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### A Critical Notice On:

McLaren, Peter L. and Giarelli, James M. (Eds.) (1995). *Critical theory and educational research*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 332 pages.

Smyth, John (Ed.) (1995). *Critical discourses on teacher development*. Toronto: OISE Press, 231 pages.

McLaren, Peter (1997). *Revolutionary multiculturalism: Pedagogies of dissent for the new millennium*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 306 pages.

## Critical Paths in Pedagogy, Research and Development

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**ABSTRACT:** *These three books, while differing somewhat in focus, style and substance, have in common a concern to uphold critical approaches to the theory and practice of education. Addressing issues of pedagogy, research and professional development, these texts pose a challenge to technocratic, neoliberal and conservative discourses in the educational sphere. This essay reinforces the importance of critical work in the academy and the teaching profession, but draws attention to the problem of theoretical and personal "infighting" among left scholars. The importance of strategic alliances in the face of a (more) united, and overwhelmingly dominant, right is stressed.*

**KEYWORDS:** Critical pedagogy, educational research, teacher development.

At first glance, both the timing of this essay and the combination of books under review might seem somewhat odd. Two of the three texts were published three years ago, and, on the face of it, these books address quite distinct topics. One is a (largely) sole-authored book; the other two are edited collections. One text tackles the question of teacher development; another deals with educational research; and the third examines

multicultural pedagogies. I hope to show that these three volumes, far from being either unconnected to each other or outdated, are related in important ways to one another and highly relevant to pressing contemporary concerns. In short, these books provide a timely reminder of the importance of being *critical* in the educational sphere.

But critical in what sense? About or against what? In relation to whom? For what purpose(s)? The essays in these texts advance rigorous theoretical and practical challenges to four major strands of educational thought. First, they provide a solid theoretical foundation for critically engaging traditionalist attacks on "political correctness" in the academy. Second, the essays stand in direct opposition to neoliberal policies and practices in education. The reduction of education to a contractual process involving an exchange between supposedly self-interested "providers" (institutions) and rational, utility-maximising, perpetually choosing "consumers" (students) finds a clear antidote in the pages of these volumes. Third, on a closely related level, the authors under review argue against technocratic models of teacher education, professional development and curriculum implementation. Finally, many of the essays in these volumes speak -- in both form and content -- against the decontextualizing and depoliticizing effects of positivist approaches to investigating and explaining educational questions, issues and problems.

These oppositional voices are raised in different ways in the three books. The McLaren and Giarelli collection comprises fifteen chapters, housed between two Forewords (one by Yvonna Lincoln, the other by Thomas Popkewitz), an Introduction, and an Afterword (by Colin Lankshear). The book brings together contributions from leading critical educationists in the United States, Brazil, Malta, Britain, Singapore, and Australia. Notions of power, discourse and ideology figure prominently in these essays. Nicholas Burbules delineates five forms of ideology-critique, teases out the epistemological and political assumptions in each view, and offers a pedagogical perspective as an alternative to two dichotomous positions. Against both the view that "ideologies can be criticized only from the standpoint of a rational, scientific, objective stance", and the idea that "everything is ideological", a pedagogical perspective "claims that there are better and worse systems to choose from and that their respective merits can be assessed *reasonably*; that is, in light of a bounded, contextual process of mutual interchange that relies on standards that are not granted absolute status, but which nevertheless differentiate some methods of argumentation and persuasion as preferable to others" (p.66). Foucault provides the theoretical framework for analysing power relations in educational research (David Jones and

Stephen Ball) and "school improvement" policies (David Jones). Drawing on insights from Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and Freire, Carlos Torres discusses the difficulties of enacting participatory approaches to action research in societies where positivist, non-participatory and vulgar empiricist paradigms have been dominant. Paulo Freire, in a dialogue with Moacir Gadotti, argues against Stalinist and Nazist ideological tendencies in favour of a position of "substantive democracy". Wendy Kohli provides a fascinating account of complex, sometimes contradictory strands of academic research in the Soviet Union, drawing attention to a latent positivism in some elements of Marx's work and a problematic appeal for "apolitical" critique among scholars in the psychological institutes affiliated with the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Several modes of qualitative research activity -- ethnography (Ronald Sultana, Peter McLaren, Lois Weis), action research (Joe Kincheloe, Carlos Torres, Phil Carspecken) and oral history approaches (Kathleen Weiler) -- are on display in this volume. In some cases these research methodologies have been employed in studies discussed by the authors, while in others they serve as topics for theoretical inquiry.

*Critical discourses on teacher development* is similarly wide-ranging, with essays by educators from Australia, Canada, Britain, Malta and the United States. Some obvious points of overlap between the two edited collections can be identified. Colin Lankshear's concern with questions of "empowerment" in the Afterword for the McLaren and Giarelli volume is shared by Noreen Garman, who, in the context of a discussion of discourses on school reform, distinguishes between "empowerment-by-authorization" and "empowerment-by-enablement". She argues against the former, pointing out some of the ways in which teachers are systematically *disempowered* by teacher improvement schemes. Like Freire, Anthony Hartnett, Wilf Carr and Michael Naish ground their view of critical educational practice in a democratic ideal, and reinforce the importance of understanding the ethical, political and historical dimensions of teaching. As in the McLaren and Giarelli collection, a number of contributors to Smyth's book recall daily experiences -- either their own, or those of students and teachers with whom they have worked -- in research and teaching. Jesse Goodman uncovers some of the epistemological, moral and political issues a group of researchers confronted when studying a school attempting "bottom-up" teacher development strategies. Ivor Goodson argues for in-depth analyses of teachers' lives and work in place of the somewhat narrower focus on "teacher practice". Ronald Sultana, an academic from Malta with essays in both of the edited collections under examination here, shows how he

uses case-studies and a reworked form of Luther's catechism in allowing teachers the opportunity to examine educational issues (e.g. streaming) from a critical point of view. Jennifer Gore and Kenneth Zeichner adopt a Foucauldian perspective in arguing that the emancipatory claims made on behalf of action research cannot be sustained.

*Revolutionary multiculturalism* weaves an eclectic series of essays -- three of which are co-authored (one with Henry Giroux, another with Zeuz Leonardo, and the other with Kris Gutierrez) -- and an interview (with McLaren, by Gert Biesta and Siebren Miedema) into a multi-layered account of critical and multicultural approaches to writing, research, teaching and learning. McLaren applies insights from the work of Freire in addressing the politics of higher education in the United States, and, in his essay with Giroux, explores the relationship between language and power via an account of critical literacy and a pedagogy for cyborgs. Jean Baudrillard's ideas are studied in some detail in the chapter with Leonardo, and the role of the ethnographer -- also investigated in his edited collection with Giarelli -- is carefully examined. The complex relations of power -- the coexistence of oppressive structures and practices with creative and resistant impulses -- in a multicultural and racist world are theorised in chapters 5 ("Gangsta pedagogy and ghettocentricity: The hip-hop nation as counterpublic sphere") and 6 ("Unthinking whiteness, rethinking democracy: Critical citizenship in gringolandia"), among other places.

Such critical voices, I want to suggest, are vital in an educational world increasingly dominated by political conservatives, powerful business people, and neoliberal bureaucrats. Collectively, these groups -- against whom many of the contributors to the edited collections develop their own views -- constitute a formidable force in changing not just education but also many other domains of social life. They are, for the most part, self-consciously on, or strategically aligned with, the right wing of the political spectrum. By contrast, almost all authors in the books under review would, I suspect, want to either explicitly situate themselves on the left or at least express their discomfort with rightist positions. Herein, though, lies an important problem. In many countries of the Western world -- Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand among them -- the right, whether by accident or design (probably both), has emerged as a relatively cohesive force in effecting political, economic and educational change. Those on the left, on the other hand, have often been unable to put their differences aside in forging unified oppositional movements. This phenomenon provides the basis for my critical response to the books under discussion.

Smyth's comments in his Introduction to *Critical discourses on teacher development* are instructive as a starting point. Summarizing some of the key features of competency-based models of teaching and teacher development, Smyth observes:

All of the creations of the state alluded to above derive from the same conservative educational think tanks. The unanimity of approach in countries as different and as widely dispersed as the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand is so uncanny as to raise questions about whether in both diagnosis and prescription there has been some "invisible hand" at work crafting and replicating. The answer, I suspect, is that this is partly the case, but it is also true that all western economies encountered crises that required massive restructurings, as a result of the 1970s' oil shock and the uncontrollable inflation that followed, at much the same time. International agencies like the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD have certainly been important mediators as economies have sought both explanations and ways of extricating themselves from the bog. Muscular measures aimed at teachers and schools have been an extremely convenient rallying point for besieged governments at a loss to explain what is happening or what needs to be done (pp.4-5).

Smyth makes reference to a paper by Steve Mahary, an intellectual currently serving as a Labour member of the New Zealand parliament. Mahary identifies a crisis in the purpose of public education. He argues that "the people who are driving education policy [in New Zealand] have little sympathy with our tradition of public education. They prefer a system based on choice and competition; the consumer and the market" (cited in Smyth, p.2). A battle is being waged between those who view a nation's inhabitants as consumers with purchasing power and those who speak of citizens with rights under a social contract with the state. This is a struggle, with an important bearing on teaching and learning (among other social activities), over "whose view of reality is to prevail" (Smyth, p.2). At present, there is no question about who is winning this battle: the policies and practices of the New Right -- grounded in assumptions about the value of competitive individualism and the primacy of the market -- have, for more than a decade, held sway. Placing blame on teachers for social and economic difficulties is not a *rational* exercise but a *political* one. In this sense, the very idea of genuine debate between the right and



the left has been squashed: the pragmatic and powerful on the right have, to date, been able to proceed with a neoliberal reform agenda *irrespective* of arguments for or against their ideological position and political policies.

In one of the last books he wrote before his death in May 1997, Paulo Freire discussed, with uncommon clarity, some of the key differences between political groups on the left and the right. In *Pedagogy of the heart*, published posthumously, Freire has this to say:

We speak of *the lefts* in the plural and *the right* in the singular. The singularity of the right has to do with the ease with which its different currents unify before danger. Union among the left is always difficult and cumbersome. While the right is only sectarian against progressive thought and practice, the "lefts" are sectarian among themselves. If there are three or four factions within a leftist party, each believes itself to be the only one truly progressive, and they all fight among themselves (Freire, 1997, p.76).

Freire's belief that differences among progressive groups must be overcome if the left is to be effective against the overwhelming dominance of the (more) unified and powerful right is justified on ethical grounds:

The possibility of discerning, comparing, choosing, programming, performing, evaluating, committing, taking risks, makes us beings of decision and, thus, ethical beings. For this reason, fighting against discrimination is an ethical imperative. Whether discriminated against for being black, female, homosexual, working class, Brazilian, Arabic, Jewish -- regardless of the reason -- we have the obligation to fight against discrimination. Discrimination offends us all, for it hurts the substantiveness of our being (Freire, 1997, p.87).

Of course, as I hinted earlier, it must not be forgotten that those on the right have typically enjoyed some enormous advantages given imbalances in the distribution of resources. The amount of money available through conservative think tanks and foundations for supporting rightist attacks on multiculturalism and political correctness dwarfs the funding obtainable by left scholars who wish to defend curriculum reforms in higher education (see Messer-Davidow, 1993). Yet, even if strategic

unity is not a sufficient condition for overcoming the dominance of the right, it is sometimes necessary and, as Freire's comments intimate, justifiable on ethical grounds. "Collective action", "solidarity" and "unity" are, for many who oppose right wing policies and practices, now "dirty words": they recall an old-style unionism based on an oppressive glossing over of differences. Appeals to universalist solutions to right wing hegemony will, it is believed, simply reproduce their own equally oppressive practices. Freire's point is, however, surely salient here. The left may fight over the meaning of "discrimination" (and "exploitation", "oppression", etc.), but there is at least agreement that discrimination is undesirable. It is a matter, at times, of finding reasons to emphasise agreement -- no matter how minimal this may be -- over disagreement for the purposes of mounting an effective political strategy.

Ironically, part of the explanation for the lack of unity lies in one of the key strengths of left scholarship: the long tradition of rigorous criticism, involving an interrogation of voices both external and internal to left-wing politics. Indeed, left-leaning scholarship has in large measure defined itself by its willingness to constantly put its assumptions to the test. Constant critical reflection, arguably one of the pivotal characteristics of living a good scholarly life, will inevitably lead to frequent revisions -- and sometimes to the complete abandonment -- of positions vigorously supported in the past. This tradition of critical scholarship needs to be upheld and defended. Universities have, in theory (and sometimes, as in New Zealand, at law), been required to act as the "critic and conscience" of society. This is a role many academics on the left have taken very seriously. Others reject the notion that any group ought to, or could, serve as the "conscience" for another. Often, the question has never made it to the debating agenda: left scholars have been too busy fighting each other -- at academic conferences, in university departments, and within scholarly journals and books -- over matters of theory and (inter)personal politics. Thus, despite being united by their concern with power relations in education and wider society, postmodernists and Marxists are frequently unable to go beyond their theoretical differences in finding sufficient common ground to collectively oppose the *exercising* of power by the right. To *others* -- interested observers in the media as well as conservative academics -- the similarities between postmodernists, feminists, Marxists, and multiculturalists are greater than their differences. Giving emphasis to points in common does not have to imply the abandonment or (illusory) "overcoming" of difference(s); to the contrary, unity may be established precisely on the basis of a shared commitment to respecting and upholding difference(s).



The plight of the left is addressed directly by Lynda Stone in her essay on feminist educational research in the McLaren and Giarelli collection. Stone employs a thought experiment as a device for opening up theoretical and practical questions about the politics of difference. She imagines that at her disposal is "a sizeable grant to use to bring a blue-ribbon group (say fifty people) to an all-expenses paid institute in 'paradise'. Our task ... is to develop a working plan to undertake a research project in feminist critical education targeted for high schools in North America" (p.145). The problem then becomes one of considering how the project might be "defined and bounded" and who might be invited. Stone observes that educational "reform" is typically conceived in rightist terms, with calls by those on the left for structural change receiving little attention outside the academy. "What has occurred", she says, is this: "a penchant for critique has itself become individuated and has fractured a left unity. If squabbles sometimes occur among researchers in the center, stronger disagreements -- often personal ones -- take place among members of the left". On the other hand, "at times when politics is put aside and wholesome theoretical disagreement is explored, a healthy pluralism has resulted" (p.147). It is clear from Stone's account that while feminism has been marginalised in many academic departments, critical theory has often been co-opted by those who have little knowledge of its theoretical roots and no commitment to critical politics. Stone argues that left scholars need to find agreement on some common ground. Alliances against the forces of cooption can be formed, and left scholars can cease making enemies of one another. Maintaining significant scholarly differences can be a source of theoretical strength rather than a divisive force. Stone advocates the recovery of a form of "common memory" and a language of "collective translation". The former involves, among other elements, continued

... attention to opposing sexist oppression and upholding sisterhood, ... valuing of critique out of diversity, ... recognition of central 'historical' concerns -- issues of body and voice, of public life and equality, of processes of collective understanding and action, ... attention to opposing hierarchical domination based on class (race and gender), remembrance of structural roots and of [the] centrality of history and ideology, ... understanding of a dialectical tradition, ... [and] utilization of languages of critique and possibility (p.150).

The process of collective translation entails a reapproachment between critical theorists and feminists for the purposes of "radicalizing" students and teachers. The goal is to overcome internecine warfare, and to allow those on the left to play an effective role in influencing substantive educational change.

Stone's essay is helpful in allowing scholars to reconsider the perennial left question: "What is to be done?". Favouring unity for the sake of political effectiveness alone is not the answer. Yet there are *moments* when unity of a certain kind might be justified. Recognising, for example, that the culture wars of the early 1990s were not simply arguments over theory or even curriculum content but also battles to claim space for conveying political ideals through the media has an impact on the way we react to, and participate in, such debates. The struggle is not just between competing stances on political correctness, great books and the like; it is also about who sets the terms for discussion and the parameters for debate. There is, on the one hand, a need to avoid lapsing into a kind of populism that would destroy the substance of left arguments against right wing practices and ideas. On the other hand, theoretical stances need to have *some* kind of popular appeal if they are to be accessible for those who are not academic specialists. There is merit, perhaps, in the notion of assuming multiple subject positions in relation to battles of this kind. Certainly it is important to acknowledge that debate occurs at different levels, or rather in different ways, within a range of discursive settings. Speaking to, and arguing with, one's peers through scholarly journals might serve one end in participating in the debates; publishing one's views through more popular media (e.g. teacher magazines, union circulars, newspapers, radio shows, etc.) serves another. It is not a matter of compromising one's political position or scholarly integrity, but rather of finding ways in which to make one's voice heard. Bringing voices together -- e.g. through collective statements by professional organisations or scholarly societies -- for expression in these popular forums can be an important dimension of an effective political strategy.

Of the many points that might be made in summing up strengths and weaknesses in the three books under review, let me highlight just a few. A healthy mix of the "theoretical" and the "empirical" in discussing approaches to, experiences of, and issues in educational research is a noteworthy feature of the McLaren and Giarelli collection. Similarly, the blending of conceptual critique with practical, grounded alternatives to technicist models of teacher development works well in the Smyth volume. It struck me as rather odd that McLaren and Giarelli's text --

overtly devoted to critical theory -- did not contain a lengthy discussion of the Frankfurt School. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others are mentioned by many contributors, but no one provides an extended defence or critique of either these individual theorists or the School as a whole. *Revolutionary multiculturalism* is, in many ways, a deeply personal book, even if several chapters are co-authored. The third chapter, in particular, gives readers a revealing glimpse of McLaren's feelings of ambivalence toward life in Los Angeles and East Berlin. Among other strengths, McLaren's discussion of ethnography and the politics of research, and his intertwining of educational theory with cultural studies (broadly conceived), stand out. More overt connections could have been drawn between the different chapters, originally published as separate essays. The Epilogue makes some attempt to do this, but more explicit links could have been made along the way. The McLaren and Giarelli collection is marred by poor proof-reading in places.

The edited collections succeed in integrating diverse theoretical perspectives for the purposes of examining (and demonstrating) critical approaches to educational research and teacher development. In this sense, these texts show how differences can be highly productive in furnishing a deeper understanding of complex educational problems. Ironically, however, those with whom the authors of the essays differ on more substantial grounds -- right-wing politicians, members of the business elite, and neoliberal zealots in government departments -- are unlikely to hear any of the oppositional voices expressed in the three books under review. This is not to say that academic books of this kind cannot make a significant political difference: they can, and (sometimes) do, even if there may be additional or other reasons for publishing them. The political changes that accompany books like these tend to be of a more subtle, gradual, indirect, discontinuous, and diffused kind than those enacted by leaders of the New Right economic, social and educational revolution. The changes often develop -- though not in any direct, cause-and-effect way -- through encounters teachers have with critical educational texts in their initial or in-service training. Teachers have, as some of the contributors to the Smyth collection reveal, often been treated with insufficient professional respect -- if not outright contempt -- by right-wing policy developers and decision makers. Yet the role teachers have to play in altering, even if only in a minor way, the course of human history is, potentially at least, unique. Almost every child in the Western world will encounter at least one teacher in his or her formative years. Teachers work (as Marx would have reminded us) under historical circumstances not of their choosing, and are always subject to certain

external constraints, but their pedagogical activities are never totally determined by others. The incentives to accept the prevailing neoliberal ideology, and to pass this on to others, are strong in the current age. Teachers can, however, also play an important role in granting students opportunities to consider a range of alternative political ideals, some of which may have been offered in books (such as those under review here) devoted to critical approaches in research, teaching and learning. Allowing a spark of critical doubt to flicker through classroom activities will never, on its own, be sufficient to change an oppressive world, but it can become one dimension of a wider process of resistance against dominant ideas, structures and practices.

### References

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