

Between Hope and Despair is Resolve: Remembering Roger Simon

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“Can there be a more hopeful way to live historically?”¹ (Simon, 2000, p. 18). “[H]ow might remembrance,” Roger Simon asked, “be understood as a praxis creating the possibilities of new histories and altered subjectivities?” (2004, pp. 186–187). That is a loaded question, reverberating with echoes of Simon’s earlier commitments to “empowerment” (1987), teaching against the grain (1992a), and counter-commemoration (1992b, 1993). Rather than remembrance as intrusion – being reminded of something I might prefer to forget – remembrance is in Simon’s question an expression of agency.² No voluntaristic action by a socially severed self, remembrance becomes in Simon’s sentence a praxis in which thought and action are enacted reciprocally. And it is not self-enclosed, as what is remembered is reconstructed and she or he who remembers is also reconstructed by the encounter. That education is “selfformation,” Simon was sure (1992, p. 17).³ “[E]ducation is, for me,”

Simon asserted, “a basic resource for the task of self-constitution” (1992, p. 22).

To act in remembrance within the amnesia of the present – in a culture of narcissism there is no memory – means the reactivation of the past. Reactivation is my term: in Simon’s language, it becomes a two-pronged praxis of remembrance, thought and “pedagogic action”⁴ that cultivates “historical consciousness” (1992, 82).⁵ The canonical curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – cannot be answered definitively (that is in part why it is pedagogic provocation) but in remembrance knowledge matters. Knowledge has not replaced with a skill set standardized tests measure and the “global marketplace” sometimes employs. In retrospect, it is painfully clear that our progressive predecessors were too eager to replace knowledge as the center of the curriculum.⁶ Knowledge enables remembrance and the reactivation of the past.⁷

The opposite of arrest,⁸ to *activate* means to vitalize, to breathe life into, and be breathed into life. Reactivating the past is engagement with alterity – specifically with the singularity of the past in its distinctive complexity – that sets in motion, well, we can’t know. The history Simon and his colleagues choose to remember is savage: massacres, mutilation, misery, each beyond comprehension. Unlike its function for the “history boys,” remembrance is no means to upward mobility. Simon’s is a more dangerous game than saying something interesting, as those who remember – not just recall for an entrance exam – can be consumed by what is remembered. Perhaps its state as apparently past misleads us into mistaking the present moment as still,

even safe. That innocence (or denial) renders the present moment potentially ruthless.

Why, then, this fantasy of “new history”? Sure there will be new smart phones but history’s not going to get any better. Is Simon enticing us with that phrase – the “possibilities of new histories” – to make the risk seem worth taking, the risk of remembrance that promises to unleash what is repressed? Perhaps Simon risked remembrance in part because he knew there can be no future – no reparation – without reactivating the past. In remembrance – then at least we know we are its progeny – there are no innocents, only victims, however sweet the deal we’ve inherited (with the planet imperiled, no deal will prove sweet enough). Did Simon risk remembrance to change the subject from identity politics⁹ to the victims from whom we cannot profit, even when we are their descendants? Changing the subject means subjective reconstruction, and for me that requires regression to a past occluded in the present, perhaps in autobiographical acts of subjective dissolution.¹⁰

Ethical engagement with that alterity that is within subjectivity carries its own risks of course. “It may be objected,” Simon knew, “that the reflexivity I suggest as being necessary to the formation of a public memory is a narcissism that turns an engagement with history toward a concern with oneself rather than the concerns of others” (2004, p. 197). Because remembrance – I use regression¹¹ to emphasize returning to the past rather than recalling it from the present – means self-dissolution; subjectivity becomes the site for social reconstruction, not its substitute. Becoming deceased, descendants engage with the

legacies they have been bequeathed by accidents of birth, self-shattering as also debt to the dead.

Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert emphasize the former when they construe “remembrance ... as a *strategic practice* in which memorial pedagogies are deployed for their sociopolitical value and promise” (2000, p. 3). For the sake of social reconstruction one engages in the self-shattering remembrance regression engenders. This is no one-way street from the present to the past, as “remembrance,” Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert point out, is “a *difficult return*, a psychic and social responsibility to bring the dead into presence, a responsibility that concurrently involves learning to live with, and in relation to, loss” (2000, p. 3). The presence of the past – most prominently its causalities disinterred through remembrance – restructures the present¹² as temporal, as inhabited by what we have lost not only by what we hope to gain. Not only the dead live again, but we the living die, dissolved among the dead, returning not unharmed but alive, as we could not have been before.¹³

Remembrance, then, means regression, living with/in loss, returning to what was past, returning to a present we might not now recognize because we are different. Because the present now slips past, we become historical, conscious of our situatedness in what has happened and is happening still. Becoming dated might break the spell of the screen in front of which we may have forgotten what time it is; what time is, as the endless *now* of technoculture renders everything eternal in its virtuality. Becoming actual means becoming historical, becoming attuned to the distinctiveness of historical moments, as John Toews (2008) details. For

both Kierkegaard and Marx, Toews (2008) points out, becoming historical meant subjective reconstruction:

Becoming historical involved a historical reconstruction of the current forms of self-identification – in this case, the reflective egoism of postrevolutionary bourgeois society – as a specific product of human practices in time. The goal was to experience the self that was simply given as a self that was historically particular and contingent. Implicit in this reconstructive activity was a conception of the self as not only product but also producer.... Experiencing one's own individual identity as a historical product implied an act, or series of acts, that brought this existing self into being. (p. 438)

Reconstruction, then, enacts agency as it engages the specificities of historical determination.¹⁴ Remembrance *is* agency, enabling understanding of how our – their – determination occurred, understanding that initiates non-coincidence with it. “A response is expected,” Simon knew, “everything must be taken into account” (2004, p. 184). We must understand how history happened, and that understanding presents us with our next move.

True, the presence of the past can leave one entranced by what cannot be undone, but Toews' analysis implies that engaging with what our descendants did and what was done to them can make contingent what had seemed set in stone. The world may not change but its capacity to reproduce itself through us can. Racism remains but its forms mutate; in certain places (psychic¹⁵ and social) it's on the run. In other places it's

dug in deep. Subjectively speaking, the circuit starting with Ham (or so the slaveholders and segregationists imagined) can get rerouted – yes even defused in certain spheres – as our soft wiring splinters.¹⁶ In acts of subjective reconstruction one moves between hope – in *Teaching Against the Grain*, Simon defines it as “the acknowledgement of more openness in a situation than the situations easily reveals; openness above all to possibilities” (1992, p. 3) – and despair – succumbing to what was as what must be.¹⁷ Resolve is not a strategy; it is ethical conviction. It is, I suggest, the “synthesis” to which “regression” can lead.

No resolution of atrocities, no redistribution of suffering or of ill-gotten gains, resolves registers defiance by remembering contingency. There’s no profit in resolve, no return on investment, no “social justice,” as if it – like “culturally responsive pedagogy” – could, in one fell swoop, set things right. History – humanity – fantasizes such redemption but admits it is always futural. Like the virtual, the futural isn’t actual. Remembrance knows that it is the past that is real. The present is made of it. Begrudging the present requires becoming historical, and that means living in the past. Which we can’t do, stuck in the mud of the moment we are. So loss is our gain. Remembrance means, Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert remind, “learning to live with loss, a learning to live with a return of a memory that inevitably instantiates loss and thus bears no ultimate consolation, a learning to live with a disquieting remembrance” (2000, p. 4). Such disquiet – that non-coincidence with what is – is the psychic-social space of resolve, in-between hope and despair.

Notes

¹ Surely this is the crucial question: given its power and horror, how can the past not ruin the future? Can remembering the murdered resurrect hope for a future denied them but etched in our remembrance of them? Simon's sentience leaves the question open, offering us passage between hope and despair.

² "The *hopeful* [emphasis added] person," Simon emphasized, "does not merely envisage this possibility as a wish; the hopeful person *acts* upon it now by loosening and refusing the hold that take-for-granted realities and routines have over imagination" (1992, p. 3).

³ "I am working from the assumption," he acknowledged, "that education is but one initiative in relation to the process of self-formation, the means through which people attempt to constitute themselves as subjects of their own experience" (1992, p. 17). That "self" was social and historical, as "there can be no 'fully realized' person beyond and outside the history within which the forms of everyday life have been constructed" (1992, p. 21).

⁴ Here Simon associates "pedagogical action" with "symbolic violence" but his reflection upon the pedagogue's implicatedness in students' "fear of theory" underscores his resolve to reconstruct – Simon uses "transcend" – such violence as a "pedagogy of possibility" (1992, p. 98).

⁵ "The historical consciousness we refer to here," Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert explain, "is not simply a 'state of mind,' the cognitive accumulation that comprises one's knowledge of the past" (2000, p. 2).

Not “simply” of course, but it is, they acknowledge, both “state of mind” and “knowledge.” While starting points for Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, they are central points for me. Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert emphasize its social nature: “[we view historical consciousness as always requiring another as an indelibly social praxis, a very determinate set of commitments and actions held and enacted by members of collectivities” (2000, p. 2).

⁶ “If the curriculum of our schools is to serve its true function,” Harold Rugg wrote, “it must be reconstructed on a two-fold basis. Adequate provision must be made for creative personal development, and tolerant understanding of American life must be erected as the great guiding intellectual goal of education. Its reconstruction, therefore, must concentrate upon two foci – child growth and the dynamic content of American civilization” (1926, pp. 3-4). While Dewey and many of his colleagues appreciated the interrelatedness of these two foci, here Rugg ignores that it is academic knowledge that enables their cultivation.

⁷ At one point Simon seems to devalue, knowledge: “What must be signaled at the outset then, is that ‘historical memory’ is not to be conceived singularly as a practice of retention, as the recollection of expressed experiences or grounded narrations of past events. Quite differently, historical memory also includes the potential for a fertile commingling between present consciousness and the staging of evidentiary traces of past presence” (2000, p. 10). The use of “includes” shows Simon has not discarded “knowledge,” but it is the “juxtaposition” (see Simon 2000, p. 21 and p. 23) – a concept of interest to

me as well (2009, p. 154 n. 13) – of “evidentiary traces of past and present” – Benjamin’s “dialectical images” (Simon, 1992, p. 140) – wherein remembrance’s pedagogical potential lies.

⁸ See Pinar, 1994, p. 38.

⁹ “This essentialization of experience within a form of relationship called identity politics,” Simon (1992, 68) knew, “needs careful scrutiny.”

¹⁰ This is, of course, the first step in the autobiographical method of *currere*, but not the last, as futural fantasy (progression), analysis, and synthesis follow in my “praxis” of educational experience (Pinar 1994, 19-27). I theorize its racial enactment in regression to the so-called Curse of Ham (2006). While Simon never uses this term – he emphasizes instead history’s return to the present rather than our return to the past (see, for instance, Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000, 3, 4) – he does suggest that “zakhor requires a particular mode of attendance, a particular embodied cognizance necessary to support its pedagogy. What is at issue here is the sensibility with which one engages the stories of others” (Simon 2000, 17). It is that sensibility regression shatters, enabling its reconstruction. LaCapra (2009, 124) references “Walter Benjamin’s notion of historiography as returning to unrealized possibilities of the past that are worth reactivating in the present.” Again, I argue that to do so requires reactivating the past by returning to it.

¹¹ Regression means reconstruction in its historiographic sense, as laboring to understand the past on – in – its own terms, supplemented by subjective engagement of varying intensities as one grapples with what that distinctive past was. When Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert (2000, 2)

speak of “engagement with the traces of traumatic history” they imply the intensity “regression” allows, but they seem to want memory to “return” to the present (see 2000, 3), rather than us to “return” to the past, as regression encourages. In the third stage of the method of *currere* – analysis (following regression and progression) there is “mindful attentiveness to, learning from, and participation in the memory of the traces of traumatic history,” for Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert (2000, 3) a matter requiring understanding.

¹² It is a matter, Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert (2000, 5) suggest, of “reopening the present.”

¹³ acknowledge “the limits of a consolatory assurance that the past can be discursively integrated into coherent – and pragmatic – contemporary frames of social memory.” Limits indeed.

¹⁴ Acknowledging the power of determination that reproduction theory proclaimed, Simon (1992, 10) affirmed agency: While I do not wish to contest the outlines of this rather bleak picture nor diminish the need for structural change, this view of schools cedes too much. The current hegemony over how schooling is to be done remains a project, not an accomplishment. Within the spaces that do exist in certain schools, courses of study, and classrooms, this hegemony has been and is being contested by students, teachers, and parents who remain genuinely hopeful that pedagogies which support social transformation can be realized.” That agency is not individualistic but formed and expressed in solidarity (see 1992, 66-69). But, he noted, “it makes little sense to consider the notion of social forms abstractly, outside the context of

history" (1992, 21). While not using the word, "reconstruction" seems to me to be what Simon (1992, 139) has in mind in his pedagogy of possibility, which he links to the work of Walter Benjamin: "he [Benjamin] begins to formulate the epistemological outlines of one aspect of what might be recognized as a pedagogy of possibility. This was a practice that did not require the obliteration of the past and its replacement with a new 'truth,' but rather a fundamental reconfiguration [reconstruction] and rereading of the documents of tradition in a way that might help 'reveal the present as a revolutionary moment'."

¹⁵ "[The possibility of hope," Simon (2000, 17) argues, "depends on our capacities for providing a psychic locus of such stories, a locus that requires we take up the stories of others with in the pedagogical dynamics of *zakhor*."

¹⁶ Mica Nava shows how racism can mutate into eroticism even cosmopolitan. Racism remains but surely sex is to preferable to violence (even though the two are hardly mutually exclusive).

¹⁷ In his study of the cultural catastrophe European settlement of North America precipitated, Lear (2006, 152) focuses on Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow nation: "Plenty Coups had to acknowledge the destruction of a *telos* – that the old ways of living a good life were gone. And that acknowledgement involved the stark recognition that the traditional ways of structuring significance – of recognizing something as happening – had been devastated. For Plenty Coups, this recognition was not an expression of despair; it was the only way to avoid it." Plenty Coups required no regression; he was immersed in the past and lived its

self-shattering destruction. What was required of him, and what he achieved (as Lear makes plain) was facing up to this crushing historical reality and somehow working it through psychically and culturally: subjective reconstruction provided the only path to move through the ruins. That undertaking – between hope and desires - requires resolve.

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