OVERCOMING OPPRESSION: PRAXIS AND THE ETHICS OF “THE OTHER”

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family who have pledged their support to my endeavors at San Diego State University. A special thanks to my parents, Donald, and Fatima for their guidance, love, and support.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Overcoming Oppression: Praxis and the Ethics of “The Other”

by

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In this thesis I am broadly concerned with the fundamental aspects of social inequality. Specifically, I focus in the theoretical foundations and the underlying social justification of oppression. To facilitate the analysis of these concerns, I look at the concept ideology, or the Marxist understanding of the broad based social support of social inequality. Ideology is the embodiment of the perspective of the oppressor by the oppressed. I also look at Marxist ontology, which places emphasis on economic relations and therefore tends to emphasize inequality and oppression in the form of classism. The Marxist educator, Paulo Freire, utilizes Marx’s conceptualization of being and ideology in order to suggests a way to address social inequality through education. Freire reimagines the education system as something flat and without hierarchy, where students can practice being citizens of an egalitarian society.

In this thesis, I examine ideology and Marxist ontology in order to determine their applicability to creating social change. I conclude that Freire’s methodology of addressing inequality is very useful, but could be enhanced by emphasizing the social aspect of the Marxist ontology. Marx emphasizes productive relations, however if these relations were expanded to all social relations the Freirian methodology could apply to all forms of social inequality, and not just ones defined in the productive realm.

To facilitate the emphasis of this aspect of Marx’s ontology, I borrow from modern theorists who develop ontology of the other, or where being comes from interpersonal relations with no specific defining characteristics such as class, gender, or race being more legitimate. As applied to the Freirian methodology, it results in an ontology expressed through egalitarian educational practices that makes any act or belief system that oppresses or subjugates the other illegitimate.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historians such as Howard Zinn describe the persistent problem of social inequality throughout American history (Zinn, 2005). Whether inequality is defined economically or socially, groups of people have often found themselves blocked from social resources, shunned or killed in all historical epochs. Historically, discrimination has affected a broad spectrum of people based on their religion, race, class, and gender. Despite the claims of progress, progress has often been limited to technological advancements, and the issue of social inequality still remains very much intact. Inequality today takes on a variety of forms: economic inequality where the top 1% control 35.6% of the wealth (Inequality.org, 2009), racial inequality where families identified as white controlled six times the net worth of families identified as non-white (Gordon, 2012), and gender inequality where people who were identified as women earned only 80% of their reported male counterparts (International Labor Organization, 2011). These statistics only show a part of the picture as inequality takes on many more forms than just the ones that can be captured by statistics, and these statistics in particular do not express inequality on the global scale. The extent or even the existence of social inequality is often not understood in contemporary American society. However, the denial of oppression does nothing to address the issue, rather, maintains and expands inequality.

Combatting oppression is a complicated issue because of the variety of forms, and the multitude of places where takes place. Social inequality is not simply a picture of “haves” and “have-nots,” because within the categories there are those who have more and those who have less. An individual may be a part of one privileged group, such as class, but may feel oppression based on another aspect, such as race or gender. Therefore, it seems difficult to come up with a singular way to address these diversified issues because there doesn’t seem to be a singular cause for oppression.

The problem of oppression appears in many different ways so there are as many solutions. An important part of how solutions are determined is how the problem is
characterized. If the problem appears rooted in race or gender or class than the solution is developed according to that particular aspect. If for a moment we were to consider class the problem, than we would develop a solution that addressed economic inequality. This means that how we conceive the problem influences how we address the problem and the actions taken to correct the problem. So here, as with other social problems, the steps taken to alleviate oppression depend largely on how we conceptualize the problem. This is the point that I want to emphasize, the relationship between theory and action.

In Marxism, the relationship between theory and action is characterized by the term Praxis. Praxis acknowledges the inextricable link between theory and action, and when taken seriously is an excellent guide towards developing a cohesive response to oppression. Praxis is “a socio-political activity in which thought and action are reciprocally determined” (Gramsci, 1992, p. 333). It can be used to combat oppression because it can be used as a guiding principle to engage in social change.

This leads us to another important concept, ideology, or the uncritical belief of the perspective/theory of the oppressor (Reiman, 1995, p. 166). Those who benefit most from the status quo, or things staying as they are, are those who are on top of the social hierarchy. The oppressor stands to lose the most if social conditions were to change, so they have an active interest in maintaining current conditions. Concepts that support the status quo are varied, but some primary ideologies are: capitalism, religion and science. The capitalist ideology outwardly maintains equal opportunity, while maintaining aspects of systemic poverty. Similarly, religion and science have some outward appearances of equality and objectivity but still lead to inequality (Lyotard, 1993). The important point here is that these systems are often accepted uncritically, that they “just are,” which allows the systems to continue and perpetuate the issues that are inherent within.

Therefore, an important aspect of praxis then is a critical eye towards systems, and not accepting them as “just is.” Beyond just connecting theory and action, praxis is necessarily critical. This is because theory and action can be connected while not necessarily being critical. Examples of non-critical praxis may be found in applied sciences, or trade school a situation where what is learned is then applied to “real world” situations. The problem with these programs is that they never question the structure of oppression itself, they take it “as is” and work within the guidelines. An example of praxis without critique
would be a program that sets about to address unequal access to higher education by training the “underprivileged” children and making them competitive. This may improve the conditions for a few children, but will never be able to fully address the problem of access to higher education while the institutions themselves actively block access to the majority of applicants (Kozol, 1991).

In this way, I see the concept of praxis as largely being a way to overcome ideology by re-engaging people with their community and seeing that nothing “just is.” So in Marxism the concept of praxis is largely shaped by Marx’s view on ontology.

For Marx, Praxis characterizes the individuals developing out of interactions with their material surroundings, and limited by their socio-historical conditions. For Marx “being” comes about through necessity, where humanity begins to harness the natural world for survival (Marx, 1978b, p. 156). Social relations come from usage of the natural world for human needs, out of necessity, to better serve humanity though collaborative production. It is out of the process of satisfying material needs that an unbreakable connection between productive and social forces develops. It is important to note here that productive and social forces are not two independent forces that interact metaphysically, but are an active and ongoing process. It would be a mistake to label this process dualistic, and attempt to measure productive or social forces independently of each other.

Therefore, Marxism is essentially an attempt to resolve issues that disrupt this “natural” process, or the open flow between the social and productive forces, with the goal of changing society. In this case the productive process of capitalism is the unnatural influence that separates these spheres. Unnatural because it alienates humanity, by separating the individual from what they produce; literally separating the individual from being (Marx, 1978a). I see Praxis as the practical methodology for restoring being, which has been unnaturally bisected by the capitalist mode of production.

In Marxism then, our understanding of oppression is both shaped and solved by our understanding of being. With Marxism, and with any other framework, it is of absolute importance that we are sure that we have a strong theoretical foundation. Because the way we structure the concept, in this case our understanding of being, invariably shapes how we understand problems in society. Marxism develops an ontology that is rooted in the individual satisfying needs with the help of others through production. It makes sense then,
that problems in society that are derived from a Marxist framework have both an economic source and solution. Not to be too simplistic, but the root of the problem is the economic system of capitalism and the solution to the problem is the correction of the contradiction of capitalism with an egalitarian productive. But before this can happen, what needs to be addressed is the concept of dualism because in the absence of a dualistic philosophy, the oppressor has little justification for dominating the oppressed.

Dualism is an ontology that separates being separate planes of existence, where one aspect is inherently more valuable than the other. A popular example would be Descartes separation of mind and body, where the corporeal body is of secondary importance to the metaphysical mind (Murphy, 1989). The mind is more valued in the Cartesian ontology because it is “purer,” or closer to the idea of “Truth.” The way that Truth is conceived is affected by ontology; in Descartes’ case being originates in the mind and is developed between an interaction between mind and body. Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” places the origin of being strictly in the mind, and to reach “pure” being, the body needs to be made as much like the mind as possible. Similarly, Christianity develops being from God, and man is supposed to become like Him. Western science also constructs an idea of pure observable fact. And in order for that Truth to be reached the scientist has to “purify” his or her perception.

Therefore, a recurring theme among these perspectives is this idea of a universal and unchanging Truth. Accordingly, truth is universal and can’t be questioned, even when Truth has direct social consequences. These so called “Truths” create hierarchal structures that rank people, ideas, and values. This stems from the idea that whichever is held to be closer to the “Truth” translates into more social value. It is useful here to look into different historical epochs. In era’s defined by God and the church, priests were most valuable, while in capitalism CEO’s are most valuable. Importantly, this also affects the reverse that is those who least match the “Truth” are considered less valuable. So in contemporary terms the poor are less valuable than the rich. And since the “Truth” is universal and unchangeable, the value of a person is intrinsic. Because of this widely accepted ideology, great atrocities can be justified because the people associated with lesser values are thought to be inherently wretched. When groups, whether defined by class, race, or gender are labeled as inferior it is possible to justify acts of violence or oppression against these groups (Memmi, 1965).
The recurring theme here is that universal truth associated with dualism invariably leads to inequality. This is because in this scenario, value has hierarchy “built in,” there is always something that is inherently more valuable than another. Consequently, if an equitable society is to be constructed it needs be founded in an ontology that has no innate or universal value built into it.

Therefore, ontology must be founded in interaction between people, meeting each other on equal terms. Martin Buber calls the ontological space of equitable interaction between people the “in-between.” The in-between is a relationship developed between people through genuine interaction. Buber defines genuine interaction as something independent of formal exchange. He continues, interaction that is more than just tolerance, but a place where the individual is open to a relationship of acceptance, of “openness, directness, mutuality and presence” (Buber, 1972, p. xiv). Additionally, the “in-between” is not something done individually but requires “the other.” The process must be mutual; people must create this space together.

The concept of the in-between comes from ontology where interaction is reality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty clarifies this concept through a metaphor where being is a horizon, and existence is gradients and shades as reflected upon the observer (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). These shades and gradients do not exist absolutely because their intake is always done in an intimate reflection of the observer. Importantly then, for Merleau-Ponty existence is not absolute, rather “ad-hoc” and developed spontaneously between people. Consequently, when being is rooted in interaction between people there is no universal Truth, existence is dynamic and change is possible.

Therefore, the way we construct being has consequences because it directly shapes our world. Ontology affects our actions, goals and values. Consequently, we need to be cognizant of how our perspectives and values affect others and ourselves. This is why the concept of Praxis is so important, it reminds us to link our perception with our actions. Therefore, if we want to overcome oppression we need to constantly link our actions with theory.

Paulo Freire provides an excellent model for “doing” praxis, or a methodology of how to practically connect theory and action in society. Freire links social change with pedagogy, and an education that fosters equitable relationships and creative consciousness.
Freire includes in his pedagogy a very important point, the concept of teaching as an act of love. This concept reinforces the idea of people interacting as equals, and provides an ethical imperative. Freire stresses that teachers need to reach students in an environment without hierarchy. This enables students to practice interacting in an egalitarian society as well as reminds everyone that no idea is inherently more valuable than another. Furthermore, Freire’s concept makes equality a moral necessity as well as making oppression immoral (Freire, 2004).

However, Freire’s framework is limited to the extent that it is founded in Marxist ontology that derives being from the act of production. Therefore Freire’s description of oppression and pedagogical techniques are rooted in solving inequality within the materialist framework. I believe Freire’s framework would be strengthened if it were to instead draw from ontology of the ethical other, or the “in-between.”

This is not to say that the Marxist framework could never address other aspects of oppression. Adjustments to the relations of production, and the elimination of capitalism would undoubtedly be a huge step in the right direction. However, if the issues of universal values are not addressed, oppression will likely develop in other aspects of society. Because a world could be imagined that had equitable conditions in the workplace, and still contain remnants of oppression.

A historical example from U.S. history is the Oneida Community, which was a commune founded during the 1800s. The community was largely egalitarian, importantly; productive practices were distributed equally among the community members. However, the community was religiously based, meaning that the ontological beliefs of the society were based on an absolute God. Consequently, the person most closely associated with the Truth in the community, John Humphrey Noyes, was leader and controller of the community. Therefore an egalitarian society was not realized, even though the division of labor was equitably structured.

The thrust of this project is to develop a framework that could address all forms of social inequality based on dualism. To facilitate the development of the ethics of Praxis, I will discuss several aspects of the problem in detail. Chapter 2 will focus on the issue of universal values and the development of grand narratives from the philosophy of dualism. I will look at the history of dualism in order to establish how universally value systems
invariably lead to social inequality by creating hierarchal values and preventing “genuine”
interaction. I will also analyze two contemporary narratives of inequality, Capitalism and the
Education system. In Chapter 3, I will describe the decline of the legitimacy of dualism and
develop alternatives to the dualistic philosophy with existential and post structural ontology.
In Chapter 4 I will discuss Marxist ontology and its foundation in productive relations. I will
continue by developing Freire’s concept of praxis and its limitations associated with the
Marxist ontology. I will propose and develop an alternative model of Praxis rooted in the
“ethical other.” Finally, in Chapter 5 I will conclude the thesis with an application of the
principle of Praxis and the ontology of the other to our economic and education systems,
which will clarify the concept and illustrate the practical application of the principle.
CHAPTER 2

THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND OPPRESSION

In order to begin our discussion of social inequality I am going to “take stock” of our social values, and the systems that support them, because traditionally people have tried to put a “rational foundation” on morality without questioning the content itself (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 97). I am going to analyze the history and the philosophical foundations and implications of the dualistic value system. I will also look at the social values surrounding our economic and education systems. This process is important because in order to discuss what values we should promote and how to promote them in society we need to understand the foundations of our current value system. Nietzsche made a similar point in Genealogy of Morality where he also “took stock” of morality in order to establish the “value” of morality (1994). Nietzsche’s provocative question brings to the forefront the possibility that value system itself may be flawed and needs to be changed or abandoned. Mikhail Bakunin also warns “we are always in danger of relapsing” if we do not understand the root cause (Bakunin, 2011, p. 8).

I believe dualism is one such value system that needs to be abandoned because it inevitably leads to social inequality. This is because dualism is comprised of universal values, which inhibit people from directly interacting with each other and also create social hierarchies. Therefore, this section will look at a value system that could provide the necessary basis for equitable interaction and make legitimate social hierarchies possible. I will look at post structural and existentialist models of being and social interaction to provide the foundation for an equitable society. This section will facilitate the discussion in the subsequent sections that will link post structuralist being with the concept of praxis to create a methodology for combating social inequality.
DUALISM AND THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Dualism has a long tradition in Western philosophy. Initially dualism was used as a theoretical solution to the “problem” of human subjectivity. Human subjectivity was thought to be problematic because there was no absolute way to establish morality or ethical conduct, based on their earthy and animal composition. So philosophers, instead, looked to heavenly bodies that were thought to be reliable because of their absolute and unchanging nature. Universals were considered more valuable, and were considered superior to human beings; who were thought to be fallible and needed to “fix themselves” by emulating the perfect universal. The universal, whatever form it may take, such as God, Natural Law, Cosmological Order and so on, as superior to anything that is worldly (Russell, 1946).

The establishment of universals is thought to be a way to avoid chaos by providing everyone with a common reference point for moral activity. The universal perspective is also associated with a purer form of rationality. The universal is thought to be more rational because it is not clouded with human subjectivity and imperfection. Consequently, those who are most closely related with the universal are considered more rational than others. Those who are more rational are also considered to be more valuable than other people in society. The social positions associated with the universal automatically carry more social value. Nietzsche referred to the people associated with these positions as the “heroes” of the age as much for their status as the “good” values associated with them. Therefore, the universal plays a significant role in shaping how society looks.

One of the first universals was God, which helped legitimize Kings and their lofty social positions by invoking the idea of divine right (Murphy, 1989). Additionally, those who were the gatekeepers of the word of god were granted important social positions. Priests were trained to be interpreters of the word of god. Priesthood also established firm rules of who was included and excluded from the circle of interpreters of the universal. Priests separated themselves from the corporeal world of people. Relenting all but the most necessary physical needs were thought necessary in order to continue along the dualistic spectrum away from human beings towards god. The ascetic philosophy did not end when god died, but continued into the realm of objectivity boasted by science.

Science, the next dominant universal, replaced god as a way to gain “true” to reality (Murphy, 1989). In order to overcome the human element, science boasted that it was able to
do away with all of the human aspects of experience and reach true objectivity. Scientists replaced priests as those who had special access to the universal. Scientists emphasized the use of strict methodology to overcome the obstacles of human perception. The methods were supposed to standardize technique in order to ensure that subjectivity played no part in the experiment. In this way, science began to establish social dominance and technocrats were thought of as masters of impartial methods, which elevated their social status in society.

**Dualism and Universal Values**

Dualism relies on universal unchanging values. These values are important when discussing inequality for at least two reasons: it prevents the conceptualization of change by relying on an unchanging source of *being* and value, and it prevents equitable human relations by mitigating and filtering human interaction.

Universal is a something that is all encompassing and without beginning or end. As a value system, universalism means that value is derived from a central unchanging truth, or principle. An important consequence of this value system is that because it has no beginning or end it seems to exist independently of humans. Universal values are therefore a-historical and beyond the control of human beings. Consequently, these value systems have to be adapted *to*, rather than adapted *for* humanity. To be sure, universal value systems are not conducive to change, so societies that are follow these systems tend towards maintaining the status quo.

Additionally, the social rank of people is closely linked with how their role is related to the universal value. Social hierarchies are established based on the values that are held, those closest to “matching” the universal value have a higher rank while those who do not “match” are less valuable. For example, where money is valued the rich are valuable and the poor are not. These ranks also apply to the way that people interact in society.

Universal value systems also prevent equitable relations between people because they mitigate and filter human interaction. Therefore, people do not directly interact with each other; people interact directly with the value system, and only *indirectly* with other people. Consequently, people are not necessarily responsible to each other.
DUALISM AND IDEOLOGY

A significant part of how grand narratives maintain themselves is through what is considered “legitimate knowledge.” Grand narratives, an extension of dualism, are built on an absolute value of Truth. And when Truth manifests itself in society, a class of people rises as representatives of Truth. Some examples of narratives and their respective classes: Narratives of divinity and priests, science and scientists, capitalism and CEOs. The representatives of Truth have the social authority to determine what fits into the framework of the narrative. And since the narrative represents the guidelines of inherent good, the representative class has been granted the ability to determine who/what is right and who/what is wrong. This class has a vested interest in maintaining status quo, and with the power of determining what is considered legitimate knowledge they have a powerful tool to do this. The term “ideology” encompasses the perspective and the interests of the ruling class. The power of determining knowledge easily silences dissenting narratives because they can be determined to be unworthy or illegitimate.

Lyotard provides an example of how science claims dominant status in society through a series of legitimizing mechanisms, rather than a reflection of objectivity. Lyotard focuses primarily on the sciences in the postmodern condition, but the analysis can be applied to other narratives. Scientific knowledge is determined by an insulated group of experts who submit knowledge proposals to peer groups. Those who are considered experts are often those with degrees or certifications in the field of study. If the peer groups can find no flaws in the proposal the knowledge becomes legitimate, or the perspective valid, unless “proof” is provided that makes the experts think otherwise.

Lyotard’s example shows that those who are most closely associated with the narrative are granted the ability to determine what is and what is not legitimate ways of seeing the world. The limitation of the interpretation to “experts” automatically precludes the majority of the population. But as Lyotard points out, even being and “expert” may not protect a voice from being silenced if your opinion may disrupt the status quo.

Lyotard’s description of legitimating is a concept called consensus, where through dialogue peers collectively reach conclusions. However, Lyotard warns that this process is limited by power politics that, someone is “silenced…not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened” (1993, p. 64). Lyotard points out that
the dynamics of legitimacy are not fair and a person may lose their voice simply because they have “too abruptly destabilized the accepted positions” (p. 63).

The question of legitimate knowledge is not only how it becomes legitimate, but who determines its legitimacy. Without a full conception of how every individual contributes to the legitimization of knowledge the determination of legitimate knowledge is largely a function of power. To borrow from Marxists, ideology is a concept that can be used to describe how power blocks the individual from realizing/contributing to the creation of the world. Essentially, ideology is the embodiment of the perspective by the oppressed of those in power. Or as Reiman puts it “the prevailing ways of thinking about the world…are shaped in ways that promote the belief that the existing society is the best of all possible worlds” (1995, p. 166). Ideology deals with the play of power, and the various ways that it works to maintain social inequality through the perpetuation of the dominant perspective.

The confinement of legitimate knowledge is disconcerting because it limits the possibility of social change. The limitation of social change comes from what Nietzsche calls a “narrowing of our perspective” where due to threats of social exclusion, people conform (1996, p. 102). Human character is limited when it is forced to fit within a narrowly defined social mold, especially when those who benefit from the status quo determine that mold. John Dewey had a similar concern that ideology leads to the “narrowing of intelligence” (2008 p. 257). People become primarily concerned with the focus of the ideology, and their efforts and attention are dedicated in this direction. Dewey notes that under the ideology of capitalism that people become attentive to the “factors concerning technical production and marketing of goods” (p. 257). This means that only things that have to do with capitalist interests are legitimate activities; all others are either less important or illegitimate activities.

Paulo Freire talks about the concept of prescription, which is similar to ideology, “the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another” which results in the oppressed following the guidelines of the oppressor (2004, p. 47). Prescription highlights the psychological aspect of domination, the reason why oppressed feel compelled to support the oppressor. Freire describes a very drastic process of colonization of the mind of the oppressed in which the oppressed at least partially embody the oppressor. In describing the oppressed, “who are at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose image they have internalized” (p. 61).
The colonization of the mind makes it difficult for the oppressed to push for change, largely because they are at least partially blinded to their situation by taking on the perspective of the oppressor. And this brings up another aspect of Freire’s analysis, the importance of awareness of oppression. Freire believes that before any change can happen the oppressed must first be aware of the fact that they are oppressed.

Prescriptions in one sense blind the oppressed to their material situation, in another sense they give the oppressed a false sense of control or power. By identifying with the oppressor, the oppressed support the status quo as if it reflects his or her own interests. Rather than changing the material conditions to suit their own interests, the oppressed get a sense of control by connecting to the world as created by the oppressors. As Freire describes it, by identifying with the oppressor they “come to feel that they themselves are active and effective” (p. 78).

**CONTemporary Narratives**

In the following section I will look at some contemporary value systems. I will look at capitalism and the education system because these are the systems that Marx and Freire primarily analyzed. Furthermore, these systems are nearly ubiquitous, and affect all aspects of society. Therefore, if they are rooted in inequality they will likely contribute to social inequality. Before we address these issues we need to understand how they are structured. This will facilitate the discussion about Marx and Freire’s ontology as well as the discussion of praxis and the ethics of the other.

**Capitalism**

There is a wide selection of resources that are critical of capitalism, though critiques of capitalism are seldom taken seriously, or even if they are, action is rarely taken against capitalism. In spite of capitalism’s spotty track record its seems that it is still considered to be “the best system.” The system has proven itself to be consistently unstable for the majority of the population resulting in recessions, depression, job and home loss: as well as being stable for only a small minority of the population who seems to be immune from the ups and downs of the economy (at least the downs). Both are indicators of a polarization of society into two classes, Harry Braverman points to the decline of self employed Americans, down from about 80% in the 19th century to 10% by the end of the 20th (1974, p. 36).
Marxists provide an excellent framework for understanding oppression under the capitalist economic system. Exploitation at work is based on, in Marxist terms, a contradiction which is the bisection of the human being. There are many ways that the bisection has been characterized, but as Harry Braverman (1974) describes it, the "separation of the conception from the execution" of work (p. 79). This means that the traditional method of work where a person both plans and completes a work task is no longer applicable. The planning of the task and the execution of the task are done by separate people, and those executing the task may have no idea “why” they do a task a certain way. Consequently, the individual has lost their autonomy in the performance and planning of tasks. This gets to a larger aspect of Marxism where humanity is unique in its ability to creatively solve problems, and create their world. According to Gramsci, people “take an active part in the creation of the history of the world” (1992, p. 323). Though other animals seem to be “working” such as ants and bees in their creation of colonies and hives respectively, this differs in form of human work. Braverman points out this aspect in his reading of Marx, "but what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of the bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (1974, p. 31). The distinctive human quality is our ability to creatively solve problems beyond what our “instincts” dictate, and to alter or limit this ability in any way is to fundamentally contradict nature itself.

**Capitalism – The Division of Labor**

The division of labor is hardly an invention of capitalism, however the division of labor has taken on a form that is specific to capitalism. The division of labor simply refers to how work is divided up in a society. And work has been divided in unique ways throughout history. The division of labor in capitalism is based on the separation of conception and execution of work, or a contradiction. This means is that those who plan work are not the same as those who “do it.” For example, in the production of a “widget,” the designer of the machines of production and the managers of the processes of production are not the same as the person/people who use the machines or follows work protocols. These people are separated in order to ensure the minimum amount of skilled workers, and maximize productive output.
Previously, work was largely completed through the guild system. In this system apprentices, or novices in the trade would learn the trade step-by-step from a master. The master was considered to be knowledgeable of all aspects of the production of a specific item. The master’s knowledge included all of the planning process as well as the technical skills of producing the item. Braverman points out that during this era innovation came from the hands of the craftsman and not the scientist. Craftsmen were innovators because they had mastery of their craft, and both the theoretical knowledge and technical skills to implement their ideas. However, these skilled workers were costly, due to the time and resources that were needed to help each apprentice reach mastery.

Frederick Taylor was concerned with ways to cut the costs of production, a primary concern was cutting labor costs. Taylor is considered the founder of scientific management of labor. Scientific management is associated with the collection and analysis of work data with the goal of increasing the efficiency of labor. Taylor, who Braverman characterizes as “obsessive,” would monitor and time every aspect of a productive process, sometimes spending over twenty years at a factory site collecting data (1974, p. 76). Taylor’s goal was to not only analyze each aspect of the process, but to break each step of the process into the smallest parts. The break down of each step was based on Adam Smith’s observation that productive efficiency would increase the more labor was divided. Taylor thought that as each step is made more efficient so too would the overall efficiency of each worker. There was an added “bonus” that this process results in a general deskilling of the worker.

Since the labor process is broken into the smallest parts possible, less skill is required in each step of the labor process. For example, instead of needing multiple master craftsmen to produce several chairs per hour, you can have many “unskilled” laborers who cut, hammer and nail many chairs per hour. Because each step of the process is reduced to a single motion, the worker does not need much practice to “master” their part of the production. This has several effects on the labor pool, which results in less skilled persons, therefore cheaper labor. The master craftsmen were more indispensable to the production process as they not only had the skills to produce the goods; they controlled the management of the process as well. However, as the production process is broken into simpler steps workers become more replaceable. The dispensable workforce thus commands less control over their wages.
There is a larger and more pervasive problem that results. Over time there is a general “deskilling” of the population. While there is still a requirement for technical knowledge, this tends to get concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. Management requires the specialized knowledge, however even this “advantage” is short lived. In a process that Marxists refer to as the Proletarization of the white-collar worker, managers and other skilled workers are subject to the same deskilling and wage lowering process as their blue-collar predecessors. Braverman refers to the intrigue associated with early office work, which over time the prestige as well as the pay was reduced, due largely to the process described above (1974, p. 90). This all speaks to one of the central goals of capitalism that is to maximize profit, which comes almost exclusively from lowering the wage of the worker.

The reason that capitalists depend almost exclusively on wage reduction to make a profit is because wages are one of the few variables in production. Workers, due to their ability to “create” their world, have a unique characteristic of being able to “create” value. That is, by expending time and effort into something they can make it worth more than it was in its raw state. For example, cloth on its own has a set price per yard, however, when a worker makes a shirt out of the cloth, it “magically” has more value. Marx focused a lot of attention on what he called “labor power” and its ability to create value.

The value of labor power is, as we said, one of the few ‘x’ factors in production. Because the cost of raw materials, cloth, nails, hammers are constant. Even the machines of production are a relatively constant cost: the cost of upkeep, replacement parts and so on. However, a worker’s labor power is not constant, if a worker labors for a given amount of time at a set wage than they can “create” profit working with the raw materials. Because while laboring on an assembly line, the worker’s effort can make value, and all the while they are paid a set wage. Paying workers at a set wage is a way that the capitalist can make them into a “constant” on the cost side, but a variable in the profit side of production. This is why Taylor was so consumed with scientific management of labor, the method of extracting (or exploiting) the most labor power out of the worker as possible. Because every increase in productive power of the worker, while keeping wages at a relatively stable low, means more profit for the capitalist. And this trend can be seen in statistics of worker productivity and compensation in the 20th century: between 1980 and 2005 productivity rose 71% with compensation increased only 14% (Levy & Temin, 2007).
The worker, in the capitalist system, has little say in their wage. Because they are pushed into a situation termed by Marxists “wage slavery,” which means that because the worker is paid a minimal wage, he or she has no choice but to return to work every day. The worker gets paid just enough to survive, pay rent, food and so on, in order to come back to work the next day. This puts the worker in a very unequal position with the capitalist, because they have no choice but to work, while the capitalist has a “reserve army” of unemployed workers to choose from. The deskilling of labor, unemployment (and any other means possible) keeps the worker in a cycle of dependency on the people paying their wages. White-collar workers are, as mentioned above, not immune to this problem as they too are subject to the same endemic lowering of wages. Globalization and increased competition to “the bottom” has exasperated this problem.

Unionism is a way that has helped address some of the inequality in negotiation of wages, which has resulted in some great wins for countries with high union density, including shorter workday, health care and retirement. However even unionism can’t fully remedy the problem if it doesn’t address the wage issue, because the essential inequality of the capitalist system still remains.

All of this talk about the wage system is not to say that we need to go back to the apprentice method. Instead this was meant to show how capitalism is an economic system that in order to function needs to exploit the majority of the population, and over time makes the situation worse as more of the population is trapped behind economic barriers.

**Capitalism – and Ideology**

There are several aspects of the ideology of capitalism that need to be explored. Again ideology is the embodiment of the perspective of the dominant class by the oppressed. Aspects of the ideology of capitalism include but are not limited too: meritocracy, survival of the fittest, and individualism.¹

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¹ Paulo Freire (2004) also discusses the myths of capitalism in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Including: “myth that the oppressive ride is a “free society”, “anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur”, “myth of equality of all individuals” (p. 139), “myth of private property as fundamental to personal human development”, “the myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed” (p. 140).
Capitalism is rooted in a universal value of the “invisible hand” of the market. This universal needs to be invoked to ensure that the rest of the narrative makes sense, but more importantly it gives the narrative a firm foundation from which to make absolute judgments. The invisible hand refers to a hidden force that guides the market, the market’s tendency towards equilibrium. If economists, or the rest of the population for that matter, did not have such a universal narrative, capitalism would seem absurd. Why would anyone subject themselves to the ups and the downs of the market, home and job loss if the system were based on an arbitrary opinion of a few “experts?” There is no objective basis to the narrative of capitalism, so why do we continue to subject ourselves to it?

One of the basic tenets of the capitalist system is meritocracy. This idea states that society’s rewards and punishments are based on individual merit, or an individual’s ability. The perspective is often connected with the idea of “pulling yourself up by your own boot straps,” which has been a popular aspect of American lore. However, if working hard is connected with success, then being unsuccessful should mean not working hard. This unfortunate corollary to meritocracy means that the unsuccessful, or the poor in society are that way because they are “lazy,” “unmotivated” or “genetically inferior.” The perspective not only justifies some terrible social policies (decreasing funds for public assistance, public space) but is also embodied by the oppressed. Rather than questioning unfair social policy or the inequality built into the system, the oppressed blame themselves.

The myth of meritocracy is a very individualistic perspective. Americans pride themselves in their rugged individualism. However, individualism can never account for systemic inequalities, and is therefore overly simplistic and mistaken. Systemic inequalities refer to those that are caused by the system itself, structural barriers that can’t be overcome by individual efforts, such as the unemployment rate.

Capitalists oppose full employment because it undermines their ability to control wages (Kalecki, 1943). Capitalism requires a certain level of unemployment in order to function, the “natural rate of unemployment.” As we have seen before capitalists primarily derive profit from wages, keeping them at the minimum. Unemployment helps to ensure that wages never go too high because a large reserve army of the unemployed keeps workers competing to the lowest working price. A worker on strike, or a worker who is uncooperative can be replaced by a worker who doesn’t have a job. Conversely, we could imagine that if
employment was full, at 100%, than workers would have much more say in their compensation.

American individualism can take on a very extreme form, survival of the fittest. Linked with Darwin’s theory, survival of the fittest means that only the strongest in society survive and the weak literally die out. This perspective is consistent with the idea of meritocracy, that rewards and punishments are connected with the individual’s ability. However, when linked with biology, it seems to take on an even darker affect. Social Darwinism helps guard the ideology with a violent edge, as the system is to remain unchanged and those who are unsuccessful will simply have to suffer.

**EDUCATION**

In spite of the hope that I have, the education system in the United States currently reproduces social inequality. The primary way that the education system does this is through fostering a passive, anti-critical cadre of students. Students are taught to accept the status quo through being taught an a-historical view of society, and that what is taught and who teaches it are beyond question. The education system also supports dominant ideologies including individualism, meritocracy and survival of the fittest. Additionally, the education system is strongly influenced by the scientific narrative, which supports standardized testing and the “ranking” of schools, students, and job placement. These ideological influences are facilitated and held in place by material limitations supported by inequitable social policies, such as school funding supported by private property taxes, increasing costs of education and, limited access to higher education.

The standard classroom environment is largely reflective of the larger overall goal of the education system, to foster passivity. The classroom has ridged hierarchal structure that is materially reinforced through the “benefits” of grades, class rank, and school/ job placement and the “punishments” of exclusion, and limited post educational opportunities. Additionally the teacher’s position is placed in a superior position in the education structure through a dualistic value system that makes the teacher’s views intrinsically more valuable. The students are shown that their opinions do not matter because they can never be as “right” as the teacher. Since the perspective of the teacher cannot be questioned the values and mores of
society seem to be static and innate, society seems immovable. Through such a view of society change is unheard of, negative, and highly improbable.

The hierarchal nature of the education is linked with the widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of the scientific narrative. There is a prevalent feeling that student’s abilities can be accurately measured and compared “scientifically.” This is to say that one student can be accurately measured to be better than another, and therefore more deserving of acceptance or reward. The educational narrative has gone further towards this end with the wide spread use of standardized testing. Students are inducted at earlier ages, and begin prep work to take tests that act as gatekeepers, deciding if students are worthy to graduate, or to be accepted into a place of higher education (Pappas & Tremblay, 2010).

The real danger of the scientific measure is that it is thought to be fair and objective. The common view of anything scientific is its objectivity, therefore devoid of any human interest including that of the dominant class. Some of the oppressed may actually look to be measured “scientifically;” at least this way they will have a “fair” chance. Problematically, these tests have little to do with a student’s academic ability. Performance on the SAT’s for example, consistently are shown to be linked with family income (Rampell, 2009). This indicator hardly seems “fair;” presumably if students wanted to get better scores, they should be born into a richer family. This also shows that the so-called objectivity of scientific inquiry usually supports the dominant perspective, as the measure and values that are created by the scientists are drawn from a narrow social context.

So this means that even if people could accurately measure a student’s ability, the measurements themselves couldn’t escape the social context from which they come from, intelligence, aptitude, work ethic and so on, are always going to be relative terms and contingent on historical circumstances. The point of this is to show that different “virtues” have been championed and encouraged depending on the time and place of origin. A virtuous Greek or Roman valued for valor on the battlefield may seem quite out of place in a society like ours where CEO’s not soldiers get the lion’s share of social resources. The point here is that even if science could accurately measure students ability, and it can’t, the results would still be subjective and tend towards reproducing social inequality. Because at base, the values judged by the test will always be subjective, and likely in the interests of the dominant class of people.
In spite of the subjectivity of science it is still used as a basis for assessment in education. Often assessment is used in education institutions because of the scarcity of resources, for positions in colleges, as well as job shortages. There are a limited number of positions available in colleges, which filter into a limited job market. So there has to be an objective way to turn people away, so that when someone “fails” in society it’s their fault that they were not “fit enough” to compete against others in a “fair” system. Therefore scientific assessment is linked with meritocracy, but it is also linked with the necessity to maintain low wages in capitalism.

The system of capitalism thrives by maintaining the lowest possible wages. Ensuring that the labor force is largely unskilled is one of the ways that wages are kept low. If the majority of the population is barred from access to higher education than it is easier to justify low wages. Skilled labor costs more money, and capitalists need to limit the pool of skilled labor as much as possible. There is another advantage to maintaining a large pool of unskilled labor; it sets the relative “low wage” very low, so that even moderate wages appear “high” by comparison.

When the minimum wage is set to where the worker is barely able to keep him or herself alive, than the bar for the standard of living is set incredibly low. When a worker has a little extra in their pocket at the end of the month, he or she feels fortunate for being able to do so well relatively to the other. While, for sake of contrast, if the minimum wage was set to a point to where even the most unskilled worker was able to enjoy, as Marx would say, ample leisure time, than the relative wage of the skilled worker would also have to be much higher. The limitation of skilled work, along with the maintenance of a high level of unemployment, ensures that the worker feels fortunate even when he or she can barely sustain life.

There are also social polices that make sure that the “right” people go to college and have successful careers. Currently, the largest portion of funding for schools comes from private property taxes. This means that the schools surrounded by expensive homes have more funding. Conversely this also means that schools surrounded by less valuable houses or apartment complexes receives much less funding. School funding is important because it directly relates with the opportunities that the student will have in their education. Funding relates to the amount of money that the school has to spend per student; this includes
textbooks, computers, and the student to teacher ratio. Students from schools that are better funded also have higher acceptance rates into colleges and universities, by virtue of the amount of money that their schools had to spend on the students. College graduates have a better chance at getting a “good” paying job than those who do not go to college. And the cycle repeats itself as those with better paying jobs can move into better neighborhoods, and ensure that their kids get the best opportunity to “make it.”
CHAPTER 3

DUALISM DISSOLVED? AND THE ETHICAL OTHER

Thus far, I have explored how universal value systems contribute to social inequality by mitigating human interaction and establishing hierarchy in the social structure. Universal value structures that manifest themselves in the dualistic philosophy are incompatible with an egalitarian society. However, dualism has long been a part of Western culture, which makes it difficult to imagine alternatives. In this chapter we will explore the gradual decline of dualistic philosophy, or specifically how people in different disciplines began to question the legitimacy of dualistic narratives. The discussion of the displacement of dualism will help facilitate the discussion of alternatives to dualism. I will argue that an ontology based on the ethical other will be sufficient both as a foundation to being as well as an ethical principle to guide democracy at the personal as well as the social level. Finally, I will link the concept of the ethical other with the Freirian idea of Praxis, where I will show how the concepts are consistent with each other and that Praxis is actually strengthened with an ontology rooted in the other.

Dualistic grand narratives are traditionally considered to be a crucial aspect of social order. These narratives help establish order because they are founded in an “unshakable” dualistic philosophy. However, coinciding with the progress of science, these grand narratives have been brought down to size. This is in part due to an aspect of scientific progress, which comes at the expense of a previous way of thinking, one idea trumps another, and a new foundation is set. Nietzsche believes that these narratives inevitably dissolve, and that we should find humor in the fact that we tried to control them (1974, p. 75). The inevitability of the dissolution of narratives brings into question the “real” possibility of having a firm foundation. Legitimacy seems to be more closely linked with power, a subjective rather than objective basis to knowledge.

The legitimacy of science is brought into question because the ability to have truly objective observations is questionable. The potential to make objective observations is an
integral part of science’s ability to call itself science. This is because science is based on the collection of data and the process of information. The process assumes that the information is objectively received and inputted. In order to increase the objectivity technology is employed in an increasingly precise manner (Lyotard, 1993).

With the development of technology, smaller and more precise measurements are possible. The ability of advanced optics alone has allowed for the measurement and tracking of increasingly smaller particles of matter. However, the introduction of the micro particles in the lexicon of sciences has led to some inconsistent *Truths* in science. Traditional Newtonian physics (or physics that deal with large bodies, planets, people, plants and so on.) hold to a certain set of rules, or to a particular Truth, while quantum physics holds to another.

Newtonian physics has long been able to predict the movement of larger bodies, and all was well. However with the introduction of increasingly smaller particles the same Truth did not apply anymore, Newtonian rules could no longer consistently predict the movement of smaller particles. The resulting problem is best shown through problems in quantum mechanics where some particles had equal chances of both “being” and “not being” at the same time (Lyotard, 1993, p. 55). Consequently Truth is not only problematic for science but for narratives in general.

Before the crisis of dualism, knowledge was believed to be grounded in objective facts, so the legitimacy (popular acceptance/validation) of knowledge was not questioned. In other words we were sure that we knew what we knew. However, as the objective basis of dualism was brought into question so too was the legitimacy of knowledge. It seemed much less possible to know what we know with any certainty.

**The Imperfection of Language**

Existentialists and post structuralists stress the importance of language after the legitimacy of dualistic philosophy is brought into question. Lyotard incorporates the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein who is largely credited for what was to become known as the linguistic turn, which is the role that language plays in the construction of our social world. In the process of breaking down language into what he referred to as “language games” Wittgenstein made several observations about language. Lyotard summarizes these concepts; language itself has no absolute meaning, language becomes legitimate through “a contract”
between social groups, language that does not fulfill the terms of the contract has no meaning, and language is intentional (1993, p. 10). Nietzsche adds to the concept, that ‘we’ made the rules of language, “we interpreted it…for so long…that the text finally disappeared under the interpretation” and that language is a reflection of meaning that comes from shared experiences (1996, p. 49). These language rules at least two points: meaning is constructed locally, and that individual’s can’t make up their own rules without considering the “other.”

Because dualism is based on universal values, when the building blocks of the universal are shown to be relative, dualism no longer holds the air of legitimacy. With respect to language, dualism depends on a universal language and must refer to something absolute. Therefore, words and the concept that they refer to must have a one to one relationship. Presumably then communication would be perfect, because every word, grounded in reality, has a definite meaning. However, Ortega y Gasset warns that language communicates only “a part of what we think and raises an impenetrable obstacle to the transmission of the rest” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 245).

Ortega y Gasset’s point is that language never has a one to one relationship with the concept (or concepts) in which they refer. Consequently, communication takes on a “messier” character than tradition would suggest. In fact, some postmodernists suggest that we should approach language as if we were approaching a fickle lover. What this statement suggests is that because of languages inexactness and because of people’s dependence on the other to create meaning, he or she must approach the other as someone who changes but is intimately connected to each other.

**Alternatives: Petite Narratives and the Ethical Other**

Petite narrative is a little story that is limited by location time and perspective. Or put another way the petite narrative is the individual’s story, but a story that is at least in part conditioned and constrained by those around him or her. The petite narrative is freedom for the individual, but places the individual squarely in the social context. This means that the individual does not arbitrarily construct a reality, but co-constructs a reality with his or her peers. History, culture, and identity are constructions of peer groups that influence each individual, while the individual also exercises his or her own influence on the social group.
Consequently the individual is inextricably linked with his or her peers, as they literally co-create the world in which they live (Buber, 1972).

PETITE NARRATIVES: A LESSON TO BE LEARNED FROM ELECTRICITY

The idea of locally constructed truths sounds harsh to many, especially in a time dominated by observation-based science. Some may still wish to assert that there is at least some universal, or some constant across cultures. However, according to poststructuralists there are no universals, every human action or reaction is mitigated by human interpretation. John Murphy states this succinctly that “human intentions supply stimuli with meaning, action precedes stimulation” (1989, p. 47). Murphy is saying that even what seems like the most basic stimulation, such as response to pain, is in fact constructed. Social construction also means that a given stimulation may not, and likely will not, be consistent across cultures.

A major contributor to this attempt to hold onto universals is the language that we use to describe things, including events, emotions, environments, and so on when we observe something in another cultural context and use words from our own language to describe it. Though the action may seem reminiscent of something that we do or see in our culture, the cultural context can affect what’s taking place. Let us imagine for a moment two cultures, one culture relies heavily on the narrative of science to describe the world, the other a polytheistic culture with no exposure to science. The first culture relies heavily on logic and things that are observable (similar to the U.S.). The second culture attributes everything that occurs in one form or another to acts of a wide assortment of gods, whose opinions and actions dictate daily life.

Now, one individual from each culture experiences a similar event, that they were “electrocuted” (in familiar terms). This event seems on the surface to appeal to a universal human response, however, each culture may respond differently. The individual from the scientific community is greeted by consoling peers, who fear for his or her health, that the individual’s biological balance may have been thrown off and “they are fortunate that the electric current was not higher.” The individual from the second community is received with mixed feelings; some community members believe that this is a good omen, while others fear that he or she had angered the gods. Regardless of whether the individual was greeted
positively or negatively, they agree that the individual had a moment of divinity, touched by god.

Both individuals have, at least from our perspective, experienced the same event, however one was an unfortunate victim of an abundance of electrons while the other had a divine experience. And it is the interpretation of these events, the social background from which the individual hails, that actually shapes the response of the individual. Some may still argue that the individuals experienced the same event, that they are *just words*, that we are placing far too much value on them. However, it is these very words that help shape our reality.

**THE ONTOLOGY OF THE OTHER**

When the legitimacy of dualism is brought into question by exposing flaws in its linguistic roots, we are faced with a challenge of rooting *being* in something else. A host of theorists within the existentialist and Post-structuralist movements has laid the groundwork for this endeavor. The “ethical other” is the appropriate ontology of a post – dualistic world. The *other* is an appropriate solution to dualism because it breaks down anything that would mitigate human interaction and also destroys the possibility of natural hierarchy. Within the framework of the *other* there is no universal truth in which the individual is obliged to take into consideration while interacting with others in society. Additionally, when *being* is rooted in nothing more than people, there is no longer any legitimate way to justify social hierarchies, as noting can be determined to be inherently more valuable than anything else. Furthermore, the ethics of the *other* establishes a firm ethical principle that ensures an egalitarian society by de-legitimizing any value system that harms or destroys individuals or social groups.

In the Marxist tradition, philosophy should not just be about explaining the world but changing it. And in the same tradition, we are also reminded that theory is an integral aspect of our current social situation and a necessary part of change. Therefore, when establishing or examining a way of changing the world we should look to see how we imagine the world. And when trying to understand the world without relying on the long standing tradition of the dualistic philosophy, it is especially important to be clear, and to come up with adequate metaphors to discuss *being*. 
While discussing post-structural being, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes it as “field being” (1968). In this metaphor, people come into contact on an open field and being is experienced when an individual interacts or comes into contact with another person on this field. Once contact is made, the individuals “send” and “receive” an unmitigated flow of sensory information between each other. And like a conversation or dialogue, the individual processes the received information and responds appropriately. Also, like a conversation, being is not perfect, there are no precise or exact interactions; it goes on “moment by moment” (Friedman, 1972). There is no absolute meaning because people through interaction create meaning. Being takes on a new form that is not constant, but temporal; not universal, but unique; not formal, but intimate.

Martin Buber discusses this space “in-between,” which is connected and is created by people when they interact with each other. The in-between is the intimate connection between people that is created through genuine interaction. “Genuine” in Buber’s understanding, is linked with ethics, that in order for interaction to be legitimate the “other” must be taken into consideration. The in-between should not be thought of as equivalent to empathy, it’s not just the individual imagining the perspective of the other through their perspective. It’s closer to what Levinas describes as alterity, an understanding of the other as something inextricable from self, or being radically un-individualistic (1985). In a sense, Being is symbiotic; the other is required for existence itself. This means that the in-between in not an aspect of self but “an ontological reality in which the self comes into being” (Friedman, 1964, pp. 535-544).

The ethical aspect of Buber’s concept is important because it provides a moral imperative, which compels people to consider the other. Buber’s concept fosters an environment where the individual must actively seek to understand other people, people must work towards understanding each other if they are to have any understanding at all. Love “is the recognition of the other’s freedom” (Friedman, 1972, p. xvii). Similarly to the ontology that Merleau-Ponty describes, meaning is contingent on what people create together. Therefore, meaning in both cases is dynamic and ethical because it is rooted in the “other.”

The ontology of the other is a reminder of how important the understanding of being is in the creation of an ethical value system. As opposed to dualistic value systems based on universals, which inevitably result in social inequality, value systems based on the other
foster egalitarian societies. Dualistic systems are based on static hierarchal values, which make ethical relations impossible. Furthermore, universal Truths mitigate, in Buber’s terms, genuine interaction because they prevent people from directly interacting with the other. Buber continues, “Nothing needs to mediate between me and one of my companions… because we are bound up in a relation to the same centre” (1972, p. 21). However, when being is rooted in the ethical other there are no longer any legitimate hierarchal value systems because being and value are dynamic. Values are rooted in the other, which changes depending on how people interact. Nietzsche also stresses this point when he asks “why should virtues be grave… they have to come and go” (1974, p. 43). Importantly, with the ethical other, no value can be inherently more important than another which means that people interact on equal terms. And finally, people can have genuine interactions when there is no value mitigating their connection with the other.
CHAPTER 4

PRAXIS AND THE ETHICAL OTHER

The Marxist ontology is the origin from which the critique of capitalism arises, as with other perspectives, theory outlines and guides the conclusion and the actions that will arise from the initial thesis. In the case of Marxism, *being* comes from the form of production as represented by social interactions that develop from individual needs. The Marxist “origin story” confines the argument to the division of labor, and thus creates a solution that is limited to the division of labor. But from this picture come at least two interesting possibilities. Marx sets up the groundwork for Praxis that is the practical application of theory to produce social change. Additionally, Marx also sets up the possibility for an ontology that stems from the “ethical other.” The aspect of the division of labor that Marx emphasizes is the productive one, however there is a very important social aspect to this as well. If the social aspect, that is the interdependence of individuals in the pursuit of a common goal, were the basis of being we could begin to address oppression in general, rather than economic inequality specifically.

PRAXIS AND MARXIST ONTOLOGY

In *The German Ideology*, Marx sets out to firmly root his critique against capitalism into “practical” terms. This is not a push for “philosophical materialism” or necessarily a philosophical goal, but rather to firmly place action and the concept of social change the dialogue of addressing social inequality. Specifically, Marx addressed the “overly metaphysical” or impractical philosophies of his peers, both his contemporaries and those who came before. Marx addressed these philosophies as overly philosophical, to the point where they lacked social relevance. Marx wanted to address the issue of a disconnected philosophy because he wanted to set a principle, or a moral imperative for social change. And he believed, rightly so, that a “purely philosophical” argument would not be enough to push people towards action. Nietzsche also warns that passively accepting the status quo is linked with nihilism (1996, p. 130). Furthermore, a purely philosophical ontology does not
address the real suffering that result from inequality, including poverty, starvation, and homelessness.

To develop his philosophy of action, Marx places the origin of being in people’s actions. For Marx being develops from people interacting with their surroundings, or in his terms, through the act of production. People produce their world, through manipulating their environment. The urge to manipulate the environment comes from humanity’s needs, or the basic aspects of physical survival including food and shelter. Importantly, Marx doesn’t believe that individuals create their world in a vacuum; the production of the world is inherently social. That is, when people begin to produce their world, they do so socially. In his terms, the social relations that develop out of individual necessity are called the division of labor. In the realm of production humanity satisfies their needs, and in this process more needs are created. Thus the progress of humanity is developed and measured through development in production and the ways that humanity is able to create and satisfy necessity.

There are several important consequences of Marx’s ontology. The most apparent is that being is measured and originates through the act of production. This satisfies Marx’s intention of establishing his philosophy in the “practical realm.” Which overtly has the affect of making any critique applicable to the daily life of the oppressed. However, it does so at the cost of making oppression, as with all being, a result of production. And because production is the root of being itself, oppression necessarily needs to come from this, which defines how we can understand oppression.

At this point, Marx’s ontology appears to account only for the realm of production. This however, is mitigated by the inclusion of a socio-historic aspect. The inclusion of the social into his ontology begins to address the “one-sidedness” of his production sided ontology. Because here we can begin to see that other forms of inequality may also be problematic. Inequality stemming from factors other than economic ones, including race and gender, may be addressed with this framework. Since being is communally produced, the individual cannot create their world without other people. Here, Marx establishes an ontology that is inherently social, which means that discrimination of people based on any factor should result in something “unnatural.”

Unfortunately I don’t believe that this aspect comes through strongly enough in the framework because of the continued focus on the productive side of the problem. Because
when being is understood as something that stems from the act of production, even if it is a social act, there is an assumption that an individual's primary identity is linked with their economic status. While this framework is very adept at addressing the inequality of productive relations in the system of capitalism, it appears limited in scope. Therefore, if factors such as race gender or nationality are to be considered they will be secondary to the economic factors. These factors cannot be ignored if we are to make a stand against oppression in all forms.

I think that this issue within the Marxist ontology shows that there needs to be a broader understanding of oppression, and therefore a broader ontology need to be adopted. The ontology needs to social, but also embrace all aspects of human relations beyond just the ones found in production. This project is important and necessary because of the intrinsic link between theory and action, that our perspective informs all action. Therefore, if the theoretical framework excludes aspects of oppression it will likely be unable to overcome oppression itself.

**PRAXIS- PAULO FREIRE’S PEDAGOGY OF LIBERATION**

The Marxist concept of Praxis can be usefully adapted here to begin to develop this ontology. Marx’s emphasis on practical action, that the necessary development of any legitimate philosophy needs to be social change, is a necessary factor in any progressive ontology. Praxis is important because similarly to Marx’s intentions for social change it is a useful principle to keep in mind to ensure that the framework is not detached from “real world” suffering. Praxis can be a principle that activists and philosophers alike can refer to in ensuring that the current course of action is indeed progressive, and not furthering social inequality.

The Marxist educator Paulo Freire who provides a prime example of the application of praxis brings the concept to life. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire establishes a framework for social change that applies the concept of praxis rooted in ethics. For Freire, praxis needed to come from a place of love, where people interact on an equal footing with each other with the common goal of improving society. Social improvement means eliminating oppression, which is an intrinsically violent act (Freire, 2004, p. 55). In Freire’s conception of praxis, social change stemmed from the oppressed having a dual knowledge;
an awareness of their oppression, as well as steps to rid society of oppression. Additionally, the action taken can never be action for or on behalf of the oppressed; it needs to be action done with the oppressed. Therefore, for Freire, praxis practically applied is community-based action among equally constituted peers working towards the common goal of social improvement. Freire uses the methodology of the education as a way to apply praxis and to combat social inequality.

Freire’s concept of education mandates equality among peers. Freire emphasizes peer equality, because any other type of social change will end up resulting in a new social situation that resembles the former oppressive state. If people are not imagined as equals the “new” society will resemble the hierarchy of the old, a few on top and many on the bottom. A simple inversion of the “who” is at the top and bottom is not going to resolve the problem of inequality. This is why theory and knowledge of being is important, awareness of how inequality is built and sustained.

In the classroom this means that the “teacher” can no longer be more valuable than the “student.” It is of course possible that the teacher knows more on the subject being taught than the students, however this in no way implies that the teacher should be considered more valuable than the student. “Inherently” more valuable social roles result in the minimization or destruction of the voice and opinion of the other. In the case of the traditional education the teacher’s views and opinion are more valuable than the students, therefore the student can’t question the teacher and must accept the teacher’s perspective, which is often the embodiment of the oppressor’s. The process results in the perpetuation of the status quo, generation after generation.

Practically applied, Freire proposes an alternative teaching method, problem posing rather than the traditional banking method. The traditional banking method is directly linked with hierarchy in the classroom because it relies on the superior social rank of the teacher to imbed knowledge in the students. Freire imagines the banking method similarly to its namesake, a bank, where the teacher “deposits” information into the student’s minds. Because the students are viewed as “less valuable” they are to unquestionably take the information in and accept it as truth. Alternatively the problem posing method is built off of an equitable classroom structure where the teacher and the student work together to uncover mutually relevant questions, and then solve them. Therefore, a good teacher is “someone who
fosters genuine mutual contact and mutual trust” (Friedman, 1972, p. xix). The primary focus of this method is for the teacher to work with the students to unravel the existence of their mutual oppression and seek ways to address it.

Paulo Freire exemplifies the use of Praxis as a principle by developing an ethical and progressive pedagogy. Freire describes teaching as an act of love, which has the immediate affect of creating the student teacher relationship as an ethical one, that the fate of both student and teacher are tied together in order to mutually benefit each other. However, I believe it would be a mistake to apply Freire’s pedagogical principles strictly to the classroom environment. Freire reimagined the education as taking place independently of environment. Therefore the ethical relationship described in his pedagogical practices takes place throughout society and not just in the classroom.

Freire’s outline of praxis is also an important reminder that people must be critically aware of their environment. Freire’s concept of Praxis is more than just establishing a link between action and theory, but that the individual must be aware of the social and historical factors surrounding themselves and society. The critical awareness is largely the goal of the pedagogical practices described in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In Freire’s pedagogy the students and teachers are not only to work together to understand the relation of theory and action, but to do so in the social context of oppression. This practice has the effect of linking individual actions to social problems, and reinvigorating the understanding of the possibility of social change.

The aspect of history as never “just is” is an important part of Praxis. In Freire’s framework teachers and students are reminded that history is intentionally and communally created through the productive actions of everyone in society. This is important to remember because if people forget about their personal contribution to history than they are likely to be serving someone else. In this case people who are uncritical of the social structures, and do not acknowledge the importance of theory, may unwittingly support and reproduce oppression. This results in social inequality because the oppressed support values and then act on these values, which contribute to a social structure that ensures their unequal access to resources.
THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE, PRAXIS AND THE OTHER

One of the aspects of this project has been to develop an ethical argument that addresses social inequality, rather than strictly “logical” one. Logical arguments, or those that attempt objectivity by avoiding emotions, are not suitable for social change. The Marxist tradition develops arguments along these lines, avoiding strictly “academic” work. However, this is not to say those seeking social change need to avoid logical statements, or to disregard philosophy entirely. The tradition of Praxis reminds us of the importance of theory to understand the structure of oppression. While philosophy in this sense utilizes logic and theory, it is still rooted in ethics. It is in this tradition that I propose a conception of praxis to include all forms of oppression.

Marxism is developed from an understanding of being that originates and is perpetuated though relations of production. Consequently, class defines the primary relationship of people. While this ontology can account for other forms of social inequality, these will be secondary to classism. Therefore, being needed to be reestablished as something that occurs outside of productive relations so that other forms of inequality could be addressed.

Paulo Freire’s conception of Praxis is rooted in the idea love, that people should approach each other with love. Importantly, Freire linked social change with an ethical imperative, which came with a practical application of theory and action through pedagogy. Freire’s critical pedagogy established a framework to address social inequality both practically and ethically. Freire’s pedagogy is invaluable in establishing a methodology for social change.

Freire conception of the problem of social inequality is influenced by the Marxist ontology. This can be most readily seen in how Freire describes the differences between education styles of problem posing and the banking method. The banking method is the pedagogy that leads to reproduction of social inequality, and the problem posing method is a pedagogy that facilitates social change. The banking method successfully reproduces the status quo because it separates the individual from the world, by making them into passive objects instead of active citizens. This concept follows the same logic as Marx’s conceptualization of Capitalism’s affect on the workplace, where people are alienated from the fruits of their labor. Further, the contradiction of the workplace and the contradiction in
the classroom are similarly addressed, by re-engaging the individual’s productive powers with the world. Consequently, Freire’s framework is similar to Marx’s, because it is based on an ontology derived from a specific type of interaction, specifically those created though “productive” relations.

Post-structural ontology adds to both Freire and Marx’s framework and addresses all types of inequality. Inequality cannot exist within this ontological framework because universal truths are abandoned. Universal truths inevitably result in social inequality because they mitigate human interaction and support value hierarchies. This means that people do not interact directly with each other and an egalitarian social structure cannot be supported. Post-structural ontology fosters egalitarianism because being develops from un-mitigated human interaction where no universal truth can be legitimately justified. Therefore, inequality in any form is unjustifiable as well as unethical.

Consequently, when Paulo Freire’s concept of Praxis is rooted in the post-structuralist rather than the Marxist ontology, a methodology that addresses all forms of social inequality emerges. Economic relations are no longer the primary relationship and source of being, the relationship itself is the ultimate source of being. This conception of being is consistent with Freire’s pedagogy of love, and can practically provide guidelines for an ethical principle of change. For academics and activists, if the course of action or thought violates the other it is illegitimate as well as unethical. We now have a coherent principle with which to guide the struggle against social inequality in all forms, a concept of praxis that engages the individual with the world who are inextricably linked with the other. This principle is used to guide ethical egalitarian behavior and is a tool to deconstruct or actively question legitimacy of oppression in any form. Additionally, no universal truth or oppressive system can be deemed more important than people.
CHAPTER 5

THE WORLD OF THE ETHICAL OTHER

Paulo Freire’s concept of Praxis is a powerful tool for combating social inequality when it utilizes the framework of the ethical other. The new framework strengthens Freire’s original argument by grounding his pedagogy of love in an ethical principle that applies to oppression in all forms. Any action, theory or social system that limits, hurts or oppresses the “other” is illegitimate.

It should be clear by now that the contemporary capitalist economic system is incompatible with the ethical principle of “do no harm to the other.” Capitalism is rooted in a necessary exploitation of the majority of the population in order to produce profit for an extremely small minority. As the Marxists have pointed out the system encourages the division of the workforce into smaller and smaller parts with the intention of furthering their alienation from others. This aspect of capitalism directly limits the ability for individuals to have equitable relations. And this becomes increasingly clear as the divide between the very rich and the very poor increases, as these people have neither the time nor material resources to participate in a “democracy.”

In order to address the issues of capitalism many of the suggestions that Marxism suggests would be necessary, including worker owned factories and the abolishment of private property, as these are the tools that capitalists use to limit access to the realm of production, which also means access to basics like shelter and food. Direct control of these resources is necessary from the Marxist perspective because it restores the “natural” social relationship of humankind and their being. Nietzsche refers to this relationship, that “in man creature and creator are united” (1996, p. 154). In terms of the “ethical other,” these steps are necessary in order to ensure egalitarian relationships between people. These relations are in danger in the capitalist system because of overarching universal values like the American dream and the “invisible hand” in capitalist economics. These values create social hierarchies around the goals of capitalist accumulation and subjugate those whom lack access to the economy or the means of production.
An alternative economic system would have to break down all forms of hierarchy that value a particular segment of the productive population over another. The guiding principle of egalitarian relations and fostering an environment where people can work together to better produce their world is needed. Practically, this would mean communal operations of production, meaning that management would have to be abolished. Additionally, Those associated within the production model would have to guide the business according the principle of the *other*. The principle would have at least one consequence that their “business” could not support or contribute in anyway to the destruction of the *other* inside or outside of their operation. What constitutes destruction of the other would have to be decided communally, but would mean that the business could not have operate with devastating environmental impacts or contribute to warfare. In this sense, the economy would be an extension of egalitarian social values, facilitating equality rather than working against it.

The development of an egalitarian society would have to include some form of “training” or intellectual and practical development of methods to ensure equality. This is where a “new” model of education could be utilized. As Paulo Freire saw it, the education system is a viable revolutionary tool for developing conscious citizens. Education would be used as a social space for people to “practice” democracy, a place for “students” to be creative, to develop their conscious and a place for interpersonal development. Interpersonal relations are a central aspect of developing the ethical other, because this is the source of *being*, the equal relation among peers.

Education would not necessarily need to take place in any particular space, or over any particular time, because education would be ongoing, like democracy, and not something that is accomplished with finality. It would be necessary for people to become life long “learners” or practitioners of democratic relations. A structure that would be conducive to that may encourage creative outlets as well as communal development. Art and any creative outlet are ways for the individual to practice praxis, or strengthening the connection between understanding of the theory that drives the community and action. One thing that the educational system cannot have is standardized testing, or value-free assessment that leads to and legitimizes inequality, as these practices inevitably result in social hierarchy. In sum, with the guiding principle of the *other*, praxis can be applied to all systems of oppression and social inequality.
REFERENCES


