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Of Communities and Collectivities

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Thoughts. I'll get to the classroom in a minute. But hear me out. I think that the political economy and the ideology that supports that political economy makes it hard for us to do community fully. The liberalism that has defined our society—and I mean classical liberalism—makes it difficult to think in terms of community, fully, truly. In part this difficulty is because at the heart of classical liberalism is individual rights, individual freedoms. We are individuals, equal. That's the ideology. When the economy is poured into the mix, it too is built on the premise of the individual in competition with other individuals—dogs eating dogs, rats racing. Now, look where this mix has taken us: the collectives we recognize are those who have been seen as excluded from the equality that is supposed to be at play: Black, Latino, LGBTQ+, and the like. And the result of that focus on the traditionally excluded is that those who once could assume a certain amount of power now also feel excluded and start to assert another kind of power. Within our profession, we have seen Whiteness Studies, for example. Its work is necessary and important, but it clearly comes as a response to identity politics. And in the political arena, we have seen the assertions of those whose identities are tied to class, the white working class or particularly American religious associations. The American subaltern spoke. So we go around bemoaning the lack of equity. Microaggressions. All groups now feeling more victim than power (with those in true power either silent or claiming associations with the disempowered). In our classrooms, we hear the grumbles of group work and hear the complaints from those who feel exploited—someone always complaining about having had to carry more than the fair share. It's hard to do community work when the very idea of the community is in flux.

It's a funny thing to realize the vastness of my Otherness at this age in life. I am an academic in an anti-intellectual society; a humanist in the world of science; a person of color, Latino, Puerto Rican, yet not of the Island, not even of my original New York any longer; working class in my head,

middle class in my newer economy. Could go on. And so my identity has to be uniquely my own; yet my identity has also to be the Othered—and not just because I am a person of color but because of what I do, how I spend my time and thought-energy. Strange. And somehow, then, the Othering itself has become a broader notion of the collective.

So where does this kind of universal othering take us? A couple of theoretical concerns and then a kind of simple pedagogy, basic, things we probably all do. But I am always of the mind that we do our pedagogies better when we understand the theoretical basis for those pedagogies. Good to know why, beyond it works or a now clichéd assertion about social constructions (as true as the cliché might be).

At the heart of my thinking of late has been the philosophy of subjectivity. It was a big deal when I started in this profession, but like many theories, it seems to have receded. Yet if the most powerful ideology of our society is individualism, then the philosophy or the psychology of individuation which is subjectivity has to be equally important, especially as we see the need for our collectivities to grow larger, stronger, a greater self-interest than self-interest. Subjectivity reminds us that the self is always a self that is tied to others. We know we are individuals, of course, wonderfully unique in so many ways, yet we are formed in relation to others, to common experiences, to community. Subjectivity looks to what makes me who I am and how I respond to or react within society. Now that gives rise to the question of how "I" become I. The only way we know, structuralists and post-structuralists alike remind us, is through language. It's the only way we can assess the Self. And this assessment is where Brazilian sociologist José Maurício Domingues comes in. He reminds us that the individual subject isn't always aware of the psychological influences in what we do. That is, the Self, is never truly known. We've all experienced extreme cases where we've asked ourselves "Why did I do that?" Domingues calls these moments of not knowing a "*decentering of the subject"* (Collective Subjectivity, 41). And the subject, the self, is decentered in that each of us is a product of the communities in which we are contained. But that also suggests, according to Anthony Giddens in *The Constitution of Society,* that society, its communities, must then be more than sum total of individuals. We are in part our communities; and our communities are only in part all of us.

So this understanding of community leads to what I think is important in a society that we're often told has become more fragmented than ever before. Domingues suggests that it's the very individualism that gets in the way of coming together, or at least of knowing where we are together. He argues for "subjective collectivity." In the same way that individuals affect the social and are affected by the social, so too do collectives influence other collectives and can be affected by them.

To understand how these collectivities come about, Domingues turns to Aristotle's four causes. Now, because our focus on Aristotle tends to be less about his *Physics* and more about his *Rhetoric*, we come to the four causes in rhetoric and comp by way of Kenneth Burke, the degree to which he incorporates the four causes within the scholastic questions to arrive at the pentad (*Grammar* 228), to which Ann Berthoff applies the four causes in *Forming, Thinking, Writing* to a lesson on how to create definitions. These applications make sense, of course, but Aristotle's aim was to get at the "why" of things, where "cause" would be better translated to "because"; that is, Aristotle's four causes are the four explanations of why things are or how they come to be. Now I belabor this explanation because to get at Domingues's "collective subjectivity" one must first work through "collective causality" (and why we're going through any of this theorizing will soon become clear).

Individuals are psychologically complex, affected by all sorts of stuff in the mind, some of which we are conscious, some not. Our subjectivity is necessarily decentered. There is no central, centered, "I" that we can tap. That is no less true for collectives. The collective subject is also decentered; that is, the collectivity may not be able to recognize itself, undergoing a different kind of decentering than individuals undergo. Like the psyche, "previous patterns of interaction and institutions, shared symbolic systems (although they are always idiosyncratically absorbed by actors), in short shared memories are an important influence upon actors [within a collective] and furnish patterns for their behavior" (Collective Subjectivity 42). The decentering of the collective is what Domingues terms a *conditioning causality*, akin to Aristotle's formal cause, because it constitutes a pattern (Collective Subjectivity 42). That is, when the collective acts, engages in an *active causality*, that activity is a transformed version of Aristotle's "final cause." The act itself becomes the goal. Black Lives Matter might march to make a point, but it is the visibility of the march that is the immediate goal. "Illegal aliens" who nevertheless make their presence known seek to highlight the need for immigration reform. The change in the current conditions might be the long-term goal, but the immediate purpose (or motive, in Burke's term) is in the visibility itself. And for a collective subjectivity to be realized, the collective must share memories. It is the shared memories, then, that help to establish the genre of a movement, the pattern or form—a conditioning causality "decisively contributing to shape social life" (Collective Subjectivity 42). In between these two causalities—the goal and the memories—there is, according to Domingues, *collective causality*. Just as in individual subjectivities there are unforeseen consequences and thereby a decentering, collectives must have different ways of centering, a more ambiguous or even amorphous

intentionality. They are multilayered interactions, though the greater the identity and organization of a system, the greater the centering.

Why is all of this theory important? Because those of us who seek to change the system while working within the system are caught in a bind—the amorality of bureaucracy (guided by rules, giving grades that make for individual competition, say) and the idealism of our work (and I always draw a distinction, sometimes minor, sometimes great, between my work and my job). Graduate students who first come to Freire inevitably ask if they are the oppressed or the oppressor. And the answer is "Yes." Both. But what if we see ourselves as members of collectives, not neatly balanced but not necessarily opposed? I am a traditional teacher within the collective that is the university. I am also a member of the Community of Color. They're not intentionally opposed (a difficult matter to explain to folks of color who find themselves the victims of the system; a difficult matter to explain to those in power with good intentions and outrageous ignorance—different subjectivities; difficult when I find myself teaching the Standard and opposing the Standard or arguing that Spanish is no less the language of the oppressor than English, just different oppressors historically). But there are possibilities within the decentered subjectivities of the collectivities of which we are a part.

Domingues demonstrates the workings of collective subjectivities by the one reliable collectivity he has at his disposal, the central collectivity of Marx and of Weber (Domingues is a sociologist, recall). But it's also the one that has recently displayed the greatest power—class (where the middle class in 2016 was trumped by the working class and the truly wealthy, classes who joined collectively, whether intentionally or not). Domingues begins with class, which he calls *antonomasia* (Latin America 85), a rhetorical term, the metonymic epithet that represents something larger and more complex. For Domingues, "class" is a metonymy for collective subjectivity (along with nation and state). Marx's hope or vision or prediction was that the class system would simplify, its many classes finally reduced to two: the bourgeoisie or owners of the means of production, the accumulators who accumulate for the overall purpose of further accumulation (as opposed to saving for the kids' college education or saving for retirement or even saving for those two weeks of vacation) and the proletariat, the workers, the wage earners. What this antonomasia signifies to Domingues is that if such a class simplification were the case, then the working class would be able to achieve "a very high level of centering—hence of intentionality" (Latin America 86). But he realizes that this possibility of nearly-centered working class is complicated because of the rise of the middle class, or in Weber's terms, the difference between the economic order and social status, which allows, for instance, for academics to live

in poverty yet enjoy a privileged status. Accordingly, Domingues turns to Nicos Poulantzas. Here's my own reading of Poulantzas, a reading which agrees with Domingues:

> Poulantzas–describes the middle class as a new petty bourgeoisie, a kind of update of Weber's contention that the proletariat would move more and more to a class that fills the space the petty bourgeoisie would leave behind. Or, better, that the petty bourgeoisie would be eaten up by bigger economic fish while the rise of bureaucracy would make for a new class of white-collar workers. What Poulantzas does with this is not to say that there is a class displacement but that the middle class joins with the petty bourgeoisie, given their similar ideological predispositions. For instance, the petty bourgeoisie and the middle class, says Poulantzas, display similarly firm beliefs in the sanctity of individualism, liberalism, rather than a collective sense. The middle, then, joins the petty bourgeoisie in disparaging workers because they are lazy, unwilling to pick themselves up by their bootstraps. Poulantzas also sees the middle class as occupying basically the same position as the petty bourgeoisie in the structure itself, a position between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Both are structurally in the middle. (An Introduction 267)

But though Domingues places Erik Olin Wright in the same category as Poulantzas (reducing Wright to a "see also" in the footnote for Poulantzas), he seems to overlook how Wright argues that the class system is more a matrix than a simple hierarchy, that there are contradictions within the class system, so that one might be the working class and move up, yet it's not a move up at all, just a move within—that is, a different working class. But more important is his overlooking the Ehrenreichs, who coined the "Professional/Managerial Class," a term which seems to resonate in the United States. But here's what's most important: Domingues observes how Giddens, like Poulantzas and others, notes that "class awareness" is different from "class consciousness" (Latin America 88). That is, it is possible to have a collective subjectivity that does not carry a collective causality. There can be awareness without a clear direction for movement. And that lack of a clear direction, perhaps, is where we might walk in as teachers.

Chantal Mouffe makes the point that we, society, have always been fragmented, that there are always communities which see "opposing" communities. As such, she opposes consensus in a large political scale. John Trimbur long ago argued that the search for consensus in our classrooms would not serve all students

well. For both, the logic is simple, really: majority rule means minority silenced. But notice how profound that silencing becomes manifest when the numbers are nearly equal. Consider the 2016 election (not to discuss it, just what happens when collectives are neatly divided). 45% didn't bother to vote. Already we have a nearly equal divide The Silent Community v. The Voting Community. Of the Voting Community, 46% voted Republican; 48 % voted Democratic, the numbers so close that the Electoral College negated the popular vote. Half saw no reason to vote; and half of the remaining half were nearly equally divided. How was consensus possible? These were subjective collectivities, collective ideologies within the greater liberal ideology of individuals voting. But it was more a conflict among subjective collectivities, with one collective believing itself excluded except by the Republican candidate. While the Democrat vied for Women, People of Color, LGBTQ+, the white working class appeared to be excluded. Consensus among subjective collectivities was not attained, wasn't even sought. In the language of Kenneth Burke, we watched two collective divisions with no real attempt at rhetoric. Although rhetoric and composition tends to define Kenneth Burke in terms of identification, Burke is clear that where there is identification there is always division: "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division … [O]ne need not scrutinize the concept of 'identification' very sharply to see, implied in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 22-3). It is in the interstices between identification and division that rhetoric lies. That is, if there is complete division, rhetoric will fail; if there is complete identification, rhetoric is unnecessary. Rhetoric is where we agree and disagree.

So, to the classroom. Although there is always a danger in identity politics, the danger of essentialism, the danger of singling particular students out, there is something that students take to when "collectivities" are named in class (as in "What are the communities you belong to?"). Students begin by wanting to belong to some community, some collective, that none other in the class belongs ("Upper Peninsular farmers" spoken in a class in the Pacific Northwest, the student having to define "the UP"). This is the need to assert uniqueness, an individualistic impulse. Push for commonalities—they're all Team Mascot ("We're all War Eagles," or Cougars, Huskies, Tide, whatever the school mascot is). More. The range astounds, as do the good- natured conflicts ("We're all Americans." Are you? "Well, in some sense." I never point to the international student(s). The class does that). We open up the possibilities of many collectives, great and small, breaking down the primacy of individualism. And in so doing we open up the possibilities for problem posing. Since I believe that writing and rhetoric courses should be concerned with writing and

rhetoric, I will eventually take the class to variations on language politics: translingualism, dialect, English Only laws, official bilingualism in Canada, etc. The class decides on the particular focus.

And the papers take over where the class discussion began. Having heard the various collectives to which the fellow students claim allegiance, each is asked to write about his and her principal community. How is it characterized? How is it like some of the others discussed in class? How different? Then group work, co-authoring. Two papers: on the subject at hand (say official bilingual nation-states); and on the points of agreement and disagreement. That is, consensus in terms of a silencing is not the goal. The goal is to rise above the self (to the degree to which that is possible), recognizing commonalities among communities, and realizing that agonisms nevertheless remain.

In very pragmatic terms, students come to recognize and articulate underlying assumptions. Aristotle's distinction between the dialectic and the enthymeme is precisely here, in the unstated assumption. Once that's articulated, we can work on the argument more than the ideology.

> *One student, for example, wrote about his professor, a good man, well intentioned, but falling outside the student's Christian beliefs (and many years later, stopped that professor on the road to introduce him to the student's wife). I (the "professor") might not have sympathized with the political implications of his views, but I could see in his papers a real understanding of those views and a real understanding of how another community might regard those views while nevertheless remaining true to his community.*

And what more can we hope for? In a Rogerian rhetoric, understanding is sufficient; a true conversion in one class paper is unrealistic. He had found points of identification *and* division. Good enough.

Our students are surely individuals, but like all individuals, they are tied to communities, to collectives. Some of those are, perhaps, unique given a particular context, but there will also be collectivities in common. The only way to engage without seeming to attack is to move beyond the individual onto the collectives in common and the divisions even within those identifications. Like every classroom strategy, there are failures and successes, but moving to a series of subjective collectivities has, in my experience, generated some great discussion and interesting papers, taking comfort both in our similarities and differences.

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