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The Dialectic of Freedom by Maxine Greene

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BOOK REVIEW

Connecting to Freedom

A Review of Maxine Greene's *The Dialectic of Freedom*

(Teachers College, Columbia University: Teachers College Press, 1988. 152 pages. ISBN: 0-8077-2897-7)

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Maxine Greene pushes against common conceptions of what it means to be free. By exploring how various individuals and groups struggled to identify, confront, and transcend the obstacles that limited their agency, Greene shows us that resistance to oppression is essential to the pursuit of human freedom. Reflection and action upon conditions that constrain us is an “existential project” directed at achieving freedom, and as such it is “a central life task” (p. 67). Informed by philosophy, history, art and literature, Greene explores how freedom-seeking women, immigrants, minorities, and other oppressed groups have moved from private to public domains in their efforts to connect with others to reshape the realities of their lives.

Reading *The Dialectic of Freedom* as a woman in transition, I am able to view my changing conditions through a new lens; as an educator I see a multiplicity of ways in which educational, social, and political systems of today echo historical injustices and the sensibilities of decades past. Greene’s declaration that the American Dream, grounded in a reverence for individualism and autonomy, has impeded examinations of unethical behavior, irresponsibility, and relativism is prophetic when considered in a present-day context. Power holders in the United States appear to have been either complicit in or myopic to bad acts born of greed and self-interest. While there are some among us who challenge the *status quo*, Greene points out that they are few. Too many Americans are lackadaisical about scrutinizing whose interests are being served by the policies and practices of corporations, financial institutions, and our government.

In the absence of questioning, challenging, and holding public leaders accountable to serve the common good, we see evidence of a population resigned to powerlessness or, perhaps, conditioned by apathy; people who too often seek refuge in isolation rather than freedom in community. When we refrain from looking at the world together, we overlook subjective experiences and are left with a *schematization* of phenomenon such that “the system is asserted to be the thing itself” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944, p. 193).

My interpretation of Greene’s work is that we are called to awaken to the world we have co-created, to view our conditions from new and diverse perspectives, and to then create more just and sustainable realities for all.

Long before No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) was fodder for educational discourse, Greene urged teachers to foster a love of learning by creating spaces in which learners are allowed to question, discover, and make meaning of their world. Yet schools continue to focus on preparing students to serve the nation’s goal of “economic competitiveness” (p. 12). Schools, then and now, deliver content and measure proficiencies that are determined by economic concerns rather than a desire to holistically foster children’s development as they grow into their potential. In light of NCLB, we are witness to further systemic narrowing of what it means to educate.

The functionalist model of education assumes that society consists of actors who fulfill specific roles that support the survival of the whole of society (Shannon, 1996), and, as such, learners must choose between reproducing and resisting the status quo (Long, Peck, & Baskins, 2002). Greene insists that the functionalist approach to schooling negates learners’ search for meaning, and as such, contradicts the noblest aims of education. We must push through the incongruity that is generated by the conflict between the demands of society and the requirements of human growth. Greene offers a method for unpacking the dichotomy of what we say public education is, and what it is. Only by recognizing the intersection of the subjective and objective can we prepare to promote more just effects on less privileged groups (Orellanam and Bowman, 2003).

The concept of *negative freedom* that is threaded throughout Greene’s work is grounded in Fromm’s (1984) distinction between positive freedom, the *freedom to*, and negative freedom, the *freedom from*, which Fromm likens to the dialectical nature of human evolution toward freedom as opposed to the pursuit of personal freedom. Because negative freedom is focused on the self and rests in the realm of individuation and isolation, individuals who pursue this form of freedom distrust and feel distanced from the world. Conversely, positive freedom involves integration, reason, and “growing solidarity with other human beings” (Fromm, p. 26). In a state of positive freedom the individual “can be free yet not alone, critical yet not filled with doubts, independent and yet an integral part of mankind” (Fromm, p. 222).

Greene argues that freedom comes into being when people present their authentic selves to one another. In a context of mutuality, people become attached not only to other human beings, but also to projects and possibilities that can be pursued collectively. When the transactional relationship between the subjective and the objective is recognized and made comprehensible to all members of a group, freedom can be achieved in solidarity. In the absence of the plurality, compassion, and common cause, Greene notes that individuals “may think of breaking free, but they will be unlikely to think of breaking through the structures of their world and creating something new” (p. 17). Endeavoring toward positive freedom requires that we confront the complexities and moral dilemmas of life. Thus, due to the effort required to do otherwise, many choose negative freedom or other forms of escape, and subsequently continue to live *determined* lives. Consciousness is elemental to freedom. Greene reminds us that, “Human beings, unlike cattle, must choose what they will do” (p. 46).

Human actualization will not occur unless we grow beyond a desire to pursue negative freedom and into a more humane and creative realm. Yet Americans are conditioned to view liberty in terms of consumerism, the ability to accumulate material goods, which oddly “is equated with the lofty ideal of human freedom” even while political rhetoric moves swiftly from “freedom” to “free trade” to “free markets” (Capra, 2002, p. 263). Greene defines negative freedom as “freedom from interference and control” (p. 38). She points out that this level of personal freedom is insufficient as a means to transition from individualism to interdependence. The myth of meritocracy, the refrain of freedom that is the homily of American discourse, is an example of just how ineffectively negative freedom contributes to the collective good. America’s double-lexicon of freedom has resulted in “Deregulation, noninterference, privatization: All are linked to the development of “character,” to consumption, to merit, to (deserved) material gain” (Greene, p. 17). Some manifestations of negative freedom can be recognized in present-day realities as we encounter war, economic crisis, and protections given to corporations while commoners struggle for food and shelter. Greene recalls Dewey’s (1960) perspective on what occurs when impediments (read regulations) are removed from the domain of economics; it was the financiers, bankers, and “robber barons,” that benefited:

But it left all the others at the mercy of the new social conditions brought about by the freed powers of those advantageously situated. The notion that men are equally free to act if only the same legal arrangements apply equally to all – irrespective of differences in education, in command of capital, and the control of the social environment, which is furnished by the institution of property – is pure absurdity. (p. 18)

Greene and Dewey show us that structures of inequity are firmly rooted; they declare that freedom for some is not human freedom. The Dalai Lama and Cutler (1998) tell us that freedom is achieved through holding every human being lovingly in our hearts; that compassion frees us. Greene describes compassion as being grounded in deep intelligence, an open heart, and imagination. Indeed, a first step to overcoming oppression is to simply embrace the human spirit and connect with other human beings. A second step is to take reprieve from those things that create the illusion of human contact and to seek true connections with others by engaging in dialogue, reflection, and action. When we question the world in community, with true volition, understanding, and agency – we can exercise the option to act. Greene calls us to “reawaken the consciousness of possibility” by endeavoring to know and be known, understand and be understood, and to seek to “discover what it signifies to be free” (p. 23).

Greene invites us to name, make meaning of, and share our situatedness in the world as a form of resistance. She suggests that, “female imagery” (p. 85) is a useful means of addressing common realities. Conditioned for and subjugated by gender expectations that were imposed by patriarchal familial and religious norms in my lived experience, I know what it is to seek liberation through education. Situated by my femininity as a young woman, my purpose was to bake bread, butter it for the children, and sweep the crumbs to clear a metaphorical path for the men in my life to walk the direction of their choosing; yet I perceived myself as a free spirit. Greene tells us that “When people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change, they are likely to remain anchored or submerged, even as they proudly assert their autonomy” (p. 9).

In my case, even while subordinated by gender-associated traditions, I ventured on a quest for freedom, not by abandoning my family or taking to the road, but through education. In community with others I came to understand the evolutionary nature of education as both freedom and joy. Freire (1998) tells us “Joy does not come to us only at the moment of finding what we sought. It comes also in the search itself” (p. 125). The educative process enabled me to question, reflect, resist, rejoice, and to make sense of my world. “It is through education that preferences may be released, languages learned, intelligences developed, perspectives opened, possibilities disclosed” (Freire, p. 12). Indeed, education can be an incremental process of rebellion, compliance, personal evolution, communal knowing, and human growth. Under the best of conditions, education can be the foundation for a revolution of consciousness, as it is capable of providing opportunities to become more deeply aware that our world “is not limited to a rationalistic experience” (Freire, 1997, p.

94). Sharing my experiences here, in a public space, is an act of searching, naming, and resisting the constraints of privacy, of negative freedom. As I interpret Greene (1988), that is what she calls us to do. Greene writes:

It must be clear enough that the mere assertion of freedom as a natural right or “independence” guarantees little when it comes to finding a space for personal becoming. This is so even though the rejection or ignoring of human rights (whether of women or slaves or oppressed peoples generally) can often destroy any possibility of choice. To overthrow tyranny or authoritarian controls, in other words, is not to bring freedom into being; it is only to allow for the search. The search, however, never occurs in a vacuum. Freedom cannot be conceived apart from a matrix of social, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions. It is within the matrix that selves take shape or are created through choice of action in the changing situations of life. (pp. 79-80)

Subjectivity is wedded to the proximity of events that shape our lives, the immediacy of which urges us toward freedom if we are *awake*. Greene encourages us to *defamiliarize* the familiar, to examine what we know from a new perspective, and to engage the world alert to possibilities not yet contemplated. She urges us to recognize that we are in community with other situated human beings and that together we can transform or transcend the obstacles on our path toward actualization. Greene challenges us to become more intentional human beings, educators, and co-creators of intersubjective realities. She urges us to embrace education as liberation and to foster the liberation of others through the educative process.

Because education is an “attempt to move towards a new way of thinking in both educators and educatees, through the dialogical relationships between both” (Freire, 1973, p. 125), we can see how freedom is linked to intersubjective educational experiences. Communication is prerequisite to the interdependence that is born of social interactions and the subsequent progress from “I” to “we” that occurs “when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort” (Dewey, 1981, p. 625). As such, Greene encourages us to create public spaces in which we can openly “appear before one another” (p. 115) as who we are – to name, examine, resist, transform, and ultimately embrace our common world. We must become real with one another in order to come into real being.

While identity cannot be abandoned, aspects of oneself can be concealed (Olesen, 2005), and full identity will not be exposed to a community that is stratified. As a means to reduce the potential for stratification, it is useful to acknowledge our common experiences and to accept that we respond similarly, emotionally and intellectually, to similar conditions. To recognize our common humanity is to foster compassion.

Freire (1970) tells us that the subjective and objective exist in continual dialectic relationship. We experience being real, and real being, through constant interaction with one another as we create objective social realities. Because we create reality, we can also change it: “This can be done only by means of praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, p. 33). The pathway to praxis is outlined in Greene’s (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom*. Reflection requires that we be *awake* to the world and conscious of our own consciousness; that we embrace ambiguity and that we engage the metacognitive process of thinking about our thinking. We must also inquire into the thinking and experiences of others; we must question our subjective and collective realities by viewing the ordinary with new eyes. Greene reminds us that the ultimate goal of education is to make meaning of our lives; therefore, “Teachers, like their students, have to learn to love the questions, as they come to realize that there can be no final agreements or answers, no final commensurability” (p. 134). Finally, Greene urges us to develop moral agency, to ground our actions and interactions in love. We must come to know ourselves and share ourselves. And, we must seek to know others. Through dialogue, reflection, and action may we strive for collective well-being and reach for freedom.

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