

Reading Resistance Psychoanalytically

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I agree whole-heartedly with Barbara Applebaum that we cannot ask the pragmatic question without also considering the complicity question. The question of how we might undo the mechanisms through which we unwittingly participate in the reproduction of social and global domination — our own oppression and that of others — is one with which we must grapple in the struggle for social justice. I suggest, however, that she may be underestimating the degree to which the pragmatic approach actually does consider the complicity question. For it is precisely because she believes that imposing strict rules for classroom engagement (those that Lynn Weber Cannon and Applebaum defend) “unwittingly reinforce power relations” that Barbara Stengel claims we should abandon them.¹ Furthermore, while Applebaum worries that “when educators focus on ‘defusing’ resistance,” the needs of the systemically privileged are recentered at the expense of the marginalized, I contend that the problem of resistance is central to educational theory and practice.

Not only does reflection on resistance — our own and that of others — provide us with valuable (and much needed) insight into the problem of how we might pedagogically deal with shifting students (and educators) into seeing their structural habits as something they can collectively change — what I take to be a shared concern of both the Butlerians and the Pragmatists, but it can, I think, pave a way to developing more nuanced conceptions of subjectivity, privilege, and ignorance. I borrow from psychoanalysis to argue that resistance is best thought of as a defense against difficult knowledge. Emphasizing that perceptions are passionate, knowledge is difficult, and subjectivities are split, psychoanalysis reveals subjectivities as in constant conflict with themselves and the world around them; in the face of difficult knowledge, we learn, resistance is inevitable, paradoxical, and an essential dynamic in the learning process.²

In response to Stengel’s depiction of student resistance as a defense mechanism that “begins in doubt and blossoms into fear,” Applebaum highlights the way fear functions to protect the innocence of the fearful and emphasizes the need to consider how *resistance might often be an expression of arrogance that is institutionally supported as knowledge*. Applebaum draws our attention to the ways resistance can function to protect systemically privileged ignorance. There is an important tension here between the ways in which ignorance can function as a strategy of both power and resistance. When ignorance is culturally produced, how do we hold individual students responsible for their individual responses that reflect it? I think the psychoanalytic concept of defense can lend valuable insight to understanding the ways in which ignorance is productive on both cultural and subjective levels and shed light onto the ways in which our practices can render us unwittingly complicit in practices with which we do not identify or would not consciously condone, *no*

matter which side of the privileged/marginalized spectrum we find ourselves on. Thinking about resistance as a defense against difficult knowledge can help us begin to see just how complex notions of complicity and responsibility become when we consider how subjects of education are duped by both knowledge and power on the one hand and their own affective investments in ignorance and self-deception on the other.

I appreciate Applebaum's concern that we ought to maintain vigilance with regard to how "projects of critique can become complicit with their object" and try not to recenter the needs and interests of systemically privileged students at the expense of the marginalized. But just who are the marginalized and who are the privileged? How do we take seriously Suzanne de Castell's call to attend to the hybridity of identity, to recognize how most of us inhabit identities that are both privileged and oppressed? Indeed, students' social positioning as relatively privileged or oppressed does shape their responses to social justice education and affect educators' reading of their resistance. "Lost in the fault lines," however, as Deborah Britzman points out, "is the question of education as psychic event."³ While clearly a classroom is not the same as an analytic situation — one chooses to enter into analysis whereas students are compelled to enter into education, making power relations central to teaching and learning at the outset, I emphasize that psychoanalysis offers valuable insight into subjective processes involved in teaching and learning. In challenging the assumptions that "learning is a one way road from ignorance toward knowledge and that identity organizes political consciousness,"⁴ psychoanalytic insight provides us with a dynamic reading of student resistance that lends to grappling with the fluidity and multiplicity of identities.

Shedding light on just what it means to think of learning as a psychic event, Anna Freud contends that perceptions both pass through and constitute an ego's mechanisms of defense. The term defense, she argues, describes "the ego's struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects."⁵ Simply put, defense is the attempt to rid oneself of a perception, idea, or reality that one finds threatening, unbearable, or in some way anxiety inducing. Defensive processes can be thought of as the psychical correlative of the flight reflex and perform the task of preventing the generation of unpleasure, and in fulfilling this task they act for mental events as an automatic regulation mechanism.⁶ And while it is important not to equivocate the different experiences of subjects from different social locations and the ethical implications involved in resisting certain types of knowledge over others, when we only understand resistance as a barrier to learning that stems from privileged desire to defend domination, we fail to take note of the ways in which each of us have affective investments in ignorance, we overlook, as Applebaum states, the ways "marginalized voices can repeat dominant discourses while dominant voices may challenge dominant ideology." Given the way the relations between teachers and students are structured by relations of power, it is of paramount importance that both teachers and students grapple with their propensities to defend against that which one finds anxiety inducing or threatening.

The concept of defense helps us to appreciate, invites us to deeply reflect on the fact, that certain forms of knowledge are disturbing, and can even be terrorizing, to both students and teachers. However, in asking students to confront standpoints, situations, and ideas that are not just difficult or unfamiliar but appear to be a criticism of the learner's perspective, Anna Freud argues that we should expect denial, but we should also expect that people will surpass their initial attempts at refusing to learn. Sigmund Freud points out that although resistances pose difficulties, "the difficulties might act precisely as a stimulus and makes us suspect that the work will be worth the trouble."⁷ Not only should we anticipate and prepare for resistance, teaches Sigmund Freud, but we should also be suspicious that any real learning has occurred if we do not. He writes,

we are aware that these resistances are bound to come to light; in fact, we are dissatisfied if we cannot provoke them clearly enough and are unable to demonstrate them to the patient. Indeed we come finally to understand that the overcoming of these resistances is the essential function of analysis and is the only part of our work which gives us an assurance that we have achieved something with the patient.⁸

This insight might help to turn resistance into a nonthreatening pedagogical resource.

The paradoxical elements of resistance come to light when we recognize that although defense mechanisms are strategies adopted by the ego to console itself, the consolation does not come without a cost. In *The Last Resistance*, Jacqueline Rose writes that "Psychoanalysis remains for me the most powerful reading of the role of human subjects in the formation of states and nations, subjects as driven by their unconscious, subjects in thrall to identities that will not save them and that will readily destroy the world." The reading that subjects are *in thrall to identities that will not save them* highlights another important insight that psychoanalysis has to offer us is, which is that despite appearances, despite the fact that unconscious desires determine perceptions and actions, we often act against our own best interests. This insight challenges common understandings of how and why students, particularly privileged students, are read as resistant to social justice pedagogy, too often read as resisting because they seek to reinforce the power structures that work in their favor.

Frustrated with their seeming lack of political consciousness, we may see student resistance as designed to absolve privileged students from acknowledging complicity in ongoing social and global injustice. This may be part of the story, of course, but I argue that a more dynamic conception of resistance can help educators more effectively work through it. Because resistance marks out the moment where students begin to encounter difficult knowledge, the very moment we may find ourselves frustrated with them is the moment we need to concertedly engage with them in their struggle to learn. Reading resistance as signaling alienation from reality, the self, and others, but ultimately the first step involved in personal transformation may help to alleviate much of the anger, frustration, and resentment that abounds in educational theory and practice, particularly when it is aimed at engaging students in critique of the very structures that have produced them.

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1. Barbara Stengel, "Facing Fear, Releasing Resistance, Enabling Education," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 39 (2008): 74, <http://www.ovpes.org/2008/Stengel.pdf>.
 2. See Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
 3. Britzman, *Lost Subjects*, 3.
 4. Ibid., 8.
 5. Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (New York: International Universities Press, 1966), 42.
 6. P. J. Van Der Leeuw, "On the Development of the Concept of Defense," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 52 (1971): 57.
 7. Sigmund Freud, "The Manifest Content of Dreams and the Latent Dream Thoughts," in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 142.
 8. Sigmund Freud, "Resistance and Repression," in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 361.
 9. As quoted in Atef Alshaer, "Review of *The Last Resistance* by Jacqueline Rose," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 8 (2008): 376.