To the egoistic and asocial being that has just been born, [society] must, as rapidly as possible, add another, capable of leading a moral and social life. Such is the work of education.

—Emile Durkheim, 1911

“Critical pedagogy,” a body of education theory represented by the writings of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Michael Apple, and other leftist-leaning thinkers, takes its cue from the Durkheim quotation above, but it carries the notion of schools as agents of moral instruction and socialization far beyond what Durkheim envisioned and what the public expects. Critical pedagogy extends critical theory—the neo-Marxist examination of the relationship between power and culture, aimed at addressing issues of class, race, gender, and social justice through the remaking of societal institutions—to the realm of schools. The core concern of critical pedagogy is to illuminate the role of schools in perpetuating the established order and to convert them, instead, into instruments for social reform.

Despite its radical bent—bordering on the kind of liberation theology associated with Latin American revolutionary clergy—the critical pedagogy school has managed to carve out a respectable niche in America’s schools of education, enough to get its views aired in journals such as the Harvard Educational Review (see Giroux’s essay in the Winter 2002 issue) and to have its patron saint, Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Marxist, recognized by the New York Times as one of 13 “provocative leaders” in education “on whose shoulders the future is being built.” Marilyn Cochran-Smith, the newly elected president of the influential American Educational Research Association (AERA), is at least sympathetic to the critical pedagogy movement and is the director of a curriculum and instruction doctoral program at Boston College that lists critical pedagogy as one of only four areas of specialization. At its 2002 annual meeting, the AERA program featured more than 40 panels on critical theory and pedagogy.

Admittedly, the critical pedagogues have squarely confronted two of the most enduring issues surrounding the work of education: 1) To what extent should the mission of public schools be focused on character development, societal reform, and other such affective goals, as opposed to cognitive development and academic preparation? 2) To the extent that values should be taught in school, whose values should take precedence? A related issue, first raised by Durkheim and now at the center of critical pedagogy, is: How much emphasis should schools place on promoting individual achievement vis-à-vis collective well-being?

Proponents of critical pedagogy view “egoism” as incompatible with societal progress and complain that schools have become too wedded to Social Darwinist competition. By contrast, traditionalists worry that schools have taken the “it takes a village” slogan to
such lengths that they risk producing an increasing number of village idiots.

**Historical Context**

There has always been the temptation to use schools for proselytizing or other ends normally associated with religious and other institutions. Both conservative and progressive forces at various moments in American history have been behind the move to turn schools into sites not only for informing minds but also for transforming lives. In *Who Controls Our Schools?* Michael Kirst notes that the widely read McGuffey readers, first published in 1836, openly preached the Protestant ethic, while Catharine Beecher "urged that the school teach the importance of fresh air, loose clothing, simple diet, and exercise." By the early 20th century, schools were increasingly relied on to assimilate newly arrived immigrant children into the American mainstream and to instill a sense of patriotism.

From John Dewey's democratic schooling crusade and George Counts's anti-capitalism pedagogy at Columbia's Teachers College in the 1930s, and the life adjustment movement of the 1940s and 1950s, to the character education movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the academic mission of schools has continued to compete for attention with other mandates. The character education movement itself was a conservative reaction to what some viewed as an excessive liberal fixation on the psychosocial needs of schoolchildren and the relaxation of standards of conduct in the name of diversity, inclusion, and other politically correct shibboleths.

The building of "self-esteem" and "community" has been part of the same progressive project, coalescing in today's dominant K–12 paradigm—constructivism—which combines the child-centered, nonjudgmental, nonhierarchical, teacher-as-facilitator classroom (rooted in the romantic tradition of Rousseau) with a cooperative learning regimen (rooted in Counts's vision of a New Social Man). The conjointing of seemingly paradoxical elements of independent and collaborative learning reflects the odd juxtaposition of radical libertarianism and radical egalitarianism that defined the Woodstock generation now running America's schools.

Some attention to "moral" education in schooling is almost inevitable (in other words, it is nearly impossible to completely separate normative values from empirical analysis) and desirable (surely we do not want schools to be wholly amoral). The same goes for "political" education, if by that we mean citizenship education. But the question remains, What exactly should be the extent and nature of such training—how much time should be spent shaping the heart and soul relative to the mind? Critical pedagogy answers this question in a highly provocative manner that leaves it open to much criticism. Critical pedagogy is an especially militant sect. Indeed, the apostles of critical pedagogy have fallen out with their progressive brethren because of the progressives' pretensions toward science and, hence, failure to adopt a more evangelical posture toward schooling. Critical pedagogy shares with constructivism the following: 1) Critical pedagogy is very PC in that it pays homage to multiculturalism and situational learning (tied to the student's group identity and personal experiences) as antidotes to what is portrayed as the traditional, Eurocentric education system; 2) critical pedagogy is wrapped in the rhetoric of "emancipation" and "collaboration," promoting creativity as long as that does not create advantages for some students over others; 3) critical pedagogy stresses "higher order thinking" while disparaging the teaching of basic skills (rules of grammar, punctuation, computation) and basic information (factual knowledge) as producing mere "rote memorization"; and 4) critical pedagogy opposes what it calls the "corporatization" of education, represented by the testing and standards movement.

Critical pedagogy departs somewhat from constructivism, first in its emphasis on the affective-normative domain at the expense of the cognitive-empirical domain—it is more interested in engaging students in understanding the world as it ought to be than in how it is—and, second, in its acceptance of the hierarchical, judgmental classroom, where the teacher's role is not to facilitate value-free inquiry but instead to use the bully pulpit to preach doctrinaire gospel, with schools performing the function not of political socialization but of counter-socialization. The school is to be, if not a ministry, at least a political party.

The high priest (or, as McLaren puts it, "inaugural protagonist") of critical pedagogy is no less paradoxical.

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**If constructivism is not so much a scientific theory as a "secular religion," then critical pedagogy is an especially militant sect.**

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**What Is Critical Pedagogy?**

If, as D. C. Phillips has put it, constructivism is not so much a scientific theory as a "secular religion," then critical pedagogy is an especially militant sect.
pedagogy is the late Paulo Freire, whose view of conventional schooling (a teacher instructing students in the canon of established academic curricula) was captured in the title of his seminal 1970 book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* In his tribute to Freire following the latter’s death in 1997, McLaren stated that Freire supported “a radical politics of historical struggle” and “acquired a mythic stature among progressive educators, social workers, and theologians” for “fomenting dedication to the ways that education can serve as a vehicle for...a politics of liberation.”

Although Freire boasts numerous disciples (Michael Apple, Stanley Aronowitz, and Donald Macedo, among others), McLaren and Giroux are arguably the leading exemplars of critical pedagogy today. In the 1980s both, ironically, were housed in McGuf fey Hall (named after the inaugural protagonist of character education) at Miami University of Ohio, where Giroux was director and McLaren associate director of the Center for Education and Culture Studies. Their paths continued to cross, even after the former migrated to Penn State and the latter to UCLA. In fact, their writings have crossed so much—the authors often mirroring one another, even at times sharing the same volume as coauthors and coeditors—that it is hard to distinguish between the two. Reviewing a few selected, representative pieces, I will trace the evolution of their thinking since the 1980s, although there is relatively little observable change, given not only the constant polemical tone that has remained at the core of their work but also the similar language that appears throughout the corpus of that work; they unabashedly acknowledge their frequent borrowing, almost verbatim, from previously published essays. If one wished to be unkind, one might say that the “three Rs” in their case stand for redundant, recycled rants—well-rehearsed arguments exhibiting a recitative, drill-like quality of the very sort that critical pedagogy abhors. Nevertheless, if nothing else, these authors do challenge us to reexamine our basic assumptions about the American school.

**In Their Own Words**

In *Teachers as Intellectuals* (1988), a collection of his early articles, Giroux criticizes the “hidden curriculum,” the excessively “technocratic” character of literacy training, and insufficiently “radicalized” teacher education programs, among other targets. He opens with the observation:

In the worldview of traditionalists, schools are merely instructional sites. That schools are also cultural and political sites is ignored. . . . Rather than viewing school knowledge as objective, as something to be merely transmitted to students, radical [critical pedagogy] theorists argue that school knowledge . . . [represents the] dominant culture . . . [with its] privileged language forms, modes of reasoning, social relations, and lived experiences.

We begin to see here the connection between critical pedagogy, postmodernism, and the legitimation of Ebonics (in Oakland and elsewhere), inventive spelling (in the national standards published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1996, which devalued standard English conventions), fuzzy math (in the national standards published by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989, which devalued right and wrong answers), and a relativist, multicultural social studies (in the 1994 national history standards project, whose director, Gary Nash of UCLA, said, “We want to liberate students from the prison of facts”).

While questioning the very existence of any objective, core knowledge and competencies to teach students, Giroux at the same time says, “Schools are public places where students learn the knowledge and skills” that constitute an educated person. He resolves the apparent contradiction by explaining what “knowledge and skills” he has in mind. Teachers and administrators, Giroux argues, should play the role of “transformative intellectuals who develop counterhegemonic pedagogies” and educate students “for transformative action.” One of the problems with critical pedagogy is that authors express ideas in such airy, abstract terms that it is hard to get a handle on exactly what practical classroom applications might follow. It is clear, however, that instruction in the core subjects of math, science, English, and history is secondary to other goals.

We should not be “organizing schools around the goals of raising reading and math scores,” writes Giroux, “but our primary concern is to [get students] to learn how to affirm their own experiences, and to understand the need to struggle individually and collectively for a more just society.” Discovery learning and individual empowerment go only so far. Giroux rejects absolutism when it comes to empirical knowledge, but he is more dogmatic with regard to the values teachers as transformative intellectuals are supposed to cultivate. While historical facts, multiplication tables, and proper grammar may be in the eyes of the beholder, what constitutes a “just society” is an objective exercise, to be defined by Giroux and his associates, not by parents, taxpayers, school boards, or other stakeholders.
He is critical of “how schools socialize students to accept unquestionably [sic] a set of beliefs” and how “all social interaction between teachers and students [is] mediated by hierarchically organized structures,” yet he praises Freire for “fashioning a theory of education that takes seriously the relationship between radical critical theory and the imperatives of radical commitment and struggle” [emphasis added].

Given his revolutionary zeal—he does not disguise his fondness for the “important focus” and “value” of “the neo-Marxist position”—one has to wonder whether, in Giroux’s classroom, students are exposed to a full range of ideas and opinions, lively debate, and the best scholarship based on evidence and argument, or whether only “counterhegemonic” thoughts are permitted.

Giroux believes that “central to a realizable critical pedagogy is the need to view schools as democratic public spheres,” but his vision invites the charges of elitism that have always dogged proletarian vanguards.

Giroux caricatures the traditional classroom as one where “students sit in rows staring at the back of each others’ heads and at the teacher who faces them in symbolic, authoritarian fashion”; “events are governed by a rigid time schedule imposed by a system of bells and reinforced by cues from teachers”; we “glorify the teacher as the expert [and] dispenser of knowledge”; “social relationships . . . are based upon power relations inextricably linked to the teacher’s allotment of grades”; and tracking “alienates students from schooling.” Thanks to Giroux and others, the contemporary classroom—even if it falls short of the critical pedagogues’ ideal—increasingly is a block-scheduled site presided over by a teacher who, at least concerning academics, is the guide on the side, eschews grades in favor of portfolios, minimizes ability-grouping, and, rather than being a content provider, is a manager of peer editing, team building, and other processes. (Curiously, the standards movement has been gaining momentum despite, or perhaps because of, these trends.) If the logic of the hegemonic classroom, according to Giroux, was “more ideological than rational,” at least as much could be said for the counterhegemonic classroom. While Giroux is critical of neoconservative “moral regulation” represented by the recent character education movement, he has few misgivings about his own neoradical version of character ed.

One has to wonder whether Giroux’s students are exposed to a full range of ideas and opinions, or whether only “counterhegemonic” thoughts are permitted.

More Contradictions

Similar themes are struck by Giroux in *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (1988). He recommends that teachers “concern themselves with the business of moral and political education” and not “work to become curriculum experts.” While praising John Dewey for making “a valuable pedagogical contribution . . . that linked a theory of ethics to the issue of moral character,” he condemns “various right-wing spokespersons, in and out of the government, [who] have become quite aggressive in pushing a program for schools to teach a particular set of moral values and virtues.” He scoffs at teachers’ being asked “to promote character development in students, to teach them a clear sense of right and wrong, to promote skills of individual achievement.” He accuses not only conservatives but even liberals and postmodernists of “a flight from ethics,” given their “silence regarding forms of race, class, and gender discrimination.”

Giroux struggles with the inconsistency of ridiculing the moral clarity of others while defending his own and of teachers’ mapping what is supposed to be a student’s journey of self-discovery: “The issue here is how can educators make their own political commitments clear while developing forms of pedagogy consistent with the democratic imperative that students learn to make choices . . . and act on their own beliefs.” He applauds the efforts by Counts and others in “usurping pedagogical opportunities in schools . . . in order to transform existing political and economic inequalities.” In social studies, while rightly criticizing the tendency of earlier American citizenship educators to produce America-Firsters by teaching a sanitized, celebratory U.S. history, Giroux overcorrects in promoting a curriculum calculated to produce America-Worsters, focused on the country’s warts, as schools serve as “sites of struggle that address the suffering . . . of the oppressed.” His is not a recipe for a serious, sophisticated, accurate, intersubjective history, but one where “knowledge and power come together” in support of “the good society.”

Literacy is “associated with the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition based on the virtues of hard work, industry, [and] respect for family.” Children in urban schools, we are told, are especially at risk of becoming bored or disruptive if teachers ignore their “voice” and “cultural capital,” which Giroux equates with teachers’ behaving like “white collar” functionaries, dispensing insights from Great Books and tips on diagramming sentence structure. Instead of following in the Marxist tradition of Antonio Gramsci, who argued that the working class needed to master
the knowledge and skills of the establishment in order to succeed, Giroux prefers Freire's "emancipatory literacy," designed to "throw off the colonial voice" and "the terror and brutality of despotic regimes." This is more than a call for respecting diversity; it is an attack on the teaching of fundamentals, as Giroux opposes schools of education training teachers in "the implementation of mandated basics," which he contends only results in masses of students participating in their own oppression.

In Education Still Under Siege (with Stanley Aronowitz; 1993), Giroux states that central to "transformative intellectual" is the task of making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical." Again, "knowledge and power are inextricably linked." In place of "the authoritarian classroom armed with the three Rs curriculum," we must draw on "the legacy of a critical Marxism" but "move beyond Marx," mounting a "challenge to the racist, patriarchal, sexist principles embedded in American society and schooling." He says all this while berating the conservatives' "hubris that declares they know what truth and the good life really are" and confessing bewilderment over "the paradox of how groups that so blatantly favor the rich, the upper classes, and the logic of unbridled individualism can so effectively mobilize . . . oppressed groups."

Here, as in other writings, Giroux laments the "proletarianization of teacher work," their demotion to "high-level clerks," and their "deskilling" and "demoralization," all of which he blames on a conservative-driven "emphasis on accountability schemes, teaching to the tests, and . . . the growing corporatization of the schools." Might it be, instead, the progressive-driven collapse of classroom discipline, the proliferation of bureaucratic paperwork for special education and the concomitant full inclusion of behavior-disordered and learning-disabled students, the devaluing of subject-matter expertise, the mind-numbing coursework often required for certification and advancement, and the refusal to reward professionals based on their merit?

**Fellow Traveler**

With Peter McLaren, we get more of the same. Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education (2002), the latest edition of his 1989 text, is dedicated to Giroux and Freire and candidly relies heavily on the former's "ideas" as well as "sections from our co-authored works." The book is mostly an account of his four years as an elementary teacher in a Toronto inner-city school, first narrated in his 1980 Cries from the Corridor, and it echoes the customary critical pedagogue's conclusion that the school must be foremost a "social and moral agent."

He takes on the important task of shedding "a more critical light on the issue of why disadvantaged students generally don't succeed in school," but adds little to Giroux's explanation. Teaching has become "apolitical . . . stripped of its . . . ethical imperative to analyze and remediate existing societal and institutional practices" and of its mission to promote "self-empowerment and social transformation." There has been a "devaluing and deskilling of teachers," as they have been "reduced to . . . 'clerks of the empire'" by "the present rush toward accountability schemes, corporate management pedagogies, and state-mandated curricula." Schools "favor the interests of the dominant culture," as "the dominant curriculum separates knowledge from the issue of power," and "the hidden curriculum" favors boys over girls and whites over people of color. Here, then, is what purports to be a definitive portrait of public schools, painted in broad strokes (spanning the United States and Canada, urban, suburban, and rural settings), based on anecdotal (action) research, by someone who does not believe in the possibility of objective knowledge—who says "any worthwhile theory of schooling must be partisan"—begging the question: Why should we take his study any more seriously than any other?

In Revolutionary Multiculturalism (1997), McLaren expounds on "a socialist-feminist multiculturalism that challenges . . . historically sedimented processes through which race, class, and gender identities are produced within capitalist society." His analysis suffers from all the intellectual flabbiness (for example, claiming that "the U.S. is fascist," or "the greed and avarice of the U.S. ruling class are seemingly unparalleled in history") and turgid prose (like his reference to the "Dickensianizing of postmodern megalopolises," or his final chapter, entitled, "Unthinking Whiteness: Critical Citizenship in Gringolandia") that are commonly associated with the postmodern genre.

As always, schools, including universities, must serve as "moral agents." Possible role models include rap and hip-hop artists, whom he characterizes as "organic intellectuals," suggesting what he means when he says, "What is needed in school settings . . . is radical shifts in what counts as knowledge and what counts as learning." He devotes an entire, mostly laudatory chapter to "the terrorist pedagogy" advocated by the French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard. Reading McLaren, one searches in vain for any discussion of the normal stuff of school-
ing, of alphabets or algorithms or lab experiments. School is treated almost like experimental theater, the theater of the absurd. At one point, McLaren refers to ideas buried in the recesses of his mind as “gliding past me like some eerie opium-induced object,” as if getting high on higher-order thinking. If his goal is to shock us out of accepting the conventional education paradigm, he fails badly, since it is simply impossible to translate any of this into best practices in the classroom. Critical pedagogy is critical of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but titillation for titillation’s sake seems permissible.

Barbarians in the Temple
Like McLaren, Giroux extends his analysis to the collegiate level. In the aforementioned Winter 2002 Harvard Educational Review article, entitled “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere,” Giroux discusses “the role the university should play as a site of critical thinking [and] democratic leadership” that “confronts the march of corporate power.” He envisions a seamless K–16 system in which affective learning trumps cognitive learning throughout all grades. Meanwhile, equating the teaching of basics with job training of “compliant workers,” he glosses over the fact that “many employers in the business community feel dissatisfied because,” in the words of the Committee for Economic Development’s 1994 report, Putting Learning First, “a large majority of their new hires lack adequate writing and problem-solving skills.” Giroux would prefer that schools produce a cadre of social activists who can take to the streets even if they lack the marketable skills that can put a roof over their family and bread on the table.

The academy is lambasted as a place where, like the larger society, “anyone who does not believe that rapacious capitalism is the only road to freedom and the good life is dismissed as a crank,” and “academic disciplines gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange value on the market.” Never mind that recent surveys of university faculty have shown that an overwhelming percentage are liberal Democrats and that women’s, black, and minority studies programs continue to proliferate on campuses. While Giroux raises legitimate concerns about bottom-line financial pressures’ potentially undermining the university’s intellectual mission, he fails to consider how critical pedagogy, in its emphasis on ideology over inquiry, fosters its own brand of anti-intellectualism.

Perhaps nowhere does one see this more vividly than in Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution (2000), McLaren’s paean to two figures with whom he shares “a feeling of kinship.” McLaren explains why “Che and Freire have never been needed more than at this current historical moment,” since their pedagogical ideas can be used “to contest and transform current global relations of exploitation and oppression. . . . [They have taught us that we need] to do battle in the streets, in the boardrooms, in the classrooms.”

McLaren says very little about education here, devoting much of the book to biography and to his critique of capitalism. He laments that critical pedagogy “no longer enjoys its [earlier] status as a herald for democracy, as a clarion call for revolutionary praxis. . . . The conceptual net known as critical pedagogy has been cast so wide and at times so cavalierly that it has come to be associated with anything . . . from classroom furniture organized in a ‘dialogue friendly’ circle to ‘feel-good’ curricula designed to increase students’ self-image.” He winds up faulting constructivists not for their ideas, with which he is generally sympathetic, but for their lack of radical fervor, as “their work is marked by a flirtation with but never full commitment to” the cause of revolution.

Perhaps it is just as well that critical pedagogy’s clarion call has not been fully heeded. We would do better to reaffirm education as that which promotes “the discipline and furniture of the mind.” Put more simply, we might “let schools be schools.”

We would do better to reaffirm education as that which promotes “the discipline and furniture of the mind.”

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