

Thanksgiving and “identity politics”

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Nasty exchanges about “identity politics” in Left circles on FaceBook I’ve glanced at recently haven’t seemed very relevant to my work as a teacher educator or union activist. This is curious because I know one reason education is so contested is that schools reproduce (or change) the beliefs that underlie the society’s political and economic arrangements. Schools and teachers convey how we make sense of our identity, as a society and as individuals. So why does the debate seem tangential to me?

In contrast to the back and forth about class and race and culture, this photo of George Bush presenting his plastic turkey to soldiers in Iraq struck home. It reminded me how pressing is our job of teaching students to think critically about how the media present what’s real, what’s meaningful. How do we teach the meaning of Thanksgiving? At what age (and how) should children be taught the racist underpinnings of our nation? Should we link genocide of native peoples to slaughter of turkeys? Was there anything progressive about the nation’s creation that should be taught? And how do we reconcile differences on these issues if we believe in having a democratic school system?



One factor in my disinterest in the exchanges about identity is that there seems not much new or different from debates over the “national question” that divided the Left more than a century ago. As I see it, the one new dimension the (Marxist, neo-Marxist) Left has pretty much refused to grapple with is, in the words of the Internationale, the expectation that “the international working class” will “free the human race.” That hasn’t happened. Why? Is our theory flawed? If not, what has gone wrong? Might we have to figure out how to redefine the “we” in making the capitalist thief “disgorge his [her] booty as this reworking of lyrics to the Internationale suggests? And what does it mean to ““free the spirit from its cell”? What’s our vision (not blueprint, vision) for human emancipation? What I find sorely missing in debates over “identity politics” is contextualization of the long-time Left debates in our present economic and political situation and a willingness to be sharply self-critical.

This challenge of the Left is especially acute for teachers, as for instance right now, when teachers have to decide how they will teach Thanksgiving. (That is, if there’s time to teach anything besides from doing test preparation — a related but separate story.) My solution as a teacher educator is encouraging my students to understand the conflicting points of view and examine data that supports critical analysis of the mythology/ideology of a nation born in freedom and equality. Frequently my students, often immigrants or children of immigrants, don’t buy that critique, even when presented information about how immigration is configured by imperialist relations. Because I believe in their right as students to disagree with my perspective, the discussion ends in a stand-off. Am I right to allow this? I think so but look forward to comments by readers about how they think teachers should handle Thanksgiving.

I invite reader responses, either to New Politics as a blog or to me directly at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter, Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.

