



Volume 50 | Issue 4


Article 10

2005

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Recommended Citation

Antonia Darder, *Schooling and the Empire of Capital: Unleashing the Contradictions*, 50 Vill. L. Rev. 847 (2005).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/vlr/vol50/iss4/10>

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SCHOOLING AND THE EMPIRE OF CAPITAL:
UNLEASHING THE CONTRADICTIONS

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CONTEMPORARY notions of democratic schooling are historically linked to the civil rights struggles. At that time, a small cadre of African American and Latino political activists passionately believed that the civil rights movement should be linked to anti-imperialist struggles around the globe—that is, struggles to challenge capitalism through embracing a politics of class struggle and anti-racism. Instead, a rights-centered politics prevailed as the common orthodoxy of the period. The strategy to retain a civil-rights approach to organizing with a predominant focus on legal intervention was to represent a significant political juncture—a political juncture that may have, unwittingly, helped to open the door for the unfettered advancement of globalization, in the final decades of the twentieth century.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, movement efforts in schools were driven by repeated demands for multicultural curriculum, bilingual education, ethnic studies programs and affirmative action efforts to diversify students and faculty. Social movements principally anchored in identity politics aggressively pushed against the boundaries of traditional institutional policies and practices. Although such efforts most certainly served to initiate and marshal a new population of “minority” professionals and elites into a variety of fields and professions, it did little to change the structural conditions that reproduce the oppressive material conditions prevalent in poor, working class and racialized communities. As such, the civil rights ideal centered on representative participation based on “race,” despite its gains, failed to challenge the fundamental contradictions at work within schools and society that functioned to perpetuate relations of power linked to class formations.

For example, a study conducted by Gary Orfield and the Harvard Civil Rights Project found that although progress toward school desegrega-

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tion peaked in the late 1980s, it is now on the decline.¹ A third of a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*,² the Supreme Court's resegregation decisions began to reverse the trend, as "segregation began to intensify again."³ Thus, our continued concern over segregation in this country still holds significance, particularly with respect to questions of academic achievement and the failure of U.S. schools to educate Latino, African American and other racialized and working class student populations. Ironically, as Latinos become the largest U.S. minority population, Latino students find themselves more segregated today than their African American counter-parts.

There has always been an inseparable link between racism and economic inequality. As such, contemporary theories of segregation as an outcome of racialized and class reproduction must be firmly tied to the politics of class struggle. Racism, as an inherent political strategy of exclusion, domination, marginalization, violence and exploitation cannot be separated from its economic imperative. For instance, it should be no surprise that ninety percent of segregated African American and Latino neighborhood schools are located in areas of concentrated, abject poverty. Or, that students who attend segregated minority schools are eleven times more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty than do students (of all ethnicities) who attend desegregated schools.

So, although much good can be attributed to the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*, there remain many, seldom discussed, issues that beg reexamination, particularly given the lessons of the last fifty years. In the past, most solutions were anchored in the "race relations" paradigm of the civil rights era. But there are researchers who would argue that the race-relations paradigm actually obscures the phenomenon of racism and hence, the hegemonic forces at work in the construction of segregation.⁴ Moreover, it is argued that the process of racialization, with its reified commonsense notions of "race," fails to challenge fundamental structural inequalities inherent in the modes of production of capitalist societies.

As a consequence, U.S. society has become entrenched in the language of "race" as destiny, with an implicit dictum that membership in

1. GARY ORFIELD, *SCHOOLS MORE SEPARATE: CONSEQUENCES OF A DECADE OF RESEGREGATION* 2 (July 2001), available at http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/deseg/Schools_More_Separate.pdf ("[N]ew statistics from the 1998-99 school year show that segregation continued to intensify throughout the 1990s, . . . [f]rom 1988 to 1998, most of the progress of the previous two decades in increasing integration . . . was lost.").

2. 347 U.S. 483 (1954) (overruling "separate but equal" doctrine by holding racial segregation violates Equal Protection Clause).

3. ORFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 5.

4. ANTONIA DARDER & RODOLFO TORRES, *AFTER RACE: RACISM AFTER MULTICULTURALISM* 2 (2004) ("We argue that we must disconnect from 'race' as it has been constructed in the past, and contend fully with the impact of 'race' as ideology on the lives of all people . . ."); ROBERT MILES, *RACISM AFTER 'RACE RELATIONS'* 1-23 (1993) (describing problems of "racism paradigm" after "race relations" paradigm).

particular “races” enacts social processes rather than ideology and material conditions of survival. Accordingly, this approach has effectively fueled identity politics, through which political discourses of every kind are now structured by attaching deterministic meaning to social constructs of physical and cultural characteristics. The outcome is the racialization of all social and political relations, infusing every conflict of interest with an ethnic dimension, so that “race” becomes a way of explaining all group conflicts.⁵ Meanwhile, the malignant ideology of racialized class formations, which sustains conditions of segregation and other exclusionary practices in the first place, remains solidly entrenched.

A case in point is the busing solution of the 1970s, one of the predominant solutions utilized for the remedy of school segregation and clearly anchored in the “race relations” paradigm. To the apparent chagrin of many African American and Latino communities, this solution actually functioned to destroy the strength, cohesion and coherence of community life in many regions. Some would argue that it was, in fact, the already more economically privileged minorities who made the greatest gains. This can be linked to the fact that almost forty years later, the class composition of U.S. society based on control of wealth has failed to improve, and, in fact, has become more polarized between the rich and the poor across all population groups.

Members of the ruling class in this country, of all ethnicities, are wealthier today than they were in the 1960s. Hence, solutions grounded in “race relations” did little to fundamentally alter the practices of racialization and the hierarchical class structure of inequality upon which U.S. institutions have always functioned. Thus, the expansion of an elite class of African American and Latinos ultimately did little to alter the fundamental economic and racialized policies and practices of the capitalist state.

While public education today continues to invoke the Jeffersonian ideal of educating citizens for participation in a democratic society, poor, working class and racialized student populations often experience a multitude of difficulties in their relationships with schools that result in a negative impact on their academic achievement. As teachers continue to buy into the belief that schooling is a neutral and benevolent enterprise, students from oppressed communities are tested, labeled, sorted and tracked, while notions of justice and equality are touted within U.S. schools, particularly within poor racialized communities. Yet such rhetoric has done little to shift the basic fact that public schooling continues to function in the interest of capitalist accumulation and class formations rather than cultural, political and economic democracy.

There is no question that both the construction of knowledge and the control of knowledge are at the heart of this phenomenon. Despite demo-

5. See Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Colorline* 1-39 (2000) (discussing crisis of raciology).

cratic claims, conditions within the enterprise of education are fundamentally authoritarian and deny most students their freedom and autonomy to be themselves without undue fear of retaliation and to express the power of their knowledge in ways that build on their personal histories of struggle and survival. Moreover, the difficulties faced by students are seldom engaged seriously and the dissonance that exists between their lives and the culture of schooling is often ignored and dismissed. Student complaints regarding the curriculum or classroom life are seldom regarded as worthy of deeper analysis and are more likely to be seen as simply individual resistance by a student who lacks rigor.

Consequently, even well-crafted programs which claim to be committed to social justice tend to sabotage student autonomy and compel them to adopt particular constructions of knowledge which ring false within their daily lived experience.⁶ As such, well-meaning teachers use their authority and privilege to, wittingly or unwittingly, invalidate students when they are involved in constructing their own knowledge. Unfortunately, educators who are able to recognize injustices within instructional settings are less willing to accept that they have a responsibility to make needed changes in their own practice.

Given all this, I want to consider two questions: What should be the role of an emancipatory pedagogy? And, how do we, as cultural workers committed to social justice, human rights and economic democracy, articulate our pedagogy and politics during these difficult times? There is no question that critical pedagogy must be fundamentally linked to the construction of a new culture. This new culture must be built within the existing culture of a capitalist state where, more and more, an extremely conservative notion of social justice is being embraced; that is, a view in which as long as everyone is treated the same, then justice prevails—irrespective of context or conditions. This is a perspective that categorically ignores the historical and contemporary disparities that exist in material social conditions across populations, as well as the ideological, and structural inequalities that shape and reproduce all forms of human oppression.

Moreover, with the dismantling of the welfare state, the liberal idea that the State should provide for the needy has also been supplanted by a neo-liberal, conservative notion of social justice, which permeates the nation's health, education and welfare agencies. With unbridled fervor and shameful disregard of the masses, neo-conservatives and liberals alike have busily channeled massive expenditures toward the military and prison industrial complex, while poverty worsens across the nation. As an aside, it is significant to note that a similar dynamic is at work in the international arena of globalization, where Keynesian-inspired policies have been dis-

6. See Russell Butson, *Teaching as a Practice of Social Injustice: Perspective from a Teacher*, RADICAL PEDAGOGY, available at http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue5_1/10_butson.html (last visited Feb. 18, 2005).

placed by the neoconservative philanthropic policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

In the development of an emancipatory pedagogy, we must recognize how schooling functions within an untenable contradiction—to respond, on one hand to the needs of hierarchies associated with the capitalist workplace and the free market, and on the other hand, to create equality of access to rights and opportunities for the nation's citizens. This is the promise of an ostensibly democratic republic; a republic which, in fact, functions as an empire, given its impact on current global affairs, whether that be the war on terrorism, the occupation of Iraq, U.S. foreign economic policies in Latin America or the control of global markets.

Here, I want to suggest that the politics of globalization today are not too dissimilar to those at work from 1875 to 1914, a period characterized by historian Eric Hobsbawm as the "age of empire"—a significant moment in the consolidation of the capitalist state.⁷ Unfortunately, then as today, many scholars rejected economic explanations, concentrating instead on psychological, ideological, cultural and political explanations divorced from political economy, in order to avoid the minefield of domestic politics. This served to counteract explanations of working class struggle and appeals to class consciousness. Of course, the disadvantage here is that it fails to explain the inseparable conjunction of the economic and political, national and international and public and personal spheres.

Then, as today, the empire of capital sought global conquest, through a singular political economy. While in an earlier time, conquest was focused on raw materials and natural resources for the expansion of industrial capabilities, global conquest today is tied to the control of labor, natural resources and the marketplace. This occurs with little regard for the creation of deep economic dependency, ecological devastation, the dismantling of sovereign nations and, at times, even the genocide of human populations.

Critical educators and community activist engaged in a liberatory pedagogy, must also come to terms with what Henri Lefebvre calls the colonization of everyday life—where every aspect of life, including birth, death, marriage, family, work, leisure, parenthood, spirituality and so on, is disconnected and compartmentalized and placed at the mercy of economic imperatives.⁸ The consequence is a deep sense of personal and collective dissatisfaction, which results because of the inability of the marketplace to meet or satisfy authentic human needs—human needs that can only be met through conditions that break the alienation and isolation so prevalent in educational institutions today. Thus, we need to estab-

7. ERIC HOBSBAWM, *THE AGE OF EMPIRE 1-12* (1987) (calling Age of Empire "the moment in history when . . . society and civilization created by and for the western liberal bourgeoisie represented not the permanent form of the modern industrial world, but only one phase of its early development").

8. See HENRI LEFEBVRE, *EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD 1-67* (1971) (discussing philosophy in context of everyday life).

lish a new decolonizing culture within schools and communities that cultivates human connection, intimacy, trust and honesty.

Within a critical perspective, the central role of schools and the construction of knowledge should be in the interest of self-determination and collective participation in democratic life. But, as educators and activist, we must contend with what Richard Brosio identifies as the two major forms of curricula that sustain the Capitalist State.⁹ That is, the marketing of hegemonic ideology through 1) television and popular culture and 2) the enterprise of public schooling.¹⁰ Both are informed by a hidden curriculum that, unfortunately, functions to destroy historical memory and imposes an official (often apolitical and ahistorical) public transcript of events that is in concert with the imperatives of capitalism. As such, another role of critical pedagogy must be not only the unveiling of the hidden curriculum in schools and society, but the reinstatement of a multiplicity of historical memories tied to the everyday lives of the disenfranchised.

In our work, the realm of schooling represents an essential political project in the interest of both engaging questions related to racism, sexism, class inequality, compulsory heterosexism, homophobia and disability and challenging the politics of empire. This requires noting in our work the exclusionary consequences of heightened productivity and economic structural changes on working-class populations in this country and worldwide, especially in terms of constructing economic dependencies, reserve armies and incarcerated subjects.¹¹

To accomplish this in our educational efforts, we must cultivate a critical understanding of how the politics of globalization have functioned to perpetuate increasing material inequality and human suffering, in the name of economic development, democracy and social progress. The consequence of this imposed modernity—the reordering of society in ways that increase the efficiency of capitalist production and the accumulation of wealth, while replacing independence with new forms of exploitation—has been a new wave of massive immigration to the center of the empire. As a consequence, a revival of alarmist rhetoric and vicious attacks against immigrants has ensued, particularly against immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America. In turn, racialized conjectures of Latino immigrants have gradually seeped into public policy debates related to schooling, language, immigrant and worker rights as well as the heightened surveillance and control of immigrant populations in the U.S.

This calls to mind the recent article by Samuel P. Huntington where he argues that:

9. See generally Richard Brosio, *A Radical Critique of Capitalist Education* (1994).

10. See *id.*

11. See *id.*

The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide United States into two people, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexican and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves . . . and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.¹²

Undoubtedly, the reactionary scholarship and politics generated by changing demographics constitutes an important arena of interrogation for the future of both Latino politics and epistemology. As Latino populations continue to expand, we are conveniently poised to become the scapegoats for the backlash of the increasing economic restructuring resulting from neo-liberal economic policies in this country and abroad. Disconcerting as this may be, this phenomenon also provides Latino educators, scholars and community activists a ripe opportunity to rethink our notions of politics and pedagogy, in order to reconstitute our efforts through greater ethical and moral solidarity, within and across all communities of struggle.

There is no question, as Paulo Freire repeatedly argued, ethics must occupy an increasingly significant role in our pedagogy and scholarship.¹³ As critical educators and community activists committed to democratic principles of everyday life, ethics must be understood as a political question—that in the final analysis constitutes a moral question.¹⁴ For without morality, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, politics becomes an instrument of oppression.¹⁵ Here, we must not mistake morality for moralism. Instead, being moral means exploring deeply the texture and quality of human behavior, ideas and practices, which cannot be done by abstracting men and women from our social surrounding, from our culture or from our histories of survival.¹⁶ This requires “the interwovenness of the moral and political, of power and the personal . . . [for] ethics is about excelling at being human, and nobody can do this in isolation.”¹⁷

Along the same vein, the pernicious legacy of racism—the multiplicity of ideologies, policies and practices that result in the racialization of populations—must be understood in the context of everyday struggles and the

12. Samuel Huntington, *The Hispanic Challenge*, (Mar. 2004), available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/files/story2495.php> (identifying impact of Hispanic and Latino immigrants on United States).

13. See PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE CITY* 1-35 (1993) (arguing respect and ethics are essential part of education); PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF HOPE* (1996) (emphasizing importance of ethics in education); PAULO FREIRE, *TEACHERS AS CULTURAL WORKERS: LETTERS TO THOSE WHO DARE TO TEACH* (1998).

14. PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE CITY*, *supra* note 13, at 1-141 (arguing education is political); PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF HOPE*, *supra* note 13 (describing education as political process); PAULO FREIRE, *TEACHERS AS CULTURAL WORKERS*, *supra* note 13.

15. See generally TERRY EAGLETON, *AFTER THEORY* (2003).

16. See *id.*

17. See *id.* at 142-44.

conditioning of student identities. Here, identities are often well conditioned by a capitalist-inspired curriculum, fueled by fabricated consumer sensibilities of gendered, racialized, homophobic and patriotic notions of “the good life.” Moreover, it is this core ideological process that sustains the ravages of globalization and that must be challenged and dismantled, if poverty and human suffering are to be eradicated.

In light of this, critical educators and community activists must come to terms with the fact that injustice, as Sam Gindin argues, “is not an unfortunate aberration under capitalism, but an inescapable outcome and an essential condition of its successful economic functioning. Capitalism is—and this is surely as clear today as it ever was—a social system based on class and competition.”¹⁸ Capitalism functions as a globalized system, which requires as its prerequisite, the deep impoverishment and exclusion of three-quarters of the world’s population.

Given this reality, it is unfortunate that the theories and practices adopted by many educators and scholars in this country function conveniently to deaden and annul opposition to the capitalist order, while existing social controls are conserved, even in the wake of increasing impoverishment and incarceration. Meanwhile, the marketplace continues to move people away from few, modest needs to the creation of many false needs, through the use of advertising and the belief that consumption equals happiness.¹⁹ Such an ideology results in the deceptive belief that money is everything, capital rules and that all aspects of life are open for the making of profit.

Additionally, capitalism disembodies and alienates our daily existence. As our consciousness becomes more and more abstracted, we become more and more detached from our bodies. For this reason, it is absolutely imperative that critical educators and scholars acknowledge that the origin of emancipatory possibility and human solidarity resides in our bodies. For it is “the moral, fragile, suffering, ecstatic, needy, dependent, desirous, compassionate, body which furnishes the basis for all moral thought.”²⁰ It is, in fact, moral thought that places the body back into the political discourse.

Eagleton also argues that it is the material body that we share most significantly with the rest of our species.²¹ And, although we might say that our needs, desires and suffering are culturally determined, “our material bodies are such that they are, in principle, completely capable of feeling compassion”²² for all others. And it is precisely upon this capacity for shared subjectivity and knowledge that moral values are founded, that

18. Sam Gindin, *Anti-Capitalism and the Terrain of Social Justice*, 53 MONTHLY REV. NO. 9 (Feb. 2002), available at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0202gindin.htm>.

19. See BROSIO, *supra* note 9.

20. TERRY EAGLETON, *supra* note 15, at 155.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 156.

emancipatory knowledge is constructed and that human solidarity is established.

Accordingly, any form of emancipatory pedagogy must function to revive a politics of collective self-determination in our teaching, research and politics. But, to do this requires that we acknowledge that self-determination requires available free energy that is not committed to paid labor, household problems and our enmeshment with non-fulfilling personal relationships. Inherent in this function is the need for a personal community of colleagues and comrades with whom we labor and struggle in our efforts to establish coherence between our words and our deeds. For, "what we say must be rooted in what we actually do; otherwise it will lack all force."²³

This is a particularly salient issue as we work together to develop our teaching, scholarship and activism, in an effort to challenge the politics of empire with its legacy of oppressions and to construct a common public dialogue across our differences. This must encompass a sphere or network of relationships that is not anchored in repressive interpretations of reality or the unrelenting drive for acquisition and accumulation. There is a need to surrender the penchant for chasing after new intellectual experiences for the mere sake of obtaining personal fulfillment, recognition or reward. Instead, we must link, rigorously and with perseverance, our labor within schools, universities and communities to actual conditions and events, with the clear purpose and intent of transforming these conditions collectively in very concrete and meaningful ways.

If we believe that a new world is possible, then we must begin by constructing that new world within the spheres in which we currently live, work and teach. In so doing, we must not forget that even when we work together in small groups or communities, we are always in danger of the oppression that resides within and enacts itself in undemocratic ways. As such, we must not forget that any context of civil society can also function to veil the reproduction of inequality in the larger body politic of the society in which we reside.

In fact, at times by disaggregating society into fragments (particularly among those who are working to resist the hegemonic relations of the larger body politic), structural inequalities are conserved, as emancipatory efforts are severely curtailed and weakened. This is to say that our collective work cannot stop at the boundaries of Latino communities. Instead, our work must conscientiously engage with the liberatory vision and work of the many excluded Others, to ultimately intervene and alter the very structure of the organizations and institutions, which so strongly impact our everyday lives as educators and cultural workers.

As we contend today with the ravages of globalization and its destructive impact on three-quarters of the world's population, we must remain cognizant that the transformation of schools and society can only take

23. *Id.* at 198.

place when educators, scholars and cultural workers, working in solidarity, take ownership of institutions. And, more importantly, struggle to radically change the political and economic structures of power that perpetuate violence and war in our neighborhoods, our nation and the world.

By redefining politics as pure expediency, neo-liberal conservatives hide from ethical questions with slogans of patriotism, the fright of terrorism and the power of capital. We are living in what Eagleton calls “the post-ethical epoch, in which world powers no longer bother to dress-up their naked self-interest in speciously altruistic language, but are insolently candid about it instead.”²⁴ As a consequence, we are facing a dangerously aggressive and violent global condition. Our government is in the hands of extremists and fundamentalists. On the world’s stage, we are seeing that the more predatory and corrupt capitalism becomes, the more urgently the U.S. empire spins a web of distortions in its defense. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rhetoric used to justify the war in Iraq.

Our struggles against racism in schools and communities must be linked to an international, anti-capitalist struggle. As citizens of the world, we must oppose all national and international actions that defile our revolutionary dreams and that make the world an unsafe and frightening place for all the world’s children. Our courage must show itself in our teaching and our scholarship and in our willingness to love one another, despite our differences and disagreements.

Love, here, means to comprehend that the moral and the material are inextricably linked. And as such, any critical pedagogy must recognize love as an essential ingredient of a just society. Eagleton again sheds light on this concept by defining love as a political principle through which we struggle to create mutually life-enhancing opportunities for all people.²⁵ It is grounded in the mutuality and interdependence of our human existence—that which we share, as much as that which we do not. Such a love is then nurtured by the act of relationship itself. Love finds in such relationships the freedom to be at one’s best without undue fear. Such an emancipatory love allows us to realize our nature in a way that allows others to do so as well. Inherent in such a love is the understanding that we are not at liberty to be violent, authoritarian or self-seeking.

There are those who would have us believe that the world has changed and that these are new geopolitical conditions, very different than those of another time. But the truth is that little has changed with respect to the have and the have-nots. Once more the world’s people are at the mercy of an empire and capital rules. U.S. economic interests continue to dictate who lives, who eats and who dies. These are the same capitalist interests that colonized the world, enslaved populations and have been, directly or indirectly, responsible for the genocide of millions in Northeast Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. A case in

24. *Id.* at 148.

25. *See id.*

point, the genocide in Rwanda was permitted because the U.S. had no particular economic interest in the region that would motivate its intervention. This scenario is, once again, being repeated in Darfur.

If we, as citizens of the empire do not use every opportunity to voice our dissent, we shamefully leave the great task of dissent to our brothers and sisters around the world who daily suffer greater conditions of social, political and economic impoverishment than we will ever know. If we do not stand up, who will? For how long will our teaching and politics fail to address the relevant and concrete issues that impact people's daily life? How many more of our children will have to be doomed to meaningless education? How many more of our youth will have to be incarcerated? How many more people will have to suffer the ravages of war and poverty? How much suffering must we witness before we finally remove the blinders of complacency and step into the courage and humility of a truly revolutionary love—a love with the power to awaken us fully to a new meaning of shared kinship, self-determination and social justice.

