Critical Social Theory and Transformative Knowledge: The Functions of Criticism in Quality Education

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Critical social theory is a multidisciplinary knowledge base with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge. It approaches this goal by promoting the role of criticism in the search for quality education. Through critical social theory in education, quality is proportional to the depth of analysis that students have at their disposal. As a critical form of classroom discourse, critical social theory cultivates students' ability to critique institutional as well as conceptual dilemmas, particularly those that lead to domination or oppression. It also promotes a language of transcendence that complements a language of critique in order to forge alternative and less oppressive social arrangements. A critical social theory-based movement in education highlights the relationship between social systems and people, how they produce each other, and ultimately how critical social theory can contribute to the emancipation of both.

Critical social theory (henceforth CST) is a multidisciplinary framework with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge. CST is not a traditional discipline but maintains a quasi-disciplinary status in the academy, which is more accurately described as a convergence of existing disciplines. In education, CST promotes critical thinking, broadly conceived. Through the multidisciplinary framework of CST, "quality education" is proportional to the depth of analysis that students have at their disposal. Deprived of opportunities for historical analysis in its material and discursive forms, students experience their education in its alienated and abstract form; we could hardly call such an experience "quality." However, with the benefit of CST, classroom discourse broadens students' horizon of possibility, expands their sense of a larger humanity, and liberates them from the confines of their common sense (Leonardo, 2003a). The multidisciplinary knowledge base of CST affirms the role of criticism as bound up in the definition of a quality educational experience. It also privileges the role of theory in critical education, not as something separate from practice, but its conceptual form. In fact, CST rejects the radical distinction between theory and practice as two separate poles of a dualism. CST does not promote theory for theory's sake, or what Althusser (1976) called "theoreticism," but encourages the production and application of theory as part of the overall search for transformative knowledge.

Critical social theorists have produced many generative critiques of educational processes, such as parental involvement (Lareau, 2000) and curriculum formation (Apple, 1990), as well as less formal aspects of schooling, like popular culture (Giroux, 1994). Critical social theorists have also broadened the influences impacting education, including insights on new constructions of identity within the postcolonial context (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2004). Without suggesting that CST should become the new "tool kit" for educators, in this essay I will focus on the usefulness of CST as a critical form of classroom discourse, one whose contribution promotes criticism as the defining aspect of a quality education. By presenting CST as a form of criticism, I highlight its power to change the pedagogical process from one of knowledge transmission to knowledge transformation. After a brief genealogy of CST, I proceed with a section outlining the contours of a language of critique, which is followed by a final section on a language of transcendence in quality education.

A Genealogy of Critical Social Theory

As a descriptor, critical theory finds its lineages in at least three lines of inquiry. In philosophy and literature, critical theory engages debates in aesthetic as far back as Greek thought, collected by volumes such as Hazard Adam's (1970) *Critical Theory Since Plato*. There is another sense of critical theory found in the Frankfurt School's programmatic study of a Kantian theory of knowledge coupled with a Freudo-Marxist theory of modern society. It has been suggested that theory first became "critical" with the arrival of Kant's critiques of reason, ethics, and beauty. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer during Nazi Germany, Frankfurt Critical Theory sought to make theory critical insofar as it exposed the dialectical tensions in modernity, such as between authoritarianism and enlightenment, summed up by Horkheimer and Adorno's (1976) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In a third sense, critical theory is a more general description of theory that is politically edgy, a form of "agitational theory" (Agger, 1992) concerned with institutional and conceptual transformations. Its project is centered on the function of criticism and its ability to advance research on the nature of oppression and emancipation.

Critical theory is related to social theory, which is a broader category of theoretical production than critical theory, including subsets like sociological theory, race and ethnic theory, cultural theory, and literary theory (see Lemert, 1993). Its multidisciplinary knowledge base is typical of both critical and social theory. Some scholars have synthesized critical and social theory into an overarching framework, such as Craig Calhoun's (1995) *Critical Social Theory*, which includes a chapter dedicated to the Frankfurt School but goes beyond it to include discussions of Foucault,

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standpoint feminism, and nationalism. Bennett de Marrais and LeCompte's (1999) text on the sociology of education explicitly states that it proceeds from a "critical social theory" position and Morrow and Torres' (1995) *Social Theory and Education* brings a mélange of critical and social theories from the Frankfurt School to Nancy Fraser. Finally, Patricia Hill Collins' (1998) *Fighting Words*, her follow up to *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), contains a more explicit attempt to bridge critical and social theory with race and feminist theory.

Critical theory is known for its propensity for criticism, a tradition it arguably owes to predecessors, like Marx and Kant. Social theory represents an expanded set of criticism with the advent of more recent discourses, such as postmodernism and cultural studies. Together, CST is an intellectual form that puts criticism at the center of its knowledge production. Through criticism, CST pushes ideas and frameworks to their limits, usually by highlighting their contradictions. In quality education, criticism functions to cultivate students' ability to question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge in the interest of emancipation. In this essay, I will be concerned with "what" CST is, "how" scholars have engaged its central themes, and to a lesser extent, "who" represents CST. Choosing this path acknowledges that there exist bona fide critical social theorists that most scholars recognize—Martin Jay lists 50 critical theorists in the United States (see Agger, 1992)—but for this article it is more heuristic to assess how "critical ideas" have been received and engaged, even by non-critical theorists. In addition, the article appraises both critical theory and social theory with respect to the functions of criticism, thus building a case for *critical social theory*. That said, CST is by no means a unified field and contains certain contentions, such as the productive debates between materialism and discourse analysis, identity and difference, and determinism and undecidability.

Theory is not new in educational parlance. In the mid-1800s, Horace Mann's idea of the common school theorized an educational experience that resembled both the humanist focus on core subject areas and the factory model of learning. Educational theory arguably reached its golden age with Dewey's pragmatism, enjoying not only engagement within the discipline but with philosophical discourse in general. In the Deweyan sense, quality education was elusive until the empiricist tradition in educational research constructed a suitable theory of "experience" (Dewey, 1938). On the other hand, CST is relatively new in education, perhaps traceable again to Dewey's influence (see Sirotnik & Oakes,1986), but popularized by the late Paulo Freire, or its "inaugural philosopher" (McLaren, 1999), who is "without question the most influential theorist of critical or liberatory education" (Weiler, 1994a, p. 13), and whose name "has become synonymous with the very concept and practice of critical pedagogy" (Giroux, 1993, p. 177). In education, CST is a contested terrain, not the least of which is captured by Ellsworth's (1989) interrogation of what she observes as critical pedagogy's over reliance on abstract rationality over lived contradictions. In addition, her essay brought to light the importance of positionality in the process of theory production, a process, which Said (1979) describes as the imprint that an author leaves on his or her text.

Critical social theorists have tried to link up theory to the immediacy of lived realities. For example, in *Reflections on Exile,* Said (2000) addresses the problem of theory production that detaches itself from the face of real, historical suffering, such as war, imperialism, and displacement. He notices, "Reading historiographers like Hayden White or the philosopher Richard Rorty, one finds oneself remarking that only minds so untroubled by and free of the immediate experience of the turbulence of war, ethnic cleansing, forced migration, and unhappy dislocation can formulate theories such as theirs" (p. xxi). Said favors *concrete* theory that foregrounds historical experience and the necessity of interpreting its source and insight. Said (1983) does not suggest that we forsake theory, but as he warns in an essay on "Traveling Theory," the critic must be resistant to theory that attempts to universalize its insights outside of the specificities of the history that interpellates it and to which the theory responds. Finally, the critical social theorist opens up interpretations of theories to human and social needs, thus making criticism possible in the first place. This is what Deborah Appleman (2000) was encouraging when she argued for the appropriate place of critical literary theories in high school English classes. Working with English teachers, Appleman documents her participants' attempts to teach adolescent students Marxist and poststructural literary theories in their engagement of the standard classics in literature. She may as well have been referring to Said when she argues that "critical theory can travel with adolescents from the literature classroom into the rest of their lives . . . [because] we want our students . . . to reflect a keen understanding of their location (and degree of complicity) within a variety of competing ideologies and possibilities" (p. 126).

We can say that pedagogy first became critical with the arrival of Freire's work and soon after critical theory's cousin in critical pedagogy entered the educational lexicon. Although it would be accurate to appropriate Dewey as an *influence* on the development of CST in education, it is Freire's work that promotes ideology critique, an analysis of culture, attention to discourse, and a recasting of the teacher as an intellectual or cultural worker (see also Giroux, 1988). In Freire's life work, we find a challenge to the prevailing structuralism since Althusser, a qualification to the new sociology that emphasized personal autonomy, and an interrogation of radical indeterminacy popular among certain postmodern theorists. Without suggesting that Freire accomplished his goals before he died in 1997, his work became the fulcrum for a CST program in education that searched for a proper reconciliation between structural conditions and human agency. Freire gave education a language that neglected neither the effect of oppression on concrete people nor their ability to intervene on their own behalf, nor the terrorizing and structured consequences of capitalism and other systems.

A Language of Critique in Quality Education

Educational discourse not only frames the way students experience learning, it may also empower them. Pedagogically speaking, quality education begins with a language of critique, at the heart of which is a process that exposes the contradictions of social life. Through critical classroom discourse, teachers assist students not only in becoming comfortable with criticism, but adept at it. As understood in CST, criticism functions not so much as a form of refutation or an exercise in rejection, but rather as a precondition for intellectual engagement with an ideological formation (Eagleton, 1976). For example, even when bell hooks (1993) takes Freire to task for his patriarchal referents, she reminds us that "critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal" (p. 148). Engagement is at the base of criticism because one could hardly be disengaged when performing a thorough criticism of an author's ideas. That said, in CST criticism is not valued in and of itself but as part of an overall project that aims at material or institutional changes, a process which begins with a language that penetrates the core of relations of domination, such as race, class, and gender (Leonardo, 2003b). As such, CST begins with the premise that criticism targets systematic and institutional arrangements, how people create them, and how educators may ameliorate their harmful effects on schools.

This platform does not negate individual instances of oppression, but in order to understand their pervasiveness, CST attempts to lay bare their social, rather than personal, sources. By social, I mean those objective arrangements that have a stolid existence outside of our ability to articulate them. By personal, I mean more accurately "personalistic" sources of suffering, which are in and of themselves difficult to overcome, such as students' family dynamics and interpersonal relations. When these conditions become part of the overall rationalization of society and how it functions, we can say that such personal histories become instances of social patterns, not determined by them but certainly inscribed by them. These "impersonal" structures affect actual people in schools and one does not have to look further than Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*, where he describes the degradation that minorities and poor students suffer as a result of racial stratification and capitalism. To borrow a phrase from radical feminism, we can say that the "personal is structural."

In another vein, Habermas (1989) has built a project based on the notion of an "ideal speech situation," a theme he expands upon in his two volume critique of distorted communication (Habermas 1984, 1987). As a regulative concept, the ideal speech situation recognizes that communication is always a bit distorted, skewed this or that way because of personal agendas and the like. However, communication becomes ideological when it is *systematically* distorted, that is, when its distortion is socially structured and transcends interpersonal differences. Mannheim (1936) suggests as much when he distinguishes between the personal plane of ideology from its more historical form, arguing that the first is more a product of personal manipulation whereas the second is a product of a historical formation, like capitalism. Although neither Habermas nor Mannheim transcend the tension between structural determinism and personal agency, which represents the bugbear for CST, they draw attention to the systems analysis that informs the field. This fact distinguishes CST from psychotherapy, the former focusing on social emancipation whereas the latter on individual mental health. To the extent that CST locates the sources of systematic oppression and the traces they leave in people, we may call it sociotherapy.

In CST, understanding the nature of oppression is central to its internal logic. That is, it proceeds from the assumption that oppression is real and formidable—that is to say, oppression is simultaneously social and lived. This is ultimately what McDade (1992) found in her study of teen pregnancy, where social oppression was lived everyday by adolescents who were constructed as problem students and whose bodies were ostracized from the general student population (see also Luttrell, 2003). To address this, Pillow (2003) builds a case for school discourses and feminist genealogies about the body since policies are "all about bodies" (p. 146). That is, oppression is material to the extent that it directs and controls the behavior of student bodies, but it is discursive insofar as bodies in schools are culturally inscribed and normalized. In this sense, oppression forms the basis for entering discourse with other humans, its "given" as logicians might suggest. In other words, the reality of oppression is part of the human condition and its structures inscribe our pedagogical or social interactions. Although different forms of CST may debate the nature of oppression—such as economics in Marxism, discourse in Foucauldian analysis, gender in feminism, or race in critical race theory—they converge on the idea that social inequality is stubborn, the persistence of which subverts students' full learning potential. Thus, critical social theorists are not in the habit of justifying that oppression exists, but prefer describing the form it takes. Instead, their intellectual energy is spent on critiquing notions of power and privilege, whether in the form of cash or culture.

Readers of CST in education are accustomed to discourses strewn with overtly politicized phrases, such as "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1993), "predatory culture" (McLaren, 1995), "ideology and curriculum" (Apple, 1990), "struggle for pedagogies" (Gore, 1993), "dancing with bigotry" (Bartolome & Macedo, 2001), "globalization of white supremacy" (Allen, 2002), "knowledge, power, and discourse" (Cherryholmes, 1992), "discourse wars" (Pruyn, 1999), "education under siege" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1987), and "teaching to transgress" (hooks, 1994). In this portrait, quality education means having to confront the reality of inequality, one of its latest examples going by the name of neo-liberalism with its ability to create new spaces for capital around the globe. Confronting inequality means coming to terms with social arrangements that create social disparities and understanding their sources. Quality education encourages students to become aware of, if not actively work against, social injustice, such as the damage that global decentralization wreaks when it works in tandem with the centralization of capital in the hands of multinational corporations. Confronting social inequality also means that students must have access to discourses that pose critical questions about the new world order, a process assisted by theory-informed perspectives on students' social experiences.

CST in education does not ask students to wait until answers to difficult social problems are available before they critique them, as if a person cannot point out a fire because she cannot extinguish it. CST does not always offer a blueprint solution to a given problem, like racism (how does one "end" racism?), but rather to pose it as a problem, to ask questions about common answers rather than to answer questions (Shor, 1993). In other words, part of the solution can be found in how the problem is addressed in the first place. One sees this kind of engagement in Darder's (2002) reinvention of Paulo Freire in the context of southern California's sociopolitical condition. In her book, we read eight educators' narratives about how they "lived the pedagogy" that they learned through their courses in critical social theories in education. We witness their battles for language rights for Latino students in schools, their confrontations with white privilege in fairy tales like Hans-Christian Andersen's *The Ugly*

Duckling, and the relevance of CST for children from working class backgrounds. The vignettes speak to the concrete ways that CST addresses the needs of communities for whom theory has become a political weapon.

Oppression is not just the notion that someone suffers from impositions, such as having to wear a uniform in school or being unable to find socks in one's size. Rather and to Althusser's disapproval, oppression arguably occurs when one's human essence is subverted. For example, in the case of a Marxist-inspired CST, capitalism alienates individuals from their labor or productive powers, which represent the core of their humanity. It is a different situation altogether to argue that one cannot find clothes that fit—as annoying as this might be—since it is not part of human essence to wear properly fitting clothes. Moreover, capitalism alienates both workers and owners of capital—despite the fact that it benefits the latter—because it subverts their ability to achieve solidarity with each other and divides society. Quality education would mean that educators expose students to the concept of ideology critique, or examine the ways that capitalism discourages, at the structural level, a materialist analysis of social life. CST introduces them to the concept of "oppression"(or its age appropriate cognates) in order to differentiate between misfortune, which is random and quite natural, and inequality that is structurally immanent.

Quality teaching in this sense means the ability to apprehend the dialectical relationship between the objective and subjective nature of oppression. That is, part of defining oppression as the subversion of essence means that oppression must be socially pervasive. It must have material consequences registered by human bodies, which is "the central factor of human work, the actual participation of peoples in the making of human life" (Said, 2000, p. 375). In saying this, pedagogues recognize that racism is not the problem of white supremacist fringe groups, but a general institutional arrangement created between whites and people of color; the social definition of exploitation is not found in the practices of individual GM executives or Microsoft's Bill Gates, but in the productive relations found in capitalism entered into by workers and owners; finally, patriarchy is not defined only in terms of men's chauvinist attitudes but people's very creation of gender roles and expectations that limit women's choices and ownership of their sexual powers. In all, a full understanding of oppression in its subjective and objective helix necessitates a language of ideology critique. Together, the objective and subjective components of experience represent the wholeness of human existence. In quality education educators build with students a discourse that reminds us that our actions are inscribed by the very structures that we created (Shilling, 1992). A practical agent who navigates these structures acts on them in order to exercise her own autonomy without suggesting that such autonomy happens in a vacuum outside of social forces. To the critical student this means that, when aggregated together, subjective agency creates conditions for objective or institutional changes.

Ideology critique is not merely criticism. As used in common (i.e., uncritical) discourse, criticism is the deployment of commentaries for political purposes, usually indicative of a Leftist-leaning teacher in the popular mind. In this sense, criticism establishes the superiority of the critic whose impunity the audience often fears. Here critical social theorists must take some responsibility when their main concern is to become the "ultimate radical" rather than promoting dialogue. That said, mainstream audiences often mistake criticism for political agendas as opposed to engagement, as if only critics have an agenda. Criticism is (mis)construed as pessimistic, judged as a form of negativity, and not in the sense that Adorno (1973) once promoted. The teacher-as-critic may be perceived as aggressive if she teaches the idea that patriarchy is alive and well, as politically incorrect if she cites the white supremacist origins of the United States, and as homophiliac if she questions the soundness of heterosexual families. However, the teacher-as-critic understands that criticism is at the center of a quality education that values debate, openness to different ideas, and commitment to democratic processes. Moreover, pedagogical interactions are never severed from wider social relations that need to be problematized. In this sense, criticism is more a search for emancipatory forms of knowledge and less a contrived condition to honor the critic. Criticism is positioned here as a central process in promoting a quality education *even in the face of* an uneven and unjust world.

A language of critique is never simply about clarity, but is always bound up with a political project. The politics of clarity is particularly important in the reception of CST in education because of its dense theories and descriptions, and therefore warrants some critical attention. Over the years, the issue of clarity has been a sore point in the wider engagement of CST. But clarity is always a question of clarity for whom and for what? Clarity is too often an issue of conventions and a critique aiming solely for clarity takes for granted the reader's position (Giroux, 1995). This does not suggest that critique should aim consciously for vagueness and obfuscation. For confusion seems opposed to quality. It suggests that critique is not an issue of either clarity or complexity but both/and. Also, it implicates clarity as an ideological issue, rather than a merely rhetorical one (Lather, 1996). For example, an uncritical literacy program perpetuates the importance of clarity over political purpose and denies the fact that people's tastes and dispositions toward language are socially motivated. As a case in point, language learning frequently intersects issues of race, forming what Hopson (2003) calls the "the problem of the language line." Hopson combines Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital with Du Bois' thoughts on the "color line" and finds that language learning is never just about induction into mainstream schooling but a way to perpetuate linguistic racism, in this case through the hegemony of English (see also Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003).

Criticism launched against the apparently muddy descriptions of CST tends to valorize ordinary language. It is not uncommon that mainstream educators charge that critical educational language is "elitist" or "exclusivist." Its highly academic discourse is not only hard to understand, it seems to demand much previous knowledge from its readers. Though this particular criticism helps point to the important project of widening the interest in CST, it also misses the mark because quality education is proportional to the depth of one's analysis, part of which is the engagement with theoretical discourse. It assumes problematically that ordinary language is sufficient and non-ideological (Gouldner, 1976; Aoki, 2000). The argument valorizes common language as transparent when compared to the supposed opacity of critical language. In fact, there is much in ordinary language that leaves one searching for a better mode of critique in terms of providing educators, teachers, and administrators discourses for a deeper engagement of school processes and hence a quality experience. It is for this reason that Said prefers the phrase "historical experience" because it is not esoteric (therefore accessible) but not without its theoretical moorings that a critical social theorist like Said (2000) proceeds to unpack. Likewise, CST in education works to build a language of depth hermeneutics and as such maintains its critical edge while at the same time fashioning it out of people's concrete lives or lived experiences.

A Language of Transcendence in Quality Education

In forging a quality education, critical social theorists do not stop at a language of critique. In order to provide students with a sustainable education, educators are encouraged to forge a language of transcendence, or what Giroux (1983) calls a "language of hope" (see also Freire, 1994). A language of transcendence is the dialectical counterpart of a language of critique. Insofar as CST accepts the reality of oppression, it also assumes the possibility of a less oppressive condition. This is why Bowles and Gintis' (1976) groundbreaking work, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, received such strong criticisms from the educational Left. It projected a world almost completely under the sway of the capitalist imaginary, smoothly reproducing its social relations through schools without encountering resistance or striking accords. In his research on teacher group formation, Kanpol (1991) finds that teachers develop a certain level of "good sense" that resists the totalizing picture of domination found in Bowles and Gintis' analysis. In addition, Kanpol lends empirical evidence and practical support to the otherwise theoretical analysis of resistance popular in critical pedagogy. Searching for a more complete theory of social life and change, CST promulgates ideology critique as well as utopic thinking, without which the nightmare cannot transform into a dream that wants to be realized (see Leonardo, 2003c).

Dreaming is not the idle activity that a realist and positivist schooling discourse may consider a sign of a mind gone awry. In Freire's conversations with Cabral, the revolutionary from Guinea-Bissau discussed the importance of dreaming in the process of real change, punctuating his belief with," How poor is a revolution that doesn't dream!" (see Darder, 2000, p. 93). Here dreaming is less an idealist, illusory notion and more the necessary projection of the radical imagination. Kincheloe (1993) has suggested that educators can *teach* students literally to dream as part of teacher education courses. Dreaming spurs people to act, if by dreaming we mean a sincere search for alternatives and not the evasion of reality. It is not always an unconscious act, but a metaphor for social intervention that moves the critical social theorist from analysis to commitment. In James Banks' recent colloquium at California State University-Long Beach, he lamented the way that schools have co-opted Martin Luther King's radical persona and transformed him into "the dreamer." In my ensuing conversation with Banks, he relates that King's message has become so diluted, some African-American students no longer want to hear any mention of the "dream speech." To the extent that King was a radical dreamer, he died for his dreams and spurred on a generation of dreamers. For in the end, dreaming represents the cornerstone of utopia, without which a society lacks direction and a future (see Ricoeur, 1986).

Giroux's (1988) language of possibility is built on the premise that quality education revolves around the critical capacity to imagine an alternative reality for education. Educators note that Marx's contribution was contained not only in the several volumes of *Capital* where he performs a radical critique of capitalism; equally important were his collaborations with Engels on the notion of scientific socialism (Marx & Engels, 1970). Foucault's (1977) critiques of disciplinary society and the schools to which it gives rise must be understood in the context of his ideas on local resistance, rupturing regimes of truth, then establishing an alternative or counter regime, what Bakhtin (1981) calls a heteroglossic condition without finality (see also Popkewitz, 1998; Martin, 1992a). For Martin (1992b) and with respect to schools, we must excavate the constructions of knowledge, especially when they appear in the guise of objective scientific discourse and the legitimacy of textbooks. Finally, feminists such as Wittig (1993) perform unforgiving critiques of patriarchy and project a social formation where the category "women" (a sex class) would work against "woman" (a social creation). In education, Sadker and Sadker's (1994) sustained assault on the American educational system from primary grades to professorships is based on the hope that critical educators can fight against gender oppression and improve gender relations.

To the casual observer, these authors appear unjustifiably angry, prone to exaggeration, and are wont to point out the dark side of schools and society. To the critical social theorist, however, they represent an "arch of social dreaming and a doorway to hope" (McLaren, 1991). They recognize the many faces of oppression, but acknowledge the history of resistance to dehumanization, from the Underground Railroad to the Combahee Collective. It must be made clear that dreaming of a utopia does not equate with idle fantasy. Utopia is the dialectical counterpart of ideology critique and we can go so far as to suggest that ideology critique contains a kernel of utopia, or the shattering of current reality. For this reason, it is significant that Martin Luther King spoke of a dream and not a fantasy, where the first maintains a continuity with reality by first explaining it and the second is largely out of sync with it. For a critical social theorist, dreaming represents less a wandering consciousness and more a refusal to surrender to despair.

As defined here, a language of transcendence is always a process and not a description of a state of affair. In post-enlightenment strains of CST, Marxism, Deweyan pragmatism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and a host of modernist philosophies have been criticized for their reductivisms, teleologies, and essentialisms. These critics, represented broadly by postmodernists and poststructuralists, fault enlightenment critical theorists for assuming a "true world," for depicting a social life explained by a singular cause, or for promulgating an educational condition that is ultimately knowable and controllable through scientific inquiry (see Leonardo, 2003d). Under this new criticism, quality education is less the search for a particular social arrangement but rather is coterminous with the very process of criticism itself. That is, the forward motion of criticism is part of the good life. Social life is depicted as a "limit situation" in the Freirean sense, a process which exposes the limits so that they can be transcended. Quality education requires a sensibility for the "impossible," of always preparing for the unfinished project of enlightenment (Biesta, 2001). The new criticism has succeeded in complexifying the search for quality education. It builds in a limitless sense of hope without suggesting that real limits do not exist in people's lives. It has broadened our concerns to include reforming educational language and discourse, teaching students to appreciate the politics of representation and production of meaning, and highlighting the narrative structure of educational processes, like curriculum formation.

Within CST, criticism does not surrender the search for emancipation so dear to enlightenment philosophers but qualifies it as a never-ending process of liberation, of deferred and multiple emancipations. It gives up determinisms and inevitabilities in exchange for a conscious (re)making of the world (Freire, 1998). It is vigilant about oppression and takes its cue from Bell (1992) that racism is likely permanent, not as a pessimistic pronouncement but as the ultimate act of defiance. In other words, although a socialist educational system may give rise to a condition free of labor exploitation, it cannot guarantee the disappearance of racism or patriarchy (Leonardo, 2004). A language of transcendence in quality education means that students learn the difference between fighting against oppression and projecting a utopia free of contradictions and strife. For utopia is always haunted by its counter-utopia, or a condition that subverts utopia from ever becoming a reality *once and for all*. Rather, the *idea* of utopia is integral to human and educational progress because it guides thought and action toward a condition that is better than current reality, which is always a projection. In fact, by definition utopia cannot exist. For once it has been realized, utopia graduates to the status of reality and loses its utopic characteristics. Quality education is no less than the search for a language of utopia.

To the extent that CST builds a language of criticism, it depends on a language of engagement with the social world that we make and that makes us. Thus it comes with a certain discourse of hope. Not only does it deploy the politically edgy phrases cited above, but critical social theorists are also accustomed to optimistic phrases, such as "pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 1994), "pedagogy of love" (Darder, 2002), "curriculum for utopia" (Stanley, 1992), "care of the self" (Foucault, 1986), "democracy and education" (Dewey, 1916), "school reform as if democracy matters" (Fraser, 1997), and "women teaching for change" (Weiler, 1994b). Critical social theorists have made it known that quality education is as much about teaching students the ability to read the world more critically (ideology critique) as it is imagining a better world that is less oppressive (utopian critique). For Dewey and Fraser utopia may represent the radical extension of a democracy built around the common good and a vital community over and beyond a form of government. Or as Fraser (1997) describes, the fundamental nature of democracy entails:

> The commitment to equality for all people, the commitment to individual liberty and the right of every citizen to give voice to her/his ideas, and most significant, the commitment to the building up of a better community for all people – beginning in the classroom and extending to the larger society in which the school is located and in which its graduates will live (p. 55).

If this passage smacks of early 20th century Deweyan sentiments, it is because critical social theorists in education take seriously Dewey's thoughts on direct participation both in schools and society at large.

A pedagogy centered only on critique becomes a discourse of bankruptcy, a language devoid of resistance or agency on the part of students and educators. In this sense, just as Dewey pronounced that education is not preparation for a future life but is life itself, hope is not a future projection of a utopic society but a constitutive part of everyday life. It is structured into the oppressive arrangements that critical social theorists aggressively analyze because oppressive conditions always produce resistance. Hope represents what Maxine Greene (1988) calls the "dialectic of freedom," which is not a given but a power on which we act responsibly in order to become authors of our own world. In her "search for a critical pedagogy," Greene (1986) insists that we make that search as specific as we can, which suggests that she agrees with Freire who encouraged educators to remake his ideas in the contexts in which they find themselves. Greene's search for an American articulation of critical pedagogy asserts that hope is not only universal but specific to place, time, and culture. Ours, she argues, is informed by the broad and inclusive language of Whitman and Thoreau. In short, she suggests that living with difference is part of quality education.

CST is a recent innovation in education. If Freire is its founder and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* its first text, then it has been around for only three decades. Although Agger (1992) finds it problematic that there are more "students of critical theory" than actual critical theorists, CST seems to be gaining currency across the disciplines. These developments have benefited from earlier preparations at the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, among others. The field of education has appropriated these insights, which by no means represent the mainstream in educational scholarship. That said, educational scholars from conservatives to radicals have responded to CST, sometimes with outright hostility, other times with healthy skepticism, and occasionally with unspoken advocacy.

An educational movement directed by CST attempts to build on the contributions as well as to address the limitations of its predecessors, one overemphasizing structures the other reveling in linguistic play. As Giroux never tired of reminding us, critical educators assist students in mapping the contours of oppression through criticism, a process, which entails both a language of critique and hope. Through this double move, quality education fluctuates between the poles of ideology and utopia, exposing the limitations of our social formation and searching for interstices of possibility in institutions and agency in individuals. CST improves the quality of education by encouraging students and teachers to take up personally meaningful choices that lead to liberation. This move is accomplished through the practice of critique and a sense for alternatives, not as separate processes but dialectically constitutive of each other. As a discourse, CST is indeed challenging, but in this 50th year since the *Brown* decision, it remains to be said that quality education has never been achieved without a fundamental struggle for freedom. If oppression and emancipation are the two main concerns of CST, then its transformative knowledge base should also reflect their full and lived complexity. For answers are only as deep as the questions that educators and students are able to pose. In this sense, quality education is not something that teachers provide *through* CST. Rather, quality education is the product of a struggle during the pedagogical interaction where both teacher and student play the role of critic. If criticism is done appropriately and authentically, then educators put theory in its proper place within the process of education.

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