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**PAULO FREIRE, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE TASKS OF THE  
CRITICAL SCHOLAR/ACTIVIST**

**PAULO FREIRE, PEDAGOGIA CRÍTICA E AS TAREFAS DO ESTUDIOSO  
CRÍTICO ATIVISTA**

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article, I look both forwards and backwards. I connect a number of the key arguments that have come out of the work of Paulo Freire with recent theories that have increasingly made an impact in critical education. In the process, I examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of these new approaches and provide a set of criteria tasks that we can use to judge how critical these approaches and their proponents actually are. I use some personal examples of my interactions with Freire's life as a way of illuminating a number of these tasks. I also argue that there is no "safe" or "neutral" way of engaging with these task and the traditions out of which they have emerged. They are meant to be radically counter-hegemonic and they are meant to challenge even how we think about and participate in counter-hegemonic movements. I end with a specific question: How can we understand this, if we do not participate in such movements ourselves?*

*Key words: Paulo Freire; critical education; counter-hegemonic.*

## RESUMO

Neste artigo, olho tanto para a frente quanto para trás. Conecto uma série de argumentos-chave que saíram do trabalho de Paulo Freire com as teorias recentes que têm cada vez mais causado impacto na educação crítica. No processo, examino alguns dos pontos fortes e fracos dessas novas abordagens e forneço um conjunto de critérios, tarefas que podemos usar para julgar o quão crítico dessas abordagens e seus proponentes realmente são. Uso alguns exemplos pessoais de minhas interações com a vida de Paulo Freire como uma maneira de iluminar um número dessas tarefas. Afirmando também que não existe "seguro" ou modo "neutro" de se envolver com essas tarefas e as tradições das quais elas surgiram. Elas são destinadas a ser radicalmente contra-hegemônico e elas são feitas para desafiar até mesmo como pensamos sobre e participar de movimentos contra-hegemônicos. Terminando com uma pergunta específica: como podemos entender isso, se não participarmos de tais movimentos nós mesmos?

Palavras chave: Paulo Freire; educação crítica; contra-hegemônico.





## 1. EDUCATION AND POWER

In this article, I want to look both forwards and backwards. My aim is to connect a number of the key arguments that have come out of the work of Paulo Freire with recent theories that have increasingly made an impact in critical education. In the process, I shall examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of these new approaches and provide a set of criteria-tasks-that we can use to judge how critical these approaches and their proponents actually are. I use some personal examples of my interactions with Freire's life as a way of illuminating a number of these tasks.

Let me begin by situating my analysis both within some of my own work and within the history of important parts of the critical agenda in education. Over the past three decades I have been dealing with a number of "simple" questions. I have been deeply concerned about the relationship between culture and power, about the relationship among the economic, political, and cultural spheres (see APPLE; WEIS, 1983), about the multiple and contradictory dynamics of power and social movements that make education such a site of conflict and struggle, and about what all this means for educational work. In essence, I have been trying to answer a question that was put so clearly in the United States by radical educator George Counts (1932) when he asked "Dare the School Build a New Social Order?"

Counts was a person of his time and the ways he both asked and answered this question were a bit naïve. But the tradition of radically interrogating schools and other pedagogic sites, of asking who benefits from their dominant forms of curricula, teaching, evaluation, and policy, of arguing about what they might do differently, and of asking searching questions of what would have to change in order for this to happen-all of this is what has worked through me and a considerable number of other people. We stand on the shoulders of many others who have taken such issues seriously, with Paulo Freire being among the most important. And in a time of neoliberal attacks with their ensuing loss of collective memory, I hope to have contributed to the recovery of the collective memory of this tradition and to pushing it further along conceptually, historically, empirically, and practically. In the process, I have focused much of my attention on formal institutions of schooling and on social movements that influence them.





Of course, no author does this by herself or himself. This is a collective enterprise. And no one who takes these questions seriously can answer them fully or without contradictions or even wrong turns or mistakes. As a collective project, it is one in which we not only stand on the shoulders of those whose work we draw upon critically, but also one in which thoughtful criticism of our work is essential to progress. Compelling arguments cannot be built unless they are subjected to the light of others' thoughtful analyses of the strengths and limits of our claims. I want to do some of that self-reflective analysis here. Thus, my arguments are meant to be just as powerful a reminder to me as they are to the reader.

One of the guiding questions within the field of education is a deceptively simple one: What knowledge is of most worth? Over the past four decades, an extensive tradition has grown around a restatement of that question. Rather than “*What* knowledge is of most worth?” the question has been reframed. It has become “*Whose* knowledge is of most worth?” (APPLE, 2004, 2000, 1996). There are dangers associated with such a move, of course, including impulses toward reductionism and essentialism. These dangers arise when we assume, as some people have, that there is always a one-to-one correspondence between any knowledge that is seen as “legitimate” or “official” and dominant groups’ understanding of the world. This is too simplistic, since official knowledge is often the result of struggles and compromises and at times can represent crucial victories, not only defeats, by subaltern groups (APPLE; BURAS, 2006; APPLE, 2000). However, the transformation of the question has led to immense progress in our understanding of the cultural politics of education in general and of the relations among educational policies, curricula, teaching, evaluation, and differential power. Indeed, some of the most significant work on the intimate connections between culture and power has come out of the area of the sociology of school knowledge and critical educational studies in general.

In the process of making the conceptual, historical, and empirical gains associated with this move, there has been an accompanying internationalization of the issues involved. Thus, issues of the cultural assemblages associated with empire and previous and current imperial projects have become more visible. Hence, for example, there has been an increasing recognition that critical educational studies must turn to issues of the global, of the colonial imagination, and to postcolonial approaches, in order to come to grips with the





complex and at times contradictory synchronic and diachronic relations between knowledge and power, between the state and education, and between civil society and the political imaginary.

For example, under the influences of a variety of critical works on the history of literacy and on the politics of popular culture,<sup>i</sup> as in a number of other fields, it became ever clearer to those of us in education that the very notion of the canon of “official knowledge” had much of its history in a conscious attempt to “civilize” both the working class and the “natives” of an expanding empire (APPLE, 2000). The very idea of teaching the “Other” was a significant change, of course. For many years in Europe and Latin America, for example, the fear of working class and “peasant” literacy was very visible. This will be more than a little familiar to those with an interest in the history of the relationship among books, literacy, and popular movements. Books themselves, and one’s ability to read them, have been inherently caught up in cultural politics. Take the case of Voltaire, that leader of the Enlightenment who so wanted to become a member of the nobility. For him, the Enlightenment should begin with the “grands.” Only when it had captured the hearts and minds of society’s commanding heights could it concern itself with the masses below. But, for Voltaire and many of his followers, one caution should be taken very seriously. One should take care to prevent the masses from learning to read (DARNTON, 1982, p. 130). This of course was reinscribed in often murderous ways in the prohibitions against teaching enslaved peoples how to read (although there is new historical evidence that documents that many enslaved people who were brought to the Americas were Muslim and may already have been literate in Arabic).

Such changes in how education and literacy were thought about did not simply happen accidentally. They were (and are) the results of struggles over who has the right to be called a person, over what it means to be educated, over what counts as official or legitimate knowledge, and over who has the authority to speak to these issues (MILLS, 1997; APPLE, 2000). Indeed as Paulo Freire (see, e.g., FREIRE, 1970) so clearly demonstrated through his writing and his entire life, these are urgent struggles that must be continued and expanded, especially in times of neoliberal and neoconservative assaults on the economic, political, and cultural lives of millions of people throughout the world. This commitment not only to





literacy in general, but to *critical* forms of literacy as a mode of humanizing the world was not diminished as Freire aged (FREIRE, 1960), something I witnessed time and again in my interactions with him both here in the United States and in Brazil.

These struggles need to be thought about using a range of critical tools, among them analyses based on theories of political economy, of the state and its role in cultural domination, of globalization, of the postcolonial, and so much more. But none of this is or will be easy. In fact, our work may be filled with contradictions. Take for instance the recent (and largely justifiable) attention being given to issues of globalization and postcolonialism in critical education, to which I turn in my next section.

## 2. GLOBALIZATION, POSTCOLONIALISM, AND EDUCATION

At the outset, let me be honest. I no longer have any idea what the words *globalization* and *postcolonial* mean. They have become sliding signifiers, concepts with such a multiplicity of meanings that their actual meaning in any given context can only be determined by their use. As Wittgenstein (1963) and others reminded us, language can be employed to do an impressive array of things. It can be used to describe, illuminate, control, legitimate, mobilize, and many other things. The language of postcolonialism(s) (the plural is important), for example, has many uses. However, all too often it has become something of a “ceremonial slogan,” a word that is publicly offered so that the reader may recognize that the author is au courant in the latest linguistic forms. Its employment by an author here is largely part of the conversion strategies so well captured by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984) and *Homo Academicus* (1988). Linguistic and cultural capital are performed publicly to gain mobility within the social field of the academy. In my most cynical moments, I worry that this is at times all too dominant within the largely white academy.

But, of course, the postcolonial experience(s) (and again the plural is important) and the theories of globalization that have been dialectically related to them are also powerful ways of critically engaging with the politics of empire and with the ways in which culture, economy, and politics all interact globally and locally in complex and over-determined ways. Indeed, the very notions of postcolonialism and globalization “can be thought of as a site of dialogic encounter that pushes us to examine center/periphery relations and conditions with





specificity, wherever we may find them” (DIMITRIADIS; MCCARTHY, 2001). It is this very focus on “dialogic encounters” that creates connections between the postcolonial imagination and Freire’s work (TORRES, 2009).

As they have influenced critical educational efforts, some of the core politics behind postcolonial positions are summarized well by Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) when they state that “The work of the postcolonial imagination subverts extant power relations, questions authority, and destabilizes received traditions of identity” (ibid: 10) (see also BHABHA, 1994, SPIVAK, 1988).

Educators interested in globalization, in neoliberal depredations, and in postcolonial positions have largely taken them to mean the following. They imply a conscious process of repositioning, of “turning the world upside down” (YOUNG, 2003, p. 2). They mean that the world is seen relationally—as being made up of relations of dominance and subordination and of movements, cultures, and identities that seek to interrupt these relations. They also mean that if you are someone who has been excluded by the “west’s” dominant voices geographically, economically, politically, and/or culturally, or you are inside the west but not really part of it, then “postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last” (ibid: 2). Some of the best work in the field of education mirrors Robert Young’s more general claim that postcolonialism and the global sensitivities that accompany it speak to a politics and a “philosophy of activism” that involve contesting these disparities. It extends the anti-colonial struggles that have such a long history and asserts ways of acting that challenge “western” ways of interpreting the world (ibid: 4). This is best stated by Young (2003) in the following two quotes:

Above all, postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledges into the power structures of the west as well as the non-west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between different people of the world. (ibid: 7)

and

Postcolonialism...is a general name for those insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms under which we all live. (ibid: 20)





Of course, much of what Young is saying here has clear resonances with Freire's commitments. And what Young says about postcolonialism is equally true about theories of globalization and about the entire tradition of critical educational scholarship and activism. These reminders about insurgent knowledges however need to be connected relationally to something outside themselves.

### 3. KNOWLEDGE FROM BELOW

If one of the most powerful insights of the literature in critical pedagogy, and in the growing turn toward theories of globalization and postcolonial perspectives, is the valorization of knowledge from below, is this sufficient? We know that the issue is not whether "the subaltern speak," but whether they are listened to (APPLE; BURAS, 2006; SPIVAK, 1988). Yet this too can be largely a rhetorical claim unless it gets its hands dirty with the material realities faced by all too many subaltern peoples.

A focus within the critical community(ies) on "knowledge and voices from below" has at times bordered on what Whitty called "romantic possibilitarianism" (WHITTY, 1974). It is all so cultural that it runs the risk of evacuating the gritty materialities of daily lives and of economic relations, something Freire never did. Yet this reality cannot be ignored. With its brutally honest picture of what life is like for millions, even billions, of people who live (exist is a much better word) on the edge, Mike Davis' book, *Planet of Slums* (2006), demonstrates in no uncertain terms that without a serious recognition of ways in which the conjunctural *specifics* of the effects of global capital are transforming the landscape we sometimes too abstractly theorize about, we shall be unable to understand why people act in the ways they do in such situations. Work such as Davis' goes a long way toward correcting the overemphasis on the discursive that so often plagues parts of postcolonial and critical pedagogical literature in education and elsewhere. And many of us need to be constantly reminded of the necessity to ground our work in a much more thorough understanding of the realities the oppressed face every day. Any work in education that is not grounded in these realities may turn out to be one more act of colonization. When I write these words, I can hear Freire's eloquent and passionate voice constantly reminding us to do exactly that.





#### 4. CONNECTING WITH HISTORY

It is important to remember that in the Americas and elsewhere the positions inspired by, say, postcolonialism are not actually especially new in education. Even before the impressive and influential work of the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to whom this essay and this journal issue are dedicated, subaltern groups had developed counter-hegemonic perspectives and an extensive set of ways of interrupting colonial dominance in education and in cultural struggles in general (see, e.g., LIVINGSTON, 2003; WONG, 2002; LEWIS, 1993, 2000; JULES 1991). But the fact that theories of globalization and postcolonialism are now becoming more popular in critical educational studies is partly due to the fact that the field itself in the U.S. and throughout Latin America, for example, has a very long tradition of engaging in analyses of hegemonic cultural form and content and in developing oppositional educational movements, policies, and practices (see, e.g., APPLE, 2006a; APPLE; BURAS, 2006; APPLE, 2004). But, as we know so well, the place that Freire has as both an activist in, and theorist of these movements, is unparalleled.

Thinking about Freire is more than a reminder of the past. It points to the continuing significance of Freire and Freirian-inspired work for large numbers of people throughout the world. While some have rightly or wrongly challenged the Freirian tradition and argued against a number of its tendencies,<sup>ii</sup> the tradition out of which he came, that he developed throughout his life, and that continues to evolve is immensely resilient and powerful (APPLE; AU, 2009). While Freire's influence is ever-present, thinking about it has brought back some powerful recollections. Like others, as I noted earlier I too had a history of interacting with Paulo Freire. I hope that you will forgive me if I add a personal example of my own here, one that ratifies the respect so many people have for the man and his ideas.

#### 5. FREIRE AND CRITICAL EDUCATION: A PERSONAL VIGNETTE

After delayed flights, I finally arrived in Sao Paulo. The word "exhausted" didn't come close to describing how I felt. But a shower and some rest weren't on the agenda. We hadn't seen each other for a while and Paulo was waiting for me to continue our ongoing





discussions about what was happening in Sao Paulo now that he was Secretary of Education there.

It may surprise some people to know that I was not influenced greatly by Paulo, at least not originally. I came out of a radical laborist and anti-racist tradition in the United States that had developed its own critical pedagogic forms and methods of interruption of dominance. I had immense respect for him, however, even before I began going to Brazil in the mid-1980s to work with teachers unions and the Workers Party (PT) there. Perhaps it was the fact that my roots were in a different but still very similar set of radical traditions that made our public discussions so vibrant and compelling.

There were some areas where Freire and I disagreed. Indeed, I can remember the look of surprise on people's faces during one of our public dialogues when I supportively yet critically challenged some of his positions. And I can all too vividly remember the time when I had just gotten off those delayed flights and he and I quickly went to our scheduled joint seminar before a large group that had been waiting for us to arrive. The group was made up of the militants and progressive educators he had brought to work with him at the Ministry of Education offices in Sao Paulo. During the joint seminar, I worried out loud about some of the tactics that were being used to convince teachers to follow some of the Ministry policies. While I agreed with the Ministry's agenda and was a very strong supporter of Paulo's nearly herculean efforts, I said that-as a former president of a teachers union myself and as someone who had worked with teachers in Brazil for a number of years-here was a risk that the tactics being employed could backfire. He looked directly at me and said that he and I clearly disagreed about this.

The audience was silent, waiting-for distress, for "point scoring," for a break in our friendship? Instead what happened was one of the most detailed and intense discussions I have ever had in my life. For nearly three hours, we ranged over an entire terrain: theories about epistemologies; the realities of teachers' lives; the realities of life in favelas; the politics of race and gender that needed to be dealt with seriously alongside class; the international and Brazilian economy; rightist media attacks on critical education in Brazil and on him personally; what strategies were needed to interrupt dominance in the society and in the daily





lives of schools; his criticisms of my criticisms of their strategies; my suggestions for better tactics; and the list could on and on.

This wasn't a performance in masculinities, as so many public debates are. This was something that demonstrated to me once again why I respected him so much. There was no sense of "winning" or "losing" there. Paulo and I were fully engaged, wanting to think publicly, enjoying both the richness of our dialogue and our willingness (stimulated constantly by him) to enter into a field that required that we bring in *all* that we knew and believed. For him, and for me, education required the best of our intellectual and emotional resources. I'm not certain we ultimately resolved our disagreements. I know that I was taken with his passion and his willingness to listen carefully to my worries, worries based on my previous experiences with political/educational mobilization in other nations.

I also know that he took these issues very seriously (see, e.g., APPLE, 1999). Perhaps a measure of this can be seen when, after that three hour dialogue that seemed to go by in a flash, he had to leave for another meeting that had been delayed because of our discussion. As he and I said our goodbyes, he asked the audience to stay. He then asked me if I could stay for as long as it took so that the audience and I could continue the discussion at a more practical level. What could be done to deal with the concerns I had? Were there ways in which the people from the Ministry and from the communities that were in the audience might lessen the risk of alienating teachers and some community members? What strategies might be used to create alliances over larger issues, even when there might be some disagreements over specific tactics and policies?

It is a measure of Paulo's ability as a leader and as a model of how *critical dialogue* could go on, that another two hours went by with truly honest and serious discussion that led to creative solutions to a number of problems that were raised as people reflected on their experiences in favelas and in the ministry. This to me is the mark of a truly great teacher. Even when he wasn't there, his emphasis on honestly confronting the realities we faced, on carefully listening, on using one's lived experiences to think critically about that reality and how it might be changed—all of this remained a powerful presence. He was able to powerfully theorize and to help others do the same *because* he was engaged in what can only be





described as a form of praxis. I shall say more about the crucial importance of such concrete engagements in a later section of this article.

This was not the only time Paulo and I publicly interacted with each other. We had a number of such discussions in front of large audiences. Indeed, in preparation for writing this article, I took out the tape of one of Freire and my public interactions to listen to it. It reminded me that what I have said here cannot quite convey the personal presence and humility Paulo had. Nor can it convey how he brought out the best in me and others. One of the markers of greatness is how one deals with disagreement. And here, once again, Paulo demonstrated how special he was, thus giving us one more reason that Paulo—friend, teacher, comrade—is still missed.

## 6. THE TASKS OF THE CRITICAL SCHOLAR/ACTIVIST

But our task is not simply to be followers of Freire-or of any one person for that matter. Yes, much of what we do stands on his shoulders and in the United States on the shoulders of many other critical educators and cultural activists (see HORTON, 1990; HORTON; FREIRE, 1990). But no matter whose shoulders we stand on, the critical commitments remain very much the same. Here I am reminded of the radical sociologist Michael Burawoy's arguments for a critical sociology. As he says, a critical sociology is always grounded in two key questions: 1) Sociology for whom? and 2) Sociology for what? (BURAWOY, 2005). The first asks us to think about repositioning ourselves so that we see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed. The second asks us to connect our work to the complex issues surrounding a society's moral compass, its means and ends.

For many people, their original impulses toward critical theoretical and political work in education were fueled by a passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environments, an education that is worthy of its name—in short a better world. Yet, this is increasingly difficult to maintain in the situation in which so many of us find ourselves. Ideologically and politically much has changed. The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have brought us unfettered capitalism which fuels market tyrannies and massive inequalities on a truly global scale (DAVIS, 2006).





“Democracy” is resurgent at the same time, but it all too often becomes a thin veil for the interests of the globally and locally powerful and for disenfranchisement, mendacity, and national and international violence (BURAWOY, 2005, p. 260). The rhetoric of freedom and equality may have intensified, but there is unassailable evidence that there is ever deepening exploitation, domination, and inequality and that earlier gains in education, economic security, civil rights, and more are either being washed away or are under severe threat. The religion of the market (and it does function like a religion, since it does not seem to be amenable to empirical critiques) coupled with very different visions of what the state can and should do can be summarized in one word—neoliberalism (BURAWOY, 2005), although we know that no one term can actually totally encompass the forms of dominance and subordination that have such long histories in so many regions of the world (APPLE, 2010; 2006a).

At the same time, in the social field of power called the academy, with its own hierarchies and disciplinary (and disciplining) techniques, the pursuit of academic credentials, bureaucratic and institutional rankings, tenure files, indeed the entire panoply of normalizing pressures surrounding institutions and careers—seeks to ensure that we all think and act “correctly.” Yet, the original impulse is never quite entirely vanquished (BURAWOY, 2005). The spirit that animates critical work can never be totally subjected to rationalizing logics and processes. Try as the powerful might, it will not be extinguished—and it certainly remains alive in a good deal of the work in critical pedagogy, an international tradition that is deeply indebted to Freire’s work.

Having said this—and having sincerely meant it—I need to be honest here as well. For me, some of the literature on “critical pedagogy” is a vexed one. Like the concept of postcolonialism, it too now suffers from a surfeit of meanings. It can mean anything from being responsive to one’s students on the one hand to powerfully reflexive forms of content and processes that radically challenge existing relations of exploitation and domination on the other. And just like some of the literature on postcolonialism, the best parts of the writings on critical pedagogy are crucial challenges to our accepted ways of doing education.

But once again, there are portions of the literature in critical pedagogy that may also represent elements of conversion strategies by new middle class actors who are seeking to





carve out paths of mobility within the academy. The function of such (often disembodied) writing at times is to solve the personal crisis brought about by the “contradictory class location” (WRIGHT, 1985) of academics who wish to portray themselves as politically engaged; but almost all of their political engagement is textual. Thus, their theories are (if you will forgive the use of a masculinist word) needlessly impenetrable, and the very difficult questions surrounding life in real institutions, and of what we should actually teach, how we should teach it, and how it should be evaluated, are seen as forms of “pollution,” too pedestrian to deal with. This can degenerate into elitism, masquerading as radical theory. But serious theory about curriculum and pedagogy needs to be done in relation to its object. Indeed, this is not only a political imperative but an epistemological one as well. As Freire knew so well, the development of critical theoretical resources is best done when it is dialectically and intimately connected to actual movements and struggles (FREIRE, 1970; APPLE; AU; GANDIN, 2009; APPLE, 2006a, 2006b; APPLE; ASSEN; CHO; GANDIN; OLIVER; SUNG; TAVARES; WONG, 2003).

Once again, what Michael Burawoy has called “organic public sociology” provides key elements of how we might think about ways of dealing with this here. In his words, but partly echoing Gramsci as well, in this view the critical sociologist:

...works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counter-public. [She or he works] with a labor movement, neighborhood association, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations. Between the public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education... The project of such [organic] public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life. (BURAWOY, 2005, p. 265)

This act of becoming (and this is a *project*, for one is *never* finished, *always* becoming) a critical scholar/activist is a complex one. Because of this, let me extend my earlier remarks about the role of critical research in education. My points here are tentative and certainly not exhaustive. But they are meant to begin a dialogue over just what it is that “we” should do. This is again one of the places where I am reflecting on and extending what Freire’s life and work signifies.





In general, there are nine tasks in which critical analysis (and the critical analyst) in education must engage (APPLE, 2006b).

- 1) It must “bear witness to negativity.” That is, one of its primary functions is to illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination—and to struggles against such relations—in the larger society.
- 2) In engaging in such critical analyses, it also must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action. Thus, its aim is to critically examine current realities with a conceptual/political framework that emphasizes the spaces in which counter-hegemonic actions can be or are now going on.
- 3) At times, this also requires a redefinition of what counts as “research.” Here I mean acting as “secretaries” to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power or in what elsewhere has been called “non-reformist reforms.” This is exactly the task that was taken on in the thick descriptions of critically democratic school practices in *Democratic Schools* (APPLE; BEANE, 2007) and in the critically supportive descriptions of the transformative reforms such as the Citizen School and participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil done by Luis Armando Gandin and others (see, e.g., APPLE, et al., 2003; APPLE; AU; GANDIN, 2009).
- 4) When Gramsci (1971) argued that one of the tasks of a truly counter-hegemonic education was not to throw out “elite knowledge” but to reconstruct its form and content so that it served genuinely progressive social needs, he provided a key to another role “organic intellectuals” might play (see also GUTSTEIN, 2006; APPLE, 1996). Thus, we should not be engaged in a process of what might be called “intellectual suicide.” That is, there are serious intellectual (and pedagogic) skills in dealing with the histories and debates surrounding the epistemological, political, and educational issues involved in justifying what counts as important knowledge. These are not simple and inconsequential issues and the practical and intellectual/political skills of dealing with them have been well-developed. However, they can atrophy if they are not used. We can give back these skills by employing them to assist





communities in thinking about this, learn from them, and engage in the mutually pedagogic dialogues that enable decisions to be made in terms of both the short term and long term interests of oppressed peoples.<sup>iii</sup>

- 5) In the process, critical work has the task of keeping traditions of radical work alive. In the face of organized attacks on the “collective memories” of difference and struggle, attacks that make it increasingly difficult to retain academic and social legitimacy for multiple critical approaches that have proven so valuable in countering dominant narratives and relations, it is absolutely crucial that these traditions be kept alive, renewed, and when necessary criticized for their conceptual, empirical, historical, and political silences or limitations. This involves being cautious of reductionism and essentialism and asks us to pay attention to what Fraser has called both the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition (FRASER, 1997). This includes not only keeping theoretical, empirical, historical, and political traditions alive but, very importantly, extending and (supportively) criticizing them. And it also involves keeping alive the dreams, utopian visions, and “non-reformist reforms” that are so much a part of these radical traditions (JACOBY, 2005; APPLE, 1995; TEITELBAUM, 1993).
- 6) Keeping traditions alive and also supportively criticizing them when they are not adequate to deal with current realities cannot be done unless we ask “For whom are we keeping them alive?” and “How and in what form are they to be made available?” All of the things I have mentioned before in this tentative taxonomy of tasks require the relearning or development and use of varied or new skills of working at many levels with multiple groups. Thus, journalistic and media skills, academic and popular skills, and the ability to speak to very different audiences are increasingly crucial.
- 7) In addition, critical educators must *act* in concert with the progressive social movements that their work supports, or in movements against the rightist assumptions and policies they critically analyze. Thus, scholarship in critical education or critical pedagogy does imply becoming an “organic intellectual” in the Gramscian sense of that term (GRAMSCI, 1971). One must participate in and give one’s expertise to movements surrounding struggles over a politics of redistribution and a politics of





recognition. It also implies learning from these social movements. This means that the role of the “unattached intelligentsia” (MANNHEIM, 1936), someone who “lives on the balcony” (BAKHTIN, 1968), is not an appropriate model. As Bourdieu (2003, p. 11) reminds us, for example, our intellectual efforts are crucial, but they “cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of the world is at stake.”

8) Building on the points made in the previous paragraph, the critical scholar/activist has another role to play. She or he needs to act as a deeply committed mentor, as someone who demonstrates through her or his life what it means to be *both* an excellent researcher and a committed member of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities. She or he needs to show how one can blend these two roles together in ways that may be tense, but still embody the dual commitments to exceptional and socially committed research and to participating in movements whose aim is interrupting dominance. And clearly this also implies that our own teaching must embody and model the kinds of commitments and actions we write and talk about.

9) Finally, participation also means using the privilege one has as a scholar/activist. That is, each of us needs to make use of our privilege to open the spaces at universities and elsewhere for those who are not there, for those who do not currently have a voice in that space, and in the “professional” sites to which, being in a privileged position, you and I have access. This can be seen, for example, in the history of the “activist-in-residence” program at the University of Wisconsin Havens Center for Social Structure and Social Change, where committed activists in various areas (the environment, indigenous rights, housing, labor, racial disparities, education, and so on) were brought in to teach and to connect our academic work with organized action against dominant relations. Or it can be seen in a number of Women’s Studies programs and Indigenous, Aboriginal, and First Nation Studies programs that historically have involved activists in these communities, as active participants in the governance and educational programs of these areas at universities.





These nine tasks are demanding and no one person can engage equally well in all of them simultaneously, although Paulo Freire comes as close as any one person can to these ideals. What we can do is honestly continue our attempt to come to grips with the complex intellectual, personal, and political tensions and activities that respond to the demands of this role. And this requires a searching reflexive critical examination of one's own structural location, one's own overt and tacit political commitments, and one's own embodied actions once this recognition in all its complexities and contradictions is taken as seriously as it deserves.

This speaks to the larger issues about the politics of knowledge and people of which I spoke earlier and to which postcolonial authors such as Young (2003), Bhabha (1994), Spivak (1988), and others have pointed. Concepts such as “critical pedagogy,” “hybridity,” “marginalization,” “subaltern,” “cultural politics,” and the entire panoply of postcolonial and critical pedagogic vocabulary can be used in multiple ways. They are meant to signify an intense set of complex and contradictory historical, geographic, economic, and cultural relations, experiences, and realities. But what must *not* be lost in the process of using them is the inherently *political* nature of their own history and interests. Used well, there is no “safe” or “neutral” way of mobilizing them—and rightly so. They are meant to be radically counter-hegemonic and they are meant to challenge even how we think about and participate in counter-hegemonic movements. How can we understand this, if we do not participate in such movements ourselves? Freire certainly did. So did E. P. Thompson, C. L. R. James, W. E. B. DuBois, Carter Woodson, and so many others. Can we do less?





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<sup>i</sup> Raymond Williams' work was crucial historically here. See Williams (1977; 1961). See also Apple (2004).

<sup>ii</sup> A number of feminist scholars for instance raised serious questions about the Freire's epistemological, educational, and political assumptions. See, e.g., Luke & Gore (1992). At times somewhat overstated, these criticisms did have a salutary effect. The literature on critical pedagogy became much more powerful in dealing with issues surrounding gender and race (APPLE; AU 2009).

<sup>iii</sup> The category of "oppressed peoples" has been and needs to be kept broad. As I note in my next point, this includes dynamics and structures involving not only class, but gender, sexuality, race, and disability, as well as other emergent struggles over both redistribution and recognition. It also includes struggles over affective equality. See Lynch & Baker (2009). See also Apple (2006) on how dominant groups attempt to reappropriate the language of oppressed groups, claiming that, say, white people "are the new oppressed."

