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MIXED EMOTIONS: THE PROBLEMS OF MUTUALITY  
AND THE FORMATION OF ETHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS WITHIN  
INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARIES

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This paper pursues some of the problems concerning personal consciousness and its social embeddedness within institutional formations. The stratum of expressed emotions and their social context are varied to say the least, but this paper contends that they are mixed in a different sense, sometimes clouded by, sometimes tempered by, rationality. There is an irony surrounding our rational pursuits or desires and our emotional compulsions, or more simply put, between what we say or tell ourselves and how we feel and what we do. For instance, we may, in principle, wish to do the morally reciprocal thing toward the preservation of the other's dignity, but at once see this other as offensive to our preferences or partialities. Due to our histories, with or without the specific person in direct communicative space, we may potentially find the other annoying, undeserving, self-serving or their contentment less important than other affective pursuits. To illustrate this I draw from an unusual source, the newly appointed Poet Laureate Louise Gluck. From her poem "Siren" she illustrates the bifurcation of our rational awareness from our emotional impulses and their contexts. She writes,

I became a criminal when I fell in love.  
Before that I was a waitress.

I didn't want to go to Chicago with you.  
I wanted to marry you, I wanted  
your wife to suffer.

I wanted her life to be like a sad play  
in which all the parts are sad parts.

Does a good person  
think this way? I deserve  
credit for my courage--

I sat in the dark on your front porch.  
Everything was clear to me:  
if your wife wouldn't let you go  
that proved she didn't love you  
If she loved you  
wouldn't she want you happy?

I think now  
 if I felt less I would be  
 a better person. I was a good waitress,  
 I could carry eight drinks.

I used to tell you my dreams.  
 Last night I saw a woman sitting on a dark bus--  
 in the dream she's weeping, the bus she's on  
 is moving away. With one hand  
 she's waving; the other strokes  
 an egg carton full of babies.

The dream does not rescue the maiden.<sup>1</sup>

The human subject here displaces potentially self-directed anger toward the wife whose relationship she has helped imperil, and at once realizes that this may be an ethically problematic position. She admits that not being as emotionally bound might allow her take an ethical position, but suffering as she is, she sublimates her scorn, guilt or resentment as justified. Additionally, past crocodile tears, she selfishly neglects the other's position, and her responsibility not to cause her pain via her loss of relationship. Instead she deploys a rationalization, i.e., the wife's connection to her husband is petty because she does not wish for his happiness, as opposed to her potential desire to maintain said relationship, be it for love, security, etc. The other's emotional well-being and any notion of reciprocity concerning action and maintenance of dignity is precluded in preference of a linear argument that justifies the relationship to which she is now bound over the one she has helped to compromise.<sup>2</sup> The faulty premise in her argument is that a relationship only requires one person cause another's happiness. In this case it is the wife allowing the husband to pursue intimacy with another, rather than their communicative union representing a dialectical negotiation between two subject-poles, one in which, to a great extent, the subject is not a part. At last, through much emotional intransigence, she recognizes simultaneously her life's simplicity before the present relational entanglement, some of the ramifications of her emotional attachment and the potential outcomes of her actions, be she the woman on the bus or her lover's wife. What follows departs to examine emotional-rational confusions and problems of mutuality and reciprocity within institutions of education. Specifically, I contend that in our emotional lives we often confuse institutional realities and relationships as finitudes rather than humanly created and mutable modes of behavior.

#### THE INSTITUTIONAL LOCATION OF EMOTIONS

Within the restrictive confines of institutional life, there is often emotional tension between the individual and an identity group, and among identity groups

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and their respective norms—resistance to the known, the potentially known and the unknowable in relationship, and tension in what standard of both mutuality and alterity we may wish to affirm. What we *wish* to affirm, like a reflexive ethical alterity, may also have ironic undertones referent to action, for we may choose not to pursue it either as an acritical reaction to institutional values or uncritically as the result of being conditioned by these values.

Ever-looming is a strain between the rational aspects of consciousness and the emotional life. The former often prescribes a desired treatment of the other based on potentially useful, but nonetheless mechanical, axioms like the ancient Judeo-Christian golden rule, or the enlightenment liberal version a la Locke and Rousseau, or similar arguments posited by Kant, Arendt, or Rawls.<sup>3</sup> While the latter is often saturated with feelings of resentment, jealousy, anger, etc. toward other people. We may will our actions toward the immediate satiation of these feelings either through negotiation, reconciliation or violence, or inward toward passive sublimations of the circumstances in which we suffer. Nonetheless, all educators are saturated by their institution's emotional climate.

There are numerous and difficult questions concerning the ability of humans to act outside the cultural-historical conditions that have become routinized through uncritical repetition. Consciousness and emotional-rational freedom are problematic in their very embeddedness within, as Maxine Greene might have it, “a matrix of social, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions.”<sup>4</sup> Where can the possibility of emotionally sensitive relationships with others emerge within a culturally embedded consciousness? How may we foster connected inquiries into our social environments, and related affective changes in consciousness and ethical action? How can a person acquire a critical consciousness when the dynamics of the culture and structure of the institution are anathema to such an undertaking? Additionally, on one hand we have the problem of socially embedded emotions (guilt, fear, anger, resentment, grief, etc.) and on the other, possible limits related to the former concerning what humans are ethically capable of doing within a given circumstance. From a different tangent, false consciousness may lead us to support things that do not benefit us emotionally, physically or intellectually for comfort's sake or out of ignorance, or we may be cognizant of disservice and yet be compelled to ignore this dissonance in denial or the pursuit of a negotiated benefit. This is reminiscent of Ivan Illich's dictum that consumer cultural hegemony produces “inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy.”<sup>5</sup> The parallel would be for our purpose here that within institutional life, educators are the concurrent prisoners of affirmation and resignation, and compromise, resistance and resentment. That emotions are sensitive and referent to differential power in relationships will only be treated generally in what follows, although it is certainly central to acknowledge and affirm its effects.

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## INSTITUTIONS, EMOTIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCE

The situation experienced by educators under many of the standards-based mandates is Janus faced. On one hand educators may feel an allegiance to the underlying premises of the reform effort, e.g., reducing dropout rates. On the other, due to lack of resources, unrealistic expectations and otherwise difficult circumstances, they may find ways to actively and passively negotiate or manipulate hierarchically imposed mandates out of emotional confusion, resistance or fear. Robert Kimball, an assistant principal in Houston's city schools, echoes much of this frustration concerning the hierarchical dispensation of policy.<sup>6</sup> In a recent *New York Times* piece Kimball reveals the culture of authority and fear extant through his own experience with zero dropout requirements coupled with falling budgets. He states, "people are afraid. The superintendent has frequent meetings with principals. Before they go in the principals are really, really scared. Panicky. They have to make their numbers."<sup>7</sup>

The facility of established power to divert responsibility for suffering and inequality away from said power can be witnessed in contemporary educational policy's touting the needs for more hierarchical accountability and less autonomy among individual educators. For instance, few would argue that the "flexibility for States, School Districts and Schools" to meet performance standards mentioned in NCLB overshadows the "increased accountability" to meet said objective standards.<sup>8</sup> Policy, in this instance, equals the *official* broadcast of false consciousness where the shame of failure, in the mythical world of equity, fairness, and meritocracy, yields an alienated politics and pedagogy that denies communal responsibility and fosters alienation. The result of this transference of emotional energy is, on a macro level, tantamount to psychological displacement. Much energy is wasted justifying the fixity of our relative positions in the hierarchy, rather than on examining our consciousness, and seeking to benefit our circumstance through critical and emotionally connected and informed intersubjective discourse.

The above points of inquiry raise numerous questions concerning the emotional dynamics of relationship, cultural and positionality of the subjects involved within institutional life. Namely that to overcome such contradictions would-be actors must get beyond the routine negotiation for daily survival and address issues bigger than the immediate situation. Stakeholders should imagine how institutional life might be in an extra-personal yet inter- and intra-personal context. They should inquire into their innermost desires as educators and ethical beings, both structurally and discursively. However, the aforementioned problems of rational-emotional irony still shadow the scope of potential action and should be discussed.

The judgement of those without power is often clouded by what can be described via the familiar Nietzschean term *ressentiment*—a slight but not fully

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affective, nor critical, return to that which causes pain as induced by external and indomitable forces. The ones who possess *ressentiment* are reacting to a “hostile external world,” generally out of a sense of powerlessness.<sup>9</sup> The contradiction and problem is that in order to become critical and seek an end to one’s oppression the subject must act from strength of will, yet it is the lack of power that fixes us in our present circumstance. Additional problems lie in the very recognition of circumstance. Hubris, or its converse shame, often prevents those uncritically embedded within the dominant culture of meritocracy and hierarchy from admission of their condition. For to admit a loss of power due to systemic corruption or class exploitation would still serve to acknowledge a lack of power, and difference from those who wield it.

Yet action is nonetheless required for those who would question the legitimacy of power, for as Nietzsche emphasized, “the deed is everything,” and is what separates those who act ethically, and those who resent and thereby reinforce their emotionally and physically compromised circumstance. How do we create a will to act contrary to extant environments among those with little, like many public educators?

To begin, those within a position of subservience must act in such a way that does not afford those with power, administrators or political figures, the privilege of being “*the Evil one*,” and thus reified in their status. This action must involve eliminating our “unsatisfied hatred” and elevating our consciousness to discursively reveal the arbitrary or more insidious foundations of oppressive power structures.<sup>10</sup> The problem in this instance lies in the perceived inability to act and change circumstances on the part of those without explicit power. Therefore our pedagogical and political efforts in the institutional realm should focus on the creation of more actors, more wills to foment reciprocal freedom and solidarity. This suggests that educators should advocate a leveling up of personal expression and freedom in the democratic plural, and in relationship, rather than down to the individual as against all others.

It should be stated that Nietzsche made objections to democracy as weakening individuals’ wills and their “highest and strongest drives.” In somewhat sarcastic protest he states, “everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor is henceforth called evil; and the fair, modest, submissive, conforming mentality, the mediocrity of desires attains moral designations and honors.” He saw this as “not only a form of the decay of political organizations but a form of the decay, namely the diminution, of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value.”<sup>11</sup> Contrary to his individualistic notions concerning the foundations of communal existence, and his contempt for *hoi polloi* mores, those who would affirm both alterity and mutuality should take a different stance on the value of democracy and emotionally connected solidarity.

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The implications for schools are clear. The meritocratic system of honors, for students, teachers and administrators, possibly under the guise of accountability, is precisely what generates much of this psychic unrest and interpersonal discord. Although sympathetic to Nietzsche's desire for the triumphalistic aesthetic expression of individual will, we see that the will to power can easily become detrimental to other wills when it becomes institutionalized and non-relational. Within "the human condition of plurality," to borrow a phrase from Hannah Arendt, we recognize the possibility that our creative freedom may dissipate with the compromise of another's.<sup>12</sup> Our potential will is reflected in the will of the other—our wills are to some degree bound in relationship.

The US cultural system paradoxically relies on both a myth of individualism *and* herd conformity: individual because all achievement is viewed as personal, and herd because the will to power of some (although still conforming to a competitive norm) encourages and thrives upon herd behavior in others. The individual exists, in its present mythos, within a closed set of societal rules, one of the most dominant being the capitalist free market *rugged individualist*. This ideology posits that competition for the mean stuff of existence, and for psychologically pleasurable accolades, is a matter of natural law. Accordingly, justice is dispensed to those most deserving via innovation, efficiency and perseverance. Human nature, dictates that humans will only produce and progress through the competitive pursuit of scarce resources. Not accumulating the desired, or culturally requisite amount of material wealth, or social prestige, signifies one's inherent or earned unworthiness. This often becomes an internalized and paralyzing site of shame or may manifest itself in assigning cause to some preternatural force like god, nature or luck. A more pernicious form of displacement shifts blame to a less powerful and often defenseless other as the cause of misery or inhibition of will. In any case, the option to play another game, and the possibility of cooperative progress, however is denied by this teleology.

In contrast, vigorous participatory democracy in institutions, and ethical action therein, requires that individuals exert their wills in a vital and active manner. In seeming paradox, to quell *individualism* we would need to experience and express greater degrees of *individuality* which would manifest itself in the freedom of a person to create with others from personal desire, a sense of connection, but not through breach in reciprocity.

Nietzsche's point is well taken that personal courage represents the essence of the active being. As Paul Tillich states regarding Nietzsche's philosophy, "life, willing to surpass itself, is the good life, and the good life is the courageous life."<sup>13</sup> To live according to self-affirming conviction, and to express oneself against a dominant system of thought, could represent the beginning of social

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change. But, because life and society did not begin with an individual it cannot *end* with an individual. Expression of personal will cannot find genesis outside of the plurality of the human condition and the historical circumstances from which it departs. The will, to break free of the herd, cannot eclipse the reciprocity of ethical action, nor can it preclude the individual development and expression of others' wills, for to do so would vitiate its own thesis. However, mutually pursued ethical surpassing may aid institutional actors to escape the emotional *subservience* of the herd mentality toward a freer and at once more interpersonally connected institutional life. Even if we disagree with Nietzsche's ends, we should likely acknowledge that he poses difficult and important questions concerning what inhibits expression of will.

#### CONCLUSION

As previously stated, the problem lies in extracting educators out of the complacent doldrums of contemporary institutional life, with all of its artificial social divisions, and into a state of criticality and mutuality by laying bare the explicit emotional contexts of a particular institutional culture. It is a precarious proffer for people to reflexively call into question a system that in many ways rewards their subservience and uncriticality (although generally exacting its toll via self-defeating neurosis or through antisocial displacement toward weaker parties, e.g., students). They forget that their circumstance was created, and that their memories and general consciousness reflect an active world in which they have choice and agency. Experience and memory needs discourse to bring consciousness into active and mutual affective life. Concerning both institutional and pedagogical spaces, this means an active and directed critical examination of experiential memory, personal emotional location within institutional formations, and each's reference to the historical location and shape of present circumstances. It represents the pursuit of, to evoke William James, "the greatest possible enrichment of our ethical consciousness, through the intensest play of contrasts and the widest diversity of characters," regarding analysis of emotional affect and the fomentation of ethical action among institutional stakeholders.<sup>14</sup>

Those who labor within pedagogical institutions should, through democratic educational practice, address and seek to diminish what Michael Lerner terms in his popular work *The Politics of Meaning* "surplus powerlessness," where through cynicism, resignation, routine, or fear we imagine ourselves as having less agency than we actually hold.<sup>15</sup> Experience thus viewed represents a symptom of alienation from active life. In this we no longer see ourselves as an active part of a greater whole, as participants in a pluralistic and malleable world, but as its object.

Sartre tersely states that for those who live uncritically "it is a matter of implicating them and making them take stock of their responsibilities,"<sup>16</sup> or that we "may pass judgement on those who seek to hide from themselves the complete

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arbitrariness and the complete freedom of their existence.”<sup>17</sup> The problem with this masculine and somewhat mechanical bravado is that questions remain: who is them, who is us, and where specifically do our responsibilities lie to authoritatively tell others that they are getting it wrong and that we hold their salvation. We are then left with a primary concern of much of Sartre’s other work, namely self-examination and the negotiation of what Sartre refers to as our “self-cause” and its ethical projection with and for others in vicissitude within “our belonging to a subject-community.”<sup>18</sup>

What represents the nexus of potential criticality with emotional readiness to straddle the enigmatic and ambiguous coils of mutuality, alterity and reciprocity? To paraphrase an earlier question, from where does the possibility emerge of emotionally sensitive and laden inquiries into our social environment, potential affective changes in consciousness, and resulting ethical and reciprocal action? Can we reach, to enlist Freud’s term, expression as “cathexis” (although with a new interpretation, not in the libidinal sense nor in the sense of becoming obsessively bound to an object) where we come to know another, to become a part of them through a projection of emotional energy, to be bound in some degree to their fate, and their ours?<sup>19</sup> To borrow from Freud interpreter Erich Fromm’s theory of love, perhaps we should emphasize the positive relational aspects of *knowing* the other rather than the negative freedoms of mechanical reciprocity. Through this active projection one may “transcend the concern for myself and see the other person in his [sic] own terms . . . [to satisfy] the basic need to fuse with another person so as to transcend the prison of one’s separateness.”<sup>20</sup> Through an examination of our common circumstances, and the confluence of the rational and emotional in human experience and activity, we may be able to create relations through the practice of rationally and emotionally informed communication. Interpersonal conflicts might then become spaces for rationally reflective distance, self-reflective intimacy, and dialectically reparative action. Subsequently, we may then witness mutually mediated and emotionally connected ethical action and institutional change.

#### NOTES

1. Louise Gluck, *Meadowlands* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1996), 27-28.
2. The argument could be presented as follows. The wife should want the husband to be happy; granting a divorce so that he could pursue another intimate relationship would cause this happiness. Therefore, she should grant the divorce.
3. Examples of Judeo-Christian biblical precedent include Leviticus 19:18 and Luke 6:31 (Variations of this maxim are also found in most of the world’s religious narratives). Also implicated here are: John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1986). Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, ed. Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner



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Publishing Company, 1955). Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959). Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1958). John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (New York: Belknap, 1999).

4. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectics of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 80.
  5. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harpers Perennials, 1973), 46.
  6. Houston is of particular significance because the current U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige was once the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, and that much of No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) policy thrust was added to the national educational debate via the Texas model.
  7. Michael Winerip, "The 'Zero Dropout' Miracle: Alas! Alack! A Texas Tall Tale," *New York Times on the Web*, August 13, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/13/education/13EDUC.html> (accessed August 14, 2003).
  8. U.S. Department of Education, "No Child Left Behind: Executive Summary," 2001, <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/execsumm.html> (accessed July 20, 2003).
  9. Frederich Nietzsche, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 473-475, 473.
  10. Ibid., 482, 475, 476.
  11. Ibid., 113, 114, 117.
  12. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
  13. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 29.
  14. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1951), 54.
  15. Michael Lerner, *The Politics of Meaning* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 251.
  16. Tom Barone, "On Kozol and Sartre and Educational Research as Socially Committed Literature. *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, 16, no. 1 (1994), 96.
  17. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Hazel Barnes. (New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 46.
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18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 423, 626.
  19. Sigmund Freud (1923), *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), 227.
  20. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 28.
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