditions. The commons and enclosure are like two sides of the same coin, but the process of enclosure leads to many destructive consequences for the poor and socially marginalized. That is, enclosure means being excluded from what otherwise is the shared inheritance passed forward by previous generations—what some have referred to as a “gift economy.”

The cultural commons, which vary from community to community and from ethnic to ethnic group, encompass the knowledge, skills, and mentoring relationships in the following areas of daily life: the growing and sharing of food, healing practices, narratives and ceremonies, a wide range of the creative arts and craft skills, games, patterns of mutual support, language, systems for dealing with settling disputes and what is regarded as anti-social behavior, traditions of bartering and mentoring, knowledge of local ecosystems and how to ensure that meeting human needs does not endanger the viability of local ecosystems, and so forth. Of course many of the cultural commons of different ethnic groups involve carrying forward traditions of prejudice and exclusion, even as other aspects of their cultural commons reduce dependency upon consumerism. In short, the cultural commons should not be romanticized, but assessed in terms of the traditions that have a smaller ecological footprint and that strengthen the patterns of mutual support and opportunities to discover personal talents and develop skills that contribute to a life of meaning and social justice for others.

Everyone, including the members of the one percent at the top of the economic pyramid, participate in different aspects of the cultural commons—even while they hold to the ideology that everything can be monetized and a source of private ownership and profit. Educators who perpetuate the silence about the nature of the cultural commons, as well as their importance as sources of resistance to being entirely dependent upon a money economy, also participate in the cultural commons of their family and ethnic group.

Learning about the nature of the local cultural commons, including the life-enhancing cultural commons traditions of other groups in the community, should be part of the educational reforms initiated by the Occupy Movement. But these reforms should not be based on learning from books or from computer programs. Rather, they should bring together students and the various community mentors who carry forward the knowledge and skills that strengthen traditions of self-sufficiency and mutual support. This will provide the opportunity to learn how these mentors learned from others, how these relationships strengthened their sense of community, and how revising and carrying forward the different traditions of the commons enabled them to feel empowered and connected to something larger than themselves.

Students should also be encouraged to undertake an audit of how participating in various aspects of the cultural commons reduces the need for the level of income required when it is assumed that a successful life involves a high level of consumerism. The audit should also lead to identifying the differences in the carbon and toxic footprint of the lifestyle dependent upon consumerism and the one where engagement in cultural commons activities is more dominant. A third area of educational reform should focus on the interconnections between a viable cultural commons and an environmental commons that has not been privatized by corporations or by individuals who want to make a profit. This process of inquiry should not deal with abstract examples, but with the on-the-ground realities within the local communities. A fourth focus should be on examining the cultural commons traditions that exploit and marginalize various groups. This may take the form of economic exploitation or denigrating other cultural groups—such as appropriating the names and sacred images of Native American groups for the local school or sports team. This example, while seemingly less important than how the

market system works for the benefit of the super-rich, is just one of many examples of how the cultural commons of other groups are being colonized.

The above recommendations are essential if future generations of students are to recognize that there are alternatives to the global industrial economic system, and to thinking of wealth in terms of money and the accumulation of material goods. Students need to learn that sustainable forms of wealth—the kind not subject to inflation, recessions, and ideologically driven unemployment—involves making contributions that carry forward the gift economy of the cultural commons, and in living in ways that do not degrade the self-renewal capacity of the environmental commons. Exploiting the sources of water, depleting the soil, and clear cutting forests leads to greater monetized wealth for a few, but puts in jeopardy the prospects of the many—including future generations.

Enclosure of the Cultural Commons

The word “enclosure,” which is also borrowed from the enclosure movement of 19th century England, suggests another major focus of education reform that should be promoted by the Occupy Movement. The various forms of enclosure contribute to the poverty, poor diets resulting from industrialized food, lack of adequate health care, homelessness, increasing unemployment due to outsourcing and the digital-based automation of work, and the forms of spiritual poverty rooted in the belief system that rewards the individual’s pursuit of self-interest and material accumulation. That is, enclosure refers to transforming the intergenerational knowledge and skills, as well as the natural resources, that are shared in common, and that reduce dependence upon a money economy, into what is privately owned by individuals and corporations. Still other forms of enclosure occur for reasons of religion, ideologies, and the silences perpetuated through the socialization carried on in public schools, universities, and the media.

The educational reform strategy of the Occupy Movement needs to recognize that few public school teachers and academics learned about the cultural commons, or even about the environmental commons, during their years of formal education. Most teachers and professors still think within the 20th century cognitive and moral frameworks they learned during their years of graduate studies from professors who were, in turn, perpetuating the industrial mind-set they learned from their professors that can be traced back to the early conceptual foundations of the Industrial Revolution. It is important,

therefore, that the Occupy Movement does not wait for classroom teachers and professors to introduce students to the vocabulary and auto-ethnographies essential for bringing to the level of conscious awareness the cultural and environmental commons, and the many forms of enclosure. They need to act now!

Members of the Occupy Movement can draw upon their own experiences of the different forms of enclosure that are putting at risk their health and well-being. Their own experiences will provide the initial vocabulary needed for making explicit and thus resisting the modern forces of enclosure. However, there are important pedagogical issues that arise due to the way everyday life for most people involves moving seamlessly between participating in cultural commons and market-based experiences. That is, what is essentially different between cultural commons and market-based experiences is seldom made explicit. The pedagogy supported by the members of the Occupy Movement should avoid the two extremes now promoted by other educational reformers: dictating and testing what the students are to learn that will support competing in a global economy, and encouraging the students to ask their own questions and to construct their own knowledge. It is easy to recognize the social injustices perpetuated by the teach and test approach to educational reform, but less easy to see what is problematic about the progressive approach of encouraging students to construct their own knowledge and values. The problem becomes clearer when we ask how many students in open classrooms became aware of gender and racial biases, or the cultural roots of the ecological crisis, or the way in which texting, cell phones, and hours playing computer games contribute to the cultural amnesia that scientists and corporations bent on introducing new technologies are so indifferent about?

The alternative pedagogy should emphasize the role of the classroom teacher and professor as that of a mediator. The role of the mediator in helping settle labor disputes requires understanding both sides of what is being contested, which then enables the mediator to ask the questions that bring clarity to the issues—and not to dictate what the solution should be. Similarly, the educator's role is to ask questions that students are not likely to consider as this will help develop the students' vocabulary necessary for making explicit the range of differences between their cultural commons and market-dominated experiences.

The educator, when acting as a mediator, is not giving students the answer about which aspect of the cultural commons or the industrial culture needs to be embraced by the students and adopted as part of their taken for granted world. Rather, the educator's role as the mediator is to encourage students to name and thus make explicit the different dimensions of their culturally influenced experiences that they would otherwise take for granted. Critical reflection is contingent upon making explicit the otherwise taken for granted cultural patterns. An essential first step is being able to name the cultural patterns which then can lead to reflecting upon how they affect the other participants in the cultural and natural ecologies that the student is embedded in and thus dependent upon. Examples of the questions that need to be asked include the following: What are the differences between a meal shared within the context of the family and ethnic group and an industrial prepared and delivered meal? What are the differences between learning a musical instrument and playing in a group and purchasing a CD or a ticket to a performance by a media star? How does involvement in various cultural commons activities and in industrially-shaped experiences differ in terms of the development of a self-identity, discovery of interests and development of personal talents, feeling like one belongs to a community whose vision extends beyond measuring success in monetary terms and individual success? The members of the Occupy Movement are more likely to have explored these differences, and thus are more prepared to recognize the educational importance of providing the conceptual space for students to begin developing the ability to articulate these differences.

One of the encouraging developments is the way many grass-roots social groups are already resisting various form of enclosure of the environmental commons, whether it takes the form of corporations logging old growth forests, privatizing sources of water, using pesticides that threaten species, turning wilderness areas into tourists attractions, genetically engineering plants that supports an industrial approach to agriculture, and so forth. The rise of the new green chemistry movement is an admission that western science has not been free of modern assumptions that have led to introducing into the environment, again in the name of progress and a human-centered world, the life-altering toxins. But there has been less resistance to the enclosure of the cultural commons, and this is where the Occupy Movement can contribute to educational reforms.

Members of the Occupy Movement are likely to be more effective in engaging students than classroom teachers and professors who rely more on printed information for their knowledge. This text-based knowledge is useful when it provides an historical perspective that is more likely to be lacking in the Occupier's discussion of the various forms of enclosure. Understanding the historical forces, particularly as they crossed cultural boundaries in the past, is essential to challenging how western science, technology, and the free-market ideology have undermined awareness of what needs to be conserved, modified, or rejected. The dominant assumption underlying the thinking of market liberals is that every aspect of life must yield to the forces of progress and thus become integrated into the market system.

The Occupy Movement should organize community learning centers where students and members of the community can learn about the cultural commons that are otherwise taken for granted. What is important about the cultural commons experiences that are taken for granted is that the lack of explicit awareness reduces the ability to resist the forces of enclosure. What we are not aware of is easily lost, with the recent loss of privacy being a prime example. Creating opportunities for people of different age and ethnic backgrounds to come together to discuss their different cultural commons activities will lead to validating a more community-centered and ethnically diverse vocabulary while at the same time providing a conceptual basis for discussing different forms of enclosure that are difficult to resist when individuals feel alone and powerless. As mentioned earlier, there will be members of the community who have experience in organizing efforts to resist various forms of enclosure—ranging from the increasing threat to civil liberties and community-centered businesses by large corporations, the privatizing of different aspects of the environmental commons, and so forth. And this knowledge, which will be based on previous experience of different forms of resistance ranging from the moral leadership inspired by Gandhi to the community organizing skills learned in the labor and civil rights movements, is also part of the cultural commons. But it only becomes part of the commons when it is shared as part of the memory that drives the collective actions of the community.

Creating community learning centers focused on revitalizing the local cultural commons, and an awareness of the different forms of enclosure that are taking on an

increasingly fascist character, are not by themselves adequate for challenging the modern forces of economic development and colonization by the industrial culture. Public schools and universities, at some point, must become part of this educational reform effort. The distinctive contribution that many academics can make is to promote an understanding of the history of different traditions of enclosure—including a history of the modernizing forces that led to interpreting the different forms of enclosure as expressions of progress. Unfortunately, the double bind is that getting classroom teachers and professors to begin taking on the role of a mediator and as a source of historical understanding will be especially difficult because their own university education was largely focused on promoting as high-status the knowledge and values that underlie the modern forces of enclosure. It needs to be kept in mind that one of the long-held biases promoted by professors in many disciplines marginalized the oral traditions that could not be measured and reduced to objective knowledge and data. In effect, the bias against oral traditions as reliable sources of knowledge undermines the cultural commons as the latter depends upon through face-to-face communication.

There is a model for how previous generations of academics who were in denial about a social justice issue were successfully challenged. The feminists were in much the same situation now experienced by the Occupy Movement. They were initially excluded from the educational establishment, but they engaged in informal processes of consciousness raising that eventually led to greater pressure being put on faculty to acknowledge what had been part of their institutional cultural commons. Unfortunately, the Occupy Movement may find it difficult replicate the success of the feminists in bringing the threat of lawsuits against university administrators who were complicit in supporting the gender bias of faculty. Yet there are new possibilities for bringing about a change of consciousness on a massive scale. The Occupy Movement needs to provide the media with constructive strategies of resistance that go beyond the mass rallies that too often provide instances of violence the media is inclined to exploit. Awareness of how to resist the various forms of enclosure, and that resistance strengthens local democracy and community systems of mutual support, will spread more widely in this era of the Internet. Promoting community centers of learning about the cultural commons and the forces of enclosure across the country, as well as with the cultural commons of

different ethnic groups, are likely to bring about a change of consciousness on a scale that will force public school teachers and professors to take notice. At least this is the hope.

C. A. Bowers' most recent books are *Perspectives on the Ideas of Gregory Bateson*, *Ecological Intelligence*, and *Educational Reforms*, and *University Reforms in an Era of Global Warming*.