

Where is the line between education and activism? On a superficial level, education and activism can be distinguished by their respective goals: education seeks knowledge, activism seeks change. And yet, many progressive theories of education claim that knowledge without change is meaningless, or worse, oppressive. In the words of Paolo Freire, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 2005, p. 72). According to Freire, education seeks knowledge through critical thinking for the purpose of transforming reality—thus blurring the spectrum between education and activism.

Freire and others propose that education can be either empowering or emasculating depending on the presence or absence of critical thinking. I argue that the same goes for activism. Activism without inquiry is blind. Change for the sake of change alone is as oppressive as blind submission to the status quo. Activism does not by definition require critical thinking—one can move the needle on social change regardless of understanding the reasons why. And while Freire’s education may result in activism, it should only do so through the lens of critical thinking. Any educator who bypasses a thorough interrogation of the issues at hand for efficiency’s sake sidesteps the territory of good education, embracing instead the arms of activism.

I spoke about education and activism with Larry Adelman, filmmaker and co-founder of California Newsreel, a documentary film distribution company which serves “the media needs of contemporary social change movements,” according to the company’s website. Larry is the creator and executive producer of the pioneering PBS series’ *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003), *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* (2008), and *The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of Our Nation* (2016), among other films. In each of these programs, viewers are challenged to interrogate societal norms and confront scientific misconceptions. They also advocate for a specific set of policies related to social justice.

Larry’s work aligns poignantly with Paolo Freire and, to a certain extent, John Dewey, whom Larry harkened to in our interview. (“They do still teach John Dewey in school, I would hope?”) And just as Freire’s pedagogy can be said to enable revolutions, Larry’s films can be described as politically motivated as well. But Larry maintains that “the idea is not to provide an alternative point of view. The idea is to interrogate the current prevailing convention.” Having seen (and worked on) *The Raising of America* films, I would argue that the idea behind his work is *both* to interrogate the prevailing convention *and* provide an alternative view.

For example, one of the primary conventions under fire in each of these films is the idea of the self-determining individual. In the Needs Assessment Report for *The Raising of America*, Larry and his colleagues write, “the mythos of the self-determining individual... deprives parents of support, disparages government action, and rationalizes away the patterning of so many outcomes along class and racial lines” (Adelman et al 2011, p. 16). Opponents argue that this view precludes the existence of free will, but Larry rebutted that argument by referencing a quote from Karl Marx: “Men make their own history, but... they do not make it under self-selected circumstances” (Marx 1898). “I’m not taking away free will; I’m not taking away responsibility,” Larry said. “I’m just talking about people realizing their full potential.”

According to Larry’s films, realizing one’s full potential involves having access to a “nurturing childhood ecology.” The nature-nurture debate has been raging since Francis Galton and the eugenics movement of the late 1800s, and as Marx’ quote indicates, it is not a yes-or-no question. The human experience is an interplay between biology and environment, individualism and collectivism, free will and destiny. *The Raising of America* acknowledges this, but heavily emphasizes the environmental side of the scale. To do otherwise would betray the very mission of the film. The Needs Assessment again articulates:

“There are good parents and bad parents who make right and wrong choices for their children. Because the ‘right choices’ frame minimizes the role of social circumstances, it makes people skeptical of government action and even serves as a proxy for racial, class and gender bias since it obscures how the additional burdens faced by the poor, people of color and women can handicap the efforts of even the best parents. There is an ‘**us vs. them**’ built into the ‘right choices’ frame” (51-52).

The last sentence of the passage identifies the difference between activism and education: “us vs. them.” Education reveals that environmental factors are underappreciated in society; activism attempts to push the needle in that direction. In this way, there is an “us vs. them” mentality built into any activist stance. To the extent that these three media projects—*Race*, *Unnatural Causes*, and *The Raising of America*—lead viewers through a critical analysis of the mythos of the self-determining individual and its impact on society, we can describe them as educational. But when the films provide a specific set of solutions to counteract these impacts, which are presented as almost exclusively the purview of government programs and regulations, they cross over into political activism.

If California Newsreel, and the social change movements it supports, walks a fine line between education and activism, so too does environmental education (EE) which supports conservation. EE is often carried out by organizations who are “unabashedly committed to the importance of encouraging conservation behavior” (Ardoin p. 57). Such a mission is inherently

activist, often carried out under the auspices of education. Judy Braus articulates the tension directly: “Many education professionals shy away from advocacy, but the reality is that there are many elements of an advocacy campaign that include education and communication strategies” (Braus, p. 97).

Indeed, the goals of EE defined in 1977 at the Tbilisi Intergovernmental Conference in Georgia, USSR encompass both activism and education:

- To foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;
- To provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;
- To create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment. (UNESCO 1980, as quoted by Monroe 2007).

It is important that these three goals are included together, for awareness, knowledge, and behavior are interlinked. The mission of EE aligns with Freire’s definition of education as seeking knowledge through critical thinking to transform reality. Many EE organizations, however, skip the first goals (awareness, knowledge) and jump straight to specific skills, attitudes and behaviors.

If the goals of activism have been predetermined, Nicole Ardoin argues, awareness does not necessarily further them. “Knowledge about environmental issues is believed by many to be an essential basis for undertaking pro-environmental behaviors...,” she writes, but “...extensive research has demonstrated that general pro-environmental attitudes do not predict behavior” (Ardoin 2009, p. 64). The implied conclusion is for conservation organizations to forego education in the form of critical thinking and awareness, and focus on the desired behaviors and outcomes which benefit the environment directly. Ardoin sites Schultz (2002), who uses recycling as an example of a desired behavior which may or may not result from EE.

I argue that the predetermination of specific outcomes in EE is a tricky territory which requires a level of certainty usually lacking in controversial issues. The choice of recycling is a poignant one, for the benefits of recycling have been contested. I do not have the time or space to go into the details here (as much as I’d like to), but suffice it to say that, due to the energy it takes to process and repurpose the materials, the conservation benefits of recycling lie almost exclusively with paper and cardboard, while recycling glass, aluminum, and especially plastic may actually cause more harm than good. The organic food movement provides another example. Just like recycling intends to reduce energy use but may be missing the mark, so does “organic” intend to promote sustainable farming practices, but also misses the mark. The hallmark of organic lies in the promotion of naturally occurring substances instead of

synthesized chemicals, so large-scale farms can simply switch from synthetic pesticides to “organic” pesticides. The desired outcome of a sustainable farm ecology—which includes a diversity of organisms—has very little to do with “natural” vs “synthetic” pesticides, but rather with pesticide use in general. Thus, using recycling behavior or organic food choice as indicators of the success of EE is like using standardized tests to measure learning in schools—practically useless.

Not only is focusing on specific behaviors ineffective, but it may be illegal for nonprofits to do so. The “...fine line between educational activities, which traditionally focus on literacy and skills development, and social marketing activities, which promote specific behaviors, may require attention to ensure that the activities conducted are appropriate in light of the organization’s nonprofit status” (Ardoin 2009, p. 70). This may sound like legal minutiae, but it strikes to the heart of the education-activism distinction. Social marketing, a form of activism, frames conservation as an “us vs. them” dichotomy, targeting specific interventions to move the needle in the desired direction.

Dewey ties education to critical thinking, Freire ties critical thinking to activism. Social Justice institutions like California Newsreel and conservation organizations both seek activism and change, but different organizations pursue varying levels of critical thinking towards that end. Films like *The Raising of America* arrive at specific policy recommendations after a fairly thorough interrogation of the societal forces such policies are meant to correct. Conservation organizations that advocate recycling and buying organic employ less critical thinking, swinging instead towards a more didactic form of activism. I grant that some degree of simplification is unavoidable, but any effort predicated on “because I told you so” is no more trustworthy than the pedagogy of the oppressed which Freire so despises.

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