

DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATIONS



EIGHT CONFLICTS IN
THE NEGOTIATION
OF AMERICAN
IDENTITY



KERRY T. BURCH

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Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, 1838.

Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.

JOHN DEWEY, 1917.

Everybody has the blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith. In music, especially in the broad category called Jazz, there is a stepping stone to all of these.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR, 1964.

The truth will set you free. But first it will piss you off.

GLORIA STEINEM, 1973.

PROLOGUE

Considering our national absorption in a spectacle-driven and profit-seeking media environment, coupled with a political economy which leaves citizens less and less time for civic engagement, it's worth asking: Do the American people have the capacity to enact a more democratic version of themselves? Is such a democratic transformation possible in the context of the starkest inequalities in wealth the United States has seen since 1929? As a critical response to these obstacles, how might educators develop a pedagogical art to resist America's slow-motion devolution into a regime of corporate oligarchy and permanent warfare? Questions and concerns like these about the purposes of American education in perilous times give *Democratic Transformations* its shape and substance.

The nation's greatest thinkers and artists have always understood that Americans dwell in a state of permanent crisis, owing in large measure to the absence of a prefixed or settled image of national identity. It is this very open-endedness and freedom that gives rise to all manner of conflict and anxiety in American culture. Paradoxically, however, it is this difficult feature that gives both individuals and nations the capacity as well as the confidence that they can indeed reinvent themselves. If, as Deborah Britzman has written, we can "make education from anything," we should be able to make education out of the absences and anxieties of national identity.¹

Even as some of us individually may be prepared to acknowledge that a condition of crisis—born out of this lack of closure—is a permanent feature of American national identity, how often do our schools treat this condition as something admirable and good? How often do they treat the emotional content of crisis as a kind of civic aesthetic that contains transformational properties? Not so often, I suspect. Instead, we're encouraged in most public educational cultures to repress the crisis-ridden, messier dimensions of national

identity. America's bristling yet fecund contradictions, its vexing paradoxes, its endless ambiguities, and its tragic ironies, represent the very stuff of national identity formation. Yet the moral content of this stuff, its emotional field, tends to be ignored—and with a passion. This passion to ignore tends to infantilize both students and the broader public. From the standpoint of citizenship education, the passion to ignore these existential conditions as formative influences on the national identity is tantamount to squandering opportunities to harness the educational vitality latent within these evocative signifiers. To harness this energy and redirect it toward democratic ends requires us to “do” critical pedagogy.

The problem with this requirement, however, is that many Americans seem to have developed a jaundiced view of the very term, *critical*. The practice of being critical is frequently regarded as nothing more than an unproductive tendency to complain about things we don't like and can't change anyway. As a consequence of this mentality, an appreciation of the rich beauty of the term seems to have escaped us, a token of America's increasingly carnivalesque and mean-spirited cultural environment. We need to somehow turn around this negative conception of both crisis and critical as a first step in reinvigorating democratic education. Wendy Brown brilliantly recovers the Greek etymology of *crisis* and *critique* and explains how they stem from the same linguistic source and share common meanings. Brown observes

In ancient Athens, *krisis* was a jurisprudential term identified with the art of making distinctions, an art considered essential to judging and rectifying an alleged disorder in or of democracy . . . The sifting and sorting entailed in Greek *krisis* focused on distinguishing the true from the false, the genuine from the spurious, the beautiful from the ugly, and the right from the wrong, distinctions that involved weighing pros and cons of particular arguments—that is, evaluating and eventually judging evidence, reasons, or reasoning.²

In this passage, we see that *krisis* is closely aligned with the virtue of deliberation, if not critical thinking itself. Brown remarks that “its connotations are quite remote from negativity or scholasticism.”³ The etymology of critical (*kritikos*) means “to be able to judge, and to choose.”⁴ Based on the original definitions of both terms, then,

we would be justified in claiming that individuals who wish to lead meaningful “examined lives” ought to hold these democratic virtues in the highest esteem.

Applying these insights to the negotiation of American national identity, both terms can serve a valuable purpose, insofar as their exercise stimulates our moral imaginations, and this exercise functions to keep democracies democratic. For this reason, we would do well to recover the positive ethical dimensions of these foundational Western terms and learn how absolutely crucial they are to the formation of democratic selfhood.

Democratic Transformations responds to these challenges by introducing a novel and critically eclectic approach for negotiating both the question of American identity and the moral predicaments that arise when individuals identify both with and against this contested symbolic terrain. I propose that instead of shying away from the conflicted nucleus of American identity, we confront these moral and ideological conflicts head-on, and in doing so, transform them into sites of pedagogical opportunity. As a contribution to the field of critical pedagogy, *Democratic Transformations* seeks to articulate how our perceptions of these conflicts and the existential qualities of mind such conflicts tend to generate can be revalued as part of the longer-term project of theorizing how we might learn to better integrate these marginalized features into the negotiation of American identity.

To inaugurate this project, I adopt a deliberately unorthodox method for representing eight pieces of public rhetoric found in US political culture. *Democratic Transformations* revives these iconic yet now languishing strands of public rhetoric to draw out their educational and democratic meanings. In using these phrases as points of entry to telescope the nation’s defining contradictions, I hope to intensify personal encounters with how citizens navigate their way through the sometimes treacherous symbolic mind-fields of national identity. The phrases under consideration have been authored, circulated, publicly debated, and in many cases, just plain forgotten. To my knowledge, these pieces of public rhetoric, or others like them, have never been conceptualized as instruments of democratic pedagogy—until now.

One may well ask—*So what’s in a phrase?* The eight phrases have been selected for analysis because each one contains an enormous potential for what I call “civic generativity.” That is, as discursive

windows into US political culture, they are capable of generating instructive civic controversies which, if dissected and investigated in the right way, can sharpen perceptions of American social reality and our frequently indifferent, ambivalent, or unconscious relationship to that reality. The phrases are mined as treasure troves of civic meaning, because they reflect contradictory images of what it means to be an American. Identification and analysis of contradictions—located externally in society, or internally within—constitute healthy exercises in democratic moral imagination.

The public rhetoric approach adopted here is indebted to Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1929–97).⁵ Freire brings to our attention the idea that teachers should learn to frame the contradictions residing within the signs and symbols that circulate within peoples' everyday cultural life. Due to my own cultural location, I interpret this Freirean principle strictly in terms of US political culture. I am proposing, then, that the eight pieces of public rhetoric I have selected from American political culture can be conceptualized as rough equivalents of Freire's concept of "generative themes."

Among other things, one of Freire's enduring achievements was to take seriously the idiosyncratic colloquialisms of the adult illiterates he worked alongside. With the adoption of Freire's innovative method, everyday symbols and culturally specific figures of speech could be critically analyzed and *new meanings about them could be made to emerge if identified in dialogue and constructed as a problem in the right way*.⁶ In a similar manner, my book invites readers to converse with the cultural contradictions identified within these generative themes of American culture, a conversation that can potentially alter one's vicarious symbolic relation both to national identity and to the democratic project (as interrelated significations). According to Freire, moreover, a cultures' inventory of generative themes exist as sub-units within a larger "thematic universe."⁷ To deepen and extend the application of Freire's theory throughout the pages of *Democratic Transformations*, I bracket four civic tensions whose pervasiveness in American culture qualifies them to be defined as equivalents of Freire's concept of a culture's thematic universe.

As conceptual motifs, these four civic tensions are highlighted in different ways in different chapters and in different contexts. Despite their diverse expressions throughout the book, they constitute part

of the larger fabric of American culture. It is this larger fabric that Freire refers to when he theorizes a culture's thematic universe. I "factor down" the thematic universe of American culture as follows: (1) individualism/individuality, (2) democracy/imperialism, (3) historical amnesia and the politics of forgetting, and (4) the ambiguous status of American exceptionalism.⁸ To be sure, this framework is partial; however, despite its limited scope, it is an interpretive device that thematizes several of the nation's core contradictions that find expression in some form in every chapter of *Democratic Transformations*.

Freire defines critical thinking, what he calls *conscientization*, as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."⁹ An essential component of his definition is the development of a "critical historical awareness," without which Freire argued critical thinking cannot exist. When this principle is applied to a twenty-first century American context, problems immediately arise, for American culture has accurately been described as notoriously ahistorical. The origins of this deeply ingrained collective habit is traced in part to the symbolism of the American dream, a future-directed transcendent project of reinvention which depended for its existence on individuals discarding the past as irrelevant.¹⁰ This future-directed social imaginary tends to legitimize patterns of historical amnesia that are by now deeply etched into the public imagination. For democratic educators, the contagion of historical amnesia constitutes a problem of the first order since the recovery of democracy's memory is a necessary condition for its robust reemergence in the future.

The all-important ethical component of *conscientization* is reflected in Freire's assertion that one must "take action" as a consequence of acquiring greater knowledge of self and society. Of course, what constitutes an "action" is itself a complicated philosophical issue. For the purposes of this book, I take the view that launching a new inquiry, initiating a new conversation, or even speaking up in the classroom about some issue one cares about, could all qualify as legitimate forms of action.

Here we need to be flexible in applying Freire's theory. We need to acknowledge that "taking action against the oppressive elements of reality" might mean one thing to illiterate Brazilian campesinos in the 1960s and quite another to the privileged middle-class American

citizens in the twenty-first century. In either case, the enduring educational value of thinking through a culture's contradictions is that the process often leads to further inquiries and further tasks to be fulfilled. Freire writes: "I have termed these themes 'generative' because (however they are comprehended and whatever action they may evoke) they contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled."¹¹ In linking the acquisition of knowledge to an imperative to act, Freire wants to unite theory and practice. The name he gives this informed type of action is *praxis*. In the following pages, I attempt to move toward this ideal unity by asking readers to imagine how each phrase might be jettisoned out of its present moribund state and recast to democratize American identity. The last section of each chapter introduces what could be called "action-oriented" public policy initiatives. These theoretical experiments in democratic renovation are inspired not only by Freire but by the tradition of American pragmatism; and they are intended to be more exploratory than explanatory, intended more to open up new conversations about old problems than to introduce a set of infallible policy initiatives.

The pieces of public rhetoric chosen for investigation span the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. They are drawn mainly from the nation's constitutional language, from presidential speeches, and from leading public intellectuals. There are several advantages that accrue from interpreting US political history from a public rhetoric perspective. Perhaps the most notable advantage that accompanies such an approach is that these pieces of public rhetoric are closely associated with the chief architects of America's civic mythology, a set of luminaries which includes Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Horace Mann, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, William James, Theodore Roosevelt, John Dewey, Calvin Coolidge, Dwight Eisenhower, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the case of Chapter eight, "the personal is political," the rhetoric is not attributable to any single individual, rather this sublime piece of civic rhetoric emerged from the 1960s and 1970s women's movement. Because the schematic organization of the book permits me to foreground the writings of these pivotal figures and social movements in US political history, *Democratic Transformations* offers readers a radical democratic rereading of the American canon.

At the risk of oversimplifying the ways in which this approach works in each of the eight chapters, let me briefly illustrate how two of the nation's iconic pieces of public rhetoric can be recruited to frame educationally fecund contradictions.

- *The pursuit of happiness*: Americans are proud of their spiritual traditions yet, our culture is unabashedly materialistic. How does this contradiction manifest itself in debates over the meaning of the pursuit of happiness clause in the Declaration of Independence? What would Jefferson say about today's consumerist understanding of the pursuit of happiness? Is there a basis for thinking that we can turn the meaning of this phrase around from one grounded in material acquisition to one grounded in a democratic moral vision?
- *The moral equivalent of war*: Americans like to think of themselves as peaceful, yet US history presents a chronicle of constant warfare. How to make sense of this contradiction? Is it possible to develop a "moral equivalent" of war as William James boldly suggested in his 1910 essay by the same name? Can the passions for war and its heroic virtues be replaced by passions for peace and its heroic virtues?

Here, we glimpse how contradictions sequestered within two foundational pieces of public rhetoric can be viewed as sites of educational opportunity. It is crucial to learn to perceive contradictions because perceptions of contradiction give rise to heightened states of internal tension. These heightened states of internal tension can propel new desires to know into existence. Without the productive internal forces these states of tension propel, "desires to know" cannot, so to speak, "take flight." This theory of how desires to know can be brought about represents the core educational principle of the book. While such a learning theory is traced to Socratic pedagogy (and to the Platonic "dialectic"), key dimensions of it also finds modern expression in the writings of French educational psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and, as previously remarked, in the work of Paulo Freire.¹²

The theory of how human desires can be drawn out to imagine an envisioned good was so significant to Plato that he has Socrates declare in the *Symposium* that no one could find a better collaborator for acquiring virtue than being connected to this desire to know, to seek, and to transcend. Plato defined this transcendent desire as a form of love—what he called Eros.¹³ The assumption which permeates this book is that the practice of identifying and probing contradictions is a vital and healthy democratic activity. It is beneficial not only because of the possibilities it opens up for stimulating one's eros (love) for a knowledge quest but because in democratic regimes such inquiries are as essential for the health of individual "psyches" as they are for the health of the "city." Put more dramatically democratic citizens require philosophy—literally, the love of wisdom and questioning—every bit as much as human beings require oxygen.

In everyday news, we look aghast at the wickedly polarizing and disheartening conflicts that occur over the contested meaning of American identity. These spectacles of conflict tend to activate difficult emotions and, precisely for this reason, these expressions are more likely to become objects of repression. Yet, it is this conflicted ideational nucleus of American identity that *Democratic Transformations* seeks to investigate and transform into a site of education. Thus, a legitimate question arises—Why go there? The assumption here is that we need to "go there" because learning how to recode the meaning of these conflicts and to respond wisely to the psychological states they engender represents an ethical endeavor that must be worked through before we can enact the nation's next chapter in democratization.

In this regard, it is crucial to note that America's premier philosopher of democracy, John Dewey, saw in social conflict a largely untapped reservoir of educative and transformational potential. Richard Bernstein adroitly interprets this Deweyan proposition:

Conflict is not just "ineliminable" in democratic politics; it is *essential* for the achievement of social reform and justice. No longer does Dewey speak of democracy as an ideal organic unity of the individual and society. New conflicts will always break out. The key point is how one *responds* to conflict. And this requires imagination, intelligence, and a commitment to solve concrete problems.¹⁴

Grounded in an analysis of conflict, then, *Democratic Transformations* views this overall psychical terrain as one of America's great educational frontiers, a moral geography that invites our pioneering exploration.

Finally, there is one additional rationale I would mention to justify the adoption of my synergistic integration of Socratic and Freirean pedagogy, Critical Theory and American pragmatism. It can be explained by reference to two premier books in the nation's democratic canon, books that have inspired my thinking about the benefits of "difficult knowledge" as that knowledge relates to raising questions about the meaning of American identity.

In this connection, it's worth recalling why, exactly, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* struck such a popular chord with the American public. No doubt, part of this appeal was that both authors recovered repressed dimensions of the American experience that conventional textbooks seem determined to overlook.¹⁵ As a consequence of engaging these innovative texts, millions of Americans felt viscerally connected to the democratic tradition for the first time in their lives. The books had this "affect" on readers not because they offered "objective" representations of US history, rather it was the authors' abandonment of the false pretense of objectivity which inspired many to participate with the texts at a deeper level.¹⁶ Readers were compelled to wrestle with the meaning of democracy in novel ways and to participate symbolically in forging a new moral identity both for themselves and for their image of American nationhood. The process was as pleasurable as it was ethically demanding. Based on this brief overview, I think it's warranted to assert these books excited the public imagination because they tacitly embodied an alternative "civic aesthetic."¹⁷ Even though this civic aesthetic was never stated explicitly in either *A People's History* or in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, its moral content is revealed in the authorial decisions to place renewed value on the examination of contradictions and on the difficult knowledge and emotions such examinations can be expected to generate.

In a fashion similar to these books, *Democratic Transformations* is written to highlight the nation's core contradictions and through this process jostle into being a greater awareness of the American democratic tradition, the precondition for morally renovating the national identity. In contrast to these fine authors, however—and

writing as a philosopher of education—I attempt to outline the contours of a new civic aesthetic as a framework for making meaning out of these difficult-to-assimilate qualities. I argue in the Epilogue, for instance, that the cultivation of America’s democratic spirit can be educationally nourished on the basis of a critical utilization of the jazz-as-democracy metaphor. This largely untapped resource can help us negotiate with greater receptivity the conflicts that bedevil American political culture. I develop the case that the epistemic attributes of this musical idiom can be conceptualized as a civic aesthetic which can encourage us to positively integrate the existential qualities of contradiction, paradox, ambiguity and irony into our civic self-conceptions.¹⁸ Among other advantages, it can help us reconcile a sense of individuality with a viable sense of the common good. Significantly, the jazz-as-democracy metaphor can also clarify what it means to *be* democratic as opposed to merely learning *about* democracy in a procedural sense.

How we choose to negotiate the zones of tension and anxiety that saturate every dimension of national identity will, to a large extent, determine whether or not Americans can envision and enact a more democratic version of ourselves. *Democratic Transformations* marks a hopeful contribution to this perpetually unfinished enactment.

Notes

- 1 Deborah Britzman, *After-Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), 1, 150. Britzman’s concept of “difficult knowledge” is a crucial element in my book, insofar as the act of perceiving contradictions often entails encounters with difficult to assimilate forms of knowledge; at another level, Britzman’s psychoanalytic notion that education can be made out of anything, in my opinion, justifies my attempt to make education both out of the phrases and out of the creative absences of American identity.
- 2 Wendy Brown, “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5–6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 5–6. For an additional treatment of the origins of the term critical, and for a superb primer on Critical Theory, see Stephen Eric Bronner *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–3, 20–1.

- 4 *The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology*, ed. Robert Barnhart. (New York: HaperCollins, 1995), 173.
- 5 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 1997), 96–104. (all subsequent reference to this source will be cited as *POP*).
- 6 Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Books, 1973).
- 7 Freire, *POP*, 96–7.
- 8 While each of these strands of America's thematic universe are elaborated upon in varying degrees throughout the pages of *Democratic Transformations*, it may be useful to broadly frame these thematic tensions at the outset. John Dewey spent much of his career grappling with the tension between an individualist model of selfhood and a more social-oriented model he dubbed, "individuality." This civic tension appears most notably in Chapters 1, 6, and 8, but it also appears in other chapters, albeit less extensively. As an interpretive trope, the tension between the values of democracy versus those of imperialism is indebted to Cornel West's *Democracy Matters* (2004); this civic tension finds expression in Chapters 2, 5, and 7. The phenomenon of historical amnesia is wedded to what I am calling the "politics of ignorance," in that cultural forgetting is never innocent of power relations. This theme is highlighted in Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 7. Finally, the contested narrative of American exceptionalism is treated most extensively in Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7. The literature on American exceptionalism is too vast to summarize here. My thinking on the subject, however, is inspired in large part by Donald E. Pease's psychoanalytical treatment of the "fantasy" of American exceptionalism. See his "The United States of Fantasy" in *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 1–39. Far from seeing the fantasy of American exceptionalism as "delusional," or as a peripheral factor in the formation of state authority, Pease argues that fantasy is central to the life of nations and states even as it's seldom regarded as such. In this sense, then, the power within the narrative of American exceptionalism derives from the power of the wish fulfillments individuals' project onto the myths of the nation.
- 9 Freire, *POP*, 35.
- 10 For more on how the ideology of the American Dream relies on historical amnesia for its very existence, see Russell Banks, *Dreaming Up America* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 6, 7, 39.
- 11 Freire, *POP*, 102 (fn #19).

- 12 In a Platonic sense, the “dialectic” can be broadly understood as a method and process of dialogue between people whose purpose is to seek truths through questioning and through the identification of contradictions. See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies of Plato* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Paulo Freire’s concept of *conscientization*, defined as “learning to perceive contradictions” is roughly equivalent to Plato’s dialectic. See, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 2000); Jean-Paul Piaget’s concept of equilibrium posits the notion that desires to know and other positive features occur when there is “cognitive conflict” within the learner. See Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 100–15.
- 13 William Cobb, trans. *Plato’s Erotic Dialogues: The Symposium and the Phaedrus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 212b (p. 49). For more on Eros as a concept vital to democratic education see, Kerry T. Burch, *Eros as the Educational Principle of Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).
- 14 Richard J. Bernstein, “John Dewey’s Vision of Radical Democracy” in *The Pragmatic Turn* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 84.
- 15 Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York, Harper Perennial Books, 1980/2010); James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbooks Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995/2007).
- 16 This principle is articulated quite well by Richard Rorty in his *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- 17 I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Jessica Heybach for suggesting how the idea of a “civic aesthetic” might be used to clarify the underlying purposes of the book.
- 18 See, for example, Robert G. O’Meally, ed. *The Jazz Cadence in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press).

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