
FREIRE IN THE CLASSROOM:
THINKING CRITICALLY AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

Marguerite Rivage-Seul
Berea College

On September 10, I was lecturing to juniors and seniors in a course called "World Issues Since 1945" at Berea College. The subject of the day was the Cold War. In an attempt to understand the Soviet concern for a strong defense, I walked over to the National Geographic wall size map of the world and traced the entry points in Eastern Europe for successful attacks on Soviet soil. Then we looked at the United States to visualize how well protected we are by the oceans that have made us almost invulnerable to attack. Less than 24 hours later the contradictory events of 9/11 rendered that lecture moot. We were forced to confront our vulnerability as Americans, and question our well-protected position in the world.

It was this experience of contradiction that helped me see the destruction of the World Trade Center as an example of what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called a "codification" of cultural experience. As the word suggests, there was a message to discern in the tragic bombings in New York and Washington. When students filed in the next day, faces full of grief, confusion, and even rage, we began the process of "decoding," or unpacking the events of Black Tuesday. The World Trade Center represents the heart of international capitalism; the Pentagon, the strongest military force on earth. Why would someone want to destroy these bastions of business and security? And what kind of persons would sacrifice their lives to destroy these monuments to Western liberty? In this crucial pedagogical moment, these questions refocused our semester study of world issues.

The following essay chronicles a set of learning experiences in the college classroom that arose from critical reflection on the events of September 11. Using Freirean principles as a starting point, I will explain the "Criteria for Discernment" as a tool for developing critical consciousness among students. These criteria include classic Freirean categories of partiality, historicity, and critical thinking. I include excerpts from students' writing in the course to illustrate the possibilities for expanding intellectual horizons with disciplined use of these criteria.

As I began to decipher the meaning of 9/11 for myself, I started looking for ways to redirect our study so that we could embrace the project of developing Freirean-style critical consciousness. The cultural responses of stunned silence, the groping for explanations, the intuitive understandings, all created fertile ground for critical inquiry. In Paulo Freire's terms, the process of conscientization, or critical thinking, involves a dramatic re-presentation of daily life that helps

students identify their false consciousness, or contradictory behaviors. A successful codification helps us "re-perceive a previous perception." The work in the classroom is precisely the act of "decoding" or making sense of the new message presented by the teacher.

I decided to introduce my students to a framework for thinking critically, a set of criteria that embody chief maxims of Freirean pedagogy. I call them *Criteria for Discernment*. When trying to make sense of the events of September 11, I asked students to 1) Reject Neutrality, 2) Respect History, and 3) Think Scientifically. The first principle is that education is not neutral, and therefore is expressly political. For Freire, in any cultural, socioeconomic circumstance, a teacher/student always takes sides, either for the oppressed or the oppressor. Secondly, Freire argues that we mistakenly live in a "permanent today," unaware of the events leading up to the current social context and unable to imagine their actions as leading to a future different from the status quo of today. It is imperative that students learn how we arrived at our present historical circumstances and what follows from our present decisions. The third criterion requires students to apply the standard criteria laboratory science employs when it evaluates scientific theories for internal coherence, external coherence, and explanatory value. Together, the *Criteria for Discernment* help students move from their ontological status as objects of their education to Subjects with political commitments for making a world where there is room for everyone to reach their full humanity. On the day after the bombings, I presented these ideas to my students, and asked them to consider these rules when trying to make sense of the previous day's attack on the United States of America.

REJECT NEUTRALITY

The most important criterion is also the most difficult to accept. This revival of standpoint theory suggests that no one confronts a situation with a "clean slate." Instead, our vision is limited by elements such as time, space, race, and gender. In a word, we are partial. This is true for institutions as well as people. In addition to prejudice, everyone carries an underlying, often unconscious story, complete with goals, values, and assumptions about the world. For purposes of simplicity, I organized these narratives into sociological categories of consensus theory, radical conflict theory, and conservative conflict theory. Each of these worldviews possesses their own logic and beliefs, allowing individuals and institutions to create a coherent explanation for most events in the world.

Consensus theory

favors the political and economic status quo, and holds that public institutions—the government, courts, police, military, education, media, and church—are neutral, and represent everyone without favoritism. They value peace and stability, and aspire to reach the goal of harmony among all sectors of people.

Radical conflict theory

favors changing the status quo to benefit those consensus theory excludes, and asserts that public institutions serve the ruling class by justifying the unfair distribution of wealth and power. Neutrality is untenable for radical conflict theorists since those in power benefit from exploiting the working classes. The truly criminal are the teachers, clergy, politicians, journalists, and business people who advocate and promote the system.

Conservative conflict theory

privileges those who feel themselves wronged by policies benefiting victims identified by conflict theorists. This worldview also rejects neutrality, and argues that the government has been captured by the liberals' "professional victims"—blacks, feminists, third world poor, gays and lesbians. Adherents to this theory stress the values of law and order, personal responsibility, hard work and fairness determined by competition.

RESPECT HISTORY

No less important than analyzing world visions is the notion that history provides an important key to grasping our current political dilemmas. But this is not the history that Freire criticizes as the permanent today. Instead, truth seeking needs to be conducted with "ideological suspicion" by seeking out those whose viewpoints are underrepresented in standard histories. Arguably, adopting the viewpoint of the excluded—three-fifths of the world's population—is the closest one can come to "objectivity" understood as examining what is most real and undeniable. Such objective reality is represented in the "logic of the majority" which concerns itself first of all with questions of basic survival: how will I keep my family and myself alive today? Starting with society's least well off enables one to follow the web of cause and effect back to its source in a critical, comprehensive way. The actions and rationalizations of the minority wealthy cannot be ignored in such analysis since they constitute the very system under analysis.

This reversal of starting points, rejecting the center of wealth in favor of the margins of poverty, is a core idea in Paulo Freire's philosophy of education. In his most celebrated work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire claims that the majority residing on the periphery of the economic system have a more acute understanding of the world. They see both the denigrated conditions of the marginalized and the privileged lives of the wealthy minority who occupy the "center" of the global economy. The wealthy, on the other hand, can ignore the lives of the poor since we are often untouched by their reality. Such limited vision is a handicap for understanding the current global order. The majority of oppressed possess the "double-vision" and have nothing to lose by naming the world as they see it—an unjust community of "haves" and "have-nots"; hence, they are the real teachers. The "pedagogy of the oppressed," then, means much

more than a literacy method for the poor; it is the art of teaching that belongs precisely to the oppressed. The job of the Third World, for Freire, is to change the false consciousness of the wealthy nations. This idea suggests that we look to Third World countries to help us understand the events of September 11 in the United States.

Configuration Analysis

Respecting history means not only seeking truth from excluded sources, but also carefully examining the historical present, using "configuration analysis." Such thinking recognizes the complexity of a situation, and studies the interplay of historical, national, international, and spiritual forces. Given that the suspected terrorists live in the Middle East and Afghanistan, I asked students to think about the conjuncture of all these forces on September 11.

What were the general historical circumstances? Since we had been studying the Cold War, an obvious and accurate response was "the end of the cold war, and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower." "Socialism is no longer a threat to the capitalist world," said another. An activist student commented that the international peace movement has exploded in protest over the policies of the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank. What is the current situation in the United States? An economics major offered that we are in an economic downturn, even though the White House wants to increase military spending and re-introduce Star Wars technology. Someone else mentioned the problems with oil imports and gas prices in the U.S. This would mean more exploration of oil reserves. Another volunteered that both the president and vice-president of our country were oilmen. When we approached the question, "What are the spiritual forces at work in the world?" students agreed that Christianity has come to mean fundamentalism in the United States, just as Islam has a strong fundamentalist thrust in the Arab world. Students were beginning to understand the interrelationships among economies and cultural practices in the world today. They were starting to decode 9/11.

Levels of Violence

The last tool for respecting history is the use of the four levels of violence to analyze a political situation. During the 1960's, Bishop Dom Helder Camara observed the massive, yet unattended poverty in his diocese in the northeast of Brazil, and developed a schema for distinguishing three levels of violence. The first is *structural violence*, referring to the economic conditions of a society that exclude citizens through unemployment, illiteracy, lack of food, water, electricity, and healthcare. This is a situation of full-time suffering and untimely deaths, especially for children. When this kind of abuse continues without restraint, those affected move to the second level of *protest and resistance against the structures of oppression*. Second level violence also takes the form of guerrilla

forces of peasant men and women who form an army against the government's military. These armed struggles have characterized the Latin American social reality for the past thirty years. The third level of violence is the *response of the state* to the guerrilla movement as well as nonviolent citizens seeking justice. This reactionary violence of the state has historically taken the form of death squads, disappearances, torture, and indiscriminate bombings. In many cases, governments seek assistance from First World countries, especially the United States, to combat the guerrilla forces that they think will bring economic and political instability to their homelands.

During the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980's, Archbishop Oscar Romero expanded Dom Helder's thinking to take into account a fourth level of violence emerging throughout Latin America. He named this *terrorist violence* and admonished guerrilla forces for the indiscriminate murder of civilians, including women and children. This kind of violence was especially visible in the activities of the guerrilla group, Sendero Luminoso, (Shining Path) in Peru. For the past twenty years, this group has routinely opposed the government by committing terrorist attacks against the country's infrastructure, and consequently killing innocent civilians.

It was here that I asked students what level of violence we witnessed the day before in New York and Washington. Most agreed that the terrorist attack was level four. Their response opened the door for me to inquire, "What were the first three levels of violence, leading up to the attack?" Most North Americans, including me, knew little about the structures of oppression in the Middle East. Nor did we have much information on guerrilla activity in the region. Some students knew from news reports that the United States had 27,000 troops in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and speculated that such presence could constitute third level violence. The general consensus, however, was that we needed much more information. At that point, one of the students volunteered to invite her dormitory head residents from Palestine to lecture to our class on the history of the conflict in the Middle East. This was an important Freirean moment in class. At a student's initiative, we were looking outside the United States to a population who fit Freire's definition of oppressed, and perhaps the best teachers to help us decode the bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon. That lecture on the Middle East turned out to be a high point in the semester for all of us.

THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

The third rule for discerning truth is to employ the categories of science. This means analyzing everything one hears or reads for 1) internal coherence, 2) external coherence, and 3) explanatory value. *Internal coherence* refers to the logical consistency of arguments. Questions to pose are: Is the argument logical? And, are there contradictions? To be valid, arguments should avoid

self-contradiction. *External coherence*, on the other hand, directs us away from the immediate context, to what we know outside. Students need to ask: Does this information fit with what I know to be true? And are there counterexamples? *Explanatory value* refers to the comprehensiveness and plausibility of arguments. Do they explain the phenomena in a way that makes sense? Is the argument plausible? Such common sense thinking helps expose the structure of analysis at work among major decision-makers in the political arena.

Critical thinking also has students looking for *reluctant testimony*. In the present context, "reluctant testimony" refers to damning admissions made by governments about their own policies. Such admissions are readily available because various agencies of the government must communicate among themselves; they are compelled to communicate their true intentions in memos, tape-recorded conversations, and other forms of communication. This even happens in public addresses, as students soon discovered in the speech delivered by President Bush on September 11.

After putting these ideas on the table for students to consider, I asked them to practice using the criteria by analyzing the speech President Bush delivered to the nation the evening before. I gave them xeroxed copies of the text, published in the *Lexington Herald Leader* that morning. In small groups, my students dissected the text. One group read President Bush's words, "*America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.*" They identified this statement as consensus theory, illustrating their ability to distinguish multiple worldviews, and hence reject neutrality. A second group decided that the words, "*Our military is powerful, and it's prepared,*" failed the test of internal coherence. We asked whether the attack of yesterday was a war, or a crime. What circumstances would dictate a full military response? And if terrorists are located in sixty countries, will the United States declare war on all these parts of the world? At this point, several students asked to learn more about "Just War Theory." They were beginning to take charge of their learning, and direct the curriculum to meet their intellectual needs.

We labeled many more sections of the short speech according to our new criteria for analysis, but the following had the most impact on the class: "*We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.*" Students recalled a recent lecture by Roy Bourgeois. Father Bourgeois is a Maryknoll priest who has led the campaign to close the School of the Americas, the acknowledged site where the military assassins of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and the North American religious missionaries received their counterinsurgency training. All of this was funded by the United States. With some prompting from me, the students saw a link with President Bush's statement in terms of what we defined as "reluctant

testimony." The president said that all who support terrorists are themselves terrorists. Father Bourgeois had led us to see that the U.S. indeed supports terrorists. The conclusion is obvious that the United States is a terrorist state. Of course, President Bush would deny this, but both his own words and logic itself lead to other conclusions.

Similarly, we analyzed the remarks of Osama bin Laden, published a few weeks later. By then students were more adept at using the criteria. In the first paragraph, they spotted a problem with "external coherence." Bin Laden begins, "There is America, hit by God in one of its softest spots." He continues, " Its greatest buildings were destroyed, thank God for that." This second statement appeared to be "reluctant testimony" about bin Laden's culpability in the terrorist attacks. But what struck the class was the difference in "explanatory value" in the words of Osama bin Laden and those of President Bush about the reasons for attacking America. We read in bin Laden's speech, "What America is tasting now is insignificant to what we have tasted for scores of years. Our nation (the Islamic world) has been tasting this humiliation for more than 80 years. Its sons are killed, its blood is shed, its sanctuaries are attacked, and no one hears and no one heeds." From our guest lecture on Palestine, we knew that the reference to 80 years meant the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1920s, and England's arbitrary decisions about dividing up the Middle East into new territories. This was a concrete historical reason for retaliation against the United States, and directly contradicted the reason President Bush gave in his own address to the nation: " America was targeted for attack because we're the beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." In the eyes of my students, bin Laden's explanation seemed fuller, more historical, less abstract, and for this reason, more credible than President Bush's ahistorical explanation.

STUDENT RESPONSES

Because I was presenting the "Criteria for Discernment" in a new context, I was curious to know how functional these categories would prove to the development of my students' critical consciousness about September 11. My purpose in this course was to push the boundaries of students' thinking to include the possibility that worldviews other than their own are legitimate, and can be scrutinized for historical and logical accuracy by applying a common-sense set of criteria. The results were mixed. Each week I asked students to write a 1-2-page reflection synthesizing their learning in the course. One student journal entry read :

Yesterday I spent all day in my dorm talking with an international student about the role of United States in the world. He claimed to have a better view of how the U.S. is seen by countries abroad. This made me think about what I knew, and what I thought I knew.

I asked myself, 'Am I really that ignorant, or is he just someone perpetuating false and one-sided information.?'

The issue of legitimating worldviews surfaced in another student's response:

...I feel as though there was little objectivity in dealing with those that could be classified as "conservative." I am one of those conservative types and I felt very out of place when a direct negative reference was made to the fact that our president might fall into that category. I felt as if my personal opinions and beliefs were under attack.

Exercising Critical Consciousness

Besides a general overview of political history since 1945, my course focused on the effects of the current global economy on the lives of women in poor countries. Throughout the semester I tried to weave the new tools for analysis into our course readings on the subject of international debt. When I asked students to apply the Criteria for Discernment to literature published by two dialectically opposed organizations, the International Monetary Fund and the Witness for Peace organization, I received the following analysis which, from a Freirean radical conflict perspective, represents a healthy critical consciousness. A senior sociology major had "read the world" from the point of view of the underrepresented, and assessed the reality of the hegemony characterizing the current global order:

...Because both groups made arguments that initially struck me as reasonable, I exercised "ideological suspicion" to help me see them more clearly. According to the IMF, its organization is set up to benefit the economies of all its member countries by monitoring economic and financial developments and policies, lending to member countries that have balance of payment problems, and providing the governments and central banks of its member countries with technical assistance and training. I think it is true that many countries have benefited from loans they have received from the IMF, but more than that, I think the major IMF members benefit from the lending process. As rich countries like the United States and Germany lend money to developing countries, they convert the borrowers to their economic way of life. By doing this, they are able to provide themselves with the assurance that capitalism will be the dominant economic system in the world. When countries convert to capitalism, they give up their old methods of economic survival. Once their traditional economic systems disappear, they will no longer have them to fall back on if their capitalist economies collapse, so they will be dependent on

wealthy countries and the IMF to help them survive. This is yet another advantage for the wealthy countries because when other countries are dependent on them, they can exert more control over those countries.

Solidarity with the Oppressed

By all accounts, students felt inundated by the information in World Issues. In Freire's schema, the work of "Respecting History" from the point of view of the poor is a tall order. The point of classroom teaching is ultimately to create a sense of solidarity among students with the world's oppressed. The vast majority of teachers and students are plagued with a false consciousness that can only be changed by listening and dialoguing with historical actors who live on the periphery of one's defined world. As I studied weekly reflections, I looked for indications of personal transformation in favor of social justice. One of the physical education majors reflected:

All of this new information is racking my brain, and maybe at the right time. I want to find my place in this world, in this life. Suddenly, I don't want to spend my future days working in the sports field. I want to spend my future days helping people, educating those who need it, doing something that will impact one person's life...

I'm dead tired, but I've got to finish this paper and also a bibliography. I've got to pack for the weekend trip home and also work on my social life. This is what my day will be like. Then I think of what this day will be like for a Nicaraguan woman or an Afghani soldier: hardship, grief, and all those emotions that I seldom feel. That's what their day is going to be like. My country is somewhat responsible for that, maybe more than somewhat.

What's in it for my country? Can I live this life that I'm so much more privileged to live because of the situations my government puts on other countries? Do I benefit from the loan interest that Nicaragua pays to the IMF? Will I benefit because our army will bomb Afghans before the day is over?

Another physics major described his process of conscientization during the course in one his weekly reflections:

I feel as though I have been asleep, and now I am being shaken awake. In the past year I began to feel as if what I was doing with my life was pointless and I was unhappy with the fact that I was not really doing anything. I was only concerned about making good

grades so that I could get into a good graduate program. Physics was my main focus; everything else would have to wait...

One day this week I was in Room 109 of the Science Building where physics majors hang out and work on problems together, and I heard some of my friends saying things about the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. They were happy we were doing it. I could not resist telling them about the issues surrounding the current world situation. After about an hour they had all changed their views about what was going on. The interesting thing is that I would have been agreeing with them if it weren't for the recent abundance of material presented to me."

CONCLUSION

The fall semester of 9/11 was as much a learning experience for me as for my students. It became clear to me that as teachers we all employ frameworks that our students learn and eventually internalize. In a turbulent time, I introduced the divisive topic of neutrality in a way that did not exclude consensus and radical conservative viewpoints. Instead, the "opposition" became the focus of study, and the criteria enabled me to guide students into a more substantial and disciplined analysis. The weekly reflections helped students to engage in self-criticism of their own worldviews. My willingness to engage their writing gave me the opportunity to critically examine my own biases. When controversial ideas surfaced, I asked the class to think about the issue in terms of the multiple worldviews we were studying. As patriotism soared that semester, we witnessed a radical change in dominant national viewpoints, as conservative conflict theory was replaced by a highly patriotic version of consensus theory. According to that viewpoint, classes like mine were labeled unpatriotic and the "weak link" in the fight against terrorism. With the exercise of the *Criteria for Discernment*, however, students may reach a different conclusion.
