



Henry A. Giroux

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1637-9142>

The Curse of Totalitarianism and the Challenge of Critical Pedagogy

Abstract: Expanding critical pedagogy as a mode of public pedagogy suggests being attentive to and addressing modes of knowledge and social practices in a variety of sites that not only encourage critical thinking, thoughtfulness and meaningful dialogue, but also offer opportunities to mobilize instances of moral outrage, social responsibility and collective action. Such mobilization opposes glaring material inequities and the growing cynical belief that today’s culture of investment and finance makes it *impossible* to address many of the major social problems facing the United States, Canada, Latin America and the larger world. Most importantly, such work points to the link between civic education, critical pedagogy and modes of oppositional political agency that are pivotal to creating a politics that promotes democratic values, relations, autonomy and social change.

Keywords: totalitarianism, critical pedagogy, education, social responsibility, educators, crisis

Memory is the enemy of totalitarianism.
Albert Camus

The forces of free-market fundamentalism are on the march ushering in a terrifying horizon of what Hannah Arendt once called “dark times.” Across the globe, the tension between democratic values and market fundamentalism has reached a breaking point.¹ The social con-

¹ D. Harvey: *The New Imperialism*. New York 2003; Idem: *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford 2005; W. Brown: *Edgework*. Princeton 2005; H.A. Giroux:

tract is under assault, neo-Nazism is on the rise, right-wing populism is propelling extremist political candidates and social movements into the forefront of political life, anti-immigrant sentiment is now wrapped in the poisonous logic of nationalism and exceptionalism, racism has become a mark of celebrated audacity and a politics of disposability comes dangerously close to its endgame of exterminating those considered excess. Under such circumstances, it becomes frightfully clear that the conditions for totalitarianism and state violence are still with us smothering critical thought, social responsibility, the ethical imagination and politics itself. As Bill Dixon observes:

[T]he totalitarian form is still with us because the all too protean origins of totalitarianism are still with us: loneliness as the normal register of social life, the frenzied lawfulness of ideological certitude, mass poverty and mass homelessness, the routine use of terror as a political instrument, and the ever growing speeds and scales of media, economics, and warfare.²

In the United States, the extreme right in both political parties no longer needs the comfort of a counterfeit ideology in which appeals are made to the common good, human decency and democratic values. On the contrary, power is now concentrated in the hands of relatively few people and corporations it has become global and free from the limited politics of the democratic state. In fact, the state for all intents and purposes has become the corporate state. Dominant power is now all too visible and the policies, practices and wrecking ball it has imposed on society appear to be largely unchecked. Any compromising notion of ideology has been replaced by a discourse of command and certainty backed up by the militarization of local police forces, the surveillance state and all of the resources brought to bear by a culture of fear and a punishing state aligned with the permanent war on terror. Informed judgment has given way to a corporate-controlled media apparatus that celebrates the banality of balance and the spectacle of violence, all the while reinforcing the politics and value systems of the financial elite.³

Against the Terror of Neoliberalism. Boulder 2008; M.B. Steger, R.K. Roy: *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford 2010.

² B. Dixon: *Totalitarianism and the Sand Storm*. Hannah Arendt Center, February 3, 2014. [Online:] <https://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=12466> [12.09.2015].

³ B. Evans, H.A. Giroux: *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of the Spectacle*. San Francisco 2015.

Following Arendt, a dark cloud of political and ethical ignorance has descended on the United States creating both a crisis of memory and agency.⁴ Thoughtlessness has become something that now occupies a privileged, if not celebrated, place in the political landscape and the mainstream cultural apparatuses. A new kind of infantilism and culture of ignorance shapes daily life as agency devolves into a kind of anti-intellectual foolishness evident in the babble of banality produced by Fox News, celebrity culture, schools modeled after prisons and politicians who support creationism, argue against climate change and denounce almost any form of reason. Education is no longer viewed as a public good but a private right, just as critical thinking is devalued as a fundamental necessity for creating an engaged and socially responsible populace.

Education has to be seen as more than a credential or a pathway to a job.

Politics has become an extension of war, just as systemic economic uncertainty and state-sponsored violence increasingly find legitimation in the discourses of privatization and demonization, which promote anxiety, moral panics and fear, and undermine any sense of communal responsibility for the well-being of others. Too many people today learn quickly that their fate is solely a matter of individual responsibility, irrespective of wider structural forces. This is a much promoted hypercompetitive ideology with a message that surviving in a society demands reducing social relations to forms of social combat. People today are expected to inhabit a set of relations in which the only obligation is to live for one's own self-interest and to reduce the responsibilities of citizenship to the demands of a consumer culture. Yet, there is more at work here than a flight from social responsibility, if not politics itself. Also lost is the importance of those social bonds, modes of collective reasoning, public spheres and cultural apparatuses crucial to the formation of a sustainable democratic society.

With the return of the Gilded Age and its dream worlds of consumption, privatization and deregulation, both democratic values and social protections are at risk. At the same time, the civic and formative cultures that make such values and protections central to democratic life are in danger of being eliminated altogether. As market mentalities and moralities tighten their grip on all aspects of society, democratic institutions and public spheres are being downsized, if not altogether disappearing. As these institutions vanish – from public schools to

⁴ H. Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York 2001.

health-care centers – there is also a serious erosion of the discourses of community, justice, equality, public values and the common good. One consequence is a society stripped of its inspiring and energizing public spheres and *the thick mesh of mutual obligations and social responsibilities to be found in any viable democracy*.⁵ This grim reality marks a failure in the power of the civic imagination, political will and open democracy.⁶ It is also part of a politics that strips the social of any democratic ideals and undermines any understanding of higher education as a public good and pedagogy as an *empowering* practice, a practice that acts directly upon the conditions that bear down on our lives in order to change them when necessary.

At a time when the public good is under attack and there seems to be a growing apathy toward the social contract, or any other civic-minded investment in public values and the larger common good, education has to be seen as more than a credential or a pathway to a job. It has to be viewed as crucial to understanding and overcoming the current crisis of agency, politics and historical memory faced by many young people today. One of the challenges facing the current generation of educators and students is the need to reclaim the role that education has historically played in developing critical literacies and civic capacities. There is a need to use education to mobilize students to be critically engaged agents, attentive to addressing important social issues and being alert to the responsibility of deepening and expanding the meaning and practices of a vibrant democracy. At the heart of such a challenge is the question of what education should accomplish in a democracy. What work do educators have to do to create the economic, political and ethical conditions necessary to endow young people with the capacities to think, question, doubt, imagine the unimaginable and defend education as essential for inspiring and energizing the people necessary for the existence of a robust democracy? In a world in which there is an increasing abandonment of egalitarian and democratic impulses, what will it take to educate young people to challenge authority and, in the words of James Baldwin, “rob history of its tyrannical power, and illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place?”⁷

⁵ T. Eagleton: *Reappraisals: What Is the Worth of Social Democracy?* “Harper’s Magazine” 2010, October, p. 78. [Online:] <https://www.harpers.org/archive/2010/10/0083150> [12.09.2015].

⁶ A. Honneth: *Pathologies of Reason*. Trans. J. Ingram et al. New York 2009, p. 188.

⁷ M. Popova: *J. Baldwin on the Creative Process and the Artist’s Responsibility to Society*. “BrainPickings”. [Online:] <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/08/20/james-baldwin-the-creative-process/> [12.09.2015].

What role might education and critical pedagogy have in a society in which the social has been individualized, emotional life collapses into the therapeutic and education is relegated to either a private affair or a kind of algorithmic mode of regulation in which everything is reduced to a desired measurable economic outcome. Feedback loops now replace politics and the concept of progress is defined through a narrow culture of metrics, measurement and efficiency.⁸ In a culture drowning in a new love affair with empiricism and data, that which is not measurable withers. Lost here are the registers of compassion, care for the other, the radical imagination, a democratic vision and a passion for justice. In its place emerges what Francisco Goya depicted in one of engravings entitled “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.” Goya’s title is richly suggestive, particularly about the role of education and pedagogy in compelling students to be able to recognize, as my colleague David Clark points out, “that an inattentiveness to the never-ending task of critique breeds horrors: the failures of conscience, the wars against thought, and the flirtations with irrationality that lie at the heart of the triumph of every-day aggression, the withering of political life, and the withdrawal into private obsessions.”⁹

Given the multiple crises that haunt the current historical conjuncture, educators need a new language for addressing the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which there is an unprecedented convergence of resources – financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military and technological – that are increasingly used to concentrate powerful and diverse forms of control and domination. Such a language needs to be political without being dogmatic and needs to recognize that pedagogy is always political because it is connected to the struggle over agency. In this instance, making the pedagogical more political means being vigilant about those “very moments in which identities are being produced and groups are being constituted, or objects are being created.”¹⁰

At the same time it means educators need to be attentive to those practices in which critical modes of agency and particular identities are being denied. For example, the Tucson Unified School District board not only eliminated the famed Mexican-American studies

⁸ See, for instance, E. Morozov: *The Rise of Data and the Death of Politics*. “The Guardian”, July 20, 2014. [Online:] <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jul/20/rise-of-data-death-of-politics-evgeny-morozov-algorithmic-regulation> [12.09.2015].

⁹ Personal correspondence with David Clark.

¹⁰ G.A. Olson, L. Worsham: *Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha’s Critical Literacy*. “JAC” 1998, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 361–391.

program, but also banned a number of Chicano and Native American books it deemed dangerous. The ban included Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by the famed Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. This act of censorship provides a particularly disturbing case of the war that is being waged in the United States against not only young people marginalized by race and class, but also against the very spaces and pedagogical practices that make critical thinking possible.

Educators need to be attentive to those practices in which critical modes of agency and particular identities are being denied.

Such actions suggest the need for faculty to develop forms of critical pedagogy that not only inspire and energize. They should also be able to challenge a growing number of anti-democratic practices and policies while resurrecting a radical democratic project that provides the basis for imagining a life beyond a social order immersed in inequality, degradation of the environment and the elevation of war and militarization to national ideals. Under such circumstances, education becomes more than an obsession with accountability schemes, an audit culture, market values and an unreflective immersion in the crude empiricism of a data-obsessed, market-driven society. It becomes part of a formative culture in which thoughtlessness prevails, providing the foundation for the curse of totalitarianism. At a time of increased repression, it is all the more crucial for educators to reject the notion that higher education is simply a site for training students for the workforce and that the culture of higher education is synonymous with the culture of business. At issue here is the need for educators to recognize the power of education in creating the formative cultures necessary to both challenge the various threats being mobilized against the ideas of justice and democracy while also fighting for those public spheres, ideals, values and policies that offer alternative modes of identity, thinking, social relations and politics.

In both conservative and progressive discourses pedagogy is often treated simply as a set of strategies and skills to use in order to teach prespecified subject matter. In this context, pedagogy becomes synonymous with teaching as a technique or the practice of a craft-like skill. Any viable notion of critical pedagogy must grasp the limitations of this definition and its endless slavish imitations even when they are claimed as part of a radical discourse or project. In opposition to the instrumental reduction of pedagogy to a method – which has no language for relating the self to public life, social responsibility or the demands

of citizenship – critical pedagogy illuminates the relationships among knowledge, authority and power.¹¹

Central to any viable notion of what makes pedagogy critical is, in part, the recognition that pedagogy is always a deliberate attempt on the part of educators to influence how and what knowledge and subjectivities are produced within particular sets of social relations. This approach to critical pedagogy does not reduce educational practice to the mastery of methodologies; it stresses, instead, the importance of understanding what actually happens in classrooms and other educational settings by raising questions regarding what the relationship is between learning and social change, what knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, and in what direction one should desire. Pedagogy is always about power because it cannot be separated from how subjectivities are formed, desires are mobilized, some experiences are legitimated and others are not or how some knowledge is considered acceptable while other forms are excluded from the curriculum.

Paulo Freire believed that pedagogy was always a form of intervention in the world because it was impossible to separate the teaching of content, theories, values and stories about one's relationship to oneself, each other and the world from how one is formed ethically and politically. Consequently, he rejected the notion that education is neutral just as he embraced a notion of authority that was generous, self-reflective, professionally competent and willing to provide the conditions for students "to question, doubt, and criticize." For Freire, citizens do not develop as a consequence of technical efficiency. Neither do they develop under pedagogical conditions that smother the imagination or disable the pedagogical conditions for engaging students in critical dialogue, energizing them to become socially responsible, and making clear that a pedagogy that matters has a relationship to social change. Learning to think critically about the world around them is inextricably related to thinking critically about one's own self and social formation. For Freire, the classroom and any other viable pedagogical space is one in which students come to terms with their own power, make connections to others and cultivate their own sense of agency under conditions in which they engage dangerous memories and historical context, and embrace the right to dream. Freire is quite clear about what it means to be a critical educator. He writes:

¹¹ For examples of this tradition, see *Critical Pedagogy in the Dark Ages: Challenges and Possibilities*. Ed. M. Nikolakaki. New York 2012; H.A. Giroux: *On Critical Pedagogy*. New York 2011.

I am a teacher who stands up for what is right against what is indecent, who is in favor of freedom against authoritarianism, who is a supporter of authority against freedom with no limits, and who is a defender of democracy against the dictatorship of right or left. I am a teacher who favors the permanent struggle against every form of bigotry and against the economic domination of individuals and social classes. I am a teacher who rejects the present system of capitalism, responsible for the aberration of misery in the midst of plenty. I am a teacher full of the spirit of hope, in spite of all signs to the contrary. I am a teacher who refuses the disillusionment that consumes and immobilizes. I am a teacher proud of the beauty of my teaching practice, a fragile beauty that may disappear if I do not care for the struggle and knowledge that I ought to teach. If I do not struggle for the material conditions without which my body will suffer from neglect, thus running the risk of becoming frustrated and ineffective, then I will no longer be the witness that I ought to be, no longer the tenacious fighter who may tire but who never gives up.¹²

Pedagogy is a moral and political practice because it offers particular versions and visions of civic life, community, the future and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. But it does more; it also “represents a version of our own dreams for ourselves, our children, and our communities. But such dreams are never neutral; they are always someone’s dreams and to the degree that they are implicated in organizing the future for others they always have a moral and political dimension.”¹³ It is in this respect that any discussion of pedagogy must begin with a discussion of educational practice as a particular way in which a sense of identity, place, worth and, above all, value is informed by practices that organize knowledge and meaning.¹⁴ Central to my argument is the assumption that politics is not only about the exercise of economic and political power, but also, as Cornelius Castoriadis points out, “has to do with political judgements and value choices,”¹⁵ indicating that questions of civic education and critical pedagogy (learning how to be-

¹² P. Freire: *Pedagogy of Freedom*. New York 1999, pp. 94–95.

¹³ R. Simon: *Empowerment as a Pedagogy of Possibility*. “Language Arts” 1987, vol. 4 (64), p. 372.

¹⁴ H.A. Giroux: *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*. 2nd ed. New York 2015.

¹⁵ C. Castoriadis: *Institutions and Autonomy*. In: *A Critical Sense*. Ed. P. Osborne. New York 1996, p. 8.

come a skilled citizen) are central to the struggle over political agency and democracy.

In this instance, critical pedagogy emphasizes critical reflection, bridging the gap between learning and everyday life, understanding the connection between power and difficult knowledge, and extending democratic rights and identities by using the resources of history and theory. However, among many educators and social theorists, there is a widespread refusal to recognize that education does not only take place in schools, but also through what can be called the educative nature of the culture. That is, there are a range of cultural institutions extending from the mainstream media to new digital screen cultures that engage in what I have called forms of public pedagogy, which are central to the tasks of either expanding and enabling political and civic agency or shutting them down. At stake here is the crucial recognition that pedagogy is central to politics itself because it is about changing the way people see things, recognizing that politics is educative and as the late Pierre Bourdieu reminded us “the most important forms of domination are not only economic but also intellectual and pedagogical, and lie on the side of belief and persuasion.”

Critical pedagogy illuminates the relationships among knowledge, authority and power.

Just as I would argue that pedagogy has to be made meaningful in order to be made critical and transformative, I think it is fair to argue that there is no politics without a pedagogy of identification; that is, people have to invest something of themselves in how they are addressed or recognize that any mode of education, argument, idea or pedagogy has to speak to their condition and provide a moment of recognition. Lacking this understanding, pedagogy all too easily becomes a form of symbolic and intellectual violence, one that assaults rather than educates. One can see this in forms of high-stakes testing and empirically driven teaching approaches, which dull the critical impulse and produce what might be called dead zones of the imagination. We also see such violence in schools that offer repression as their chief function. Such schools often employ modes of instruction that are punitive and mean-spirited, and are largely driven by regimes of memorization and conformity. Pedagogies of repression are largely disciplinary and have little regard for analyzing contexts or history, making knowledge meaningful or expanding upon what it means for students to be critically engaged agents.

Expanding critical pedagogy as a mode of public pedagogy suggests being attentive to and addressing modes of knowledge and social prac-

tices in a variety of sites that not only encourage critical thinking, thoughtfulness and meaningful dialogue, but also offer opportunities to mobilize instances of moral outrage, social responsibility and collective action. Such mobilization opposes glaring material inequities and the growing cynical belief that today's culture of investment and finance makes it *impossible* to address many of the major social problems facing the United States, Canada, Latin America and the larger world. Most importantly, such work points to the link between civic education, critical pedagogy and modes of oppositional political agency that are pivotal to creating a politics that promotes democratic values, relations, autonomy and social change. Hints of such a politics were evident in the various approaches developed by the Quebec student protesters, the now dormant Occupy movement, the student movements in Chile, and the pedagogical strategies being developed by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States.

Borrowing a line from Rachel Donadio, these young protesters are raising important questions about "what happens to democracy when banks become more powerful than political institutions."¹⁶ What kind of society allows economic injustice and massive inequality to run wild, allowing drastic cuts in education and public services? What does it mean when students face not just tuition hikes, but a lifetime of financial debt while governments in Canada, Chile and the United States spend trillions on weapons of death and needless wars? How do we understand police violence against Black youth as part of a broader form of domestic terrorism linked to the rise of mass incarceration and the punishing state? What kind of education does it take, both in and out of schools, to recognize the emergence of various economic, political, cultural and social forces that point to the dissolution of democracy and the possible emergence of a new kind of authoritarian rule?

Rather than viewing teaching as technical practice, pedagogy in the broadest critical sense is premised on the assumption that learning is not about processing received knowledge but actually transforming it as part of a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice. The fundamental challenge facing educators within the current age of neoliberalism, militarism and religious fundamentalism is to provide the conditions for students to address how knowledge is related to the power of both self-definition and social agency. In part, this suggests providing students with the skills, ideas, values and authority necessary for them to nourish a substantive democracy, recognize

¹⁶ R. Donadio: *The Failing State of Greece*. "The New York Times", February 26, 2012, p. 8.

anti-democratic forms of power and fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial and gendered inequalities. I want to take up these issues by addressing a number of related pedagogical concerns, including the notion of teachers as public intellectuals, pedagogy and the project of insurrectional democracy, pedagogy and the politics of responsibility, and finally, pedagogy as a form of resistance and educated hope.

The Responsibility of Teachers as Public Intellectuals

In the age of irresponsible privatization, unchecked individualism, celebrity culture, unfettered consumerism and a massive flight from moral responsibility, it has become more and more difficult to acknowledge that educators and other cultural workers bear an enormous responsibility in opposing the current threat to the planet and everyday life by bringing democratic political culture back to life. Lacking a self-consciously democratic political focus or project, teachers are often reduced either to technicians or functionaries engaged in formalistic rituals, absorbed with bureaucratic demands and unconcerned with the disturbing and urgent problems that confront the larger society and the consequences of one's pedagogical practices and research undertakings.

In opposition to this model, with its claims to and conceit of political neutrality, I argue that teachers and academics should combine the mutually interdependent roles of critical educator and active citizen. This requires finding ways to connect the practice of classroom teaching with issues that bear down on their lives and the larger society and to provide the conditions for students to view themselves as critical agents capable of making those who exercise authority and power answerable for their actions. The role of a critical education is not to train students solely for jobs, but also to educate them to question critically the institutions, policies and values that shape their lives, relationships to others and their myriad of connections to the larger world.

Education as a form of educated hope is about teaching students to take responsibility for one's responsibilities, be they personal, political or global.

I think the late Stuart Hall was on target when he insisted that educators as public intellectuals have a responsibility to provide students with "critical knowledge that has to be ahead of traditional knowl-

edge: it has to be better than anything that traditional knowledge can produce, because only serious ideas are going to stand up.”¹⁷ At the same time, he insists on the need for educators to “actually engage, contest, and learn from the best that is locked up in other traditions,” especially those attached to traditional academic paradigms.¹⁸ It is also important to remember that education as a form of educated hope is not simply about fostering critical consciousness, but also about teaching students, as Zygmunt Bauman has put it, to take responsibility for one’s responsibilities, be they personal, political or global. Students should be made aware of the ideological and structural forces that promote needless human suffering while also recognizing that it takes more than awareness to resolve them.

What role might educators play as public intellectuals in light of the poisonous assaults waged on public schools by the forces of neoliberalism and a range of other fundamentalisms? In the most immediate sense, they can raise their collective voices against the influence of corporations that are flooding societies with a culture of violence, fear, anti-intellectualism, commercialism and privatization. They can show how this culture of commodified cruelty and violence is only one part of a broader and all-embracing militarized culture of war, the arms industry and a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest ethic that increasingly disconnects schools from public values, the common good and democracy itself. They can bring all of their intellectual and collective resources together to critique and dismantle the imposition of high-stakes testing and other commercially driven modes of accountability on schools.

They can speak out against modes of governance that have reduced faculty to the status of disposable, part-time employees, and they can struggle collectively to take back the governing of the university from a new class of managers and bureaucrats that now outnumber faculty, at least in the United States. This suggests that educators must resist those modes of corporate governance in which faculty are reduced to the status of clerks, technicians, entrepreneurs and a subaltern class of part-time workers with little power, few benefits and excessive teaching loads. As Noam Chomsky has observed, this neoliberal mode of austerity and precarity is part of a business model “designed to reduce labor costs and to increase labor servility” while at the same time

¹⁷ G. de Peuter: *Universities, Intellectuals, and Multitudes: An Interview with Stuart Hall*. In: *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization*. Eds. M. Coté, R.J.F. Day, G. de Peuter. Toronto 2007, pp. 113–114.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

making clear that “what matters is the bottom line.”¹⁹ Academics can work with social movements, write policy papers, publish op-eds and call for young people and others to defend education as a public good by advocating for policies that invest in schools rather than in the military-industrial complex and its massive and expensive weapons of death.

Students not only fill their worlds with commodities, but have become working commodities.

In addition, such intellectuals can develop modes of pedagogy along with a broader comprehensive vision of education and schooling that is capable of waging a war against those who would deny education its critical function, and this applies to all forms of dogmatism and political purity, across the ideological spectrum. As my friend, the late Paulo Freire, once argued, educators have a responsibility to not only develop a critical consciousness in students but also to provide the conditions for students to be engaged individuals and social agents. This is not a call to shape students in the manner of Pygmalion but to encourage human agency rather than to mold it. Since human life is conditioned rather than determined, educators cannot escape the ethical responsibility of addressing education as an act of intervention with the purpose of providing the conditions for students to become the subjects and makers of history rather than function as simply passive, disconnected objects or, what might be called, mere consumers rather than producers of knowledge, values and ideas.²⁰

This is a pedagogy in which educators are neither afraid of controversy nor the willingness to make connections that are otherwise hidden, nor are they afraid of making clear the connection between private troubles and broader social problems. One of the most important tasks for educators engaged in critical pedagogy is to teach students how to translate private issues into public considerations. One measure of the demise of vibrant democracy and the corresponding impoverishment of political life can be found in the increasing inability of a society to make private issues public, and to translate individual problems into larger social issues. As the public collapses into the personal, the

¹⁹ N. Chomsky: *The Death of American Universities*. “Reader Supported News”, March 30, 2015. [Online:] <https://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/29348-the-death-of-american-universities> [12.09.2015].

²⁰ This idea is central to the work of Paulo Freire, especially his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his *Pedagogy of Freedom*.

personal becomes “the only politics there is, the only politics with a tangible referent or emotional valence.”²¹

This is a central feature of neoliberalism as an educative tool and can be termed the individualization of the social. Under such circumstances, the language of the social is either devalued or ignored, as public life is often reduced to a form of pathology or deficit (as in public schools, public transportation, public welfare), and all dreams of the future are modeled increasingly around the narcissistic, privatized and self-indulgent needs of consumer culture and the dictates of the alleged free market. Similarly, all problems, regardless of whether they are structural or caused by larger social forces, are now attributed to individual failings, matters of character or individual ignorance. In this case, poverty is reduced to matters concerning lifestyle, individual responsibility, bad choices or flawed character.

Critical Pedagogy as a Project of Insurrectional Democracy

In opposition to dominant views of education and pedagogy, I want to argue for a notion of pedagogy as a practice of freedom – rooted in a broader project of a resurgent and insurrectional democracy – one that relentlessly questions the kinds of labor, practices and forms of production that are enacted in public and higher education. While such a pedagogy does not offer guarantees, it does recognize that its own position is grounded in particular modes of authority, values and ethical principles that must be constantly debated for the ways in which they both open up and close down democratic relations, values and identities. Needless to say, such a project should be principled, relational and contextual, as well as self-reflective and theoretically rigorous. By relational, I mean that the current crisis of schooling must be understood in relation to the broader assault that is being waged against all aspects of democratic public life. At the same time, any critical comprehension of those wider forces that shape public and higher education must also be supplemented by an attentiveness to the historical and conditional nature of pedagogy itself. This suggests that pedagogy can never be treated as a fixed set of principles and practices that can be applied indiscriminately across a variety of pedagogical sites. On the contrary, it must always be attentive to the specificity of different contexts and the different conditions, formations and problems that arise in various

²¹ J. Comaroff, J.L. Comaroff: *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming*. “Public Culture” 2000, vol. 12 (2), pp. 305–306. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-12-2-291>.

sites in which education takes place. Such a project suggests recasting pedagogy as a practice that is indeterminate, open to constant revision and constantly in dialogue with its own assumptions.

The notion of a neutral, objective education is an oxymoron. Education and pedagogy do not exist outside of relations of power, values and politics. Ethics on the pedagogical front demand an openness to the other, and a willingness to engage a “politics of possibility” through a continual critical engagement with texts, images, events and other registers of meaning as they are transformed into pedagogical practices both inside and outside of the classroom.²² Pedagogy is never innocent and if it is to be understood and problematized as a form of academic labor, educators have the opportunity not only to critically question and register their own subjective involvement in how and what they teach, but also resist all calls to depoliticize pedagogy through appeals to either scientific objectivity or ideological dogmatism. This suggests the need for educators to rethink the cultural and ideological baggage they bring to each educational encounter; it also highlights the necessity of making educators ethically and politically accountable and self-reflective for the stories they produce, the claims they make upon public memory and the images of the future they deem legitimate. Hence, crucial to any viable notion of critical pedagogy is the necessity for critical educators to be attentive to the ethical dimensions of their own practice.

Critical Pedagogy and the Promise of a Democracy to Come

As a practice of freedom, critical pedagogy needs to be grounded in a project that not only problematizes its own location, mechanisms of transmission and effects, but also functions as part of a wider project to help students think critically about how existing social, political and economic arrangements might be better suited to address the promise of a democracy to come. Understood as a form of educated hope, pedagogy in this sense is not an antidote to politics, or a nostalgic yearning for a better time or some “inconceivably alternative future.” Instead, it is “an attempt to find a bridge between the present and future in those forces within the present which are potentially able to transform it.”²³

²² For a brilliant discussion of the ethics and politics of deconstruction, see Th. Keenan: *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics*. Stanford 1997, p. 2.

²³ T. Eagleton: *The Idea of Culture*. Malden, MA 2000, p. 22.

Given the shadow of totalitarianism that haunts the US, resistance is not simply something to consider.

What has become clear in this current climate of casino capitalism is that the corporatization of education functions so as to cancel out the teaching of democratic values, impulses and practices of a civil society by either devaluing or absorbing them within the logic of the market. Educators need a critical language to address these challenges to public and higher education. But they also need to join with other groups outside of the spheres of public and higher education in order to create broad national and international social movements that share a willingness to defend education as a civic value and public good and to engage in a broader struggle to deepen the imperatives of democratic public life. The quality of educational reform can, in part, be gauged by the caliber of public discourse concerning the role that education plays in furthering, not the market-driven agenda of corporate interests, but the imperatives of critical agency, social justice and an operational democracy.

Defining pedagogy as a moral and political exercise, education can highlight the performative character of schooling and civic pedagogy as a practice that moves beyond simple matters of critique and understanding. Pedagogy is not simply about competency or teaching young people the great books, established knowledge, predefined skills and values; it is also about the possibility of interpretation as an act of intervention in the world. Such a pedagogy should challenge common sense and take on the task as the poet Robert Hass once put it, “to refresh the idea of justice going dead in us all the time.”²⁴ Within this perspective, critical pedagogy foregrounds the diverse conditions under which authority, knowledge, values and subject positions are produced and interact within unequal relations of power. Pedagogy in this view also stresses the labor conditions necessary for teacher autonomy, cooperation, decent working conditions and the relations of power necessary to give teachers and students the capacity to re-stage power in productive ways – ways that point to self-development, self-determination and social agency.

²⁴ R. Hass cited in S. Pollock: *Robert Hass*. “Mother Jones” 1992, March/April, pp. 19-22, especially p. 22.

Making Pedagogy Meaningful in Order to Make It Critical and Transformative

Any analysis of critical pedagogy needs to address the importance that affect, meaning and emotion play in the formation of individual identity and social agency. Any viable approach to critical pedagogy suggests taking seriously those maps of meaning, affective investments and sedimented desires that enable students to connect their own lives and everyday experiences to what they learn. Pedagogy in this sense becomes more than a mere transfer of received knowledge, an inscription of a unified and static identity, or a rigid methodology; it presupposes that students are moved by their passions and motivated, in part, by the identifications, range of experiences and commitments they bring to the learning process. In part, this suggests connecting what is taught in classrooms to the cultural capital and worlds that young people inhabit.

For instance, schools often have little to say about the new media, digital culture and social media that dominate the lives of young people. Hence, questions concerning both the emancipatory and oppressive aspects of these media are often ignored and students find themselves bored in classrooms in which print culture and its older modes of transmission operate. Or they find themselves using new technologies with no understanding of how they might be understood as more than retrieval machines. That is, as technologies deeply connected to matters of power, ideology and politics. The issue here is not a call for teachers to simply become familiar with the new digital technologies, however crucial, but to address how they are being used as a form of cultural politics and pedagogical practice to produce certain kinds of citizens, desires, values and social relations. At stake here is the larger question of how these technologies enhance or shut down the meaning and deepening of democracy. Understanding new media is a political issue and not merely a technological one. Sherry Turkle is right in arguing that the place of technology can only be addressed if you have a set of values from which you are working. This is particularly important given the growth of the surveillance state in the United States and Canada and the growing retreat from privacy on the part of a generation that is now hooked on corporate-controlled social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

The experiences that shape young people's lives are often mediated modes of experiences in which some are viewed as more valued than others, especially around matters of race, sexual orientation and class. Low-income white students and poor people of color are often defined through experiences that are viewed as deficits. In this instance,

different styles of speech, clothing and body language can be used as weapons to punish certain students. How else to explain the high rate of Black students in the United States and Indigenous students in Canada who are punished, suspended and expelled from their schools because they violate dress codes or engage in what can be considered minor rule violations.

Experiences also tie many students to modes of behavior that are regressive, punishing, self-defeating and in some cases violent. We see too many students dominated by the values of malls, shopping centers and fashion meccas. They not only fill their worlds with commodities, but have become working commodities. Clearly, such experiences must be critically engaged and understood within a range of broader forces that subject students to a narrow scope of values, identities and social relations. Such experiences should be both questioned and unlearned, where possible. This suggests a pedagogical approach in which such experiences are interrogated through what Roger Simon and Deborah Britzman call troubling or difficult knowledge. For instance, it is sometimes difficult for students to take a critical look at Disney culture not just as a form of entertainment but also as an expression of corporate power that produces a range of demeaning stereotypes for young people, while it endlessly carpet-bombs them with commercial products. Crucial here is developing pedagogical practices that not only interrogate how knowledge, identifications and subject positions are produced, unfolded and remembered but also how such knowledges can be unlearned, particularly as they function to become complicitous with existing relations of power.

Conclusion

At the dawn of the 21st century, the notion of the social and the public are not being erased as much as they are being reconstructed under circumstances in which public forums for serious debate, including public education, are being eroded. Reduced either to a crude instrumentalism, business culture or defined as a purely private right rather than a public good, teaching and learning are removed from the discourse of democracy and civic culture. Under the influence of powerful financial interests, we have witnessed the takeover of public and, increasingly, higher education by a corporate logic and pedagogy that both numb the mind and the soul, emphasizing repressive modes of learning that promote winning at all costs, learning how not to question authority and undermining the hard work of learning how to be thoughtful, critical and attentive to the power relations that shape

everyday life and the larger world. As learning is privatized, treated as a form of entertainment, depoliticized and reduced to teaching students how to be good consumers, any viable notions of the social, public values, citizenship and democracy wither and die. I am not suggesting that we must defend a rather dated and sometimes abstract and empty notion of the public sphere, but those public spheres capable of producing thoughtful, critically engaged agents and an ethically and socially responsible society.

The greatest threat to young people does not come from lowered standards, the absence of privatized choice schemes or the lack of rigid testing measures. On the contrary, it comes from societies that refuse to view children as a social investment, consign millions of youth to poverty, reduce critical learning to massive mind-deadening testing programs, promote policies that eliminate the most crucial health and public services, and define masculinity through the degrading celebration of a gun culture, extreme sports and the spectacles of violence that permeate corporate-controlled media industries. Students are not at risk because of the absence of market incentives in the schools; they are at risk because education is being stripped of public funding and public values, handed over to corporate interests and devalued as a public good. Children and young adults are under siege in both public and higher education because far too many of these institutions have become breeding grounds for commercialism, segregation by class and race, social intolerance, sexism, homophobia, consumerism, surveillance and the increased presence of the police, all of which is spurred on by the right-wing discourse of pundits, politicians, educators and a supine mainstream media.

As a central element of a broad-based cultural politics, critical pedagogy, in its various forms, when linked to the ongoing project of democratization, can provide opportunities for educators and other cultural workers to redefine and transform the connections among language, desire, meaning, everyday life and material relations of power as part of a broader social movement to reclaim the promise and possibilities of a democratic public life. Critical pedagogy is dangerous to many educators and others because it provides the conditions for students to develop their intellectual capacities, hold power accountable and embrace a sense of social responsibility.

One of the most serious challenges facing teachers, artists, journalists, writers and other cultural workers is the task of developing a discourse of both critique and possibility. This means developing languages and pedagogical practices that connect reading the word with reading the world, and doing so in ways that enhance the capacities of young people as critical agents and engaged citizens. In taking up this

project, educators and others should attempt to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to become autonomous actors who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical. Educated hope is not a call to overlook the difficult conditions that shape both schools and the larger social order. On the contrary, it is the precondition for providing those languages and values that point the way to a more democratic and just world. As Judith Butler has argued, there is more hope in the world when we can question common-sense assumptions and believe that what we know is directly related to our ability to help change the world around us, though it is far from the only condition necessary for such change.²⁵

I want to end by insisting that democracy begins to fail and political life becomes impoverished in the absence of those vital public spheres, such as public and higher education, in which civic values, public scholarship and social engagement allow for a more imaginative grasp of a future that takes seriously the demands of justice, equity and civic courage. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting equity to excellence, learning to ethics, and agency to the imperatives of social responsibility and the public good.²⁶ We may live in dark times, but the future is still open. The time has come to develop a pedagogical language in which civic values, social responsibility and the institutions that support them become central to invigorating and fortifying a new era of civic imagination, a renewed sense of social agency and an impassioned international social movement with a vision, organization and set of strategies to challenge the anti-democratic forces engulfing the planet. Given the shadow of totalitarianism that haunts the United States, resistance is not simply something to consider; it is both a necessity and an urgent call to rise up and once again seize the reigns of collective struggle in the interest of a radical democracy.

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²⁵ Cited in G.A. Olson, L. Worsham: *Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification*. "JAC" 2000, vol. 20.4, p. 765.

²⁶ A. Delbanco: *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Princeton, NJ 2006.

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