

ZEUS LEONARDO

INTERPRETATION AND THE PROBLEM OF DOMINATION:
PAUL RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS

ABSTRACT. Hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation, is well accepted in the humanities. In the field of education, hermeneutics has played a relatively marginal role in research. It is the task of this essay to introduce the general methods and findings of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Specifically, the essay interprets the usefulness of Ricoeur's philosophy in the study of domination. The problem of domination has been a target of analysis for critical pedagogy since its inception. However, the role of interpretation as a constitutive part of ideology critique is relatively understudied and it is here that Ricoeur's ideas are instructive. Last, the essay radicalizes Ricoeur's insights in order to realize their potential to disrupt asymmetrical relations of power in education. To this extent, the author contributes to the building of a critical brand of hermeneutics, or the interpretation of domination.

KEY WORDS: critical pedagogy, democratic education, domination, hermeneutics, ideology critique, interpretive research, Paul Ricoeur, philosophy of education, school change, social justice

Since Apple's (1979/1990) widely acclaimed book, *Ideology and Curriculum*, was first published, the concept of ideology has earned a privileged place in the critical lexicon of education. Key figures, such as McLaren, Giroux, and Freire have stressed the importance of mobilizing ideology critique in order to arrive at the structures of domination. However, less attention has been paid to the role of hermeneutics in educational research (Peters & Lankshear, 1994), especially in the study of domination. To the extent that interpretation becomes a constitutive part of ideology critique, meta-analysis of the conditions of interpretation is a necessary step. In short, if ideology is the problem of domination, then studying it is the problem of interpretation. The process of schooling is itself an interpretive endeavor concerning the role of schools in society; it is inherently hermeneutical (Feinberg & Soltis, 1998). At the heart of educational research is a hermeneutical structure where interpretations collide or complement one another. Sirotnik & Oakes (1986) mention the hermeneutical method as one of the "three faces" of critical inquiry in schools, along with traditional empirical methods and critical theory. However, it is the task of this essay to expand on the centrality of interpretation in the study of domination, or the struggle over power and meaning. John Thompson



(1981, 1984), whose work in critical hermeneutics is clear and instructive, assists in this regard. But, if we want a theory of interpretation which provides a broad foundation for the current study, then we turn to Paul Ricoeur's productive work in textual exegesis. Ricoeur's general theory provides a framework for interpreting educational texts through its focus on the conditions of meaning. In particular, his engagement with ideology's integrative function as a source of meaning departs from the Marxist definition of ideology as distortion. Ricoeur's theory of ideology assists in our understanding of interpretation as a constitutive part of domination such that it inscribes the moment of interpretation.

The following essay examines the utility of Ricoeur's brand of hermeneutics with respect to the problem of domination in education. Although the analysis provides the intellectual context for Ricoeur's ideas, it is limited to a truncated engagement of the general field of hermeneutics. Also, with respect to Ricoeur's writings the essay focuses on several important texts containing his main methodological thrust and engagement with ideology. First, the leading section sets the context for the rise of Ricoeur's hermeneutics and the historical background of his thoughts. In particular, it highlights the case for understanding as a counter to the concept of explanation found in the natural sciences. The second section documents the turn toward discourse, which signals Ricoeur's departure from structuralism in favor of a contextual theory of meaning and the text. This is significant insofar as domination is a problem made intelligible through discourse. The third section introduces the productive tension between Ricoeur's concept of distantiation and appropriation, two dialectical poles which provide entry to his theory of the integrative function of ideology. Last, I end with a section on critical hermeneutics, or the possible radicalization of Ricoeur's basic findings for research on the problem of domination.

THE RISE OF RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS AND THE CASE FOR UNDERSTANDING

In order to appreciate Ricoeur's contributions, it is appropriate to set the intellectual and historical context of the rise of his ideas. Originally, the word "hermeneutics" came from the Greek mythological figure, Hermes. As a messenger, Hermes was responsible for interpreting Zeus' messages for the other gods and goddesses (Kneller, 1984). In practice, Jews and Christians used theological hermeneutics to interpret the words and teachings of the Torah and Scriptures. For the purposes of this paper, we may define hermeneutics as the site of what Ricoeur calls the "conflict

of interpretations.” Ricoeur starts with the claim that interpretation is possible because of the necessary cleavage between subjective intentions (authorial) and objective significance (what the statements mean). Interpretation fills the gap between what a speaker meant in saying something and what her statements mean outside of her intentions. The hermeneutical process begins when dialogue ends because with dialogue comes further clarification. Without dialogue, one is forced to interpret without the benefit of the other.

In the Romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, understanding the speaker as an originary source is of paramount importance. As Schleiermacher notes, in the psychological arm of hermeneutics, one is compelled “to understand an author better than he understood himself” (cited by Ricoeur, 1976, p. 75). The appeal to empathy in Romantic hermeneutics combats against the positivism of imposing one’s categories onto another human being’s experience. As Ricoeur explains further, Gadamer’s concept of the “fusion of horizons” between the speaker and receiver proves decisive in the interpreter’s move to assume the spiritual life of an author and her work. It is the apprehension of a world outside of mine but which enriches my own. However, Gadamer departs from Schleiermacher with respect to the function of history and the limits of empathetic understanding because history is not experienced by a single individual *per se* but a unity that belongs to the history proper. For Gadamer (1975), empathy misses the mark when it encourages a reader to give up oneself to the text.

Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither “neutrality” in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one’s self, but the conscious assimilation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings (p. 238).

In contrast to Romantic, or psychological, hermeneutics Gadamer’s primary concern with history leads him to question the possibility and goal of empathy absent of a proper understanding of tradition and prejudice in its positive and negative iterations. In forging the exegetical branch of hermeneutics, Ricoeur’s philosophy synthesizes aspects of Gadamer’s historical existentialism and Schleiermacher’s romanticism of the author. In the current study, we locate Ricoeur’s method of the text as a fulcrum between history and the author.

If experience is made known through language, then history is what grounds language as a symbolic system common to “all.” Before educators can make judgments about human phenomena, they must belong to a

history that interpellates them. Thus, no subject is completely autonomous and objective, which is not to suggest that a scholar cannot map the contours of objective laws (those processes which happen with or without our will). It suffices to say that history provides the condition for our participation. As Ricoeur (1981) defines it, “prejudice” can mean either “precipitation” (to judge too quickly) or “predisposition” (to follow customs and authority) (p. 66). Pedagogically speaking, a teacher belongs to a history before she can reflect on her conditions. This history is the primordial soup of ontological understanding. It precedes and intercedes every moment of reflection:

Forschung – inquiry – scientific research does not escape the historical consciousness of those who live and make history. Historical knowledge cannot free itself from the historical condition. It follows that the project of a science free from prejudices is impossible (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 76; italics in original).

Every form of understanding is made possible by the force and influence of history common to all subjects. Exegetical research looks for the underlying structures of history, which bind together relatively autonomous individuals. Furthermore, to echo Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, as a form of interpretation ideology critique not only describes history but attempts to change it.

As Ricoeur explains, in hermeneutics *explanation*, a mode of analysis found in the natural sciences, is replaced by interpretation as a case of *understanding* in the human and social sciences. In the natural world, we explain the essence of human existence through events outside of ourselves: e.g., planetary motions or stellar formation. Much of this knowledge remains enigmatic with respect to our own self-understanding. On the other hand, in the human or social sciences

man knows man [sic]; however alien another man may be to us, he is not alien in the sense of an unknowable physical thing. The difference of status between natural things and the mind dictates the difference of status between explanation and understanding. Man is not radically alien to man, because he offers signs of his own existence. To understand these signs is to understand man (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 49).

To understand people suggests a mode of analysis that is different from explanations common to the natural sciences, something positivism unreflexively applies to the human and social sciences. In hermeneutics, the terms of argumentation and standards for evidence change from verification to validation, not unlike the standards one finds in legal procedures where probability is preferred over verifiability. Whereas natural scientists use verification to prove theories through empirical observation, validity is more productive for understanding human interactions because it is open to the examination of unobservable dimensions of human subjectivity.

Hermeneutics persists even in the face of misunderstanding. It presupposes an agreement that precedes it because interlocutors must agree on that which they find themselves disagreeing. Thus, understanding – as a form of agreement – is not the fundamental goal. Understanding is not the search for consent but the unpacking of layers of distortion in order to arrive at the immanent structure of the text. Because subjects take up different forms of validation to arrive at their conclusion, there exists a gap in their ultimate understanding of each other. In other words, misunderstanding is the risk of any form of understanding – the supplementary side of it – without which there is no understanding. Gadamer (1975) reminds us that “[t]he effort of understanding is found wherever there is no immediate understanding, i.e., whenever the possibility of misunderstanding has to be reckoned with” (p. 157). A reading that does not risk the possibility of misunderstanding is not a hermeneutical reading at all. Following Derrida, Biesta argues that something becomes a text when it is read, which represents one of the first acts of interpretation. The only way to avoid the risk of misunderstanding is “not to *engage* in an act of reading or interpretation at all” (Biesta, 2001, p. 37; italics in original).

We belong to a social class, race, and gender before we can reflect upon our situation. We understand this as prejudice, in the sense of it as the “anticipatory structure of understanding” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 58). This leads us to a very different interpretive goal than the one posed by Romantic hermeneutics of “understanding the author better than he understood himself.” Ideology critique via hermeneutics disaggregates the difference between what Ricoeur (1981) calls “simple misunderstandings” from “pathological or ideological distortion” (p. 97), the first a rather benign interpersonal phenomenon, the second symptomatic of an exploitative social formation (see also, Mannheim, 1936). Interpretation and ideology critique meet at the point where political interests struggle over the meaning of a text.

With the rise of postpositivism, we have a better framework for constructing a science that accounts for human intentionality, meaning, and interests (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Whereas the positivism of Skinner, for example, emphasizes the measurable aspects of human behavior independent of meaning, postpositivists find that a science patterned after Kuhn and Popper help educational researchers arrive at warranted and assertable truths about meaningful contexts. As opposed to the deductive scientific method, hermeneutics informed by postpositivism follows Popper’s idea that current theories are warranted until falsified. In fact, postpositivist hermeneutics structures interpretation around the very condition that it is falsifiable.

Postpositivism appears to go a long way with Ricoeur's position against pretensions of neutrality in social research. It recognizes that humans are interested beings as opposed to the indifference one finds in nature. Post-positivism recognizes the role of interest, but "in a world in which there is no true, the notion of bias is drained of content" (Philips & Burbules, 2000, p. 51). The critique of bias assumes a true interpretation, or at least a less distorted one. In short, it is reasonable to suggest that social location bears on our interpretation of the world and its texts. As Said (1979) writes, "No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society" (p. 10). Said reminds us that scholars are participants of social and cultural life and as such are inscribed by the hermeneutic circle. Participation is ideological to the extent that it represents partiality (or "prejudice" in Gadamer's terminology).

By acknowledging a state of affair wrought with conflict as well as possibilities, hermeneutic researchers are caught between the *Scylla* of interpretation and the *Charybdis* of choosing. To Ricoeur (1981), "It is because absolute knowledge is impossible that the conflict of interpretations is insurmountable and inescapable. Between absolute knowledge and hermeneutics, it is necessary to choose" (p. 193). We must interject here that even positivists avoided any search for an "absolute truth" beyond the observable world (Philips & Burbules, 2000). But neither did it ask researchers to use interpretation as a form of social intervention. As Ricoeur sees it, hermeneutics does not exonerate one from acting; on the contrary, it forces you to choose an interpretation in the face of uncertainty. In this sense, interpretation represents a form of decision.

THE TURN TOWARD DISCOURSE, MEANING, AND THE TEXT

In order to arrive at any systematic understanding of human interaction in its context, Ricoeur's framework suggests that a researcher must appreciate the distinctions between language and discourse. Whereas language, as a formal system of signs, stands impersonally above subjects who express their intentions in *langue* (Saussure, 1983), discourse cannot fail to be about something specific and someone in particular. In Ricoeur's engagement with structuralism he finds that it is in discourse where language finds its articulation; it is the temporal event of language that provides the backdrop for meaning. He departs from Saussure's science of the sign outside of history because, to Ricoeur, something happens when someone speaks and

structuralism fails to account for the context of this event. Ricoeur (1985) notes that “saying is still doing, even when the saying takes refuge in the voiceless discourse of a silent thought” (p. 156). By favoring the formal system of *langue*, Saussure cannot account for discourse, or the specific event of language. But if discourse is realized as event, it is also understood as meaning. To Ricoeur, discourse surpasses *langue*, or language as an abstract system, by becoming an event. Because we understand the meaning, for example, of a teacher’s utterance discourse also surpasses itself as event because a text maintains autonomy from its speaker long after she expires. We see this transpire when a speaker’s words become institutionalized, as in the interpretation of what the “Founding Fathers” meant in the US constitution.

To reiterate, in Romantic hermeneutics *understanding the speaker* is the goal. Dilthey’s is a hermeneutics of empathy, an entrance to the Other’s soul and spirit. By contrast, in modern hermeneutics, *understanding the text* displaces the speaker from the center of interpretation. The goal is to understand the work rather than the author. This is different from saying that the subject has been – to use a school term – “expelled.” To Ricoeur, a subject’s discourse is the articulation of how she understands her world and being. In this way, the individual objectifies her subjectivity through the work of discourse and it is the task of hermeneutics to interpret the world she projects. Thus, knowledge of others is possible through discourse as a form of objectification. We can even go further and say that self-knowledge is already an interpretation since I know myself as something objectified, such as through art, writing, and so on. Social researchers do not understand the subject as such but only through the “detour of understanding,” or the exteriorization of life through a symbolic system, such as language (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 52).

The “hermeneutical circle” of pre-understanding is the dialectical glue between a subject and the objects of her world. Ricoeur (1981) describes the circle this way:

To understand oneself in front of a text is quite the contrary of projecting oneself and one’s own beliefs and prejudices; it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself . . . Thus the hermeneutical circle is not repudiated but displaced from a subjectivistic level to an ontological plane. The circle is between my mode of being – beyond the knowledge which I may have of it – and the mode opened up and disclosed by the text as the world of the work (p. 178).

We exteriorize our being-in-the-world through our work, that is, we objectify ourselves; but our work structures how we see ourselves as subjects. We look around and see ourselves in our work, our discourse as work. Educators are no strangers to this notion, for many classroom walls are

decorated with student work. Our students' self-objectification represents their attempt to understand the world. However, even before working-on-the-world, we must reckon with belonging-in-the-world, which foregrounds our comprehension of it. This belonging-in-the-world precedes our reflection upon the world. It excludes the possibility for total and complete reflection because we must first understand the meaning of being before we can transform it through language as a social practice (Higgins, 1986).

As Ricoeur (1981) boldly states, "*The choice in favour of meaning is thus the most general presupposition of any hermeneutics*" (p. 114; italics in original). To choose meaning necessitates interpretation. Gouldner (1994) reminds us that ideologists start with the premise that words matter. However, words are polysemic because they invoke as many meanings as there are situations to use them. This is an impossible situation for the social scientist and one that we make amenable by using concepts, or the temporary "pinning down" of meaning. Discourse allows us to demarcate the endless possibilities of meaning by setting the context wherein words are used and by doing so, momentarily truncate the "play of meaning." The process of reading is constitutive of the production of meaning as the two poles dialectically play into the structure of a text. As the "activity of discernment" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 44), interpretation identifies the conditions of meaning in order to arrive at the singularity of discourse as a piece of work (see also, Lyotard, 1994).

Lyotard's argument for the singularity of language games insists on the specificity of the event, its undeniable context that escapes our grasp of its meaning because representation is always a bit behind the pure event. Researchers may find this situation impossible in light of the fact that subjects still find meaning in representation, albeit one step removed from its originary source. To accomplish this move, researchers de-psychologize meaning in order to escape the speaker's intentions and arrive at the larger significance of what is said. This is what Ricoeur means when he encourages us to move beyond the "psychological moorings" of the dreary speaking subject. A preoccupation with subjective intentions smacks of a positivism in search of an accurate representation of the discursive context, something that Husserl, according to Ricoeur, was guilty of when he declared intentionalities as the structure of mental states of being. To side with meaning is to open up the possible worlds offered by the speaker's words.

In severing intention from meaning, Ricoeur makes it clear that interpreting written discourse is a game of guesses. It is a hermeneutical process guided by a logic of probability rather than a logic of empirical verification.

Yet we should not mistake this situation as anarchic, suggesting a “free for all” interpretation. There are standards for good guesses and an interpretation may challenge and refute another. For as Hirsch reminds us, there are no rules for making good guesses but there are reliable methods for validating them (cited by Ricoeur, 1981, p. 211). The fact that what the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant liberates meaning and does not imprison research. It is to say that verbal meaning and mental meaning have different destinies. There are only certain reasonable ways of making sense of a situation. To say that meaning is interpretable does not suggest that meaning can be anything. Not all interpretations make sense; nor are they all critical in the emancipatory sense.

By emancipating the signifier from its destined signified, the work of discourse escapes its initial context marked by the subject’s intentions, decontextualizes itself for the exegete, and is recontextualized through interpretation. Consequently, the text becomes liberated for anyone who can interpret a message. Ricoeur (1981) clarifies,

Hermeneutics can be defined no longer as an inquiry into the psychological intentions which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed by the text. What is to be interpreted in the text is a proposed world which I could inhabit and in which I could project my ownmost possibilities (p. 112).

We are less concerned with what the speaker “meant” or “intended” than with the kind of world her words project. This does not suggest that we disregard the speaking subject altogether, for as Ricoeur reminds us, meaning is made up of both *noetic* (speaker’s intention) and *noematic* (discursive meaning) dimensions.

The sticky association between authorial intention and identity is where Said (1979) parts company with Foucault’s (1991) declaration of the death of the author. Rejecting the primordial association between an author and the meaning of her text, Foucault annihilates the author’s privileged impression on the work, opting instead for the indeterminacy of the text. Although an “author exceeds the limits of her work” (Foucault, 1991, p. 457) when Said states, “I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers” (p. 23), he considers a speaker or author’s positionality as critical to the content of her discourse. Put another way, her social location matters with respect to the meaning of her utterance. That said, it remains that speaking or writing subjects do not possess a secure hold of even their own intentions and are rarely transparent to themselves. First, imagine that a subject says something (a statement). Upon semantic interpretation, she actually meant something else (contradiction). Last, she actually “said” something much more than she had anticipated (an unintended message). It is even possible that a subject’s message may undo its utterer and explode

her world before us. Consistent with Ricoeur, an interpretation that prioritizes the message is more productive than a subjectivist reading because the first opens the field of interpretation whereas the second limits the search to the “one and only.” Or as Ricoeur (1988) says it, “It is at this point that a rhetoric of fiction centered on the author reveals its limits. It recognizes just a single initiative, that of an author eager to communicate his vision of things” (p. 164). To open a text does not equate with closing the author. It suggests that we recognize the text’s multiplicity in the face of the author’s unity.

With spoken discourse, the ostensive function is active because the discursive reference is something apparently common to the interlocutors; otherwise, the speaker can usually clarify her referential point in person. In comparison, written discourse abolishes any sense of a clear reference (Barthes, 1991). This is what differentiates “saying” from “speaking” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 59). The former relates to *what* was “said” whereas the latter refers to the subject *who* “speaks.” Again, here we are talking about the choice between the speaker’s text or her intentions. We choose the text for its multiple readings over the monadic ego of the speaking subject. In claiming this, we recognize that the saying passes (e.g., oral discourse) but the said remains (written discourse). It is the task of hermeneutics to interpret the said for the kind of world it projects and the politics it inheres.

As such, texts do not have an ideal, imagined audience. It is open to any readership. As Gadamer points out: “the Letters of Saint Paul are no less addressed to me than to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, etc. Only dialogue has a ‘you’ ” in mind (cited in Ricoeur, 1981, p. 192). Textual exegesis does not pretend to be context free. On the contrary, it is only by paying attention to the context of utterance that one arrives at discourse rather than *langue*. However, hermeneutics does not reduce the message to the medium, or the linguistic environment. It privileges interpretation as a mode of gaining access to repressed desires, possible dreams, and ideological undercurrents.

DISTANTIATION, APPROPRIATION, AND THE INTEGRATIVE FUNCTION OF IDEOLOGY

As Jean-Paul Sartre has pointed out, life is characterized by the anxiety produced from the existential condition of being condemned to freedom (see, Kneller, 1984). Following Martin Heidegger, Ricoeur explains that we are alone and inauthentic for most of our lives. We are thrown into a world as beings, a project which puts the responsibility of understanding our situation squarely on our individual shoulders and promotes distance

from others. However, we also exist in the world with others that we are “condemned to interpret” (Jameson, 1988, p. 6) and appropriate. As a dialogical structure, appropriation or being-together overcomes our fundamental distance or being-alone (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 15; see also, Freire, 1993). Thus, we always already exist in a world-with-others and the challenge is to acknowledge this pre-condition. This is accomplished partly through discourse with other human beings, which is why hermeneutics is first and foremost the understanding of a world projected by a discourse, the kind of lifeworld it offers. It is also what ultimately differentiates humans from animals: “Only man [sic] *has a world* and not just a situation” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 201; italics in original). Through interpretation, we not only understand a psychological subject, but an existential project, in Heidegger’s sense of it. Discourse, at least for the moment, struggles against the alienation brought about by our existential condition. Likewise, even before teachers can reflect on their conditions, they must understand their being-in-the-world, a belonging which precedes any thought about itself: in Ricoeur’s (1981) words, the “power to be” (pp. 56, 93).

Social research that involves the transformation of knowledge can be characterized as the dialectic between appropriation and distantiating. Distantiation is the dialectical counterpart to our sense of belonging, of which appropriation is a decisive example. Interpretation is the attempt to appropriate, or to render familiar what is initially strange, to make something foreign one’s very own. With respect to this essay’s concerns, we can say that “Since distantiation is a moment of belonging, the critique of ideology can be incorporated, as an objective and explanatory segment, in the project of enlarging and restoring communication and self-understanding” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 111). Ideology critique distances itself from its object of study in order to determine the structures of domination that impinge (the negative moment) on or enlarge (the positive moment) the participants’ discursive horizon. The text becomes the primary unit of analysis in order to understand and then communicate the overall work of discourse: its functions, distortions, and possibilities. But insofar as critical research “forgets” the author of a given text, it must also appropriate the world that the author proffers in order to understand the project under interpretation.

An important dualism in hermeneutics is the relationship between the Self and Other. Where there is a situation, there is an open horizon, the “horizon of the other” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 75). Hermeneutic research creates space for the subject’s critique of her own presuppositions while avoiding the narcissistic tendency of transforming the protocol from something about “them” to something about “me.” This is to point out that any interpretation of the Other constitutes a hermeneutics of the Self. Only

by appropriating the Other can I become aware of my own horizon of possibilities, my own human fallibility. Ricoeur argues that this process comes about through the researcher's willingness to disappropriate herself, a subjectivity that does not initiate the text, but an intersubjectivity that terminates it. This is meant to suggest neither that researchers enter the site as a *tabula rasa* nor the presumptuous claim that *one can be the Other*. Rather it is a discourse that builds an arc of intersubjective possibility, which acknowledges the Other not as an abstract Other, but as a "concrete Other" (Benhabib, 1987). Hermeneutics does not designate intersubjectivity in advance, but projects it as a possibility. Disappropriation of the Self and appropriation of the Other is to render what is near far and what is far near, while heeding Gadamer's warning about bias. In other words, in order to avoid self-alienation or domination of the Other, interpretation mingles two worlds through the opening of difference, the Other as concrete difference and the Self experienced as different vis-a-vis the Other.

Absent the pretensions of gaining total access to the Other's experience, hermeneutics avoids reducing the Other as only Other. Hermeneutics works at the fine threads of understanding between people, without which social research is impossible. Lived experiences may be private in the sense that the subject feels them in unique ways, but this is made public through meaning. Ricoeur (1976) describes,

My experience cannot directly become your experience. An event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another stream of consciousness. Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you. Something is transferred from one sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of the radical noncommunicability of the lived experience as lived (p. 16).

Hermeneutics neither privatizes nor co-opts the Other's experience. It recognizes a small window of opportunity where two worlds do not necessarily agree but can mutually co-exist through the pane/pain of difference. It opens a text away from its author and toward the world it discloses. The subjective experience represents an irrepressible uniqueness through the singularity of an individual but becomes shared through history, through the publicity of language.

It is by appropriating the world of the other that research arrives at something concrete as opposed to something abstract. The aim of hermeneutics is to combat against cultural distance and historical alienation, and to promote being-together. This is the project of appropriation and reappropriation, without which

human beings are merely like ants or bees; they simply observe, describe, analyze, and so on. Without a certain historical movement toward reappropriation, human beings are nothing more. It is the concept of appropriation which finally gives sense to the concept of creation. We discover that we are creative to the extent that we have a project of appropriation (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 65).

As a project, hermeneutics aims to teach social actors why they should critique meaning systems that contribute to their illusions. In Marxism, the premise is that there is much that is hidden in our presentations of self. To transcend epiphenomena, scholars use a materialist hermeneutics to arrive at the rational kernel of social interactions. Insofar as interpretation confronts this veil of mystification, a critique of “false consciousness” is where hermeneutics joins Marxism. To the extent that consciousness perpetuates relations of domination, it is false not merely as an instance of factual error but because it promotes an inverted world of misunderstandings and misappropriations, illusion as reality and reality as illusion.

Habermas has problematized a hermeneutics of tradition (recall Gadamer) with the depth hermeneutics of ideology critique. Versus the human sciences, Habermas promotes the critical social sciences where he sets forth the project of interpreting the interests behind knowledge. To Habermas (1971), “ideology [fronts] as an allegedly disinterested knowledge which serves to conceal an interest under the guise of a rationalization, in a sense similar to Freud’s” (p. 80). Knowledge interest takes three forms: technical (control over nature), practical (intersubjective communication), and emancipatory (undistorted communication). Consistent with the Frankfurt School position at the time, Habermas locates ideology in science, specifically in the form of technical rationality, or the subjugation of nature for industrial profits. In contrast, communicative rationality – an attempt to overcome historical distance – is a hermeneutics guided by the “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 1989). Because orthodox Marxism subsumes forces (technology) and forms (institutions) under the general category of production, it fails to differentiate between types of interests, one of which is emancipation (see also, Ricoeur, 1981, p. 82). Rather than rehabilitating tradition, as Gadamer suggests, the task of Habermas’ hermeneutics is to reinstate the importance of reflection over the interests tied to knowledge.

In making ideology a purely negative phenomenon, Marxism runs into problems with respect to the integrative function of ideology (Ricoeur, 1986). A “hermeneutics of suspicion” leaves something to be desired. Through a hermeneutics of suspicion, of which Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche were masters, ideology critique is the analysis of relations of domination that prohibit our true reflection on being. First, because ideo-

logy in its pejorative sense is about “someone else” (Eagleton, 1991), this tends to leave the critic free of the possibility of distortion and unfortunately, the benefits of critical reflection. It is much like a psychoanalyst who diagnoses her patients’ psychoses while leaving her own unchecked. Second, interpreting ideology entails an understanding of how a group attempts to image (i.e., reflect) and imagine itself. Through a “hermeneutics of faith,” we also gain a sense of how subjects suture the social in creative, if not progressive, ways. No group could exist without this critical moment, or ideology’s integrative function. It justifies their way of being, without which no individual or group could function in a coherent way. A social group without ideology is one without plans or direction (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 225, 241). As it is normally described, ideology appears like an oversimplification of the complex ways that people live their lives. It has a doxic quality to it, a worldview made up of maxims (“work hard and it will pay off in the end”) and slogans (“we’re all humans”). We think from *within* ideology and not *about* it, just as we do not desire authority but *within* it (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 229). An interpretive study of ideology keeps these analytics close to the problem of domination. For it is the problem of domination with which critical education is concerned.

Through an ideological analysis of discourse, one understands the *sense* of the work (its internal organization) and its *reference* (the world it invokes), not the mode of being hidden behind the text but the one opened up in front of it (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 93). This is the sense of ideology as a necessary framework (Geertz, 1994; Hall, 1996; Giroux, 1981), as opposed to its Marxist conception as distortion (Marx & Engels, 1970). To say that a text opens a world before us is a form of ideology critique, which begins with the assumption that the text is something to be understood before we are able to assess its distortions. Inasmuch as an author is a subject of the contradictions in history, she is also a carrier of its traditions. We have prejudices because we belong to the world before we can have ideas about the world (for Gadamer, we belong to history). Prejudice in the sense of belonging to a tradition is inescapable, but *systematic* ideological distortion is a product of a social formation structured around differential power relations.

Ricoeur’s concept of ideology assumes that the world is constituted in symbolic ways. To Ricoeur (1981), there is something more primary than social classes: the symbolic function (p. 230). It is more fundamental than the inversion of material life because distortion presupposes that an interpretation of social life is out of whack, mainly, that it is idealist. In this, Marx was idealistic in the ordinary sense of the word, i.e., utopic, without which social theory lacks a language of hope. That said, Ricoeur reiterates

a trajectory contained in the current study. Ideology critique must be able to engage its multiple dimensions, one of which is its integrative function. Interpretation entails that this formula replace any reductive reading of ideology as only negative, without rejecting the pejorative conception of ideology.

Although I have argued that Ricoeur's hermeneutics benefits social research, it is not without its problems. While Ricoeur effectively problematizes class politics with the symbolic function in efforts to guard against deterministic interpretations of ideology, he ultimately falls short of articulating a social vision, a project of "critical" appropriation. It is here where Ricoeur's hermeneutics lacks a coherent political project because to Marx, ideology was not only a matter of truth or falsehood, but class domination (Thompson, 1984). Ideology is not a product of the bourgeoisie, but the capitalist social formation. Working *against* ideology is at the same time working against exploitation, not for truth *simpliciter* but for social justice. Critical hermeneutics deploys a "depth interpretation" of the ways that structures of domination often exploit their victims unbeknownst to them (Thompson, 1981). This is not to go down the road which claims that the "masses are being duped by an elite class." But it points out that the world that subjects project and disclose for researchers is not a transparent world. In order to realize the full potential of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, we must radicalize it. For to interpret ideology is not only a matter of arriving at the text, how it is symbolized, and what it may mean. Ideology critique is a matter of social justice and this is ultimately the challenge of critical hermeneutics.

TOWARD A CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS

Despite the strong influence that objective reality exerts on subjects of history, they still mediate structures, interpret them, and create meaning out of them. Understanding this subjective reality is a main task of critical hermeneutics because reality does not make immediate sense to agents; it has to be mediated. However, the researcher does not make a text meaningful as such, as if the act of interpreting could be compared to Adam naming the objects of the world. The content is already replete with meaning and interpretation represents the act of apprehending its structure, to lay bare its message and account for its distortions (Jameson, 1988). Being is inherently hermeneutic and is lived as a relation between objective and subjective realities. This is the lynchpin of Ricoeur's point about appropriation where the Self and Other leave a textual interaction different from when they arrived. Seen in this light, reality appears to

subjects in flux, never quite clear but fuzzy and ambiguous. Ricoeur's method gives the exegete the tools to find the text's structural order.

Social subjects do not have direct access to the real as it exists in its pure state (Althusser, 1971). This does not suggest that the relationship between reality and representation is purely arbitrary. There is some necessity between objective reality and our representation of it. Our discourses are able to express this reality with some relative degree of coherence and connection. But in the process, we also constitute this reality through discourse. This does not mean that social life is any less real to people. Subjects live "as if" their lives are stable and constant. It is this "as if" condition that allows us to extract some sense of meaning out of social life. A research protocol produces critical results depending on the degree that it questions objective and subjective realities. It assists in this process by pushing our assumptions regarding what constitutes reality and the political consequences of constructing it one way versus another.

On the methodological plane, a researcher's judgment that something constitutes an important event is itself an informed, though not necessarily a valid, choice because it is a sign of one's prioritization. A critical hermeneuticist reflects on the historical conditions surrounding her decision-making process without paralyzing her from carving out a path to interpretation. For example, distortions in communication become an important site of critique because ideological distortions in language do not come from its use, *per se*, but from its relation to labor, power, and history. As Habermas urges, ways of symbolizing social life must be "desymbolized" then "resymbolized" to end domination (cited by Ricoeur, 1981, p. 84). Likewise, Freire's (1993) use of "decodification" follows along similar lines in his hermeneutics of the word. It is also important to note that we interpret *through* language before we interpret language itself. That is, at the heart of interpretation is a linguistic structure which attempts to reflect upon its own condition of intelligibility. This is what Giroux (1988) calls a "language of possibility," or Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" between the opening world and a closed system, between near and far, or "the universal linguality of human experience" (cited in Ricoeur, 1981, p. 62).

Resymbolization happens when terms previously thought to be unrelated are paired to create a new metaphor. Following Max Black, Ricoeur's theory of metaphor works through semantic friction. That is, metaphor comes from the tension born from the juxtaposition of two terms, similar to two like-charged poles of magnets. They resist the attraction and maintain the tension that refuses their ultimate harmony. In time, like the magnets, terms become common sense, turnover, and lose their tension.

Although most words have what Jameson calls traces of “figuration,” many terms lose their metaphorical register and become what we call everyday language.¹

Epistemological assumptions about the production of knowledge is also another critical issue in hermeneutics and studies of domination. We apparently receive reliable knowledge about a social phenomenon because we have experienced it first hand. This has been one of the problematic notions associated with the pragmatist tradition. It leads educators to assume that knowledge comes from experience. However, experience does not always lead to knowledge. As Weedon (1997) reminds us, “[T]he experience of individuals is far from homogeneous. What an event means to an individual depends on the ways of interpreting the world, on the discourses available to her at any particular moment” (pp. 75–76). We know social life by representing it in intelligible ways, that is, through reading and interpretation. In fact, one may even go as far with Ricoeur (1988) that “without a reader to appropriate it [text], there is no world unfolded before the text” (p. 164). Students have many experiences throughout the day, some of which they do not appropriate as meaningful. That is, the meaning of many of our experiences escapes us and remains unanalyzed. They remain catalogued in the deep recesses of the unconscious. Through interpretation, we make experiences matter without suggesting that they are made of matter.

To the extent that texts generate meaningful experiences for teachers and students, “It is the task of hermeneutics . . . to reconstruct the set of operations by which a work lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their acting” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 53). Combating relations of domination is not solely a negative process of detecting distortion. On the whole, it represents an arc of hope in changing the way students read and act toward one another, of gaining deeper meaning from everyday life, and of developing a critical sense of curiosity about the text and world in which they live. The tension between text and reader represents a mediating process of approachment and distantiation, of the back and forth between reading, reflecting, and acting. Ricoeur (1988) says,

The “right” reading is, therefore, the one that admits a certain degree of illusion . . . and at the same time accepts the negation resulting from the work’s surplus of meaning, its polysemanticism, which negates all the reader’s attempts to adhere to the text and to its instructions. This process of “defamiliarizing” on the side of the reader corresponds to that of de pragmatizing on the side of the text and its implied author. The “right” distance from the work is the one from which the illusion is, by turns, irresistible and untenable (p. 169).

¹ Frederic Jameson delivered a series of lectures at UCLA’s Comparative Literature Department, 2001.

If domination is born out of distance, then reading can ameliorate this condition through strategies that lessen the gap between an omniscient reader and an omnipotent text. The point, however, is not to abolish distance altogether, but to establish the “right” tension between an “irresistible” illusion and an “untenable” fixing of a text’s meaning. In other words, the suggestion is neither that we surrender ourselves to the text nor that we achieve mastery over it, or the Alpha and Omega of domination.

The problem of research into domination is not so much an issue of producing “better” knowledge, but of liberating people from accepting their knowledge as natural and neutral. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics can assist in this project by challenging the claim that research produces objective knowledge about a particular phenomenon. In addition, critical research questions the notion that progress is the production of better, more accurate, and reliable knowledge. Instead, research can justify its knowledge production in ethical terms, that is, by self-reflecting on the political consequences of the research product and project, or its epistemic gain (Calhoun, 1995). What is the knowledge for? How does this knowledge enable people to become more politically responsible subjects? And, how does the research knowledge critically help us to understand schools as sites of change?

With critical hermeneutics, the basic issue of “how we come to know” becomes problematic. Everyday knowledge is politicized and made problematic because it is in the daily interactions that knowledge begins to assume its naturalness. Critical hermeneutics unsettles this obviousness by encouraging self-reflection. It asks fundamental questions about apparently innocent statements like, “It’s common sense,” “That’s human nature,” or “We’re all humans.” First, there is nothing common sensical about the obvious. Common sense is a long process of naturalizing knowledge that is inherently historical and ideological. Gramsci (1971) has observed that ideological hegemony is established at the level of common sense in order to persuade people away from questioning certain social relations and the social order they produce. Second, human nature is a myth that lulls people into accepting as natural that which is social. As a result, apparent differences, like “women are emotional and men are rational,” are accepted as natural traits rather than social constructions serving particular interests. Third, collapsing people into “just people” forgets our situatedness, which is a discourse attempting to fix what it means to be a subject. Instead, people are participants in and are effects of discourse communities and regimes of knowledge. People bare the universal stamps of humanity but social organization has made something different of men from women, blacks from whites, and rich from poor.

Research apparently is not about describing the obvious, the natural (note the irony in “naturalistic” methods), or just people. It is a struggle of coming to know social phenomena within a particular set of assumptions and with a particular purpose.

Critical hermeneutics recognizes that “perceiving” is always perceiving from a social location, which leaves its imprint without determining the analysis. This does not strangle research as a purely subjectivist or relativist endeavor. In the postpositivist paradigm, which shares affinities with Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, the belief in truth becomes a regulative ideal and the pursuit of it is open to criticism (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). In this sense, the authors remind us that a science of the text (conceived broadly) “does not attempt to describe the *total reality* (i.e., *all* the truths) about, say, a classroom; rather, it seeks to develop *relevant* true statements – ones that can serve to explain the situation that is of concern or that describe the causal relationships that are the focus of interest” (p. 38). Despite the fact that truth becomes a node in the conflict of interpretations, this does not suggest relinquishing the quest for it.

Research is always research for a purpose. However, interpretation differs between people with outstanding and prior ideological commitments. This is different from claiming that social location determines one’s commitments. As already noted, although social location leaves its traces in the research protocol, it is a node in the ideological process and is constitutive of interpretation. Also, social location is inherited whereas ideological commitment is developed. Traditionally, much of social science has been geared toward describing social phenomena in efforts of verifying knowledge claims. With the political platform of the reconstructionists, Dewey’s pragmatic insights into democratic experience, and the current burgeoning work on school reform, a vocal group of educational researchers has become concerned with relations of domination and are change-oriented rather than descriptive. With Ricoeur’s critique of ideology, school reform can be extended to *school transform*.

Critical social theorists have made it known that social research has spent too much time describing schools. The point is to change them. This necessitates an ideological critique of the purpose of schools and how to conduct research in order to expose the contradictory conditions in which schools are embedded. As Kincheloe & McLaren (1994) describe it, a critical researcher can be characterized as

a theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values of removed from some form of ideological inscription (p. 139).

An important purpose of critical hermeneutics is to expose myths or unquestioned assumptions that have long been held as self-evident: myths like rugged individualism, history's facticity, and science's objectivity. This point echoes Ricoeur's mantra that interpretation, while being scientific, is never neutral. By critically engaging the promises of social research, scholars promote transforming social ills rather than describing them.

I have ended with an outline of a research and political project based on critical hermeneutics. En route, I have affirmed the basic insights of Paul Ricoeur's method and philosophy. To the extent that domination represents a central concern of critical methodologies, ideology critique provides the preferred mode of analysis. Insofar as there is a gap between reality and our understanding of it, hermeneutics attempts to fill the void. Emancipation is the unfinished and incomplete project of exegesis. Research then becomes the search for more liberating ways to interpret social life. Critical hermeneutics is the understanding that this process is made possible by opening up interpretation, not reducing it. But it also stresses that exegetical processes serve the interests of humanizing the educational endeavor. Ricoeur's profound insights are a necessary but insufficient part of the task. Radicalizing Ricoeur means that we appropriate his particular brand of hermeneutics for the services of social justice. In this move, we affirm the challenges of interpretation in combating relations of domination. In this move, we also affirm the proper place of philosophical research in the creation of transformative knowledge.

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*California State University
Long Beach School of Education
Department of Educational Psychology
Counseling, and Administration
1250 Bellflower Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90840-2201
USA
E-mail: zleonard@csulb.edu*