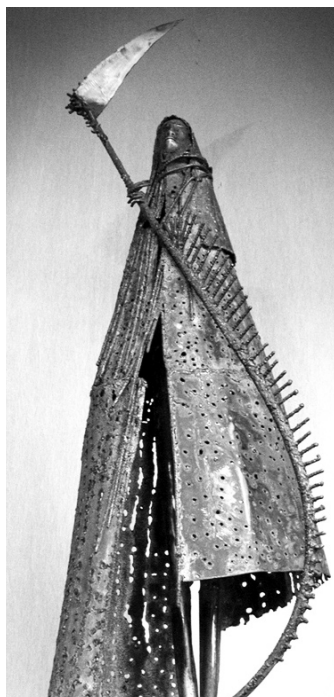


# Creating democratic education in neoliberal and neoconservative times

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Detalle obra "Parca"  
Rubén Schaap

## Resumen

Vivimos en tiempos en los que el significado mismo de la democracia está cambiando radicalmente. La democracia es en realidad un concepto discutido. Está en el centro de todas las luchas acerca de cuáles deberían ser los objetivos de la educación, cómo debería desarrollarse y esto no es sólo sobre las escuelas, sino acerca de qué clase de sociedad queremos y qué clase de políticas nos ayudarán a conseguirla. Nos preguntamos "¿La educación puede cambiar a la sociedad?" analizando el rol de las escuelas dentro de la economía, el rol social clave en la formación de identidades activistas entre las personas oprimidas; el tiempo de vida de los estudiantes dentro de las escuelas donde comienzan a comprender las relaciones de autoridad, estar con otros que son iguales y diferentes; lo que socialmente se valora como "conocimiento legítimo" y lo que es considerado como meramente "popular"; reconocimiento de raza / etnicidad, clase, género, sexualidad, capacidades, religión y otras importantes dinámicas de poder. Un ejemplo para pensar acerca de las políticas educativas y el rol de las mismas en la transformación social puede encontrarse en la ciudad de Porto Alegre en Brasil.

**Palabras clave:** democracia, escuelas democráticas, lucha, poder, dominación.

## Creating democratic education in neoliberal and neoconservative times

### Abstract

We live in a time when the very meaning of democracy is being radically changed. Democracy is indeed a contested concept; it is at the center of struggles over what the goals of education should be, how it should be done and this is not only about schools. It is about what kind of society we want and what kinds of politics will help us get there. We wonder: Can education change society? analyzing the role of schools inside economy, the crucial site for creating activist identities among oppressed people; the large part of their lives students spend inside schools where they come to grips with authority relations, to be with others who are both the same and different; what is socially valued as "legitimate knowledge" and what is seen as merely "popular"; recognition over race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and other important dynamics of power. An example to think about education policies and their role in social transformation can be found in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil.

**Key words:** democracy, democratic schools, struggles, power, dominance.

## Democracy as contested terrain

We live in a time when the very meaning of democracy is being radically changed. Rather than referring to ways in which political and institutional life are shaped by equitable, active, widespread, and fully informed participation, democracy is increasingly being defined as possessive individualism in the context of a (supposedly) free market economy. Applied to schools, this redefinition has given rise to the push for placing schools directly into the competitive market, management by private firms, commercialized media and materials, and abandonment of the broader ideals of public education (Apple 2006; Burch, 2009; Ball 2007). This degradation has extended to the point where a private consulting firm in the United States has recommended that "public" be dropped

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from “public schools” because its similar use in conjunction with housing, libraries, radio, and assistance programs has come to have negative connotations. Such is the power of linguistic politics. Social commitments for the common good are now made out to be “public nuisances.”

In a number of volumes over the past decade, I have critically analyzed the processes of “conservative modernization” –the complicated alliance behind the wave after wave of educational reforms that have centered around neo-liberal commitments to the market and a supposedly weak state, neo-conservative emphases on stronger control over curricula and values, and “new managerial” proposals to install rigorous and reductive forms of accountability in schooling at all levels (Apple, 2013; Apple, 2006; Apple, et al., 2003). The first set of reforms has not demonstrated much improvement in education and has marked a dangerous shift in our very idea of democracy –always a contested concept (Foner, 1998)– from “thick” collective forms to “thin” consumer driven and overly individualistic forms. The second misconstrues and then basically ignores the intense debates over whose knowledge should be taught in schools, universities, and other educational sites and establishes a false consensus on what is supposedly common in the cultures of so many nations (See Apple, 2010; Apple, 2004; Apple, in press; Apple, 1996; Levine, 1996; Binder, 2002. The third takes the position that “only that which is measurable is important” and has caused some of the most creative and critical practices that have been developed through concerted efforts in some of the most difficult settings to be threatened (McNeil, 2000; Apple & Beane, 2007; Valenzuela, 2005). Unfortunately, all too many of the actual effects of this assemblage of reforms have either been negligible or negative, or they have been largely rhetorical (Apple, 2006; Smith, et al., 2003).

The odd combination of marketization on the one hand and centralization of control on the other is not only occurring in education; nor is it only going on in the United States. This is a world-wide phenomenon. And while there are very real, and often successful, efforts to counter it (Apple, 2013; Apple, et al, 2003; Apple, 2010), this has not meant that the basic assumptions that lie behind neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and new managerial forms have not had a major impact on our institutions throughout society and even on our commonsense.

In many nations there have been attempts, often more than a little successful, to restructure state institutions (Jessop, 2002). Among the major aims of such restructuring were: to ensure that the state served business interests; to have the state’s internal operations model those used in business; and to “take politics out of public institutions,” that is to reduce the possibility that government institutions would be subject to political pressure from the electorate and from progressive social movements (Leys, 2003, p. 3). Recent arguments supporting plans that place educational institutions on a market and reduce democracy to simply consumption practices mirror this latter point, for example (see, e.g., Peterson, 2006; Hess & Finn, 2004; Ball, 2008).

This last point, removing politics from government institutions, is based on a less than accurate understanding not only of the state but of the market as well. While most economics textbooks may give the impression that markets are impersonal and impartial, they are instead highly political as well as inherently unstable. To this, other points need to be added. To guarantee their survival, firms must seek ways of breaking out of the boundaries that are set by state regulation. Increasingly, this has meant that the boundaries established to divide non-market parts of our lives must be pushed so that these spheres can be opened to commodification and profit-making. As Leys reminds us, this is a crucially important issue. “It threatens the destruction of non-market spheres of life on which social solidarity and active democracy have always depended” (Leys, 2003, p. 4).

It should be clear, then, that democracy is indeed a contested concept. It is at the center of struggles over what the goals of education should be, how it should be done and paid for, and how it should be evaluated. Thus, we need to recognize that democratic schooling is not just about schools. It is about what kind of society we want and what kinds of politics will help us get there. But democratic schooling has a very long and valuable history in a considerable number of nations, driven by struggles to interrupt dominance.

Elsewhere, and especially in *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013) and *Poder, Conocimiento, y Reforma Educacional* (Apple, 2012b), I have argued that among the tasks of critical educators is both to participate in movements that aim to create more critically democratic institu-



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tions in education and the larger society and to act as secretaries of these movements and institutions so that such successes are made visible. As some of you may know, I have sought to do such things myself. A prime example is the book I published with James Beane, *Democratic Schools* (Apple & Beane, 1995; 2007). The fact that this book has become very popular, with hundreds of thousands of copies in print in multiple languages, says something significant about the realities of education.

It points to the widespread commitment on the parts of large groups of people to build and defend an education that is worthy of its name, that is not reducible simply to the efficient production of scores on problematic standardized achievement tests (Au 2009). It speaks to the growing dissatisfaction on the part of educators in so many places with curricula that have little relationship with the cultures and lives of the students in our schools and literacy centers. It speaks as well to an abiding belief that educational settings are not factories, that they must reflect what is best in all of us, and that they embody not simply the rhetoric of democracy but its actual practice.

When all of this is put together, much like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the picture that emerges shows that an increasingly large number of people reject the idea of “TINA”—the notion that “There is no alternative” to the policies now being implemented in towns, cities, states, and regions throughout our nations. We are repeatedly told that the only reforms that supposedly work are those that involve a strong commitment

to testing and strict regimes of accountability coupled with a standardized curriculum and a lock-step pedagogy. These elements are to be combined with a focus on privatization and holding teachers’ and administrators’ feet to the fire of competition. Indeed, in the United States, the Obama Administration has put considerable pressure on schools throughout the nation to institute performance pay for teachers. Teachers’ pay will now have to take into consideration the test scores of their students. The assumption seems to be that if we do all of this,

major progress toward “efficiency and effectiveness” will be achieved (Hess and Finn, 2004; Peterson, 2006).

This position has a number of problems. First, there is little evidence to support these claims—and a good deal of evidence that they are not working here and have not worked elsewhere (Apple 2006; Valenzuela 2005). Just as importantly, there *are* alternatives, alternatives that work and that provide a substantive and rich education for students and that decrease the alienation of students and community members (and teachers as well). And these alternatives can be and are being created even at a time of immense pressure on educators to simply focus on mandated standards and test scores.

Documenting such critical policies and practices is crucial in another way. Let me be honest here. One of the major problems with critical work in education has been the fact that some of the academic leaders of the “critical pedagogy” movement and of critical and democratic education in general in many nations have not been sufficiently connected to the actual realities of schools and classrooms. Yet, only when it is linked much more to concrete issues of educational policy and practice—and to the daily lives of educators, students, social movements, and community members—can a critical and democratic education succeed. Thus, there is a powerful need to connect critical educational theories and approaches to the actual ways in which they can be and are present in real classrooms and other educative sites. While I may have been among the originators of critical approaches to the study

of education in the United States, I also have been one of the internal critics of this set of traditions when it has forgotten what it is meant to do and has sometimes become simply an academic specialization at universities, rather than actively working to link itself to the issues surrounding what should actually go on in classrooms and to critical educational movements and practices in local communities (Apple 2006; Apple, 2010).

Yet, as I noted above, there is a growing literature that documents that large groups of people more fully understand the need to have models of curriculum and teaching that can connect to different historical and cultural traditions, to the growing population of workers from other nations, and to the many economic and cultural transformations that are currently putting so much pressure on schools there (see Gandin, 2009; Apple, Au, and Gandin, 2009; Flecha, 2009; Flecha; 2010).

With this in mind, many people have argued that it is essential that critical and democratic educators not ignore the question of practice. That is, we must find ways of speaking to (and learning from) people who now labor everyday in schools and community centres in worsening conditions which are made even worse by conservative attacks on schools and teachers (Oliver, E., Soler, M., & Flecha, R., 2009; Flecha, 2009; Flecha, 2010; Apple, Au, and Gandin, 2009; Molina, forthcoming). One way of responding to this issue is to publish books and material that provide *critical* answers to teachers' questions about "What do I do on Monday?" Providing practical answers to this kind of question is absolutely crucial if we are to have lasting democratic reforms in schools.

This is an important intervention. Given the complicated politics of identity, there is no guarantee that all teachers will always be progressive, of course. Yet, many teachers do have socially and pedagogically critical intuitions. However, they often do not have ways of putting these intuitions into practice because they cannot picture them in action in daily situations. Due to this, critical theoretical, political, and educational insights, then, have nowhere to go in terms of their embodiment in concrete pedagogical situations where the politics of curriculum and teaching must be *enacted*. This is a tragic absence and strategically filling it is absolutely essential. Thus, we need to use and expand the spaces in which critical and democratic pedagogical "stories" are made available so that these positions do not remain only

on the theoretical or rhetorical level. The publication and widespread distribution of *Democratic Schools* provides one instance of using and expanding such spaces in ways that make critically democratic educational positions seem actually doable in "ordinary" institutions such as schools and local communities.

## Can education change society?

I noted earlier that the struggles over and for critically democratic educational policies and practices have implications not only for schooling, but for society as a whole. Yet this too is a complicated issue.

Words such as "society" speak to important intuitions. They point to the fact that education is deeply connected to the social context in which it exists. It is but a short step to see education as a set of institutions that are not necessarily neutral, as implicated in the reproduction and contestation of relations of dominance and subordination.

However, and this is a crucial point, words such as "society" have a less helpful function. They can stifle further thought. They produce visions of something that is huge, unwieldy, and somehow unchanging. They also have totalizing effects, ones in which either you have to change everything or you have changed nothing of importance.

Finally, they often smuggle in assumptions about what actually *is* society. In much of the literature this entails a tacit theory that society is "simply" the economic system that is itself neither made up of component institutions nor constantly subject to conflicts and transformation for good or for bad. Society hence is one of those lazy words that we use as a substitute for serious critical analysis. This is more than a little limiting and can have powerfully negative effects on the tasks of critically democratic educators as we shall see.

Critical educators have been guided by an abiding concern with the role of education not just in reproducing dominance, but also in its role in challenging dominance. Thus, one of the major questions that have served as an unacknowledged backdrop for my and others' work is simple to say, but very difficult to answer: "Can education change society?" I need to say something more about this here.

Of course, this way of wording the question has some serious conceptual, empirical, and political problems. First, it is important to realize that education *is* a part of society. It is not something alien, something that stands outside. Indeed, it is a key set of institutions and a key set of social and personal relations. It is just as central to a society as shops, businesses, factories, farms, health care institutions, law firms, and so many other places in which people and power interact.

But there are other things that make it decidedly not an “outside” institution. Even if one holds to the orthodox belief that I noted above, that only economic institutions are the core of a society and that before we can change the schools we need to change the economy, schools are places where people *work*. Building maintenance people, teachers, administrators, nurses, social workers, clerical workers, psychologists, counselors, cooks, crossing guards, teacher aids—all of these groups of people engage in paid labor in and around the places we call schools. Each of these kinds of positions has a set of labor relations and class distinctions attached to them. And each is stratified not only by class, but by race and gender as well.

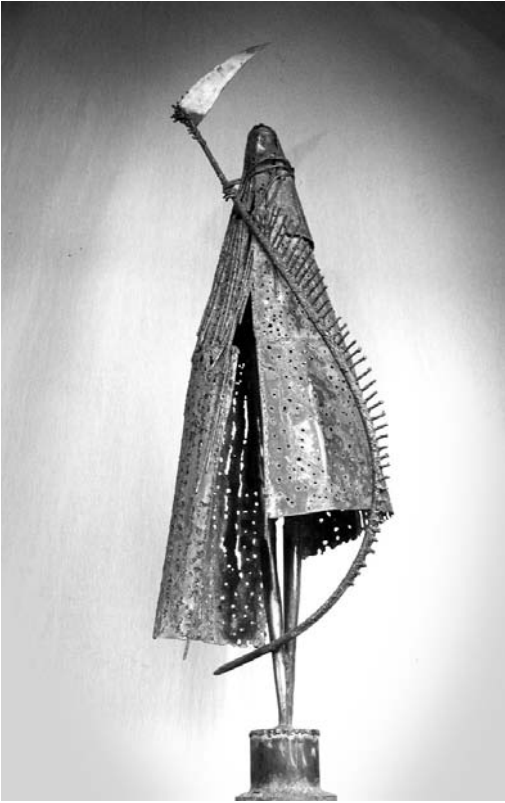
Thus, teaching is often seen as women’s paid work, as are school nurses and the people who usually serve the food in the school cafeteria. In many areas these same women who serve the food are immigrant women or women of color, as are teacher aids in many urban areas. The labor of building maintenance is usually done by men. School secretaries are most often women. Not only is the labor process of each different (although there is a significant dynamic of proletarianization and intensification of teachers’ work (Apple 1986; Apple, 2012a; Apple, in press), but there are significant differences in pay and prestige socially attached to each. Thus, it would be very wrong to see schools as other than “society.” As paid work places, they are *integral parts* of the economy. As differentiated work places, they reconstitute (and sometimes challenge) class, gender, and race hierarchies. And as institutions that have historically served as engines of working class mobility in terms of employing upwardly mobile college graduates from groups who have often been seen as “not quite worthy” or even as “despised others” such as people of color, they have played a large role as arenas in the struggle over class, gender, and race economic advance-

ment. Of course, such advancement is the result of *both* the legitimation needs of the state and, hence, cooptation (giving poor and working class children a chance to make it as an individual, but not radically changing the structures that create impoverishment in the first place) and successful struggle.

But it is not just as work places that schools are part of the economy. They are also places that are increasingly being placed on a market through such things as voucher plans. The children inside them are increasingly being bought and sold as “captive audiences” for advertising in “reforms” like Channel One in the United States (Apple in press; Molnar 2005) and in the rapidly growing policies surrounding commercialization and privatization that are becoming so much a part of daily life in schools internationally (see, e.g., Ball, 2007; Ball, 2008; Burch, 2009). Interrupting the marketization of schools and children is a form of action that challenges the economy.

But any serious analysis needs to go further still. So far, I have focused upon the ways in which educational institutions are very much part of the economy, not things that exist somehow apart from it. But, though important, this ignores the ways in which cultural struggles are crucial and, while they are deeply connected to them, cannot be reduced to economic issues without doing damage to the complexity of real life (Apple et al. 2003; Apple and Buras 2006).

Take the history of African American struggles against a deeply racist society. Schools have played central roles in the creation of movements for justice in general, but they have also been central to the building of larger scale social mobilizations within communities of color. In essence, rather than being peripheral reflections of larger battles and dynamics, struggles over schooling—over what should be taught, over the relationship between schools and local communities, over the very ends and means of the institution itself—have provided a crucible for the *formation* of larger social movements toward equality (Hogan 1983; Apple, 2013; Apple, et al. 2003; Anyon 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2010). These collective movements have transformed our definitions of rights, of who should have them, and of the role of the government in guaranteeing these rights. Absent organized, community-wide mobilizations, these transformations would not have occurred (Fraser 1997; Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly, 1999). In cases such as this, education has been and is a



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truly powerful arena for building coalitions and movements, one whose social effects can echo throughout the society (Apple, 2013).

But this is not all. Education clearly plays a key social role in the formation of identities (Apple and Buras, 2006). As work in poor and immigrant communities in Spain has so clearly documented, for adults and especially women, it changes the sense of self and opens up spheres of self-making and power among oppressed and diasporic people (Oliver, E., Soler, M., & Flecha, R., 2009; Flecha, 2009; Molina, forthcoming). Thus, it is crucial site for creating *activist identities* among oppressed people. This is seen as well in the favelas of Brazil (Gandin, 2009; Gandin and Apple, 2003), something I will note again later on.

The schools role as sites for the production of identities does not end there, however. Let us remember as well that students spend a very large part of their lives inside the buildings we call schools. They come to grips with authority relations, with the emotional labor both of managing one’s presentation of self and of being with others who are both the same and different. Transfor-

mations in the content and structure of this key organization have lasting effects on the dispositions and values that we do and do not act upon, on who we think we are and on whom we think we can become. The possible political implications of this are made even clearer in the examples in the United States of alliances between immigrant students and their “native born” allies, including many teachers, who –taking seriously their lessons in civic duty and participatory democracy– walked out of their schools in protest against the treatment of undocumented people by the government, against the demonization of immigrants in the media, and against the practices of economic exploitation that are so prevalent throughout the nation (see, e.g., Apple, 2010).

Yet, schools also are part of the cultural apparatus of society in other ways than building (positive or negative) identities. They are key mechanisms in determining what is socially valued as “legitimate knowledge” and what is seen as merely “popular.” In helping to define what is legitimate knowledge, they also participate in the process through which particular groups are granted status and which groups remain unrecognized or minimized. Thus, here too schools are at the center of struggles over a politics of recognition over race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and other important dynamics of power (Fraser 1997; Binder 2002). These too are spaces for political and educational action.

The points I have been making are not totally new of course. Critical educators and cultural workers, including Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972), in many nations have made similar points for many years. We can learn a number of important lessons from this. Critical educators in the “North” and in the imperial centers must also look outside our borders for lessons on what is possible and how to achieve it. The best example of this can be found in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil.

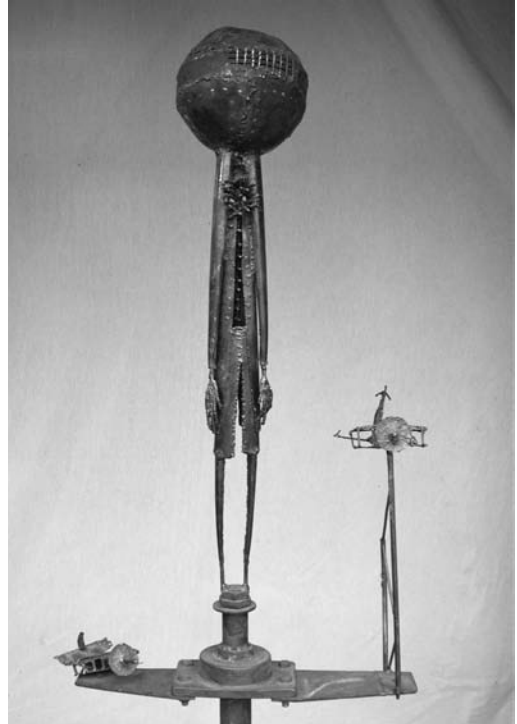
In Porto Alegre, a set of policies has been instituted that has had what seem to be extensive and long lasting effects (see, e.g., Gandin, 2009; Gandin & Apple, 2003; Apple, 2013). Influenced by Paulo Freire’s work, this has occurred in large part because the policies are coherently linked to larger dynamics of social transformation and to a coherent strategy that aims to change the mechanisms of the government and the rules of participation in the formation of state policies. The policies of the “Popular Administration” in Porto Alegre, Brazil involving the “Citizen School” and

participatory budgeting are explicitly designed to radically change both the municipal schools and the relationship between communities, the state, and education. This set of policies and the accompanying processes of implementation are constitutive parts of a clear and explicit project aimed at constructing not only a better school for the least advantaged members of society, but also a larger project of radical and thick democracy. In essence, they have recaptured the meaning of democracy back from the Right.

The reforms being built in Porto Alegre are still in formation, but they have crucial implications for how we might think about the politics of education policy and its role in social transformation. The experiences of Porto Alegre have considerable importance not only for Brazil, but for all of us who are deeply concerned about the effects of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative restructuring of education and of the public sphere in general. The principles of how specifically one can build a curriculum based on the lived culture of oppressed peoples, of how thick democracy can actually be made to work among the poor and disenfranchised (and among all citizens), of how the bureaucratic nature of educational governance can be reformed in genuinely democratic ways, of how the state can not only direct but can be *taught*—all of these are issues that are faced daily in the educational realities a large number of countries. And these are exactly the foci of Porto Alegre's ongoing experiences. Given this, there is much to learn from the successful struggles in Porto Alegre. Reversing teacher and taught in international educational relations, so that the "South" becomes the teacher of the "North," is a good place to start.

## Conclusion

Of course, the examples to which I pointed of critically democratic schools, of schools as sites of crucial struggles, and of what is happening in Spain and in Porto Alegre do not totally answer the question of whether schools and other educational sites can actually contribute to a more just society in truly lasting ways. This can only be answered through engagement in the processes of struggle. This engagement is what has guided people such as Paulo Freire, C. L. R. James, W. E. B. DuBois, Carter Woodson, and so many others in multiple sites and multiple nations. For them and countless less well known actors, there was



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—and is— an abiding concern with the role of education not just in reproducing dominance, but also in its role in challenging dominance.

Undoubtedly, even during a time of conservative modernization and attacks on the very notion of a critically democratic public sphere, within each and every institution of education, within the crevices and cracks so to speak, there are counter-hegemonic practices being built and defended. But they are too often isolated from each other and have great difficulty in organizing themselves into coherent movements and strategies. As I noted earlier, part of the task of the critical scholar/activist in education is to make public the successes in contesting the unequal and at times simply repressive control over policies, curricula, pedagogy, and evaluation—over all of our work. While public documentation and "story-telling" may not be sufficient, it performs an important function. It keeps alive and reminds ourselves of the very possibility of difference in an age of conservative modernization and disrespect.

This, then, is a task we are called upon to perform. Can we too act as secretaries for some of our colleagues in educational institutions at every level, making public their partial, but still suc-

cessful, resistances to the regime of regulation that we are currently experiencing? The narratives of their (our) political/pedagogic lives can bear witness to the possibility of taking steps toward building a reconstituted public sphere within the spaces in which we live and work.

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