

Discussion Workshop

Repositioning Paulo Freire's Educational Philosophy - Critical Pedagogy, the Birmingham School and the Problem of Popular Cultural Dissent

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In recent years, the discipline of the philosophy of education (so long the bastion of the British analytic tradition) has come face to face with the cutting-edge of French and German continentalist postmodern theory. The signal importance of the groundbreaking work of such philosophers as Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1972) and Michel Foucault for schooling and the relationship between education and culture has at long last become apparent. In the UK, this evolution of the discipline is being led by thinkers such as Paul Standish and Nigel Blake (Blake, 2003). In the US, this insight, under the guise of the 'Critical Pedagogy' movement, is being led by figures such as Peter Mc Laren, bell hooks and Henry Giroux, (Giroux, 2000) and seeks to answer the needs of the increasing complexification of youth and urban culture, as they impact on education. Also influenced by the seminal work of Frantz Fanon, these philosophers recognise the need to pay homage to a romantic tradition of creativity and imagination in education, while reformulating some of the implicit utopianism of this romantic tradition. The key intellectual influence on the US Critical Pedagogy movement, if not on the UK strand, is unequivocally Paulo Freire. (Freire, 1972)

1. In this discussion forum, I want to look at the nature of this influence and on Freire's relevance to the contemporary analysis of education and culture, most especially as these relate to the politicisation of education and culture. Particularly within the Critical Pedagogy movement, Freire has almost prophetic status and this has prevented a more critical interrogation of his work. At times, the reception of his work has been passive and eulogistic, which is ironic given Freire's consistent attempts to point to the contingency of his own thinking and the need for constant revision and transformation. I will argue that Freire's own intellectual development demonstrates significant

self-critique, early to late, but that there still remain tensions in his work which are unresolved. (Freire, 1994)

2. Through a foregrounding of the problematic of popular culture, subculture and their 'dissident' tendencies, I argue that Freire's work has been rigidified to an unnecessary extent by some of those who have developed his legacy, such as Henry Giroux and Peter Mc Laren. This leads these latter figures and Critical Pedagogy to take an unnecessarily 'moralistic' stance on popular culture and contemporary subcultures, especially those associated with youth. More to the point, I argue that this actually goes against the grain of the spirit of Freire's own work, which eschews formulaic or moralistic responses, in its emphasis on historicity. However, this is not always unambiguously stated in Freire's work and this demonstrates in his own *oeuvre* the very tensions which have come to haunt Critical Pedagogy. Nonetheless, in Freire's work, these tensions are affirmed as tensions, whereas in Critical Pedagogy there is an overly hasty attempt to resolve these tensions into a dialectic, which shuts down the possibility of dissent, and amounts to dogmatism.
3. The example I will foreground relates to the discussion of 'contemporary youth culture' in Critical Pedagogy, most especially as these are represented through film and media. In his book *Breaking In To The Movies*, (Giroux, 2000) Henry Giroux puts forward a counter-cultural critique of several examples of contemporary film and media. He castigates film directors such as Quentin Tarantino ('Pulp Fiction'), Gus Van Sant ('My Own Private Idaho') and Richard Linklater ('Slacker') for their failure to provide a moral vision to counter what he sees as an increasingly indulgent but also self-destructive youth subculture. He reserves his especial ire for the work of controversial photographer and film-maker Larry Clark (the photographic work 'Tulsa' and the film 'Kids') (Clark, 1995) whom Giroux accuses of voyeurism and the exploitation of youth.
4. Needless to say, Giroux's reading of youth culture runs the risk of feeding the 'moral panic' his work is set up to address. On his own reading, Critical Pedagogy is less about condemning youth culture and more about delineating specific patterns of negativity which seem to have developed both in education

and in society. (Giroux, 2000) For artists such as Tarantino or Clark, however, the Critical Pedagogy response is too 'moralising'. It seeks to adapt and normalise the expressiveness of youth culture to a pre-ordained emancipatory ideal. As Tarantino says, if you don't like his film, 'don't watch it, man'. (Giroux, 2000) Similarly, Clark is unabashed in his confidence that his representation of youth culture is a truer and more authentic version than any moral critique from Giroux or his like. (Clark, 2007) For Clark, there is also a clear sense that any genuine transformation of youth can only come from within youth culture itself. Critical Pedagogy runs the risk, on this reading, of imposing a solution from without, an external panacea. To paraphrase Freire, transformation must be *by youth, with youth but not for youth*. (Freire, 1972) Whichever perspective one takes, it is clear that the Giroux/Clark debate foregrounds the importance of contemporary media and film in the construction of youth identity and youth ethics, and their relation to education.

5. Freire's work, I will argue, has been more faithfully developed by thinkers such as Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (CCCS), (Hall, 1993) who are more subtle in their analysis of the complexity of popular culture and subcultures, without losing sight of the need for clear political commitments and action. (Dolby et al, 2004) As Hall has put it, 'how a politics can be constructed which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity?' It is the immense challenge of this 'politics of difference' (Charles Taylor's term) which I think Freire's work genuinely confronts.
6. To develop this discussion, then, I will look at how the evolution of Freire's work demonstrates his many-sided response to this question of political and cultural difference. I will then conclude by looking at how Critical Pedagogy on the one side and Stuart Hall (and the Birmingham School) offer alternative approaches to the development of Freire's educational legacy.

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