



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Class and Race Matters

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

May 24, 2016

Tags: racism | embodied teaching | racial and ethnic diversity | critically reflective teaching

Last time we talked about the body in the classroom. Our body, my body, the bodies of my students, are all shaped by institutional bodies that carry values, marks, love, deceptions, commitments and history. Just as our bodies carry constructions of race, gender, sexuality and so on, so too do our institutional bodies carry these same constructions. And in addition, through their organizational structures and curriculum, our institutional bodies support specific discourses of identity, race, and class as well.

In the classroom, we are always constructing or breaking these discourses, consciously or unconsciously framing forms of life, framing racial and class relations. Any syllabus is an x-ray of our understanding of these relations and our open or hidden awareness of these constructions. The classes we teach, the ways we shape our conversations, and the forms of evaluation we demand fundamentally shape structures of relationality and power. Our forms of evaluation and grading of students clearly demonstrate our views. For example, under the proper name of higher education, we can easily dismiss certain students through analysis of their grammar and knowledge - as a way to keep our class membership and privileges, either by inheritance, inculcation or social movement. Classroom evaluation clearly exhibits teachers' critical judgments: regarding race and class (those who do not have the form of education we had, or cannot sustain the proper identity or class, grammatical use, and ways of learning and thinking); regarding gender (those who do not subordinate to the male ways of thinking, respect and hierarchy); and regarding sexuality (those who do not comply with acceptable

sexual norms or think in heterosexual ways).

I wonder how we become aware of our own personal, national-racial, and class compositions. In any case, a better sense of ourselves can help us be/come more aware of the diversity of student formation and the class race composition of our classrooms. Unless clearly stated by some form of self-disclosure, discourse or statement, it is hard to figure out, especially in regards to class, where students belong or where they come from. This can hinder full class relations, participation, and development. The more we know our students, the more we are able to hear and engage. The more we know them and where they come from, the more we can listen to them more attentively and thus help them expand on issues from their own experiences. It is this relational knowledge that will guide the sources used in class and our common learning outcomes. My own adviser went to Brazil to visit my house, to know the church and the neighborhood where I grew up, and to have a better sense of me, her student. Surely we cannot all do that. However, we can visit their hoods and churches, eat where they eat, see the institutions where they work or volunteer, know their fights and passions, and ask them questions. All of these are forms of getting to know where students belong and what really matters to them. The personal, the social, the national and the economic aspects of their life/class/identity are all intertwined. As bell hooks says: “issues of both national and personal responsibility” are connected to class issues. [1]

We who teach have the requirement to go through what Paulo Freire calls *conscientization* of our personal lives in more expanded and connected ways, so that we can connect to the worlds of our students. More specifically, we must engage in what bell hooks calls a “journey to class consciousness.” It is very frustrating when the journey into race consciousness ignores class consciousness, for then its analysis ends up lacking the economic aspects of what has developed the entirety of racial discourses. Race has been built on the back of economics and it is intrinsically related to class, economic developments and disparities. The combination of race and class clearly show up in in each of our students. Sometimes we can see it: when students are exhausted, both physically and emotionally because of certain battles only minorities and poor people go through; when students can’t do the readings, not because of laziness or lack of commitment to the class, but because they can’t find time in the midst of so many demands, jobs and responsibilities.



Schools also have class commitments. I am always troubled when schools base the acceptance of applicants almost entirely on the students’ GPA.

Schools love to describe themselves as having the students with the highest GPA and the most brilliant minds -- but this is mostly because money comes with them, or they will pull the reputation of the school to places where money can be made. Some seminaries act like predatory for-profit colleges by encouraging and enabling ever greater student debt. In many ways schools are an arm of the economic neoliberal system. Usually high GPA students have had better conditions of life and better access to education and therefore could work on their grades. This education system keeps the structure of merit, instead of the rights of students to have full access to education no matter their grades. Moreover, it supports the middle and upper class ranks, divisions and separations-- keeping the cycle of injustice and perpetuating class struggles.

A just society would have schools that choose students by other measures and weights -- beginning with those who could not make it, those who do not have good GPAs, those who would never be accepted anywhere. Because these students live at the bottom of the class pyramid and are marked by gaps of sustenance and lack of almost all conditions to access better forms of education and better life, they should be the first ones on the list of any school! They should be desired! The structure of schools should find funds to pay for their studies, to help them write, read and develop their voice and critical thinking.

Thus, to talk education is to talk about the material conditions of our students, to talk about their race, sexuality and gender all wrapped up in class struggles. It is to pay attention to the material conditions of life, how people are, or are not, part of the social network, in what ways they are part of it, how they are related to the modes of production, and how much access they have to the richness of society.

Education is one of the measures of the in/equality of society. It is an apparatus of society, for it holds the cultural social capital that can foster, challenge or break the inequality of a system by ways of making itself available, or not, to all. When accessed, the material condition of students will determine the conditions of the possibility of their engagement and eventful success in their education. For education is much more than a degree. It is a form of living! Knowledge that comes from farming, from the healing of our grandparents, from the kitchens of our mother and grandmothers, from the survival on the streets, from the stories and discourses of our communities, from other forms of relation to the environment. That is why we need to fight the way our societies compartmentalize education to certain places, buildings, classrooms books and moments of life only to recognize those who have educational rank, merit, titles and are able to do scholarship away from the daily life of people.

Thus, every school makes a choice in whom to serve and to call. We need more schools that will choose and call those who would not stand any chance in our world. Education is a way of living together, in the polis or in rural areas, framing expansive ways of understandings democracy as full access to education, health and housing, rights of workers, students and so on. Education raises the awareness of our disastrous segregations, and the dismantling of class struggles, so that people can change it. As Paulo Freire said, "Education doesn't change the world, it changes people and people change the world." Education is about identifying with

students and their (class) situations so we can fix the disparities of our ecosystems. Bell hooks says: "To not identify with the poor and the downtrodden, to fail to attend to their needs, was to suffer the pain of being disinherited."

Let me finish with a true story:

A teacher had an undocumented student in class. The student couldn't engage the class mostly because of the language and the ways of reasoning which were always a challenge to him. As he couldn't engage, he distanced himself and withdrew from class participation, becoming only a listener. In the first major written work, he plagiarized. When the teacher recognized it, she was very aware that if she was to take him to the proper channels of the school, this student wouldn't stand a chance and would most likely be kicked out. She decided to talk to him first and got to know him better. Through the conversation, she was able to hear all of the hardships the student was going through: no documents, working in extraneous jobs, wife caught by immigration and in a private jail and a child back in his country with his mother and meager sources to survive. How could he focus and think in ways that were new and scary to him? School was definitely not for him. However, instead of asking him to write another, proper, final paper, the teacher suggested that they write the paper together. It took her time, but she did it. It was a wonderful discovery for both of them. Taping into his strength, knowing a bit more of his world, this teacher made a choice to walk along with him until he was able to walk by himself. Empowered, against all the odds, he could, perhaps, have a chance to survive, to compete in this jungle, and to offer some resistance to these systems of injustice. She broke with a pattern, enabled him to become a true student, and by her own choice to become an attentive and true teacher.

[1] All footnotes quoted from bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

<https://wabash.center/2016/05/class-and-race-matters/>