Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle

Henry A. Giroux
and Peter McLaren
EDITORS

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edited by

HENRY A. GIROUX and PETER L. McLAREN

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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, THE STATE, AND CULTURAL STRUGGLE

Teacher Empowerment and School Reform

Henry A. Giroux & Peter L. McLaren, editors
Department of Educational Leadership
Miami University–Oxford, Ohio

In an age when liberalism and radicalism have come under severe attack, American education faces an unprecedented challenge. The challenge has now moved beyond the search for more humanistic approaches to schooling and the quest for educational equality. Today's challenge is the struggle to rebuild a democratic tradition presently in retreat.

Laboring in a climate of anti-intellectualism and cultural ethnocentrism, educators are witnessing the systematic reduction of pedagogical skills and the disempowerment of the teaching profession; the continuation of privilege for select numbers of students on the basis of race, class, and gender; and the proliferation of corporate management pedagogies and state-mandated curricula that prescribe a narrow and sterile range of literacies and conceptions of what it means to be a citizen.

Under the editorship of Henry A. Giroux and Peter L. McLaren, this series will feature works within the critical educational tradition that define, analyze, and offer solutions to the growing dilemmas facing the nation's teachers and school systems. The series will also feature British and Canadian analyses of current educational conditions.

Dedicated to the memory of Laurie McDade

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Introduction

Schooling, Cultural Politics, and the Struggle for Democracy

Henry A. Giroux
Peter McLaren

As the Age of Reagan comes to a close, a new stage in the national debate about the future of public schooling in the United States is beginning to develop. The growing interest in such a debate can be seen not only in the ongoing announcements by both of the major political parties but also in the increasing concern by members of the general public to improve the quality of American schools. There is little doubt that the ferment that has characterized the educational debate of the 1980s will continue; hopefully, the second stage of this debate will raise a new set of questions, provide a new language of analysis, and embrace a different set of interests for defining the purpose and meaning of public education.

All of the essays written for this collection are concerned with this debate and the significance it has for addressing some of the more important issues and problems the present generation of Americans will have to confront and think about in the near future. These chapters are bound together by a common concern. It is a concern for linking the issue of educational reform to the broader considerations of democracy, the ethical and political character of fundamental social relations, and the demands of critical citizenship. As different as these contributions appear in both their theoretical focus and their ideological representation, they all point to a number of important elements for creating a new public philosophy of education. This is a philosophy for the postmodern era. It is not one that seeks ideal fathers through the grand narratives that characterized the work of Marx, Freud, Durkheim, or Parsons; nor is it one that looks for salvation in the textual wizardry of the new poststructuralists. It is a philosophy that is decidedly concrete. It is one that embraces a politics of difference, that

links questions of history and structural formations, that views ideology and human agency as a source of educational change, and that integrates macro- and microanalyses with a focus on the specificity of voices, desires, events, and cultural forms that give meaning and substance to everyday life. Characterizing the contributions in this volume is a theoretical openness and a spirit of hope, a belief that schools are places where students can find their voices, reclaim and affirm their histories, and develop a sense of self and collective identity amidst the language of larger public loyalties and social relations. But there is also a spirit of historicity that informs the various positions that make up this book, a sense of the need to push the history of recent decades against the grain in order both to question its purchase on knowledge as received truth and to shift the debate on educational reform from one dependent on a claim to a privileged reading of the past to one committed to a provisional and relational understanding of truth and commitment to investigating culture, teaching, and learning as a set of historically and socially constructed practices. In short, the spirit of hope and historicity which informs the contributions to this volume does not see the mechanisms of injustice as indelibly inscribed in the social order but rather as open to change and reconstruction through a critical rethinking of and commitment to the meaning and purpose of schooling in our society.

With this in mind we want to argue that the current debate about education represents more than a commentary on the state of public education in this country; it is fundamentally a debate about the relevance of democracy, social criticism, and the status of utopian thought in constructing both our dreams and the symbols and stories we devise in order to give meaning to our lives. The debate has taken a serious turn in the last decade. Under the guise of attempting to revitalize the language of conservative ethics, the Reagan agenda has, in reality, launched a dangerous attack on some of the most fundamental aspects of democratic public life. What has been valorized in this language is not the issue of reclaiming public schools as agencies of social justice or critical democracy, but a view of schooling that disdains the democratic implications of pluralism, rejects a notion of learning which regards excellence and equity as mutually constitutive, and argues for a return to the old transmission model of learning.

It is worth noting that since the early 1980s the conservatives have dominated the debate over public education and have consistently put liberals and other groups of progressive stripe in the uncomfortable position of defending failed, abandoned, or unpopular policies and programs initiated in the 1960s, even though it is recognized that many of these programs and policies were either never properly implemented or were not

given an adequate chance at achieving their expected results. The power of the conservative initiative resides, in part, in its ability to link schooling to the ideology of the marketplace and to successfully champion the so-called virtues of Western civilization. In addition, it has doggedly defended a programmatic policy of school reform based on jargon-filled and undifferentiated conceptions of authority, citizenship, and discipline. Unlike many radical and progressive critics of the 1960s, conservatives have not merely argued that schools have failed in their primary vision of creating a literate and industrious citizenry; they have also attempted to develop both an analysis of the failure of public schooling and a program for curing the affliction. Through the sponsorship of a number of national reports, from *A Nation at Risk* to *American Education: Making It Work*, the Reagan administration had been able to set the agenda for both defining and addressing what it labeled the "crisis in education." To be sure, the conservative analysis is by no means original, but in the absence of an alternative position which is capable of publicly contesting the assumptions that have informed the Reagan-inspired education agenda, right-wing conservatives will continue to dominate the upcoming debate on education.

In our view, the debate over public education has been predictably one-sided in that the conservatives have set the agenda for such a debate and initiated a plethora of policy studies designed to implement their own educational initiatives. The success of the conservative educational agenda also points to a fundamental failure among progressive and radical educators to generate a public discourse on schooling. This is not to suggest that there has been an absence of writing on educational issues among leftist critics. In fact, the body of literature that has emerged in the last decade is duly impressive. One major problem facing the recent outpouring of critical discourse on schooling is that over the years it has become largely academicized. It has lost sight of its fundamental mission of mobilizing public sentiment toward a renewed vision of community; it has failed to recognize the general relevance of education as a public service and the importance of deliberately translating educational theory into a community-related discourse capable of reaching into and animating public culture and life. In effect, critical and radical writings on schooling have become ghettoized within the ivory tower, reflecting a failure to take seriously the fact that education as a terrain of struggle is central to the reconstruction of public life and, as such, must be understood in vernacular as well as scholarly terms. This, of course, is not to downgrade the importance of scholarly discourse on schooling, nor publications which serve to disseminate tracts and treatises on important epistemological and theoretical concerns. It is simply to highlight the fact that the assault on grand narratives should take

place not only in the paper chase of the academy but also in classrooms of resistance and in communities struggling for a better life through a variety of public spheres.

In the upcoming debate on education in the United States, critical educators need to regain the ideological and political initiative. Such a project should at the very least embody four challenges: first, the major assumptions that characterize the conservative critique of education must be effectively challenged and refuted; second, the programmatic reforms put forth by the Reagan administration and taken up by the Bush presidency must be unmasked for what they really are: part of a major assault on the egalitarian ideology of public education as well as the principles of equity and democracy; third, a new critical language of schooling must emerge in order to formulate its own ciriticisms of schools as part of a wider project of possibility, one which provides an educational vision capable of mobilizing not only the middle class, but also those minorities of race, class, and gender who have been largely excluded from the language and practice of school reform for the past eight years; and finally, it is imperative that progressive educators put forth a federal policy for funding public education as part of an alternative program for economic growth. Before indicating how the articles in this book contribute to a public discourse of educational reform, we want to address briefly some of the issues we have raised as part of a wider debate on educational critique and transformation.

Challenging the conservative discourse of schooling

The Reagan conservatives have developed their analysis of public schooling in the United States in opposition to a number of advances associated with the progressive educational reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, the ascendency of the conservative critique of schooling began with the radical criticisms of schooling in the 1960s. Radicals and progressives argued for greater access to higher education for black and other minority students through a policy of open admissions; they criticized the schools for being merely adjuncts to the labor market; they challenged the racist, sexist, and culturally biased nature of the curriculum at all levels of schooling; they opposed school hierarchies which discriminated against women teachers and staff, which silenced a developing social conscience among students, and which excluded minorities; they challenged the tracking procedures in elementary and secondary schools which slotted minorities and other disadvantaged groups into vocational schooling; and they were instrumental in providing the impetus for a number of important federal entitlement programs in such areas as bilingual, compensatory, and special education. In

short, these educational critics attempted to democratize access to and outcomes of both public schooling and higher education, to make school curricula relevant to the lives of children, and to shape federal policy that would actively provide the financial support and national leadership to ensure that schooling in this country functions as a vehicle of social and economic mobility. Although the progressive educational movements of the 1960s and 1970s helped to inaugurate a number of important legislative programs, they unfortunately often exaggerated the concept of personal freedom, which at times collapsed into a form of vapid anti-intellectualism; they often legitimated infantile as opposed to theoretically mature forms of scholarship; moreover, they argued for a child-centered pedagogy which amounted to a romantic celebration of student culture and experience that made progressive reform patterns appear unrealistic—if not damagingly counterproductive—to the aspirations of parents of minority and working-class students and inhibited a more thorough theoretical investigation into other crucial aspects of racial and class domination.

The Reagan conservatives attacked this legacy of reform on a number of ideological and political fronts. Not surprisingly in an age of corporatist politics, the initial line of attack centered on redefining the purpose of public schools as agents of social discipline and economic regulation. Under the guise of proclaiming a national crisis in the schools, the conservatives have willfully misread and consistently argued against the reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, claiming that they both compromised the academic rigor of the public school curriculum and contributed to declining teacher and student performance. Most strikingly preposterous was the attempt to fasten the blame for the lagging domestic performance of the United States economy and its shrinking preeminence in the international marketplace on the failure of the schools to prepare adequately its young citizenry to be capable of reinvigorating corporate and industrial America. From such a human capital perspective, schools are important only to the degree that they provide the forms of knowledge, skills, social practices, and entrepreneurial values necessary to produce a labor force capable of aggressively competing in world markets. Today, as in previous decades, a concern with social transformation and critical citizenship has been replaced by a preoccupation with forging a school-business alliance. In the spirit of neoclassical economics, state boards of education continue to encourage schools to enter partnerships with industry, with its stress on producing efficient workers. The present-day culture of schooling appears more and more bent on producing what Andre Gorz calls "adapted individuals," by which he refers to "exactly the kind of people that capitalist industry needs . . . those who will put up with the regimentation, repression, discipline and deliberately unat-

tractive programs . . . [those who] are ideologically reliable, and who will not be tempted to use their technical knowledge to their own political advantage."[1]

As part of the excellence movement ushered in by the Reagan administration, we see a continual emphasis on the vocationalization of learning and the deskilling of teachers in our public schools, all of which reaches its apogee in the "teacher-proofed" curriculum, which creates a nondialectical separation of conception from execution and effectively reduces teachers to the status of technicians or state-sponsored functionaries. To assert that schools serve as meritocratic institutions for the purpose of fostering equality of opportunity and outcome simply registers, in this context, as a quaint oversimplification which masks schooling's socially and culturally reproductive dimensions.

The more this logic plays itself out in the contemporary educational scene, the more schools serve to multiply injustice under the banner of excellence, and the less likely it is that excellence will be equated with the development of pedagogical practices designed to foster critical intelligence and public conscience. In effect, the term *excellence* is reduced to a code word for legitimating the interests and values of the rich and the privileged. Within this perspective, remedial programs which try to extricate the lowly from their benighted condition label such students as "deprived" or "deviant" youth. This labeling not only serves to entrap students within the contours of a professional discourse, doubly confirming the legitimating power of school practices, but also serves to reproduce intergenerational continuity by defining who are to become members of the elite class and who are to occupy the subaltern caste.

Common perspectives animating this conservative position—and the privileged groups whose claim to power depend on its propagation and legitimation—consider social inequities to inhere in human nature and the inherent imperfection of groups marginalized by poverty, race, and gender. The logic of this position collapses into a defense of racial, class, and gender inequalities under the pretext of essentializing human nature by holding responsible for their own history and present conditions disadvantaged groups whose real powerlessness assures them of failure within the cultural and economic frames of reference set by dominant groups. The perspective that disadvantaged students should be the focus of special programs to remediate their deficiencies is in many respects as impoverishing and debilitating as the social and economic circumstances of which they are perennial victims since it impresses upon the disenfranchised that it is their personal shortcomings as minority or economically disadvantaged groups which prevent them from joining the elite tracks that lead to university life and a

better future. Nowhere does this perspective address or attempt to illuminate the lived subordination of students as it pertains to relations of power that constrain possibilities for empowerment within the dominant culture; and nowhere are relations of power and social structures acknowledged as working together as codeterminants of school failure. Within this view of excellence, learning is linked to acquiring "the basics" and uncritically adopting values consistent with industrial discipline and social conformity.

By separating equity from excellence, conservatives have managed to criticize radical and progressive reformers for linking academic achievement to the principles of social justice and equality while simultaneously redefining public schooling in relation to the imperatives of the economy and the marketplace. Consequently, when the Reagan administration trumpeted the term *excellence* as its clarion call for school reform, it usually meant that public schools should offer more rigorous science and math curricula—a notion in keeping with the conservative idea that scientific know-how and technical proficiency are equivalent to industrial progress. The language of "achievement," "excellence," "discipline," and "goal orientation" effectively meant deemphasizing liberal and creative arts and stressing "job skills" curriculum more in keeping with vocational education and returning to the authoritarian classroom armed with the four Rs curriculum (which for President George Bush means "reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and respect").

A critical theory of schooling needs to both criticize this position and, in a clear and discernible public language, drastically redefine the relationship between schooling and education. In the words of John Dewey, this means invoking a choice between education as a function of society and society as a function of education. The major economic problems faced by the United States have not been caused by public education, although the economic crisis has certainly had a significant impact on the problems schools are experiencing. Unemployment, declining productivity, inflation, and the persistence of vast inequalities in wealth and power among the general population have little to do with the declining academic achievement of American students. For example, high levels of unemployment and declining productivity have more to do with bad investment policies and the crisis within the world economy than with a decline in school-produced skills. Moreover, recent empirical studies make abundantly clear that the employment growth in the next few decades will be dominated by low-level jobs primarily in the service industries and will require little education and fewer higher-order intellectual and technical skills.

This is not to suggest that critical educators should disavow the importance of schools in educating youth with the basic skills that can be used to find employment. But it must be stressed that being educated for occu-

pational mobility must also include learning knowledge and skills of a different order of intellectual complexity from what has been advocated by the Reagan administration. In this case, we are referring to learning which is tied to forms of self- and social empowerment. Education for the future means that students will need to acquire advanced levels of economic literacy that will allow them not only to work in the marketplace but also to transform it as part of a broader struggle to create a more egalitarian and just society. Similarly, critical educators will need to address and promote policies for forging new linkages between schools and communities in relation to the issues of job creation and public service. For instance, a national youth service corps could provide students with the opportunity to integrate social reform, academic credit, and civic education. Finally, as part of an attempt to promote an ethic of civic and social responsibility, critical educators need to argue for forms of schooling that do not reduce the capacity for learning to economic or technical considerations: that is, critical educators need to develop an educational discourse that connects the purpose and practice of schooling to a public philosophy in which learning is seen as part of a wider discourse of freedom and democratic struggle.

The Reagan approach to public school reform has shifted in recent years, as reflected in a spate of recent publications either produced by the United States Department of Education or endorsed publicly by its administration. We refer here to former Education Secretary William J. Bennett's report, *American Education: Making Work*; Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*; and E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. Rather than abandoning the old technicist discourse which reduces schooling to job training, Bennett has added to it the notion of cultural uniformity. Public schools are now defended as both cultural *and* industrial sites. For example, Bennett's call for more curricular content and increased standardized testing is a thinly disguised attempt to impose cultural uniformity on the schools, to make school content irrelevant to the culturally specific traditions, experiences, and histories the students bring to schools, and to deskill teachers by forcing them to concentrate on delivering a curriculum that is both prepackaged and intellectually vapid. Rather than raising questions regarding how schools actively silence students, how the hidden curriculum of tracking works to marginalize and ensure failure for working-class and minority students, or how the dominant culture excludes the voices, dreams, and collective memories of subordinate groups, Bennett argues that equal opportunity can be achieved through more rigorous academic discipline and by instilling in parents greater educational expectations for their children. Such prescriptions remain ominously silent with respect to the forms of moral and social regulation that schools embody which benefit the stu-

dents of the rich and the privileged, and the particularly odious forms of discrimination based on race. Similarly, Bennett's proposals render invisible the suffering and the social and political hardships that students from subordinate groups frequently face both in and out of schools.

Bennett's perspective trivializes the meaning of education through both a neglect of the larger social and political issues facing our society at the present moment and an unwillingness to expand the task of reform in terms of a more critical theory of ethics and curriculum. His prescriptions for pedagogical reform embody an equally truncated vision. For example, the attributes he associates with good teaching sound as if they were taken from the scripts of the Mr. Roger's children show: a good teacher is usually white and middle class, has a necessary grasp of his or her subject matter, communicates effectively by finding a style least offensive to the majority, vigorously avoids any serious challenge to prevailing accepted mores or the social relations which reinforce them, and exhibits an unflinching moral character. In the language of educational Reaganism, this translates into teaching the so-called canon of Western virtues, transmitting standardized and politically inoffensive content to students in ways that can be measured empirically and rendered morally neutral, adopting a work ethic that is scornful of unions, and equating school achievement with raising students' SAT scores and implementing tougher forms of classroom management. Bennett's general formula for classroom teaching, if accepted, turns teachers into hapless clerks or servants of the empire. But Reagan isn't content with an educational theory based solely on the values implicit in the Mr. Roger's view of the world. Teaching in the ghetto calls for an altogether different model. Reagan's view that educators also need to "get tough" was clearly reflected in public praise for the authoritarian tactics of Joe Clark, a New Jersey high school principal. Clark has gained his reputation by imposing his form of "educational leadership" on a school of inner-city students. It is a leadership style and pedagogical philosophy that has distinguished Clark through his intimidation of teachers who disagree with him, his expulsion of over nine hundred students whom he has labeled as perverts and troublemakers, and his imposing a schoolwide military model of top-down discipline. For example, students who commit infractions are made to sing the school anthem over the public intercom system. Clark, who wields a bullhorn and baseball bat as the trademarks of his educational philosophy, claims he has restored law and order to the school while simultaneously raising students' test scores. That these "gains" (which themselves are suspect) have taken place amidst the humiliation of both students and teachers, the expulsion of students who are most in need of schooling, and the creation of a police state atmosphere appears to heighten rather

than diminish the stature of Joe Clark in the eyes of the Reagan administration. Such mean-spirited tactics have no place in a democratic classroom; they simply serve as a prescription for powerlessness and social conformity.

Central to Bennett's view, which is a popularized version of much of what can be found in the works of Bloom and Hirsch, and which is indicative of the recent ideological turn the Reagan administration has made in its language of educational reform, is the notion that it is not just the American economy which is at risk in the present failure of our schools, but the very notion of Western civilization itself. Rather than becoming an object of engagement and analysis, culture is to be understood through either the wisdom of the Great Books or a view of cultural restoration that is ironically paraded as cultural literacy. Within Bennett's social vision, cultural and social difference quickly becomes labeled as deficit, as the Other, as deviancy in need of psychological tending and control. At stake in this perspective is a view of history, culture, and politics committed to cleansing democracy of its critical and emancipatory possibilities. Similarly, in this perspective, the languages, cultures, and historical legacies of minorities, women, blacks, and other subordinate groups are actively silenced under the rubric of teaching as a fundamental act of national patriotism.

Following Bennett's lead, Bush conservatives seek to promulgate a view of education designed to rewrite the past from the perspective of the privileged and the powerful; this is a perspective that disdains both the democratic possibilities of pluralism and forms of pedagogy that critically engage issues central to developing an informed democratic public. Critical educators must offer a more progressive view of cultural literacy based on a respect for the languages and traditions that, as June Jordan has remarked, "conform to the truth of our many selves and would . . . lead us into the equality of power that a democratic state must represent."[2]

There is little doubt that the legacy of Reagan conservatism will continue to display an instinctive hostility to the democratic implications of public education. This is clear from the rhetoric structuring educational reforms at the level of state policy and in the rhetoric of liberal and conservative reformers, in which an image of schooling is evoked that enlarges corporate and hegemonic cultural concerns while diminishing a view of schooling dedicated to educating students for the ethical and political demands of democratic culture and public responsibility. The challenge that this view poses for critical educators should not be underestimated; there is a real urgency for educators to construct new frames of reference for the debate over educational reform by reclaiming schools in the interest of creating citizens capable of exhibiting civic courage, extending democratic possibili-