

DOES
YOUR
VOTE
COUNT?



Critical Pedagogy and Democracy

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Seeking Democracy through Critical Pedagogy

The radical, committed to human liberations, does not become the prisoner of a “circle of certainty” within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. The individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialog with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed: but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, 1973/2005, p. 39)¹

Is it win-lose, win-win or winner take all?

In a world of supposed infinite hope and possibility, to paraphrase politicians of pretty well every stripe in almost every country at this time (Carr & Porfilio, 2009b), are we still plagued with injustice, discrimination, poverty, famine, war, torment and undeniable sadness at visibly wretched acts of deceit and tyranny? Are we perturbed by the decadence and extravagance of small numbers of people in various lands living out reality-show lifestyles unimaginable to the translucent dreams of the majority, who are obliged to fight their battles, literally and figuratively, all the while supporting the vast inequities that pervade the human condition (Chossudovsky, 2003, 2005)? Can a conscious and enlightened spirit and mind, with or without God and the notion of a superior being, bring to bear a more humane acceptance of the *other*, which could address, as Tinder (2004) puts it, the “perennial questions” plaguing the history of civilization? Are we, individually and collectively, satisfied, ingratiated, comforted and nourished with/by the process of voting for candidates and parties destined to lead us (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2007)? These may seem like discursive and disjointed questions but there is a thread running through them.

Democracy means many things to many people. I start this book contesting the generally accepted wisdom that democracy is unquestionably good, and, conversely, what is not democracy or democratic must, therefore, be unquestionably bad. The *us versus them* paradigm, of democrats and non-democrats, or more crudely put within the American context, Democrats versus Republicans has, I

contend, not served us well, has led to extraordinarily unnecessary war and destruction, has effectively produced and (reproduced) structures that have perpetuated oppression and disdain for the human condition, and, lastly, has sought to enshrine what might be thought of as a retrenchment of overzealous and stifling anti-democratic thought, action and outcomes. This sweeping, admittedly provocative, statement does not mean to suggest neither that people are fundamentally evil, nor that there have not been some interesting, important and, even, necessary actions undertaken and achieved through the two-party/winner-take-all/*econ-ocracy* model or system (Chomsky, 2007).

Western society often starts with the notion that we are democratic, and, therefore, it is naturally (more) advanced, developed, superior, preferred, righteous, and justifiable than others, which are considered as the opposite (Gregg, 2000; McLaren, 2005a; Swift, 2002). Our supposed democratic foundation provides a rationale for us to incriminate others for their human rights orientation, all the while covering ourselves with the yolk of a quasi-imperialist glory, which epistemologically decrees that others must conform to our vision of the world or face the wrath of what we can muster, even if that means, unfortunately for the majority of peoples affected, militaristic destruction (Goodall, 2008; Magdoff, 2003; Willinsky, 1998). The goodness of Whiteness (Carr & Lund, 2007) and the (fundamentalist) Christian ethos (Giroux, 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009) is normatively inscribed into the hegemonic (supposedly democratic) mindset.

To be clear, I am not against democracy: I am, however, hoping for a more robust, critical, *thicker*² interpretation of what democracy is, what it should be, and how it can be beneficial to all peoples (see Barber, 2004, Gandin & Apple, 2002, 2005, and McLaren, 2007, for arguments for a more radical and socially just democracy). I embrace the “critical democratic pedagogy” espoused by Denzin (2009) as well as the visceral hope and passion for a more humane political, cultural and socio-economic space for all (see Darder, 2002, and McLaren, 2007) based on Freire’s work).

The problem is not that democracy is not a worthy concept but, rather, that the type of democracy that has received normative, relativistic salience is, in many regards, anti-democratic. Macedo (2009) offers a critical and lucid interpretation of this argument.

While Western capitalistic hegemonic forces insidiously work to empty out the substantivity of democracy by reducing it to ritualistic voting exercises designed to rectify elite decisions, they expect societies that suffered from centuries of colonialism and

exploitation to implement the Western prepackaged democracy when these societies are forced to spend precious resources in fighting civil wars and political instability fuelled by external powers and market interests that cynically demand democracy. Thus, the term “democracy” is not to be understood within ready-made, Western-developed democracy kit characterized by a blind embrace of asymmetrical market forces, required to be uncritically implemented without analysis or regard to suitability. In this sense, democracy precludes the development of a well-thought-out economic plan designed for the general welfare of all people rather than the interests of the ruling elites, which makes this prepackaged democracy a figment of the Western imagination. (p. 80)

This “figment of the Western imagination” cannot be countered without a vigorous and critically engaged educational experience. Critical pedagogy³ provides a space to further reflect on the meaning of democracy, and to accept, with humility, that there is not simply one way to conceive of the human condition: the mere act of voting does not make a democracy! Societies are too complex to be reduced to such a caricature: by way of example, India, commonly referred to as the world’s largest *democracy*, has massive poverty and impoverishment juxtaposed against Bollywood-style extravagance, military conflicts, a quasi-nuclear arms-race with its neighbour, renowned government corruption, and deleterious social conditions for vast segments of the population not involved in the technological revolution, all of which raises important social and human rights questions. India is but one example, and others will be explored in this book but the point to be underscored is that appreciation of the democratic condition must take into consideration myriad factors and propositions, especially in relation to power and inequitable power relations (see Lund & Carr, 2008; Macrine, 2009).

It would be an affront to all peoples, including indigenous/aboriginal peoples, marginalized groups, and those traditionally kept outside of decision-making circles, if the act of voting could stifle debate about what democracy is simply because elections have provided people with a supposed “free choice.” Democracy must be constantly worked and re-worked, with less dependence on the formal process and cycle of elections, and it must reconsider how a more humane, decent, meaningful society can be constructed, outside of the trappings of power elites and constitutional maneuvers that trivialize the legitimate aspirations of all peoples (Chomsky, 1999; Dewey, 1916/1997; Zinn, 2003).

There is ample evidence that democracy needs to be, or must be, linked to social justice (Freire, 1973/2005; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Zinn & Macedo, 2005; Macrine, 2009). The book I co-edited with Darren Lund in 2008, *Doing Democracy: Striving for Political Literacy and Social Justice* (Lund & Carr, 2008), focuses on this premise, and argues for more creative, diverse, explicit and critical

ways of achieving democracy in and through education. The foundation for this type of thinking stretches back in time, where many of the great, and it should be acknowledged from the outset, White, male philosophers raised fundamental questions about right and wrong, how power should be exercised, how we should consider virtues and values, and the meaning of a just and decent society (Tinder, 2004; Kincheloe, 2008b). This book seeks to extend the thinking, analysis and contextualization of democracy in favor of a critical pedagogical vantage point and framework, from which an alternative, yet fundamental, crystallization of democracy can be achieved.

Democracy in Light of, or in Spite of, Education

John Dewey's (1916) contribution to the notion, study and debate related to democracy, buttressed by the salience of the educational project, continues to be an inspirational and insightful commentary on the path toward liberation, or, at least, critical engagement on the part of the masses. Dewey considered the dialectical nature of democracy, which required critical inquiry in and through education, and was critical of the mercantile representation of its role that has vacillated through American society for some time (Simpson & Aycock, 2005). His interest in a humanistic, progressive education, in which authoritarian models of knowledge transmission could be problematized and replaced by experiential efforts, has long been a beacon of light in the dichotomous relationship between reformers and conservatives. Shenton (2009) argues for a return to Deweyian philosophy, maintaining that his fundamental line of inquiry is still the crux of society and democracy: "In 1927, Dewey suggested that a public comes into being when the indirect consequences of transactions between single persons and groups are important, when the effects of these transactions go beyond those immediately engaged and affect others" (p. 436). Thus, the organization of societal encounters, experiences, realities and "transactions" are what constitute, in large part, the fibre of democracy, more so than documents and elections, which might, to varying degrees, seek to underpin a democratic character of a given society.

This juxtapositioning can be exemplified in contemporary times by the (in)famous *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation, which Gordon, Smyth and Diehl (2008) argue has an ideology linked to war and neo-liberalism, and which Giroux labels as "nothing less than a program of control, both of students and of teachers" (Aronowitz, 2009, p. x). Saltman (2009) links NCLB with "disaster capitalism," which represents an onslaught on public education. Among the critiques of this reform movement tending toward what many consider a vulgar

excision of critical engagement, Westheimer (2008) suggests that the more appropriate title for the reform should be *No child left thinking*. Some examples of how NCLB has restricted or prohibited critical engagement, and even critical thinking, given that “In many states, virtually every subject area is under scrutiny for any deviation from one single narrative, based on knowable, testable, and purportedly uncontested facts” (p. 4), include:

In June 2006, the Florida Education Omnibus Bill included language specifying that, “The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history.... American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable.”

Other provisions in the bill mandate “flag education, including proper flag display” and “flag salute” and require educators to stress the importance of free enterprise to the US economy. But what some find most alarming is the stated goal of the bill’s designers: “to raise historical literacy” with a particular emphasis on the “teaching of facts.” For example, the bill requires that only facts be taught when it comes to discussing the “period of discovery” and the early colonies. Florida is perhaps the first state to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical thinking....

More and more, teachers and students are seeing their schools or entire districts and states limiting their ability to explore multiple perspectives to controversial issues. Students and a drama teacher in a Connecticut high school spent months researching, writing, and rehearsing a play they wrote about the Iraq war titled “Voices in Conflict.” Before the scheduled performance, the school administration banned the play on the basis that it was “inappropriate.” (The students went on to perform the play in the spring of 2007 on an off-Broadway stage in New York to impressive critical review)....

In Colorado, a student was suspended for posting flyers advertising a student protest. In Bay City, Michigan, wearing a T-shirt with an anti-war quotation by Albert Einstein was grounds for suspension....

The federal role in discouraging critical analysis of historical events has been significant as well. In 2002, the US Department of Education announced a new set of history and civic education initiatives that the President said was designed to teach our children that “America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people.” Similarly, in 2004, Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander (former US secretary of education) warned that students should not be exposed to competing ideologies in historical texts but, rather, be instructed that our nation represents one true ideology. Alexander sponsored his American History and Civics Education Act to put civics back in its “rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American.” Presumably, for Alexander, what it means to be an American is more answer than question. (pp. 4–5)

As Giroux (2009b) argues, despite the trappings of sophistication and technological innovation, we are entering a “new illiteracy in American life.”