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## Bubblegum and Surplus Value

Mike Messner

### A Word on Teaching Radical Subject Matter

I see the role of the radical teacher as that of a consciousness-changing agent for students. There are many structural and ideological barriers facing the radical teacher who attempts to convey radical subject matter.

The process of education is a means to an end. It is a socialization process which creates a certain type of person who will fit into and perpetuate a certain type of social system. In a class society such as ours, the ruling class determines the type of educational system to which students are to be subjected. Thus the structure of the schools and of the classroom itself serves to socialize people into the bureaucratized structure of corporate capitalism.

People are socialized by the schools not only by *what* they are taught (content) but by the *manner* in which they are taught (process). Bourgeois education treats students as empty containers into which knowledge is "dumped" by the teacher, who "knows." This process, according to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, creates people who are "objects" in the historical process. (1) People who are "objects" are easily manipulated, accept authority, and lack a critical, reflective consciousness. In short, such people fit well into the existing system and lack the critical consciousness necessary to change the system.

Since the "process" of education is so important, it is possible for a "radical teacher" to be unknowingly engaged in the act of socializing students to be objects in bureaucratic capitalist society. For example, the teacher may be lecturing his or her class on such subjects as "freedom" and "liberation," but the process and structure of the learning environment is actually conditioning the student to be an object—a non-critical actor in bourgeois society.

An antithesis to this bourgeois approach to education and knowledge would be an approach which allows the students to be active participants in the learning process and critical "subjects" in the historical process. (2) Knowledge is not something which

"exists" and is "dumped" into the head of a passive learner. Knowledge is produced on an experiential level through the interplay of theory and practice. (3)

In addition to the problem of process in teaching radical subject matter, I have found that there is the additional problem of dealing with the social conditioning that students have previously experienced. People are usually conditioned to respond negatively to such "leftist rhetoric" as "exploitation," "class struggle," "revolution," and "socialism." What is not needed is a lecture (thrown at students from behind a podium) dealing with such abstract "rhetoric." What is needed is an approach which allows the students first to attain an experiential understanding of a Marxist interpretation of society. I have found that this type of subjective understanding often leads the student to be more open to considering and understanding Marxist theory as it pertains to his or her life and world.

For this reason, I have developed the following simulation game, which I have experimented with on a number of occasions in Sociology and Education classes. In this paper, I will relate the method of the simulation game, some of the phenomena which have occurred when I experimented with the game in the classroom, and an explanation of what the game means in terms of a Marxist analysis of the "real world." This is not to imply that this simulation is intended as a predictive model of society. It is a simplification of the "real world" which is intended as a taking-off point for teaching Marxist theory.

### *The Method*

*The setting and ground rules of the game:* I usually begin by informing the students that we are going to play a simulation game to see how well they can deal with a social situation. I ask the people to assume that we are going to live the rest of our lives in the classroom. No person can ever leave the room again. It is effective to close any doors or windows to emphasize this point. We are a "closed society."

Next it is necessary to inform the class that we have no food or any means to grow food. Then I inform them that they are very lucky, because I have a machine which can produce candy. A prop, such as a gumball machine, is very effective. I own the machine and it is our only means of sustenance. It is capable of a maximum output of 110 pieces of candy per day if run 24 hours a day. Our last assumption is that five pieces of candy per person per day is the subsistence level.

*The social division of the class:* I then inform the class (assuming a class of twenty students) that I want to hire ten workers. Five will work a twelve-hour day shift and the other five will work a twelve-hour night shift. (Differences in the number of students in different classes necessitate last-second manipulation of the "statistics" by the teacher who is facilitating the game.)

I next announce that I will choose the ten people whom I think will make the best workers. I always choose predominantly, if not exclusively, white male workers, leaving ethnic minorities and women as "non-workers." An actual physical separation of workers and non-workers to opposite sides of the classroom is very effective to emphasize this division.

Often a person will walk into class late. I label this person as an "immigrant" and place him or her

among the non-workers without explaining the situation or the rules to the person.

*The economic situation:* After the division of the class takes place, I announce that the workers will each be paid six cents per day (\$.60 paid to the total work force). The workers will be taxed one cent each per day (\$.10 from the total work force). This tax will be distributed at the rate of one cent each to the non-workers (\$.10 to the total non-workers group). In addition, I will give each non-worker one cent per day (an additional \$.10 to the total non-workers group).

I then make it perfectly clear that I have no ethical obligation to give the non-workers anything, but I do so out of pure humanitarianism.

Next, I announce that all of the 110 pieces of candy produced each day are mine. I will sell them for one cent apiece. This means that the workers have the buying power to purchase fifty pieces of candy per day, or five pieces each, their subsistence level. The non-workers have the buying power to purchase only twenty pieces of candy per day, or two pieces each, considerably lower than the subsistence level.

The economics of the situation should be displayed on the blackboard for all to see. I usually display them as follows:

	TEN WORKERS	TEN NON-WORKERS	OWNER [ME]
Production per 24-hour day	110 pieces of candy	0	0
pay per day	\$.60 (\$.06 each)	0	0
tax per day	-\$ .10 (-\$.01 each)	+\$ .20 (+\$.02 each)	-\$ .10
candy purchasing power per day	50 pieces (5 pieces each)	20 pieces (2 pieces each)	—
left over (surplus) candy per day	0	0	40 pieces (minus my personal consumption per day)

*Discussion:* Now that the social and economic situation is displayed and understood, I ask the students to assume that we have been living like this for several weeks now. I emphasize that I am a believer in democracy and would like to know how people feel about the situation. If they are not happy, I would like to discuss why with them and possibly come to some solutions to their perceived problems.

From this point on, there is no set procedure to follow. The game may take half an hour or it may take hours, depending on the level of consciousness of the students and the degree of interaction. I try as much as possible to let the students dominate the conversation. Anything can happen, and the teacher

must be prepared to field all types of questions and assaults.

To get things rolling, I usually first ask the workers if they have anything to say. If the non-workers try to say anything at this point, I either shut them up or ignore them. What usually happens is one outraged worker will tell me that he wants more pay. I refuse him, and if he continues to "make trouble," I then begin to pay attention to the non-workers. I ask the "starving" non-workers if any of them would like a job. Some always raise their hands to volunteer. This action usually convinces outraged individuals that they can get nowhere by themselves.

Another tactic to use to cool off a "troublemaker" is to appoint the person to a position of authority,

such as “foreman,” and increase his or her pay by one cent per day. This usually has the effect of quieting the person down and making him or her more status-quo oriented.

The non-workers have much more at stake and much more to complain about. The ethnic minorities and the women often become quite upset over obviously racist and sexist discrimination in hiring. I usually respond by saying that the people I chose to work for me seemed to be the best suited for hard work and the only rational choice. At times, women will ask me how I expect them to be able to stay alive. I respond by reminding them that if it were not for me and the other hard-working men, they would have nothing. I add that if they use their imagination, perhaps they might be able to provide certain services for me for which I would pay them.

Often while I am putting down the non-workers, the workers begin to gain confidence and begin to organize themselves. They often have a “workers’ caucus” and announce to me that they are going to go on strike for higher wages. I deal with a workers’ strike by putting up their jobs for the non-workers. They will usually accept the jobs, leaving the striking workers jobless.

At time, an individual or small group will threaten to use force to take candy from me or to take or sabotage my machine. I tell the person or group that in a democratic society such things are not necessary, and that if they want change, we should all settle down and talk about it. If this “violent” behavior continues, I then pull out another prop, a police riot stick, and hire myself a cop from the ranks of the non-workers. It is never difficult to find a taker for the job. I explain that the cop’s duty is to maintain order and to protect people’s property—not only my property, but the property of others as well. Occasionally, we have gone so far as to organize a portion of the classroom to be used as a “prison” for troublemakers.

At this point in the game, most people are usually beginning to direct their hostilities toward me instead of each other. The next step is usually a “general strike” where the non-workers will not fill the vacated jobs. They all refuse to work for me. I respond to this situation by saying that I, who have been saving my surplus candy, can afford to wait until the workers are hungry enough to come back to work for me.

If they threaten to take the candy or the machine, I try to hire another cop or two. Whether this works or not, the students begin to talk in terms of “strength in numbers” and decide to seize the machine from me. A near unanimous decision by the students usually constitutes the “revolution.” In one instance, a group of workers actually walked up to the front of the classroom and seized the machine, carried me to the “prison,” and overpowered the “cop.”

At this point in the game, I ask the people what they intend to do with the machine now that they

have it. This sometimes becomes a chaotic discussion. One time a man said that he wanted my old position, but was willing to pay people higher wages to placate them. I always try to sabotage the “new society” by attempting to regain at least partial control, but I am very rarely listened to at this point. Usually the class decides to own and operate the machine democratically, with each person receiving an equal portion of candy.

*Discussion and analysis in Marxist terms:* When the issue of what to do with the machine is finally decided, then it is time to begin to discuss Marx and Marxism openly. I usually begin the discussion with a statement such as, “The situation that I set up in this classroom today is similar to the way Karl Marx perceived European society to be in the 19th century, and you as a class have taken the courses of action that Marx predicted would be taken.” This often surprises many students who had absolutely no idea what was happening during the simulation.

It is then necessary to go into a discussion and a Marxist analysis of what happened in the classroom. I always try to have the discussion and analysis go through three stages. In the first stage, the observational and experiential stage, I simply ask the students to relate to me what their perceptions were as to what was happening in the simulation game. In the second stage, I ask them how, if at all, these experiences and observations relate to the “real world.” In the third stage, I try to explain these phenomena in terms of Marxist theory. In other words, I am attempting to convey an understanding of the world through a Marxist perspective by proceeding from an experiential understanding to higher levels of abstraction. I usually begin the discussion by asking individuals to relate their observations to the class on the different ways that the people in the class were divided.

*A class society:* The most obvious division is the separation of myself, as the owner of the machine, from the rest of the people in the room. Likewise, in the “real world” there is a division between those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those who have to sell their labor in order to exist (the proletariat). (4)

The class division between myself and the others in the room is the most important division, but there are other divisions as well. There is the division between the workers and the non-workers, the division between ethnic minorities and whites, and the division between men and women. A Marxist analysis shows how artificial divisions of the proletariat, such as racism, sexism, and unemployment, are necessary for capitalism to continue to perpetuate itself. This is an excellent point to emphasize, especially in a “social problems” class where racism, sexism, unemployment, and other problems are often treated as isolated entities unrelated to any particular form of economic organization. (5)

It is demonstrated well in the classroom simulation how non-workers, or the "reserve army of labor," can be used by the ruling class as a lever against strikes or other working class struggles. This division in the proletariat is also very evident in the United States. The workers resent the jobless because they have to pay taxes to support them. The non-workers resent the workers because they feel that they deserve jobs. (More than once in the simulation game I have observed a white male worker yelling at an unemployed female, "Quit complaining and go find a job!") The point is that the structure of the simulation game and the structure of capitalist society determines that there are *not enough* jobs for all.

Another obvious working class division in the simulation and in capitalist society is the division between the whites and the ethnic minorities. Racism is particularly devastating in preventing working class solidarity. Racial stereotypes, scapegoating, job discrimination, and competition all serve to cloud the class issues.

The case of immigrants is another example of working class competition and division. As in the simulation game, when an immigrant comes to this country, he or she is ignorant of the customs, laws, and general culture of our society. The immigrant is easily scapegoated for many social problems. Harmful stereotypes of the immigrant are accepted by the working class, setting another artificial barrier to working class solidarity. (6)

Another obvious division in the simulation game and in capitalist society is the division between men and women. The division of the working class along sexist lines serves a function similar to racism in the perpetuation of capitalism. (7) It seems to me that the women's movement in the United States is doomed to failure, or at best limited success, if it is not linked to the class struggle. China has shown that it is possible to solve such complex social problems if the root cause of the problems, the economic system, is destroyed and replaced with a system which attempts to meet human needs. (8)

*Capitalist Economics:* The next thing that I ask the students to analyze is the figures on the blackboard. I ask them to explain what was happening in terms of economics.

The most obvious thing happening is that I, the capitalist, am making a huge profit while the workers barely make enough to stay alive and the non-workers slowly starve. Using capitalist "rationality," there is no economic logic to fight this reality. It is obvious that the 110 pieces of candy, divided equally between the 21 people in the room would be more than enough for everyone to survive. But capitalist ideology makes it seem *rational* for the owner of the machine (capital) to reap a profit. (9)

In the simulation game, I argued against workers who felt that they were being "ripped off" that they would have no job if it were not for me and my machine, so I *deserved* a profit. Non-Marxist econo-

mists argue against the labor theory of value by saying that capital (in our case, the candy machine) also produces value, so it is only right that labor not be given all the fruits of production. Marx demonstrated that capital is merely congealed labor, and that therefore the value "produced" by the machine is actually produced by previously expended labor power.

An extremely mystified principle of capitalist economics concerns the relation of the producer to his or her product. In the game, the workers produced a certain amount of candy per day for which they were paid a certain amount of money. For this money, they could buy from me a portion of the candy which they produced. This reflects the "real world" where the product becomes a commodity which is sold for money, and the producer becomes alienated from his or her product. (10)

The main point to emphasize here is that the capitalist's ownership of the means of production becomes his rationale for extracting a surplus from the labor force. When it becomes apparent that the machine (capital) has no transcendental qualities and does not produce value, but exists as stored up labor, it becomes obvious that the capitalist does not deserve his huge profits—that, in fact, he is actually "stealing" from the workers.

*Power:* Another important issue to discuss is the power dimension. In the game and in society, who has the power and how is it maintained? It is obvious in the simulation game that I, the capitalist, had all the power. I was able to define the rules so that I could actually determine who would live and who would starve. Even with all this power, I still could maintain that I believed in democracy.

Using bourgeois ideology to my advantage, I could always label any attempts by the group to limit my profits or take my machine a "violations of my democratic rights to own private property." A worker in the game once made quite a "Marxian" analysis when he exclaimed to the rest of the workers that I was "...using 'democracy' against us to promote his own self-interests." (11)

Students are usually quite able to tie this use of ideology in the game to similar situations in the larger society. People in the United States "democracy" are generally placated by being able to elect their representatives to government and to vote on certain issues. But it is a "given" in capitalist society that citizens can not vote on economic issues such as "do we want to produce Cadillacs? Bombs? Aerosol cans? If so, how many?" These decisions are made for us.

The working class divisions discussed above are also a main cause for the perpetuation of capitalist power. In the simulation game, I was able to "buy" non-workers to use against the working class as strike-breakers ("scabs") or as law-enforcers. The non-workers, or the lumpenproletariat as Marx called them, can often be used against the interests of the



proletariat. Often because of the lack of cohesiveness and education of the lumpenproletariat, and because of ruling class control of communications, the media, and propaganda, the lumpenproletariat is in a position to be used as "... a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue." (12)

*The process and tactics of class struggle:* The students in the simulation game usually go through the stages of consciousness and struggle which Marx and Engels outlined in the *Communist Manifesto*. Initially, there is a divided, unorganized working class. The workers fight amongst themselves with periodic individual outbursts which are easily dealt with by me (the capitalist). (13) The next stage of consciousness and struggle is the formation of working class unions taking collective action against me. The working class is becoming "a class for itself" (14), but I, the capitalist, am still holding the power at this stage and can often defeat or co-opt any strikes, boycotts, or movements of the working class. Even in defeat, these working class movements in the simulation and in the "real world" are important for the working class to increase its solidarity and to learn that real change within the capitalist system is not possible. (15)

At this stage in the simulation game, the working class comes to see that I am against change in the system and that I have all the power. They then come to the decision that revolution is the only alternative left to them. They do not come to this decision by gaining an understanding of capitalist accumulation or the labor theory of value, but because economic conditions have changed their collective consciousness from a status-quo orientation to a revolutionary level.

*After the revolution:* There is usually an air of exhilaration about the classroom after the seizing of the machine from me. It is often quite sobering to ask immediately how the students intend to own and operate the machine and how they intend to distribute the candy.

The level of consciousness is always too high to allow one person to seize the machine and run it, even if that person seems to be a "benevolent dictator" when compared to me. But in one instance, a group of about five men (who were the vanguard of the revolution, as a matter of fact) convinced the rest of the people that it would be more efficient if the class would allow them to make the decisions determining the production and distribution of the candy. All of the other times I have done the simulation game, the students have decided to own and operate the machine democratically.

The main question here is whether the revolution is to result in a new class society or in a socialist society. It is usually the case in the simulation game that the "new society" is a democratic socialist society where everyone owns and operates the machine collectively and the candy is distributed equally. At times (such as when I, the deposed capitalist,

attempt to sabotage the new society) it is necessary for the students who made the revolution to enforce a "dictatorship of the proletariat." This is necessary for the proletariat to secure the gains of the revolution and to prevent a reactionary "slide" back to capitalist exploitation.

But there is also the problem of allowing "opportunists" to seize control of the machine and operate it in their own self-interests. This dilemma is very obvious in the simulation game. On the one hand it is necessary to protect the gains of the revolution through a "dictatorship" (as is the case in China). But on the other hand it must also be recognized that there is a possible danger involved in allowing a small group of "vanguard revolutionaries" to seize power "in the name of the working class". This seems to me to be an invitation to a new type of stratified and exploitative society. (16)

*Other variations of the simulation game:* I see this simulation game as having much value as a taking-off point for future topics of discussion. Many topics can be explained in Marxist terms by using variations of the simulation game.

Often, when discussing the simulation game and Marxist theory with students, some very critical questions are asked of me. One very good question which often comes up usually takes the following form: "Marx said that the working class would experience increasing deprivation and misery under capitalism. How does this relate to our nation where the working class is fairly well off and the unemployed are taken care of by the welfare system?" This question can take the discussion in many directions. I often take this question as an opportunity to discuss economic imperialism by capitalist nations over third world "developing" nations.

To illustrate imperialism by using the simulation game, we have to drop our "closed society" assumption. All else is the same. I have been extracting a surplus of 40 pieces of candy per day, much of which I have saved. Obviously I cannot consume all this candy, nor do the workers and non-workers have enough money to buy it from me, so I can go next door to another (capitalistic) classroom and trade my candy for the cookies that they produce. Or better yet, I can go down the hall to another (third world) classroom where they have no machine and a very low standard of living. There I can hire inexpensive labor and have them build for me another machine upon which they can work for a wage. I can offer some of the people in my original classroom jobs as managers or police to work for me in the third world classroom. Thus I can allow the standard of living in my original classroom to rise above the subsistence level, so that in a sense we all "profit" from the exploitation of the third world classroom.

This simplified example illustrates many things about capitalist economics today. First, the fact that I had more candy than I knew what to do with illustrates the fact that a capitalist economy must not

operate in a static environment. In other words, since the labor force is not paid enough to buy back what they produced and the capitalists are not numerous enough to consume the surplus, a "glut" of commodities would soon result if there were not a continuously expanding market.

This economic fact has had devastating political results for third world nations. Since other developed capitalist nations are in the same economic "boat" as the United States, and the nations in the "communist bloc" are not open to capitalist exploitation, the third world nations are the only real direction in which capitalism can expand its markets. (17)

Suppose in the simulation game that the workers in the third world classrooms whom I had been exploiting attained a consciousness high enough to realize that they would be better off without me. If they decided to take the machine from me and use it for themselves, I would immediately appeal to my original classmates that "they" were stealing "our" machine. I would attempt to use force to regain ownership of the machine, or at least I would demand that they pay me for it. (18)

An interesting way to look at imperialism through a Marxist perspective is to think in terms of bourgeois and proletarian nations. In the simulation game, the original classroom can be compared to the United States, a capitalist society where the people have a relatively high standard of living. As a whole, class conflict is kept at a low level in the United States because the nation is united in its bourgeois oppression of proletarian third world nations.

Inflation can also be explained by using the simulation game. If the workers have a strike, I can give them a 10% wage increase. Shortly after they go back to work, using "increased costs of production" as a reason, I can raise the price of candy by 20%. Thus, while the wages of the workers have risen, their "real wages," or their buying power, has dropped. This phenomenon results in a lower standard of living for the working class and a higher rate of profit for the capitalist. This is, of course, an oversimplification of the complex problem of inflation in the "real world," but it is useful in exposing the bourgeois explanation of the "wage-price spiral."

The discussions above are by no means exhaustive of the potentialities of this simulation game in explaining capitalism and Marxist theory. Every time I have experimented with the game, I have discovered new slants or new possibilities. Often the discussion will result in debates on the labor theory of value, the "practicality" of talking about socialism in a nation which "always has been and always will be capitalistic," or the "impossibility" of a socialist economy because of the "naturally competitive and aggressive tendencies inherent in human nature." Questions and discussions like these are, I have

found, excellent opportunities to lay bare the values and assumptions about the nature of people that capitalist society has made us all accept as *a priori* truths.

#### FOOTNOTES

(1) For an excellent analysis of the theory and practice of radical education in the third world see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

(2) Paulo Freire's approach to education in Brazil emphasizes allowing the people to become "subjects" in society instead of mere "objects." Social and historical differences indicate that Freire's method would not be applicable to radicalizing education in the United States, but his philosophy and theory of education are quite valid, in my opinion.

(3) Freire emphasizes dialogue as being a far superior form of learning over monologue.

(4) See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Meredith Corp., 1955), p. 9.

(5) See Paulo Freire 1968: 137-138.

(6) This is certainly the case today with the big push to get rid of "illegal aliens" in the United States at a time when unemployment is very high. Stereotyping and scapegoating cloud the issue that the capitalist system is at fault for high unemployment.

(7) For a good historical overview of the relation between sexism and economic development, see Frederick Engels, "Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: *Selected Works* (New York: Meredith Corp., 1972), pp. 455-518.

(8) For an account of the improved role of women in China, see Ruth Sidel, *Women and Child Care in China* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 21.

(9) For Marx's classical analysis of capitalist property relations, production, and ideology, see *The Grundrisse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), and *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1947).

(10) Marx discusses the alienation of the producer from his/her product in *The Grundrisse* (1972), pp. 42-43, 61.

(11) See Marx and Engels 1955: 27.

(12) Marx and Engels 1955: 20-21.

(13) See Marx and Engels 1955: 18.

(14) See Karl Marx, "On Class," in Celia Heller, ed., *Structured Social Inequality* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969), p. 23.

(15) For a good analysis of working class movements in capitalist society, see C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971), p. 85.

(16) Milovan Djilas ("The New Class," in Heller 1969: 154-159) deals with this problem as it relates to the Soviet Union. Paulo Freire also deals with this problem extensively in his works (see Freire 1968: 52, for instance).

(17) For the classical Marxist analysis of imperialism, see V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1970). For a contemporary economic analysis of U.S. imperialism, see Harry Magdoff, *The Age of Imperialism* (New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1969).

(18) Many analogies in this portion of the simulation may be drawn with the recent reactionary setback in Chile.