

**C. A. Bowers, *False Promises of Constructivist Theories of Learning: A Global and Ecological Critique.*** ( published by Peter Lang, 2005)

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Preface

It became increasingly clear to me in recent years that the theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire were not based on an understanding of the complex ways in which culture influences values, ways of thinking, behaviors, built environments, and human/Nature relationships. Neither Dewey nor Freire were aware of the influence of their own cultures—particularly the way in which the language that was central to their analysis and recommendations carried forward the misconceptions and silences of the language community they were born into. Their arguments for universalizing their respective one-true approach to knowledge (experimental inquiry for Dewey and conscientizacao –critical inquiry—for Freire) is further evidence that they did not understand the knowledge systems of other cultures. When they did acknowledge cultural differences they relied upon a Darwinian framework whereby differences were interpreted as the expression of cultural backwardness. Dewey’s lectures at the Imperial University of Japan, which were later published as Reconstruction in Philosophy, made

no acknowledgement that his hosts had achieved anything worthwhile. Indeed, Dewey left them with the clear message that they were stuck in a spectator approach to knowledge. And when he wasn't misrepresenting the knowledge systems of other cultures in the most reductionist way, he was not reticent to referring to them as "savages". In Education for Critical Consciousness, Freire referred to his own more supposedly evolved way of thinking as "critically transitive consciousness," while the less-evolved ("men" who cannot think "outside their sphere of biological necessity" p. 17), were limited by their "semi-intransitivity of consciousness" --which he equated with the existence of animals. Freire's reliance upon a Darwinian interpretative framework is also evident in his reference to oral cultures as locked into a state of "regressive illiteracy" that made it unnecessary, just as Dewey's belief that experimental inquiry made it unnecessary, to learn about the profound differences in the knowledge systems of other cultures

Given my own efforts to base my recommendations for educational reform on a deep understanding of the differences in cultural knowledge systems, the ways in which the languaging processes carry forward earlier ways of thinking—particularly in our culture, and the ecological impact of different knowledge systems, my criticisms in the past were focused primarily on Dewey and Freire, and on how their followers were reproducing the same combination of hubris and conceptual errors—which I continue to see as the basis of an imperialistic agenda. I was aware of Piaget's ideas, but viewed them as yet another one of the passing fads that characterizes the culture of teacher educators. It was only later, after I became aware that his ideas had become a widely held orthodoxy, that I learned that his theory of stages of cognitive development, which he called a "genetic epistemology," was yet another expression of Darwinian thinking that makes it unnecessary to learn about the differences in cultural knowledge systems—and thus about the differences in how children learn.

This was my state of awareness when I participated for the second time in a seminar sponsored by PRATEC ( the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies) for members of different NGOs working in cultural affirmation projects in Peru and Bolivia. It was during the discussions of the new educational reforms being mandated by the governments of Peru and Bolivia for modernizing the schools attended by Quechua and

Aymara students that I was reminded again of how Western universities have influenced the way development is understood and imposed on non-Western cultures. But what most surprised me was learning that the educational reforms, which were to include a curriculum divided into 65 percent Western content and 35 percent local cultural content, was to be based on the core idea of constructivist learning theory—namely, that students are to construct their own knowledge. In effect, the intergenerational knowledge that has sustained the Quechua and Aymara in a wide range of ecologically challenging niches, and has led to the development of one of the world’s greatest diversity of edible plants, was to be replaced with the knowledge that students constructed from their encounter with the supposedly objective and scientifically based knowledge attained in the West—and from their own supposedly subjective experience. That the Western knowledge they would encounter in their classrooms has been a major factor in accelerating the degradation of the World’s ecosystems and the spread of poverty did not seem an important consideration in the formulation of the educational reforms. What was important was the idea that constructivist-based learning (what is now called “transformative learning”) would emancipate students from the traditional forms of knowledge that prevents them from entering the modern world.

After returning home and making further inquiries, I learned that constructivist-based educational reforms had already been initiated in countries ranging from Japan and South Africa to Islamic countries such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan. At last count, 29 non-Western countries were introducing the theory and strategies of constructivism into their teacher education programs and into their schools. In addition, constructivist theories of learning had long ago become the basis of teacher education programs in English speaking countries. The culturally transforming mix of ideas based upon a superficial understanding of the writings of Dewey, Freire, Piaget, and the romantic nostalgia for recovering the child-centered phase of the earlier progressive education movement, are now being as aggressively promoted on a global scale as McDonald’s and Coca Cola. But the contribution that constructivism will make to the success of Western imperialism will have a far more destructive impact than the current spread of the West’s diet of industrialized food—and the problem of obesity that is now spreading around the world.

The decision to write a book that explains how constructivist-based educational reforms represent the Trojan Horse of Western imperialism led, in turn, to the realization that Dewey and Freire (and their many followers) are constructivist theorists. My earlier efforts were to explain how the key cultural assumptions that Dewey and Freire took-for-granted were also shared by the industrial culture they criticized. But as I pointed out in these earlier writings, the cultural assumptions they shared with the politicians and heads of transnational corporations made their criticisms little more than arguments within an extended dysfunctional family. They were correct in their criticisms of the industrial culture as a source of exploitation and non-democratic practices. But they failed to understand the role of industrial culture has played in the enclosure of the commons, and in the destruction of the environment. Indeed, the shared assumptions within this dysfunctional family made it difficult to recognize that their respective liberal vocabularies were totally inadequate for understanding the diverse forms of knowledge and moral reciprocity that made the commons sites of resistance to the myth of progress that gives legitimacy to the Western model of development. For readers who have adopted the formulaic way of thinking of industrial culture as based on conservative values, I suggest they read the CATO Institute web site where it is pointed out that only in America is free-market liberalism labeled as the expression of conservatism. The web sites of the Hoover and American Enterprise Institutes also claim their allegiance to the classical liberal ideas: the progressive nature of the free enterprise system (which depends upon critical inquiry and experimental inquiry to advance technology and exploit new markets), individual freedom ( a basic misconception that ignores that human existence is part of a larger ecology of interdependent relationships), an anthropocentric way of understanding human/nature relationships, and the irrelevance (indeed, backwardness) of other cultural ways of knowing.

It was when I worked my way through the writings of Piaget and the numerous textbooks written by proponents of constructivist learning that I realized how the core assumptions of Dewey and Freire were being merged together, along with the ideas of Piaget and the jargon of current multiculturalism thinking, into a new orthodoxy for teacher educators and classroom practice. All of the god-words of Dewey, Freire, and Piaget were being elevated to a level of justification that few teacher educators, and even

fewer classroom teachers, had the depth of understanding to question. Constructivism, in effect, was being represented as the necessary ongoing task of reconstructing experience required for growth, democracy, emancipation, freedom, individual autonomy (which Dewey argued against), dialogue (which Freire and his followers never practice with people who disagree with them), and self-directed learning. And the silences and misconceptions that accompany the use of these god-words, which often have different meanings in non-Western cultures, were also reproduced in the constructivist textbooks. I came across only one textbook that mentioned the ecological crisis. The author, however, did not understand that the various cultural commons that represent sites of resistance to the imperialism of Western industrial culture are not renewed by adopting Henry Giroux's mantra that everything should be questioned and transformed under the guidance of teachers who function as "transformative intellectuals." As these criticisms may appear as too general, I would ask how many professors of education (or even certified philosophers) have passed on to their students the idea that Dewey is one of our most profound spokespersons for democracy, without recognizing that universalizing Dewey's one-true approach to knowledge is basically undemocratic—just as Freire's argument that critical inquiry is the only way that individuals can achieve the highest ontological expression of their being is also imperialist rather than democratic in the sense of not recognizing the legitimacy of other cultural approaches to acquiring knowledge and making decisions. Freire's references to the ontological project as the life force behind the drive for individual emancipation is yet another example of his failure to recognize that the mythopoetic narratives of different cultures have a far more powerful shaping influence on peoples' lives than the Western philosophers' abstract and culturally uninformed concept of ontology.

The problem that arises with the global spread of constructivist educational reforms is that Dewey, Freire, and the devotees of a child-centered education failed to qualify their theories by acknowledging that experimental inquiry and critical reflection are highly useful in certain situations, but that other approaches to knowledge and its intergenerational renewal might be more appropriate in other contexts—and that the contexts might vary between different cultures. In addition, their assumption that change is a constant in all aspects of life, and that it will be understood the same way in all

cultures as a progressive process, also needed to be radically qualified. As mentioned before, a core assumption underlying the cultural imperialism of the West's industrial culture is that change is the expression of progress, and that it is best achieved through the discoveries of science, technological innovation and the drive to accumulate profits by outsourcing work to the lowest wage areas of the world. This core assumption, which is also at the center of Dewey and Freire's way of thinking, makes asking the question, What needs to be conserved in light of the ecological uncertainties and the incessant pressure to transform what remains of the commons into new market opportunities? appear as reactionary.

The ability to answer the question about what needs to be conserved requires an historical understanding of the forces that continue to transform what remains of the commons into market opportunities, which at the same time undermines, as Ivan Illich pointed out years ago, the skills that enable people to participate in the mutual support systems within their communities. If acquiring this knowledge is viewed as irrelevant in a constructivist classroom and even viewed as yet another source of adult oppression, students are not likely to acquire a knowledge of such hard-won traditions as the gains made in the areas of workers' and women's rights, the separation of church and state, the right to a fair trial, the importance of an independent judiciary rather than one packed with political ideologues that support the classical liberal agenda of universalizing the idea of unrestricted market forces, and the right to privacy and free expression—even when it differs from the anti-democratic forces that are being nurtured by neo-liberal think tanks such as the CATO Institute and talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh. And if other traditions, such as those connected with ethnic approaches to the growing and preparation of food, healing, mentoring in the arts in how to live lightly on the land, are also to be replaced by the student's own construction of knowledge—including their subjective decisions about what they want to learn—they will lack the knowledge needed to resist the changes now being promoted by the forces of industrial culture. The media is the voice of this new form of collective consciousness, and it packages its seductive message in the same language that is used to promote constructivist approaches to learning: emancipation from all traditions, greater freedom of self expression—limited of course by the media representations of what is possible, democratic choice of consumer

products, the endless stream of new technologies and improved models that are the expression of endless progress, the excitement of the transformative learning that accompanies the Deweyian moment of doubt when the source of employment is outsourced to a foreign county-- as well as the more uplifting experience of becoming dependent upon a new technology, and so forth. Dewey, Freire, and their many followers understood their guiding metaphors as contributing to progress in achieving greater social justice; but as we are now witnessing, these same metaphors can be used to create greater dependence upon a technology/consumer dependent lifestyle—and to promote this lifestyle on a global and environmentally destructive scale.

To reiterate a key point about the weakness of a constructivist approach to learning that applies to the followers of Dewey, Freire, Piaget, and even the romantic followers of the child-centered education of the early part of the nineteenth century and the early nineteen sixties: none of them are able to ask the question of what needs to be conserved in the face of incessant technological and market driven change. Nor are they able to recognize that this question requires a combination of critical thinking, a knowledge of the traditions that are being undermined as well as how they reduce dependence upon consumerism, and an ability to assess who benefits from undermining the traditions that sustain a viable cultural and environmental commons, and who benefits from perpetuating the traditions of enclosure and oppression. Democracy requires this more complex set of understandings; unfortunately, they are not likely to be part of the education of students who are under the influence of constructivist-oriented teachers.

What neither Freire nor his many followers understand is that critical reflection may be more effective in conserving the traditions of community (and cultures) that represent resistance to the industrial culture that requires the kind of individual whose subjectively constructed knowledge alienates them from the mutual support and civil rights traditions of their community. Unfortunately, teachers in different countries of the world who have come under the influence of Western constructivist thinkers are not likely to ask about the importance of revitalizing their cultural and environmental commons as sites of resistance to the poverty and environmental degradation that follows the spread of the West's industrial culture. Indoctrinating students with the idea that they can escape what the West represents as the backwardness of their own culture by

constructing their “own” knowledge reduces the possibility that they will be able to recognize which of their own cultural traditions contribute to the networks of mutual aid and non monetized relationships and activities. Nor are they likely to be able to recognize which aspects of Western science, technology, and ways of understanding social justice issues that can be adopted without coming under the influence of new forms of colonialism.

As the above observations suggest, the globalization of the constructivist ideas of Dewey, Freire, and Piaget, which in many instances will be further reduced to slogans by educators already indoctrinated into thinking that the consumer-oriented West is more advanced than their own cultures—and thus cannot question the slogans, has implications that go far beyond the theory of learning, classroom practices, and the well-intentioned desire to contribute to a better world that characterizes the thinking of most educators. One of my aims in writing this book is to clarify the fundamental misconceptions in the thinking of the founding “fathers” of constructivist learning, to highlight how their theories of learning fail to account for the process of learning in a culture that is ecologically-centered (and I am not suggesting that we should or can copy this culture or that it is the only one that could be used as a source of comparison). A third purpose in writing the book is to explain how constructivist approaches to learning lead to the form of individualism and the destruction of community that is required by the spread of the West’s industrial/consumer dependent culture. An additional purpose is to suggest that we begin to think of the teacher’s responsibility in terms of mediating between the quality of life implications of adopting the practices and values of the West’s industrial culture and the implications of renewing those aspects of the local cultural and environmental commons that are more ecologically sustainable and less dependent upon a money economy.

I am indebted to colleagues around the world who have helped me to understand the extent that constructivist-based reforms have been adopted in their countries—and the reaction of teachers and parents where the reforms have been in place for some time. These include Anthony T. Goncalves (Brazil), Karina Costilla, Grimaldo Rengifo, Julio Vallodolid, Jorge Ishizawa Oba (Peru), Loyda Sanchez (Bolivia), Brooke Thomas, Levi Shmulsky, Katie Marlowe, and Caitlin Daniel (Smith College graduate students who did



field research on Quechua learning patterns), Taku Sugimoto (Japan), Michael Ashley (South Africa), Kuo Shih-yu (Taiwan), Gustavo Esteva (Mexico), Rolf Jucker, Robert Bullock (Great Britain).

While relying upon their assessment of the status of constructivist educational reforms in their respective countries, I take full responsibility for any errors of interpretation. In addition, I take full responsibility for the admittedly surface sketch of the patterns of learning of the Quechua and Aymara children that I used as a source of contrast with Piaget's genetic determinism that has been translated into the dogma for understanding the universal stages of cognitive development—that supposedly will lead (for some, as Piaget claimed) to individual autonomy. In relying upon the descriptions of Quechua and Aymara culture by people who are themselves part of these cultures, I think I got enough of it right to make the point that Piaget's theory of cognitive development might have been better grounded if he had started out as a cultural anthropologist rather than as a scientist who transferred his interest in studying the adaptive behavior of mollusks to that of children.