

Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures (2nd Edition)

By Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva.

New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-4331-0061-1

Reviewed by T. Francene Watson

These simple men [Michael K and Bartleby] and their absolute refusals cannot but appeal to our hatred of authority. The refusal of work and authority, or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, is the beginning of liberatory politics. Long ago, Étienne de la Boétie preached just such a politics of refusal: “Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.”

—Hardt and Negri¹

Endear me—I am beginning with a story. In Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, the chapter “On the Rainy River” unravels a moment of courage that has remained with me since teaching the novel as a (former) high school English teacher. In a true and fictionalized moment, O’Brien motors his character to a moral abyss in a little aluminum fishing boat on a northern Minnesota river—a kind of Odyssean inversion. Having received a draft notice, O’Brien is in the final struggle of whether to go to war or flee to Canada, with the brush of the Canadian refuge twenty yards away from his tiny vessel. Here, the 21 year-old character recounts his youthful theory of courage, having believed that it is something that “comes in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down.”² Weeping, with a silent (humming) witness of 81-year-old Elroy Berdhal, O’Brien realizes he cannot flee—“Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave.”³ O’Brien’s mind’s eye manifests an audience in the waning seconds decision—the whole universe looking at him—and feels the heat of their fantasized mockery, disgrace and patriotic ridicule. “Even in my imagination, I could not make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that’s all it was. And right then I submitted. I would go to war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to.”⁴ The chapter closes, poignant and inconsistent with socially prescribed mainstays; “I was a coward. I went to the war.”⁵

O’Brien captures important images in the light of a new paradigm for how we engage in teaching and learning, especially because “[b]y old habit or new force, carrot or stick, educators and education are rapidly changing...to stay unchanged.”⁶ Inside of schooling and global education, we are collectively in a small aluminum boat on a rainy river of possibility and a choice is in front of us. In contrast to typical revolutionary acts, it begins with a simple, but deep-

¹ Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 204.

² Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway Books, 1990), 40.

³ Ibid, 57.

⁴ Ibid, 59.

⁵ Ibid, 61.

⁶ Ibid, 1.

seated refusal, and then, the courage to take action and create a new life. In *Escaping Education*, Prakash and Esteva celebrate the current and increasing choice of refusal by peoples across the globe, the “uneducated, miseducated, and undereducated,” who, in their own rich and ancient ways, are teaching each other to become “refuseniks” of the educational Colossus.⁷ The initiating act of refusal is igniting a renewed way of being across the earth and is one that simply stops supporting a project that has never been sustainable. *Escaping Education* emerges from an ancestry that urges the deschooling of society, and is a kind of refuge in its unyielding stance facing global education; “Enough is enough! ¡Ya Basta!” Its convergence, drawing largely from Ivan Illich, Wendell Berry, and John Holt, marks a coalescing epic at the grassroots, one that Illich termed the “rebirth of the Epimethean man.”⁸ Here we can swim away from a Promethean task of creating institutional boxes to fearfully and mechanistically contain the ills that escaped from Pandora, and refuse a world that creates ever-rising and intentionally impossible demands. Instead, we have gained deeper insight around what did not escape—hope; we are bringing forth a presence for people who “value hope above expectations” and “love people more than products”; people living in global commons. We are seeing the “meaning of the Pythos which Pandora brought from the gods as being the inverse of the Box: our Vessel and Ark.”⁹ Collectively, we’re seeing that we have all of the courage that we’ll ever need.

With grief in one pocket and hope in the other, while reading *Escaping Education*, I began to newly imagine my own moment of truth, my own escaping of education. And similar to O’Brien’s literary artifacts, it was something I carried adolescently, everywhere. This seems, then and now, a child-like detail in the grown up world of academia, but the carrying of the book was somehow an embodiment that serves as the backbone of *living as learning in grassroots culture*; it enabled me to “re-member” that learning is an intrinsic part of who we are and life’s path simply allows its natural unfolding, if we can trust in that. My physical and metaphorical carrying of the book triggered the understanding that even now, in an ironic “going-to-help-you” doctoral track, I am mustering the courage to flee, and do what I know I *should* do despite the chorus of scrutiny. Prakash and Esteva act as witness to something each individual must decide, but they invite a (re)membering of self-and community, and of our wholeness and multiplicity—to “our commons, commonness and common sense.” The book is a reminder that in our “pluriverse,” woven through *I and Thou* encounters, there is a growing and strengthening grassroots practice of seeing one’s power reflected where no one “gives” it; it’s a power that the peoples of the planet already possess.¹⁰ *Escaping Education* is the confluence of a steady (re)emergence of a holistic and courageous stand in our world—a stand for interconnectedness with dignity inextricably bound in bringing forth an ecologically sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilled human presence on the planet. This stand is rhizomatic, tectonically rising up across the earth, and (re)imagining education at its nexus. It is first a stand of courageous and ordinary refusal because we are no longer embarrassed; we want our lives back.

Like a strong and outstretched hand to the social minority in reform-quicksand, Prakash and Esteva build a frame which convincingly unseats the widely accepted truism of education as a human right (and the notion of a “human right” all together). The authors provide several

⁷ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures (2nd Edition)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 1.

⁸ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyar, 1972).

⁹ Ibid, 115.

¹⁰ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures (2nd Edition)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 28.

powerful critiques of various versions of educational change under the name of reform, revamping, and radicalization—"Multicultural Education: An Oxymoron" for example—but their challenging of the assumption of education as a human right is the lynchpin. Characterized as the "contemporary Trojan Horse" of academic discourse and school reform, education as a human right is argued as problematic when considering that the need for human rights solely comes from the global manufacture of the independent western-state, after centuries of decimation of peoples and places of our planet by the "developed." This backdrop is sobering.

The regime of the nation-state, fusing nationalism and statehood, was constructed at this same time, to keep the social order in a society exposed to the forces of the modern market, reducing the human condition to that of *homo oeconomicus*.¹¹

Human rights are social constructions or cultural *inventions*. They are not, as some adherents claim, natural discoveries. Human rights are but the formal, juridical expression of a *specific* mode of being and living. They are defined by the kind of man, woman, and child who has appeared on the earth only very recently: *Homo oeconomicus*, the possessive individual. First born and brought up in the West, this modern "person"—the individual self—is now threatening the whole world with the plague of endless needs, legitimized under the moral mask of human rights.¹²

In this way, the master (false) narrative for disciples of a universal declaration of human rights (I am one of them, still in a kind of grief from the blows of this paradigm shift) is to stay hooked to a modern-era construct, ruttled in a dualistic view of human capacity and intention, one of naming who is right and who is wrong in a "coat of philanthropy."¹³ And actually, it's a little funny.

When we can let go of blame and just "look," it's funny that we defend that school, as we have lived/survived it (or not), is some kind of pinnacle experience, so much so that we need to protect it as a human right. Those of us participating in a western, industrialized model of learning have not unhooked from the absurdity that this is "it." *Escaping Education* is a direct reminder that where we need to look instead, is to the Two-Thirds World, the peoples that have never needed to be dependent on a colonizing system of "learning." Prakash and Esteva use Illich's belief that the Two Thirds World has the crucial responsibility in the One Third World's liberation; they are opening the way in the search of a style to learn for living, as its multitudes have never been trapped in the habit of consuming.¹⁴ And we are seeing it happen. "Hopeful trust and classic irony (*eironeia*) [have conspired] to expose the Promethean fallacy."¹⁵ In an unprecedented moment in linear time, *Escaping Education* contextualizes our state of *Blessed Unrest*, where the multitude is refusing to pay attention to the middle man. The postmodern turn here is paradigmatic—a movement from *E pluribus unum* to *out of one, many*, where there is the possibility that we remain different so that we can discover the commonality that allows us to

¹¹ Ibid, 19.

¹² Ibid, 21.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1990), 137.

¹⁴ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures (2nd Edition)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 112.

¹⁵ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyar, 1972), 114.

communicate and act together. “The multitude too might thus be conceived as a network: an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common.”¹⁶ Prakash and Esteva might call this refusenik culture our “pluriverse.”

A refusenik culture moves beyond the simple starting point of refusal and begins the act of constructing “a new mode of life and above all a new community. This project leads not toward the naked life of *homo tantum* but toward *homohomo*, humanity squared, enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community.”¹⁷ What is emerging now might be compared to the body’s immune system, a kind of living that is learning to respond to the centuries-old attack on our humanity and commonness; “We became human by working together...faith and love are literally buried in our genes and lymphocytes, and what it takes to arrest our descent into chaos is one person after another remembering who and where we really are.”¹⁸ For example, Prakash and Esteva take from margin to center the refusenik Zapatistas and the reclaiming of their commons to help us understand the postmodern nature of grassroots, network power. Here, a “country of 90 million changed in a few months, following the initiatives of a few thousand ‘powerless’ people who dared to declare with all dignity in their local spaces, that the emperor had no clothes. He was naked.”¹⁹

The initiatives now being taken by the people at the grassroots are opposing, first and foremost, those [developed] elites. They are turning a bad thing into a good thing: using their marginalization as the context for creating new opportunities; transforming their conditions as the desperate, the passive left-overs, the dropouts, into becoming active and creative refuseniks; transforming their unfulfillable demand for education and other economic goods and services into a new awareness of the false promises of development or progress. They are recognizing and celebrating the reliability of their own traditions to achieve their cultural ideals of a good life.²⁰

Here’s the kicker. It’s right in front of us. As Illich et al. posed, *living as learning in grassroots culture* is all but 20 yards away. Emerging from the river of decades—centuries—of passionate and brilliant writing calling for the restructuring of education and deschooling of society, we have reached a moment where the dam of schooling’s impenetrability has broken open, and we are in a state of flow. Unlike that of a self-protected nation-state, or even that of global corporations, here’s an old thought: “Liberation from the grip of schools could be bloodless. The weapons of the truant officer and his allies in the courts and employment agencies might take very cruel measures against the individual offender, especially if he or she were poor, but they might turn out to be powerless against the surge of a mass movement.”²¹ Prakash and Esteva further affirm Illich’s call for “institutional inversions” (already) being created by

¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004), xii-xiv.

¹⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 204.

¹⁸ Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), 165.

¹⁹ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures (2nd Edition)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 50.

²⁰ Ibid, 112.

²¹ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyar, 1972), 49.

political networks of the commons who by virtue of their marginalization have been deinstitutionalized or damaged—the dropouts, the unemployed. And we are seeing, in the present, that “the people at the grassroots have not forgotten the skills required to live and flourish outside the academic ‘cave’—with its shadows, its dark doubts that are mistaken to be liberatory or emancipatory certainties.”²²

Our options are clear enough. Either we continue to believe that institutionalized learning is a product which justifies unlimited investment or we rediscover that legislation and planning and investment, if they have any place in formal education, should be used mostly to tear down the barriers that now impede opportunities for learning, which can only be a personal activity.²³

With the courage, knowledge and leadership of the Two Thirds World, “we have learned to free our imaginations from the clutches of classroom information; to recover our common sense before it was extinguished by underuse or denigration.”²⁴ In other words, we are writing a story in which we are seeing our non-finite courage, even in our imaginations and we are brave in our stand with fervor like that of a hummingbird, unparalleled in action, strength and who is uniquely able to fly backwards, mirroring the gift of Epimetheus. We’re in a time of going back to something we’ve never seen before, one of (re)membering our capacity.

Author’s Bio

T. Francene Watson is a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Studies and Social Thought at Washington State University.

²² Ibid, 111.

²³ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1972), 49.

²⁴ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning in Grassroots Cultures (2nd Edition)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 111.