In Search of a Critical Pedagogy

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Maxine Greene discusses the primacy of developing a critical pedagogy appropriate for education in this country. The author asserts that because the problems of education are great and educators' notions of the possibilities for change limited by a constrained discourse, it is often difficult merely to envision more humane, more just, and more democratic alternatives. Yet, without that vision, one cannot develop a critical pedagogy. She therefore suggests ways educators can begin to reappropriate our cultural heritage in order to create conditions for a pedagogy which is meaningful to the American experience.

In what Jean Baudrillard describes as "the shadow of silent majorities" in an administered and media-mystified world, we try to reconceive what a critical pedagogy relevant to this time and place ought to mean. This is a moment when great numbers of Americans find their expectations and hopes for their children being fed by talk of "educational reform." Yet the reform reports speak of those very children as "human resources" for the expansion of productivity, as means to the end of maintaining our nation's economic competitiveness and military primacy in the world. Of course we want to empower the young for meaningful work, we want to nurture the achievement of diverse literacies. But the world we inhabit is palpably deficient: there are unwarranted inequities, shattered communities, unfulfilled lives. We cannot help but hunger for traces of utopian visions, of critical or dialectical engagements with social and economic realities. And yet, when we reach out, we experience a kind of blankness. We sense people living under a weight, a nameless inertial mass. How are we to justify our concern for their awakening? Where are the sources of questioning, of restlessness? How are we to move the young to break with the given, the taken-for-granted—to move towards what might be, what is not yet?

Confronting all of this, I am moved to make some poets' voices audible at the start. Poets are exceptional, of course; they are not considered educators in the ordinary sense. But they remind us of absence, ambiguity, embodiments of existential possibility. More often than not they do so with passion; and passion has been called the power of possibility. This is because it is the source of our interests and our purposes. Passion signifies mood, emotion, desire: modes of grasping the

1 Baudrillard, In the Shadow of Silent Majorities (New York: Semiotexte, 1983).
appearances of things. It is one of the important ways of recognizing possibility, "the presence of the future as that which is lacking and that which, by its very absence, reveals reality." Poets move us to give play to our imaginations, to enlarge the scope of lived experience and reach beyond from our own grounds. Poets do not give us answers; they do not solve the problems of critical pedagogy. They can, however, if we will them to do so, awaken us to reflectiveness, to a recovery of lost landscapes and lost spontaneities. Against such a background, educators might now and then be moved to go in search of a critical pedagogy of significance for themselves.

Let us hear Walt Whitman, for one:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of 
hell are with me.
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I 
translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,

I chant the chant of dilation or pride.
We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,
I show that size is only development.

Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?,
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one,
and still pass on.

Whitman calls himself the poet of the "barbaric yawp"; he is also the poet of the child going forth, of the grass, of comradeship and communion and the "en masse." And of noticing, naming, caring, feeling. In a systematized, technicized moment, a moment of violations and of shrinking "minimal" selves, we ought to be able to drink from the fountain of his work.

There is Wallace Stevens, explorer of multiple perspectives and imagination, challenger of objectified, quantified realities—what he calls the "ABC of being . . . the vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X," questioner as well of the conventional "lights and definitions" presented as "the plain sense of things." We ought to think of states of things, he says, phases of movements, polarities.

But in the centre of our lives, this time, this day,
It is a state, this spring among the politicians
Playing cards. In a village of the indigenes,
One would still have to discover. Among the dogs
and dung,
One would continue to contend with one's ideas.

One's ideas, yes, and blue guitars as well, and—always and always—"the never-resting mind," the "flawed words and stubborn sounds."

And there is Marianne Moore, reminding us that every poem represents what Robert Frost described as “the triumph of the spirit over the materialism by which we are being smothered,” enunciating four precepts:

Feed imagination food that invigorates.
Whatever it is, do with all your might.
Never do to another what you would not wish done to yourself.
Say to yourself, “I will be responsible.”

Put these principles to the test, and you will be inconvenienced by being over-trusted, overbefriended, overconsulted, half adopted, and have no leisure. Face that when you come to it.  

Another woman’s voice arises: Muriel Rukeyser’s, in the poem “Käthe Kollwitz.”

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open

The idea of an officially defined “world” splitting open when a repressed truth is revealed holds all sorts of implications for those who see reality as opaque, bland and burnished, resistant both to protest and to change.

Last, and in a different mood, let us listen to these lines by Adrienne Rich:

A clear night in which two planets
seem to clasp each other in which the earthly grasses
shift like silk in starlight
If the mind were clear
and if the mind were simple you could take this mind
this particular state and say
This is how I would live if I could choose:
this is what is possible

The poem is called “What Is Possible,” but the speaker knows well that no mind can be “simple,” or “abstract and pure.” She realizes that the mind has “a different mission in the universe,” that there are sounds and configurations still needing to be deciphered; she knows that the mind must be “wrapped in battle” in what can only be a resistant world. She voices her sense of the contrast between the mind as contemplative and the mind in a dialectical relation with what surrounds.

They create spaces, these poets, between themselves and what envelops and surrounds. Where there are spaces like that, desire arises, along with hope and expectation. We may sense that something is lacking that must be surpassed or repaired. Often, therefore, poems address our freedom; they call on us to move beyond where we are, to break with submergence, to transform. To transform what—and how? To move beyond ourselves—and where? Reading such works within the contexts of schools and education, those of us still preoccupied with human freedom and human growth may well find our questions more perplexing. We may become more passionate about the possibility of a critical pedagogy in these uncritical times. How can we (decently, morally, intelligently) address ourselves

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both to desire and to purpose and obligation? How can we awaken others to possibility and the need for action in the name of possibility? How can we communicate the importance of opening spaces in the imagination where persons can reach beyond where they are?

Poets, of course, are not alone in the effort to make us see and to defamiliarize our commonsense worlds. The critical impulse is an ancient one in the Western tradition: we have only to recall the prisoners released from the cave in *The Republic*, Socrates trying to arouse the “sleeping ox” that was the Athenian public, Francis Bacon goading his readers to break with the “idols” that obscured their vision and distorted their rational capacities, David Hume calling for the exposure of the “sophistries and illusions” by which so many have habitually lived. In philosophy, in the arts, in the sciences, men and women repeatedly have come forward to urge their audiences to break with what William Blake called “mind-forg’d manacles.” Not only did such manacles shackle consciousness; their effectiveness assured the continuing existence of systems of domination—monarchies, churches, land-holding arrangements, and armed forces of whatever kind.

The American tradition originated in such an insight and in the critical atmosphere specific to the European Enlightenment. It was an atmosphere created in large measure by rational, autonomous voices engaging in dialogue for the sake of bringing into being a public sphere. These were, most often, the voices of an emerging middle class concerned for their own independence from anachronistic and unjust restraints. Their “rights” were being trampled, they asserted, rights sanctioned by natural and moral laws. Among these rights were “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” which (especially when joined to justice or equity) remain normative for this nation: they are goods to be secured. Liberty, at the time of the founding of our nation, meant liberation from interference by the state, church, or army in the lives of individuals. For some, sharing such beliefs as those articulated by the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, liberty also meant each person’s right to think for himself or herself, “to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead” in an atmosphere that forbade “mental slavery.”

The founders were calling, through a distinctive critical challenge, for opportunities to give their energies free play. That meant the unhindered exercise of their particular talents: inventing, exploring, building, pursuing material and social success. To be able to do so, they had to secure power, which they confirmed through the establishment of a constitutional republic. For Hannah Arendt, this sort of power is kept in existence through an ongoing process of “binding and promising, combining and covenanting.” As she saw it, power springs up between human beings when they act to constitute “a worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action.” When we consider the numbers of people excluded from this process over the generations, we have to regard this view of power as normative as well. It is usual to affirm that power belongs to “the people” at large; but, knowing that this has not been the case, we are obligated to expand the “wordly structure” until it contains the “combined power” of increasing num-

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bers of articulate persons. A critical pedagogy for Americans, it would seem, must take this into account.

For the school reformers of the early nineteenth century, the apparent mass power accompanying the expansion of manhood suffrage created a need for “self-control” and a “voluntary compliance” with the laws of righteousness. Without a common school to promote such control and compliance, the social order might be threatened. Moreover, the other obligation of the school—to prepare the young to “create wealth”—could not be adequately met. Even while recognizing the importance of providing public education for the masses of children, we have to acknowledge that great numbers of them were being socialized into factory life and wage labor in an expanding capitalist society. Like working classes everywhere, they could not but find themselves alienated from their own productive energies. The persisting dream of opportunity, however, kept most of them from confronting their literal powerlessness. The consciousness of objectively real “open” spaces (whether on the frontier, “downtown,” or out at sea) prevented them from thinking seriously about changing the order of things; theoretically, there was always an alternative, a “territory ahead.” It followed that few were likely to conceive of themselves in a dialectical relation with what surrounded them, no matter how exploitative or cruel. As the laggard and uneven development of trade unions indicates, few were given to viewing themselves as members of a “class” with a project to pull them forward, a role to play in history.

The appearance of utopian communities and socialist societies throughout the early nineteenth century did call repeatedly into question some of the assumptions of the American ideology, especially those having to do with individualism. The founders of the experimental colonies (Robert Owen, Frances Wright, Albert Brisbane, and others) spoke of communalism, mental freedom, the integration of physical and intellectual work, and the discovery of a common good. Socialists called for a more humane and rational social arrangement and for critical insight into what Orestes Brownson described as the “crisis as to the relation of wealth and labor.” He said, “It is useless to shut our eyes to the fact and, like the ostrich, fancy ourselves secure because we have so concealed our heads that we see not the danger.” Important as their insights were, such people were addressing themselves to educated humanitarians whose good offices might be enlisted in improving and perfecting mankind. Critical though they were of exploitation, greed, and the division of labor, they did not speak of engaging the exploited ones in their own quests for emancipation. No particular pedagogy seemed required, and none was proposed, except within the specific contexts of utopian communities. Once a decent community or society was created, it was believed, the members would be educated in accord with its ideals.

There were, it is true, efforts to invent liberating ways of teaching for children in the larger society, although most were undertaken outside the confines of the

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common schools. Elizabeth Peabody and Bronson Alcott, among others, through “conversations” with actual persons in classrooms, toiled to inspire self-knowledge, creativity, and communion. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, they were all hostile to the “joint-stock company” that society seemed to have become, a company “in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.” Like Emerson as well, they were all hostile to blind conformity, to the ethos of “Trade” that created false relations among human beings, to the chilling routines of institutional life. It is the case that they were largely apolitical; but their restiveness in the face of an imperfect society led them to find various modes of defiance. Those at Brook Farm tried to find a communal way of challenging the social order: Fuller found feminism; Emerson, ways of speaking intended to rouse his listeners to create their own meanings, to think for themselves.

The most potent exemplar of all this was Henry David Thoreau, deliberately addressing readers “in the first person,” provoking them to use their intellects to “burrow” through the taken-for-granted, the conventional, the genteel. He wanted them to reject their own self-exploitation, to refuse what we would now call false consciousness and artificial needs. He connected the “wide-awakening” to actual work in the world, to projects. He knew that people needed to be released from internal and external constraints if they were to shape and make and articulate, to leave their own thumbprints on the world. He understood about economic tyranny on the railroads and in the factories, and he knew that it could make political freedom meaningless. His writing and his abolitionism constituted his protests; both Walden and On Civil Disobedience function as pedagogies in the sense that they seemed aimed at raising the consciousness of those willing to pay heed. His concern, unquestionably, was with his “private state” rather than with a public space; but he helped create the alternative tradition in the United States at a moment of expansion and materialism. And there are strands of his thinking, even today, that can be woven into a critical pedagogy. Whether building his house, hoeing his beans, hunting woodchucks, or finding patterns in the ice melting on the wall, he was intent on naming his lived world.

There were more overtly rebellious figures among escaped slaves, abolitionists, and campaigners for women’s rights; but the language of people like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sarah Grimke, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton was very much the language of those who carried on the original demand for independence. The power they sought, however, was not the power to expand and control. For them—slaves, oppressed women, freedmen and freedwomen—the idea of freedom as endowment solved little; they had to take action to achieve their freedom, which they saw as the power to act and to choose. Thomas Jefferson, years before, had provided the metaphor of polis for Americans, signifying a space where persons could come together to bring into being the “worldly structure” spoken of above. Great romantics like Emerson and Thoreau gave voice to the passion for autonomy and authenticity. Black leaders, including Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, the Reverend Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, not only

engaged dialectically with the resistant environment in their pursuit of freedom; they invented languages and pedagogies to enable people to overcome internalized oppression. Struggling for their rights in widening public spheres, they struggled also against what the Reverend King called “nobodiness” as they marched and engaged in a civil disobedience grounded in experiences of the past. Du Bois was in many ways exemplary when he spoke of the “vocation” of twentieth-century youth. Attacking the industrial system “which creates poverty and the children of poverty . . . ignorance and disease and crime,” he called for “young women and young men of devotion to lift again the banner of humanity and to walk toward a civilization which will be free and intelligent, which will be healthy and unafraid.”14 The words hold intimations of what Paulo Freire was to say years later when he, too, spoke of the “vocation” of oppressed people, one he identified with “humanization.”15 And the very notion of walking “toward a civilization” suggests the sense of future possibility without which a pedagogy must fail.

Public school teachers, subordinated as they were in the solidifying educational bureaucracies, seldom spoke the language of resistance or transcendence. It is well to remember, however, the courageous ones who dared to go south after the Civil War in the freedmen’s schools. Not only did they suffer persecution in their efforts to invent their own “pedagogy of the oppressed”—or of the newly liberated; they often fought for their own human rights against male missionary administrators and even against the missionary concept itself.16 It is well to remember, too, the transformation of the missionary impulse into settlement house and social work by women like Jane Addams and Lillian Wald. Committing themselves to support systems and adult education for newcomers to the country and for the neighborhood poor, they supported union organization with an explicitly political awareness of what they were about in a class-ridden society. They were able, more often than not, to avoid what Freire calls “malefic generosity” and develop the critical empathy needed for enabling the “other” to find his or her own way.

For all the preoccupations with control, for all the schooling “to order,” as David Nasaw puts it,17 there were always people hostile to regimentation and manipulation, critical of constraints of consciousness. Viewed from a contemporary perspective, for example, Colonel Francis Parker’s work with teachers at the Cook County Normal School at the end of the nineteenth century placed a dramatic emphasis on freeing children from competitive environments and compulsions. He encouraged the arts and spontaneous activities; he encouraged shared work. He believed that, if democratized, the school could become “the one central means by which the great problem of human liberty is to be worked out.”18 Trying to help teachers understand the natural learning processes of the young, he was specifically concerned with resisting the corruptions and distortions of an increasingly corporate America. In the Emersonian tradition, he envisioned a sound community

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life emerging from the liberation and regeneration of individuals. And indeed, there were many libertarians and romantic progressives following him in the presumption that a society of truly free individuals would be a humane and sustaining one.

This confidence may account for the contradictions in the American critical heritage, especially as it informed education within and outside the schools. Structural changes, if mentioned at all, were expected to follow the emancipation of persons (or the appropriate molding of persons); and the schools, apparently depoliticized, were relied upon to effect the required reform and bring about a better world. If individual children were properly equipped for the work they had to do, it was believed, and trained to resist the excesses of competition, there would be no necessity for political action to transform economic relations. The street children, the tenement children, those afflicted and crippled by poverty and social neglect, were often thrust into invisibility because their very existence denied that claim.

John Dewey was aware of such young people, certainly in Chicago, where he saw them against his own memories of face-to-face community life in Burlington, Vermont. Convinced of the necessity for cooperation and community support if individual powers were to be released, he tried in some sense to recreate the Burlington of his youth in the “miniature community” he hoped to see in each classroom. In those classrooms as well, there would be continuing and open communication, the kind of learning that would feed into practice, and inquiries arising out of questioning in the midst of life. Critical thinking modeled on the scientific method, active and probing intelligence: these, for Dewey, were the stuff of a pedagogy that would equip the young to resist fixities and stock responses, repressive and deceiving authorities. Unlike the libertarians and romantics, he directed attention to the “social medium” in which the individual growth occurred and to the mutuality of significant concerns.

Even as we question the small-town paradigm in Dewey’s treatment of community, even as we wonder about his use of the scientific model for social inquiry, we still ought to be aware of Dewey’s sensitivity to what would later be called the “hegemony,” or the ideological control, implicit in the dominant point of view of a given society. He understood, for instance, the “religious aureole” protecting institutions like the Supreme Court, the Constitution, and private property. He was aware that the principles and assumptions that gave rise even to public school curricula were so taken for granted that they were considered wholly natural, fundamentally unquestionable. In The Public and Its Problems, he called what we think of as ideological control a “social pathology,” which “works powerfully against effective inquiry into social institutions and conditions.” He went on, “It manifests itself in a thousand ways: in querulousness, in impotent drifting, in uneasy snatching at distractions, in idealization of the long established, in a facile optimism assumed as a cloak, in riotous glorification of things ‘as they are,’ in intimidation of all dissenters — ways which depress and dissipate thought all the more effectually because they operate with subtle and unconscious pervasiveness.”

A method of

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social inquiry had to be developed, he said, to reduce the “pathology” that led to
denial and to acquiescence in the status quo. For all his commitment to scientific
method, however, he stressed the “human function” of the physical sciences and
the importance of seeing them in human terms. Inquiry, communication, “con­
temporary and quotidian” knowledge of consequence for shared social life: these
fed into his conceptions of pedagogy.

His core concern for individual fulfillment was rooted in a recognition that ful­
fillment could only be attained in the midst of “associated” or intersubjective life.
Troubled as we must be fifty years later by the “eclipse of the public,” he saw as
one of the prime pedagogical tasks the education of an “articulate public.” For him,
the public sphere came into being when the consequences of certain private trans­
actions created a common interest among people, one that demanded deliberate
and cooperative action. Using somewhat different language, we might say that a
public emerges when people come freely together in speech and action to take care
of something that needs caring for, to repair some evident deficiency in their com­
mon world. We might think of homelessness as a consequence of the private deal­
ings of landlords, an arms build-up as a consequence of corporate decisions, racial
exclusion as a consequence of a private property-holder’s choice. And then we
might think of what it would mean to educate to the end of caring for something
and taking action to repair. That would be public education informed by a critical
pedagogy; and it would weave together a number of American themes.

Certain of these themes found a new articulation in the 1930s, during the publi­
cation of The Social Frontier at Teachers College. An educational journal, it was ad­
dressed “to the task of considering the broad role of education in advancing the
welfare and interests of the great masses of the people who do the work of society
—those who labor on farms and ships and in the mines, shops, and factories of
the world.”21 Dewey was among the contributors; and, although it had little im­
pact on New Deal policy or even on specific educational practices, the magazine
did open out to a future when more and more “liberals” would take a critical view
of monopoly capitalism and industrial culture with all their implications for a sup­
posedly “common” school.

In some respect, this represented a resurgence of the Enlightenment faith. Ra­
tional insight and dialogue, linked to scientific intelligence, were expected to re­
duce inequities and exploitation. A reconceived educational effort would advance
the welfare and interests of the masses. Ironically, it was mainly in the private
schools that educational progressivism had an influence. Critical discussions took
place there; attention was paid to the posing of worthwhile problems arising out
of the tensions and uncertainties of everyday life; social intelligence was nurtured;
social commitments affirmed. In the larger domains of public education, where
school people were struggling to meet the challenges of mass education, the em­
phasis tended to be on “life-adjustment,” preparation for future life and work, and
“physical, mental, and emotional health.”

There is irony in the fact that the progressive social vision, with its integrating
of moral with epistemic concerns, its hopes for a social order transformed by the
schools, was shattered by the Second World War. The terrible revelations at
Auschwitz and Hiroshima demonstrated what could happen when the old dream

of knowledge as power was finally fulfilled. Science was viewed as losing its innocence in its wedding to advanced technology. Bureaucracy, with all its impersonality and literal irresponsibility, brought with it almost unrecognizable political and social realities. It took time, as is well known, for anything resembling a progressive vision to reconstitute itself; there was almost no recognition of the role now being played by "instrumental rationality," or what it would come to signify. On the educational side, after the war, there were efforts to remake curriculum in the light of new inquiries into knowledge structures in the disciplinary fields. On the side of the general public, there were tax revolts and rejections of the critical and the controversial, even as the McCarthyite subversion was occurring in the larger world. Only a few years after the Sputnik panic, with the talent searches it occasioned, and the frantic encouragement of scientific training, the long-invisible poor of America suddenly took center stage. The Civil Rights Movement, taking form since the Supreme Court decision on integration in 1954, relit flames of critical pedagogy, as it set people marching to achieve their freedom and their human rights.

Viewed from the perspective of a critical tradition in this country, the 1960s appear to have brought all the latent tendencies to the surface. The Civil Rights Movement, alive with its particular traditions of liberation, provided the spark; the war in Vietnam gave a lurid illumination to the system's deficiencies: its incipient violence; its injustices; its racism; its indifference to public opinion and demand. The short-lived effort to reform education and provide compensation for damages done by poverty and discrimination could not halt the radical critique of America's schools. And that many-faceted critique—libertarian, Marxist, romantic, democratic—variously realized the critical potentialities of American pedagogies. Without an Emerson or a Thoreau or a Parker, there would not have been a Free School movement or a "deschooling" movement. Without a Du Bois, there would not have been liberation or storefront schools. Without a social reformist tradition, there would have been no Marxist voices asking (as, for instance, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis did) for a "mass-based organization of working people powerfully articulating a clear alternative to corporate capitalism as the basis for a progressive educational system." Without a Dewey, there would have been little concern for "participatory democracy," for "consensus," for the reconstitution of a public sphere.

Yes, the silence fell at the end of the following decade; privatization increased, along with consumerism and cynicism and the attrition of the public space. We became aware of living in what Europeans called an "administered society"; we became conscious of technicism and positivism and of the one-dimensionality Herbert Marcuse described. Popular culture, most particularly as embodied in the media, was recognized (with the help of the critical theorist Theodor Adorno) as a major source of mystification. The schools were recognized as agents of "cul-

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22 Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).
tural reproduction," oriented to a differential distribution of knowledge. Numer­
ous restive educational thinkers, seeking new modes of articulating the impacts of
ideological control and manipulation, turned towards European neo-Marxist
scholarship for clues to a critical pedagogy. In an American tradition, they were
concerned for the individual, for the subject, which late Marxism appeared to
have ignored; and the humanist dimension of Frankfurt School philosophies held
an unexpected appeal. Moreover, what with its concern for critical consciousness
and communicative competence, Frankfurt School thinking held echoes of the En­
lightenment faith; and, in some profound way, it was recognized.

There is, of course, an important sense in which the Frankfurt School has reap­
propriated philosophical traditions (Kantian, Hegelian, phenomenological, psy­
chological, psychoanalytical) which are ours as well or which, at least, have fed
our intellectual past. But it also seems necessary to hold in mind the fact that Euro­
pean memories are not our memories. The sources of European critical theory are
to be found in responses to the destruction of the Workers' Councils after the First
World War, the decline of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Stalinism, the spread
of fascism, the Holocaust, the corruptions of social democracy. As climactic as any
contemporary insight was the realization that reason (viewed as universal in an En­
lightenment sense) could be used to justify the application of technical expertise
in torture and extermination. Europeans saw a connection between this and the
rationalization of society by means of bureaucracy, and in the separating off of
moral considerations long viewed as intrinsic to civilized life. The intimations of
all this could be seen in European literature for many years: in Dostoevsky's and
Kafka's renderings of human beings as insects; in Musil's anticipations of the col­
lapse of European orders; in Camus's pestilence, in Sartre's nausea, in the Diony­
sian and bestial shapes haunting the structures of the arts. We have had a tragic
literature, a critical literature, in the United States. We need only recall Twain,
Melville, Crane, Wharton, Hemingway, Fitzgerald. But it has been a literature
rendered tragic by a consciousness of a dream betrayed, of a New World cor­
rupted by exploitation and materialism and greed. In background memory, there
are images of Jeffersonian agrarianism, of public spheres, of democratic and free­
swinging communities. We do not find these in European literature, nor in the
writings of the critical theorists.

One of the few explicit attempts to articulate aspects of the Western tradition
for educators has been the courageous work of Freire, who stands astride both
hemispheres. He has been the pioneer of a pedagogy informed by both Marxist
and existential-phenomenological thought; his conception of critical reflectiveness
has reawakened the themes of a tradition dating back to Plato and forward to the
theologies of liberation that have taken hold in oppressed areas of the Western
world. His background awareness, however, and that of the largely Catholic peas­
ants with whom he has worked, are not that of most North Americans. It must
be granted that his own culture and education transcend his Brazilian origins and
make him something of a world citizen when it comes to the life of ideas. Like his
European colleagues, however, he reaches back to predecessors other than Jeffer­
sion and Emerson and Thoreau and William James and Dewey; his social vision
is not that of our particular democracy. This is not intended as criticism, but as

a reminder that a critical pedagogy relevant to the United States today must go beyond—calling on different memories, repossessing another history.

We live, after all, in dark times, times with little historical memory of any kind. There are vast dislocations in industrial towns, erosions of trade unions; there is little sign of class consciousness today. Our great cities are burnished on the surfaces, building high technologies, displaying astonishing consumer goods. And on the side streets, in the crevices, in the burnt-out neighborhoods, there are the rootless, the dependent, the sick, the permanently unemployed. There is little sense of agency, even among the brightly successful; there is little capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise.

Where education is concerned, the discourse widens, and the promises multiply. The official reform reports, ranging from *A Nation at Risk* to the Carnegie Forum's *A Nation Prepared*, call for a restructuring of schools and of teacher education to the end of raising the levels of literacy in accord with the requirements of an economy based on high technology. The mass of students in the schools, including the one third who will be “minorities,” are to be enabled to develop “higher order skills” in preparation for “the unexpected, the nonroutine world they will face in the future.” The implicit promise is that, if the quality of teachers is improved (and “excellent” teachers rewarded and recognized), the majority of young people will be equipped for meaningful participation in an advanced knowledge-based economy wholly different from the mass-production economy familiar in the past.

On the other hand, there are predictions that we will never enjoy full employment in this country, that few people stand any real chance of securing meaningful work. If the military juggernaut keeps rolling on, draining funds and support from social utilities, daycare centers, arts institutions, schools and universities, we will find ourselves devoid of all those things that might make life healthier, gentler, more inviting and more challenging. At once we are reminded (although not by the authors of the educational reports) of the dread of nuclear destruction (or of Chernobyls, or of Bhopal) that lies below the surface of apparent hope for the future. This dread, whether repressed or confronted, leads numbers of people to a sense of fatalism and futility with respect to interventions in the social world. For others, it leads to a sad and often narcissistic focus on the “now.” For still others, it evokes denial and accompanying extravagances: consumerism increases; a desire for heightened sensation, for vicarious violence, grows. And for many millions, it makes peculiarly appealing the talk of salvation broadcast by evangelists and television preachers; it makes seductive the promise of Armageddon.

As young people find it increasingly difficult to project a long-range future, intergenerational continuity becomes problematic. So does the confidence in education as a way of keeping the culture alive, or of initiating newcomers into learning communities, or of providing the means for pursuing a satisfying life. Uncertain whether we can share or constitute a common world, except in its most fabricated

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and trivialized form, we wonder what the great conversation can now include and whether it is worth keeping alive. Michael Oakeshott spoke eloquently of that conversation, "begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries." He said it involves passages of argument and inquiry, going on in public and in private, that it is an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure. . . ." Education, for him, "is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation," which gives character in the end "to every human activity and utterance." We know now how many thousands of voices have been excluded from that conversation over the years. We know how, with its oppositions and hierarchies, it demeaned. As we listen to the prescriptions raining down for "common learnings" (which may or may not include the traditions of people of color, feminist criticism and literature, Eastern philosophies) and "cultural literacy," we cannot but wonder how those of us in education can renew and expand the conversation, reconstitute what we can call a common world.

Yes, there are insights into humane teaching in the latest reports; but, taking the wide view, we find mystification increasing, along with the speechlessness. We have learned about the diverse ways we Americans interpret our traditions: about those who identify with the old individualism, those who yearn for old communities, those who seek new modes of justice, those who want to lose themselves in a cause. We know something about the persistence of a commitment to freedom, variously defined, and to the idea of equity. At once, we are bound to confront such extremes as a moral majority usurping talk of intimacy and family values, while neoliberals seek out technocratic, depersonalized solutions to quantified problems and speak a cost-benefit language beyond the reach of those still striving for public dialogue.

People have never, despite all that, had such vast amounts of information transmitted to them—not merely about murders and accidents and scandals, but about crucial matters on which public decisions may some day have to be made: nuclear energy, space vehicles, racism, homelessness, life-support systems, chemotherapy, joblessness, terrorism, abused children, fanatics, saints. There are whole domains of information that arouse frustration or pointless outrage. All we need to do is think of the persecution of the sanctuary-movement leaders, of children living in shelters, of the contras in Honduras, of adolescent suicides, of overcrowded jails. At the same time, no population has ever been so deliberately entertained, amused, and soothed into avoidance, denial, and neglect. We hear the cacophonous voices of special interest groups; we hear of discrete acts of sacrifice and martyrdom; we seldom hear of intentionally organized collaborative action to repair what is felt to be missing, or known to be wrong.

Complacency and malaise; upward mobility and despair. Sometimes we detect feelings of shame and helplessness perceived as personal failure. To be dependent, to be on welfare, is to be certified as in some manner deviant or irresponsible since good Americans are expected to fend for themselves. Even as oppressed peasants

internalize their oppressors' images of them as helpless creatures, so unsuccessful Americans (young or old) internalize the system's description of them as ineffec­tual. They are unable to live up to the culture's mandate to control their own lives and contribute to the productivity of the whole. Our institutional responses are ordinarily technical (and we are drawn to technical solutions out of benevolence, as well as out of helplessness). Yet we know that to think mainly in terms of tech­niques or cures or remedies is often to render others and the earth itself as objects to be acted upon, treated, controlled, or used. It is to distance what we believe has to be done (efficiently, effectively) from our own existential projects, from our own becoming among other incomplete and questing human beings. It is to re­press or deny the prereflective, tacit understandings that bind us together in a cul­ture and connect us to our history.

Having said all this, I must ask again what a critical pedagogy might mean for those of us who teach the young at this peculiar and menacing time. Perhaps we might begin by releasing our imaginations and summoning up the traditions of freedom in which most of us were reared. We might try to make audible again the recurrent calls for justice and equality. We might reactivate the resistance to materialism and conformity. We might even try to inform with meaning the desire to educate “all the children” in a legitimately “common” school. Considering the technicism and the illusions of the time, we need to recognize that what we single out as most deficient and oppressive is in part a function of perspectives created by our past. It is a past in which our subjectivities are embedded, whether we are conscious of it or not. We have reached a point when that past must be reinter­preted and reincarnated in the light of what we have learned.

We understand that a mere removal of constraints or a mere relaxation of con­trols will not ensure the emergence of free and creative human beings. We under­stand that the freedom we cherish is not an endowment, that it must be achieved through dialectical engagements with the social and economic obstacles we find standing in our way, those we have to learn to name. We understand that a plural­ity of American voices must be attended to, that a plurality of life-stories must be heeded if a meaningful power is to spring up through a new “binding and promis­ing, combining and covenanting.” We understand that the Enlightenment heri­tage must be repossessed and reinterpreted, so that we can overcome the positiv­ism that awaits on one side, the empty universalism on the other. But we cannot and ought not escape our own history and memories, not if we are to keep alive the awarenesses that ground our identities and connect us to the persons turning for fulfillment to our schools.

We cannot negate the fact of power. But we can undertake a resistance, a reaching out towards becoming persons among other persons, for all the talk of human resources, for all the orienting of education to the economy. To engage with our students as persons is to affirm our own incompleteness, our consciousness of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be tapped, possibilities still to be opened and pursued. At once, it is to rediscover the value of care, to reach back to experi­ences of caring and being cared for (as Nel Noddings writes) as sources of an ethi­cal ideal. It is, Noddings says, an ideal to be nurtured through “dialogue, practice,
and confirmation,\textsuperscript{32} processes much akin to those involved in opening a public sphere. We have to find out how to open such spheres, such spaces, where a better state of things can be imagined; because it is only through the projection of a better social order that we can perceive the gaps in what exists and try to transform and repair. I would like to think that this can happen in classrooms, in corridors, in schoolyards, in the streets around.

I would like to think of teachers moving the young into their own interpretations of their lives and their lived worlds, opening wider and wider perspectives as they do so. I would like to see teachers ardent in their efforts to make the range of symbol systems available to the young for the ordering of experience, even as they maintain regard for their vernaculars. I would like to see teachers tapping the spectrum of intelligences, encouraging multiple readings of written texts and readings of the world.

In “the shadow of silent majorities,” then, as teachers learning along with those we try to provoke to learn, we may be able to inspire hitherto unheard voices. We may be able to empower people to rediscover their own memories and articulate them in the presence of others, whose space they can share. Such a project demands the capacity to unveil and disclose. It demands the exercise of imagination, enlivened by works of art, by situations of speaking and making. Perhaps we can at last devise reflective communities in the interstices of colleges and schools. Perhaps we can invent ways of freeing people to feel and express indignation, to break through the opaqueness, to refuse the silences. We need to teach in such a way as to arouse passion now and then; we need a new camaraderie, a new en masse. These are dark and shadowed times, and we need to live them, standing before one another, open to the world.
