Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals

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Cultural studies seems to have passed into the shadows of academic interests, replaced by globalization and political economy as the new millennium’s privileged concerns among left academics. Yet, cultural studies’ longstanding interest in the interrelationship of power, politics, and culture remains critically important. Matters of agency, consciousness, pedagogy, and rhetoric are central to any public discourse about politics, not to mention education itself. Hence, this article argues that the promise of cultural studies, especially as a fundamental aspect of higher education, resides in a larger transformative and democratic politics in which matters of pedagogy and agency play a central role.

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Within the last few decades, a number of critical and cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, Douglas Kellner, Meghan Morris, Toby Miller, and Tony Bennett have provided valuable contributions to our understanding of how culture deploys power and is shaped and organized within diverse systems of representation, production, consumption, and distribution. Particularly important to such work is an ongoing critical analysis of how symbolic and institutional forms of culture and power are mutually entangled in constructing diverse identities, modes of political agency, and the social world itself. Within this approach, material relations of power and the production of social meaning do not cancel each other out but constitute the precondition for all meaningful practices. Culture is recognized as the social field where goods and social practices are not only produced, distributed, and consumed but also invested with various meanings and ideologies implicated in the generation of political effects. Culture is partly defined as a circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is mani-
festes in both individualized and social forms, and discourses are created, which make culture itself the object of inquiry and critical analyses. Rather than being viewed as a static force, the substance of culture and everyday life—knowledge, goods, social practices, and contexts—repeatedly mutates and is subject to ongoing changes and interpretations.

Following the work of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, many cultural theorists acknowledge the primacy of culture’s role as an educational site where identities are being continually transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic as it becomes not only the condition for the acquisition of agency but also the sphere for imagining oppositional social change. As a space for both the production of meaning and social interaction, culture is viewed by many contemporary theorists as an important terrain in which various modes of agency, identity, and values are neither prefigured nor always in place but subject to negotiation and struggle, and open for creating new democratic transformations, though always within various degrees of iniquitous power relations. Rather than being dismissed as a reflection of larger economic forces or as simply the “common ground” of everyday life, culture is recognized by many advocates of cultural studies as both a site of contestation and a site of utopian possibility, a space in which an emancipating politics can be fashioned that “consists in making seem possible precisely that which, from within the situation, is declared to be impossible.”

Cultural studies theorists have greatly expanded our theoretical understanding of the ideological, institutional, and performative workings of culture, but as important as this work might be, it does not go far enough—though there are some exceptions as in the work of Stanley Aronowitz, bell hooks, and Nick Couldry—in connecting the most critical insights of cultural studies with an understanding of the importance of critical pedagogy, particularly as part of a larger project for expanding the possibilities of a democratic politics, the dynamics of resistance, and the capacities for social agency. For too many theorists, pedagogy often occupies a limited role theoretically and politically in configuring cultural studies as a form of cultural politics. While many cultural studies advocates recognize the political importance of pedagogy, it is often acknowledged in a very limited and narrow way. For instance, when invoked as an important political practice, pedagogy is either limited to the role that oppositional intellectuals might play within academia or reduced almost entirely to forms of learning that take place in schools. Even when pedagogy is related to issues of democracy, citizenship, and the struggle over the shaping of identities and identifications, it is rarely taken up as part of a broader public politics—as part of a larger attempt to explain how learning takes place outside of schools or what it means to assess the political significance of understanding the broader educational force of culture in the new age of media technology, multimedia, and computer-based information and communication networks. Put differently, pedagogy is limited to what goes on in schools, and the role of cultural studies theorists who address pedagogical concerns is largely reduced to teaching cultural studies within the classroom.

Within this discourse, cultural studies becomes available as a resource to educators
who can then teach students how to look at the media (industry and texts), analyze audience reception, challenge rigid disciplinary boundaries, critically engage popular culture, produce critical knowledge, or use cultural studies to reform the curricula and challenge disciplinary formations within public schools and higher education. For instance, Shane Gunster has argued that the main contribution cultural studies makes to pedagogy “is the insistence that any kind of critical education must be rooted in the culture, experience, and knowledge that students bring to the classroom.” While this is an important insight, it has been argued in enormously sophisticated ways for over fifty years by a host of progressive educators, including John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and Paulo Freire. The problem lies not in Gunster’s unfamiliarity with such scholarship but in his willingness to repeat the presupposition that the classroom is the exclusive site in which pedagogy becomes a relevant object of analysis. If he had crossed the very disciplinary boundaries he decries in his celebration of cultural studies, he would have found that educational theorists such as Roger Simon, David Trend, and others have expanded the meaning of pedagogy as a political and moral practice and extended its application far beyond the classroom while also attempting to combine the cultural and the pedagogical as part of a broader notion of political education and cultural studies.

Many cultural studies theorists, such as Lawrence Grossberg, have rightly suggested that cultural studies has an important role to play in helping educators rethink, among other things, the nature of pedagogy and knowledge, the purpose of schooling, and the impact of larger social forces on schools. And, surely, Gunster takes such advice seriously but fails to understand its limits and in doing so repeats a now familiar refrain among critical educational theorists about connecting pedagogy to the histories, lived experiences, and discourses that students bring to the classroom. In spite of the importance of bringing matters of culture and power to the schools, I think too many cultural studies theorists are remiss in suggesting that pedagogy is primarily about schools and, by implication, that the intersection of cultural studies and pedagogy has little to do with theorizing the role pedagogy might play in linking learning to social change outside of traditional sites of schooling. Pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations. Pedagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and settings. As Roger Simon observes, pedagogy points to the multiplicity of sites in which education takes place and offers the possibility for a variety of cultural workers to comprehend the full range of multiple, shifting and overlapping sites of learning that exist within the organized social relations of everyday life. This means being able to grasp, for example, how workplaces, families, community and institutional health provision, film and television, the arts, groups organized for spiritual expression and worship, organized sport, the law and the provision of legal services, the prison system, voluntary social service organizations, and community based literacy programs all
designate sets of organized practices within which learning is one central feature and outcome.7

In what follows, I want to argue that pedagogy is central to any viable notion of cultural politics and that cultural studies is crucial to any viable notion of pedagogy. Moreover, it is precisely at the intersection at which diverse traditions in cultural studies and pedagogy mutually inform each other that the possibility exists of making the pedagogical more political for cultural studies theorists and the political more pedagogical for educators.

Rethinking the Importance of Cultural Studies for Educators

My own interest in cultural studies emerges from an ongoing project to theorize the regulatory and emancipatory relationship among culture, power, and politics as expressed through the dynamics of what I call public pedagogy. Such a project concerns, in part, the diverse ways in which culture functions as a contested sphere over the production, distribution, and regulation of power, and how and where it operates both symbolically and institutionally as an educational, political, and economic force. Drawing upon a long tradition in cultural studies work, I take up culture as constitutive and political, not only reflecting larger forces but also constructing them; in this instance, culture not only mediates history but shapes it. I want to argue that culture is the primary terrain for realizing the political as an articulation and intervention into the social, a space in which politics is pluralized, recognized as contingent, and open to many formations.8 I also argue that it is a crucial terrain in order to render visible both the global circuits that now frame material relations of power and a cultural politics in which matters of representation and meaning shape and offer concrete examples of how politics is expressed, lived, and experienced. Culture, in this instance, is the ground of both contestation and accommodation, and it is increasingly characterized by the rise of mega-corporations and new technologies that are transforming the traditional spheres of the economy, industry, society, and everyday life. Culture now plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others. From my perspective, culture is the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns. It is also the sphere in which the translating possibilities of culture are under assault, particularly as the forces of neo-liberalism dissolve public issues into utterly privatized and individualistic concerns.

Central to my work in cultural studies is the assumption that the primacy of culture and power should be organized through an understanding of how the political becomes pedagogical, particularly in terms of how private issues are connected to larger social conditions and collective forces—that is, how the very processes of learning constitute the political mechanisms through which identities are shaped and desires mobilized, and how experiences take on form and meaning.
within and through collective conditions and those larger forces that constitute the realm of the social. In this context, pedagogy is no longer restricted to what goes on in schools, but becomes a defining principle of a wide ranging set of cultural apparatuses engaged in what Raymond Williams has called “permanent education.” Williams rightfully believed that education in the broadest sense plays a central role in any viable form of cultural politics. He writes:

What [permanent education] valuably stresses is the educational force of our whole social and cultural experience. It is therefore concerned, not only with continuing education, of a formal or informal kind, but with what the whole environment, its institutions and relationships, actively and profoundly teaches. . . . [Permanent education also refers to] the field in which our ideas of the world, of ourselves and of our possibilities, are most widely and often most powerfully formed and disseminated. To work for the recovery of control in this field is then, under any pressures, a priority.9

Williams argued that any viable notion of critical politics would have to pay closer “attention to the complex ways in which individuals are formed by the institutions to which they belong, and in which, by reaction, the institutions took on the color of individuals thus formed.”10 Williams also focused attention on the crucial political question of how agency unfolds within a variety of cultural spaces structured within unequal relations of power.11 He was particularly concerned about the connections between pedagogy and political agency, especially in light of the emergence of a range of new technologies that greatly proliferated the amount of information available to people while at the same time constricting the substance and ways in which such meanings entered the public domain. The realm of culture for Williams took on a new role in the latter part of the twentieth century because the actuality of economic power and its attendant networks of control now exercised more influence than ever before in shaping how identities are produced, desires mobilized, and everyday social relations acquired the force of common sense.12 Williams clearly understood that making the political more pedagogical meant recognizing that where and how the psyche locates itself in public discourse, visions, and passions provides the groundwork for agents to enunciate, act, and reflect on themselves and their relations to others and the wider social order.

Following Williams, I want to reaffirm the importance of pedagogy in any viable understanding of cultural politics. In doing so, I wish to comment on some very schematic and incomplete elements of cultural studies that I believe are useful not only for thinking about the interface between cultural studies and critical pedagogy but also for deepening and expanding the theoretical and political horizons of critical pedagogical work. I believe that pedagogy represents both a mode of cultural production and a type of cultural criticism that is essential for questioning the conditions under which knowledge is produced, values affirmed, affective investments engaged, and subject positions put into place, negotiated, taken up, or refused. Pedagogy is a referent for understanding the conditions of critical learning and the often hidden dynamics of social and cultural reproduction. As a critical practice, pedagogy’s role lies not only in changing how people think about themselves and
their relationship to others and the world, but also in energizing students and others
to engage in those struggles that further possibilities for living in a more just society.
But like any other body of knowledge that is continuously struggled over, pedagogy
must constantly enter into dialogue with other fields, theoretical domains, and
emerging theoretical discourses. As diverse as cultural studies is as a field, there are
a number of insights it provides that are crucial to educators who use critical pedagogy both inside and outside of their classrooms.

First, in the face of contemporary forms of political and epistemological relativism, a more politicized version of cultural studies makes a claim for the use of highly disciplined, rigorously theoretical work. Not only does such a position reject the notion that intellectual authority can only be grounded in particular forms of social identity, but it also refuses to endorse an increasing anti-intellectualism that posits theory as too academic and complex to be of any use in addressing important political issues. While many cultural studies advocates refuse either to separate culture studies from politics or reject theory as too complex and abstract, they also reject theory as a sterile form of theoreticism and an academicized vocabulary that is as self-consciously pedantic as it is politically irrelevant. Matters of language, experience, power, ideology, and representation cannot make a detour around theory, but that is no excuse for elevating theory to an ethereal realm that has no referent outside of its own obtuseness or rhetorical cleverness. While offering no guarantees, theory in a more critical perspective is seen as crucial for relating broader issues of politics and power to the problems that shape everyday life. Moreover, theory in this view is called upon as a resource for connecting cultural studies to those sites and spheres of contestation in which it becomes possible to open up rhetorical and pedagogical spaces between the actual conditions of dominant power and the promise of future space informed by a range of democratic alternatives.13

Underlying such a project is a firm commitment to intellectual rigor and a deep regard for matters of compassion and social responsibility aimed at deepening and extending the possibilities for critical agency, racial justice, economic democracy, and the just distribution of political power. Hence, cultural studies theorists often reject the anti-intellectualism, specialization, and methodological reification frequently found in other disciplines. Similarly, such theorists also reject both the universalizing dogmatism of some strands of radical theory and a postmodern epistemology that enshrines difference, identity, and plurality at the expense of developing more inclusive notions of the social that bring together historically and politically differentiated forms of struggles. The more progressive strains of cultural studies do not define or value theory and knowledge within sectarian ideological or pedagogical interests. On the contrary, these approaches to cultural studies define theorizing as part of a more generalized notion of freedom, which combines democratic principles, values, and practices with the rights and discourses that build on the histories and struggles of those excluded because of class, race, gender, age, or disability. Theory emerges from the demands posed by particular contexts, and reflects critically upon ways both to better understand the world and to transform it when necessary. For instance, cultural studies theorist, Imre Szeman, has looked
at the ways in which globalization not only opens up a new space for pedagogy but also “constitutes a problem of and for pedagogy.” Szeman examines the various forms of public pedagogy at work in the rhetoric of newspapers, TV news shows, financial service companies, advertising industries, and the mass media, including how such rhetoric fashions a triumphalist view of globalization. He then offers an analysis of how alternative pedagogies are produced within various globalization protest movements that have taken place in cities such as Seattle, Toronto, and Genoa—movements that have attempted to open up new modes and sites of learning while enabling new forms of collective resistance. Resistance in this instance is not limited to sectarian forms of identity politics, but functions more like a network of struggles that affirms particular issues and also provide a common ground in which various groups can develop alliances and link specific interests to broader democratic projects, strategies, and tactics. What is particularly important about Szeman’s analysis is how such collective struggles and networks are generating new pedagogical practices of resistance through the use of new media such as the Internet and digital video to challenge official pedagogies of globalization.

Second, cultural studies is radically contextual in that the very questions it asks change in every context. Theory and criticism do not become ends in themselves but are always engaged as a resource and method in response to problems raised in particular contexts, social relations, and institutional formations. This suggests that how we respond as educators and critics to the spheres in which we work is conditioned by the interrelationship between the theoretical resources we bring to specific contexts and the worldly space of public-ness that produces distinct problems and conditions particular responses to them. Politics as an intervention into public life is expressed, in this instance, as part of a broader attempt to provide a better understanding of how power works in and through historical and institutional contexts while simultaneously opening up imagined possibilities for changing them. Lawrence Grossberg puts it well in arguing that cultural studies must be grounded in an act of doing, which in this case means “intervening into contexts and power . . . in order to enable people to act more strategically in ways that may change their context for the better.” For educators, this suggests that pedagogy is not an a priori set of methods that simply needs to be uncovered and then applied regardless of the contexts in which one teaches but is instead the outcome of numerous deliberations and struggles between different groups over how contexts are made and remade, often within unequal relations of power. At the same time, it is crucial for educators to recognize that while they need to be attentive to the particular context in which they work, they cannot separate such contexts from larger matters and configurations of power, culture, ideology, politics, and domination. As Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner observe, “Pedagogy does not elide or occlude issues of power. . . . Thus, while the distinctive situation and interests of the teachers, students, or critics help decide what precise artifacts are engaged, what methods will be employed, and what pedagogy will be deployed, the socio-cultural environment in which cultural production, reception, and education occurs must be scrutinized as well.”
The notion that pedagogy is always contextual rightly points to linking the knowledge that is taught to the experiences students bring to their classroom encounters. One implication for such work is that future and existing teachers should be educated about the viability of developing context-dependent learning that takes account of student experiences and their relationships to popular culture and its terrain of pleasure, including those cultural industries that are often dismissed as producing mere entertainment. Despite the growing diversity of students in both public schools and higher education, there are few examples of curriculum sensitivity to the multiplicity of economic, social, and cultural factors bearing on students’ lives. Even where there is a proliferation of programs such as ethnic and black studies in higher education, these are often marginalized in small programs far removed from the high status courses such as business, computer science, and Western history. Cultural studies at least provides the theoretical tools for allowing teachers to recognize the important, though not unproblematic, cultural resources students bring to school and the willingness to affirm and engage them critically as forms of knowledge crucial to the production of the students’ sense of identity, place, and history. Equally important, the knowledge produced by students offers educators opportunities to learn from young people and to incorporate such knowledge as an integral part of their own teaching. Yet, there is an important caveat that cannot be stated too strongly.

I am not endorsing a romantic celebration of the relevance of the knowledge and experience that students bring to the classroom. Nor am I arguing that larger contexts, which frame both the culture and political economy of the schools and the experiences of students, should be ignored. I am also not suggesting that teaching should be limited to the resources students already have as much as I am arguing that educators need to find ways to make knowledge meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative. Moreover, by locating students within differentiated sets of histories, experiences, literacies, and values, pedagogical practices can be employed that not only raise questions about the strengths and limitations of what students know, but also grapple with the issue of what conditions must be engaged to expand the capacities and skills needed by students to become engaged global citizens and responsible social agents. This is not a matter of making a narrow notion of relevance the determining factor in the curriculum. But it is an issue of connecting knowledge to everyday life, meaning to the act of persuasion, schools and universities to broader public spheres, and rigorous theoretical work to affective investments and pleasures that students use in mediating their relationship to others and the larger world.

Third, the cultural studies emphasis on transdisciplinary work is important because it provides a rationale for challenging how knowledge has been historically produced, hierarchically ordered, and used within disciplines to sanction particular forms of authority and exclusion. By challenging the established academic division of labor, a transdisciplinary approach raises important questions about the politics of representation and its deeply entrenched entanglement with specialization, professionalism, and dominant power relations. The commitment to a transdisciplinary
approach is also important because such work often operates at the frontiers of knowledge, prompting teachers and students to raise new questions and develop models of analysis outside of the officially sanctioned boundaries of knowledge and the established disciplines that sanction them. Transdisciplinarity in this discourse serves a dual function. On the one hand, it firmly posits the arbitrary conditions under which knowledge is produced and encoded, stressing its historically and socially constructed nature and deeply entrenched connection to power and ideological interests. On the other hand, it endorses the relational nature of knowledge, inveighing against any presupposition that knowledge, events, and issues are either fixed or should be studied in isolation. Transdisciplinary approaches stress both historical relations and broader social formations, always attentive to new linkages, meanings, and possibilities. Strategically and pedagogically, these modes of analysis suggest that while educators may be forced to work within academic disciplines, they can develop transdisciplinary tools to make established disciplines the object of critique while also contesting the broader economic, political, and cultural conditions that reproduce unequal relations of power and inequities at various levels of academic work. This is a crucial turn theoretically and politically because transdisciplinary approaches foreground the necessity of bridging the work educators do within the academy to other academic fields as well as to public spheres outside of the university. Such approaches also suggest that educators function as public intellectuals by engaging in ongoing public conversations that cut across particular disciplines while attempting to get their ideas out to more than one type of audience. Under such circumstances, educators must address the task of learning the forms of knowledge and skills that enable them to speak critically and broadly on a number of issues to a wide range of publics.

Fourth, in a somewhat related way, the emphasis by many cultural studies theorists on studying the full range of cultural practices that circulate in society opens the possibility for understanding a wide variety of new cultural forms that have become the primary educational forces in advanced industrial societies. This seems especially important at a time when new electronic technologies and the emergence of visual culture as a primary educational force offer new opportunities to inhabit knowledge and ways of knowing that simply do not correspond to the longstanding traditions and officially sanctioned rules of disciplinary knowledge or of the one-sided academic emphasis on print culture. The scope and power of new informational technologies, multimedia, and visual culture warrant educators to become more reflective about engaging the production, reception, and situated use of new technologies, popular texts, and diverse forms of visual culture, including how they structure social relations, values, particular notions of community, the future, and varied definitions of the self and others. Texts in this sense do not merely refer to the culture of print or the technology of the book, but refer to all those audio, visual, and electronically mediated forms of knowledge that have prompted a radical shift in the production of knowledge and the ways in which it is received and consumed. Recently, my own work has focused on the ways in which Disney’s corporate culture—its animated films, radio programs, theme parks, and Hollywood
blockbusters—functions as an expansive teaching machine which appropriates me-
dia and popular culture in order to rewrite public memory and offer young people
an increasingly privatized and commercialized notion of citizenship.17

Contemporary youth do not simply rely on the culture of the book to construct
and affirm their identities; instead, they are faced with the daunting task of
negotiating their way through a de-centered, media-based cultural landscape no
longer caught in the grip of either a technology of print or closed narrative
structures.18 I do not believe that educators and other cultural workers can critically
understand and engage the shifting attitudes, representations, and desires of new
generations strictly within the dominant disciplinary configurations of knowledge
and practice and traditional forms of pedagogy. Educators need a more expansive
view of knowledge and pedagogy that provides the conditions for young people and
adults to engage popular media and mass culture as serious objects of social analysis
and to learn how to read them critically through specific strategies of understanding,
engagement, and transformation. Informing this notion of knowledge and pedagogy
is a view of literacy that is multiple and plural rather than singular and fixed. The
modernist emphasis on literacy must be reconfigured in order for students to learn
multiple literacies rooted in a mastery of diverse symbolic domains. At the same
time, it is not enough to educate students to be critical readers across a variety of
cultural domains. They must also become cultural producers, especially if they are
going to create alternative public spheres in which official knowledge and its
one-dimensional configurations can be challenged. That is, students must also learn
how to utilize the new electronic technologies, how to think about the dynamics of
cultural power, and how it works on and through them so that they can build
alternative cultural spheres in which such power is shared and used to promote
non-commodified values rather than simply mimic corporate culture and its under-
lying transactions.

Fifth, cultural studies provocatively stresses analyzing public memory not as a
totalizing narrative but as a series of ruptures and displacements. Historical learning
in this sense is not about constructing a linear narrative but about blasting history
open, rupturing its silences, highlighting its detours, acknowledging the events of its
transmission, and organizing its limits within an open and honest concern with
human suffering, values, and the legacy of the often unrepresentable or misrepre-
sented. History is not an artifact to be merely transmitted, but an ongoing dialogue
and struggle over the relationship between representation and agency. James Clifford
is insightful in arguing that history should “force a sense of location on those who
engage with it.”19 This means challenging official narratives of conservative educators
such as William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, Diane Ravitch, and Chester Finn for whom
history is primarily about recovering and legitimating selective facts, dates, and
events. A pedagogy of public memory is about making connections that are often
hidden, forgotten, or willfully ignored. Public memory in this sense becomes not an
object of reverence but an ongoing subject of debate, dialogue, and critical engage-
ment. Public memory is also about critically examining one’s own historical location
amid relations of power, privilege, or subordination. More specifically, this suggests
engaging history, as has been done repeatedly by radical intellectuals such as Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, by analyzing how knowledge is constructed through its absences. Public memory as a pedagogical practice functions, in part, as a form of critique that addresses the fundamental inadequacy of official knowledge in representing marginalized and oppressed groups along with, as John Beverly points out, the deep-seated injustices perpetrated by institutions that contain such knowledge and the need to transform such institutions in the “direction of a more radically democratic nonhierarchical social order.”

Sixth, cultural studies theorists are increasingly paying attention to their own institutional practices and pedagogies. They have come to recognize that pedagogy is deeply implicated in how power and authority are employed in the construction and organization of knowledge, desires, values, and identities. Such recognition has produced a new self-consciousness about how particular forms of teacher authority, classroom knowledge, and social practices are used to legitimate particular values and interests within unequal relations of power. Questions concerning how pedagogy works to articulate knowledge, meaning, desire, and values not only provide the conditions for a pedagogical self-consciousness among teachers and students but also foreground the recognition that pedagogy is a moral and political practice which cannot be reduced to an a priori set of skills or techniques. Pedagogy instead is defined as a cultural practice that must be accountable ethically and politically for the stories it produces, the claims it makes on public memories, and the images of the future it deems legitimate. As both an object of critique and a method of cultural production, no critical pedagogical practice can hide behind a claim of objectivity but should instead work, in part, to link theory and practice in the service of organizing, struggling over, and deepening political, economic, and social freedoms.

In the broadest sense, critical pedagogy should offer students and others—outside of officially sanctioned scripts—the historically and contextually specific knowledge, skills, and tools they need to participate in, govern, and change, when necessary, those political and economic structures of power that shape their everyday lives. Needless to say, such tools are not pre-given but are the outcome of struggle, debate, dialogue, and engagement across a variety of public spheres.

While this list is both schematic and incomplete, it points to some important theoretical considerations that can be appropriated from the field of cultural studies as a resource for advancing a more public and democratic vision of higher education. Hopefully, it suggests theoretical tools for constructing new forms of collaboration among faculty, a broadening of the terms of teaching and learning, and new approaches to transdisciplinary research that address local, national, and international concerns. The potential of cultural studies for developing forms of collaboration that cut across national boundaries is worth taking up.

**Where is the Project in Cultural Studies?**

Like any other academic field, cultural studies is marked by a number of weaknesses that need to be addressed by educators drawn to some of its more critical
assumptions. First, there is a tendency in some cultural studies work to be simply deconstructive, that is, to refuse to ask questions about the insertion of symbolic processes into societal contexts. There is little sense in some deconstructive approaches of how texts, language, and symbolic systems are historically situated and contextualized “within and by a complex set of social, political, economic and cultural forces.”22 As the exclusive focus of analysis, texts get hermetically sealed, removed from the political economy of power relations, and as such, the terrain of struggle is reduced to a struggle over the meanings that allegedly reside in such texts. Any viable form of cultural studies cannot insist exclusively on the primacy of signification over power and, in doing so, reduce its purview to questions of meaning and texts. An obsession in some cases with cultural texts results in privileging literature and popular culture over history and politics. Within this discourse, material organizations and economic power disappear into some of the most irrelevant aspects of culture. Matters of fashion, cultural trivia, isolated notions of performance, and just plain cultural nonsense take on the aura of cultural analyses that yield to the most privatized forms of inquiry while simultaneously “obstructing the formulation of a publicly informed politics.”23 In opposition to this position, cultural studies needs to foreground the ways in which culture and power are related through what Stuart Hall calls “combining the study of symbolic forms and meanings with the study of power,” or more specifically the “insertion of symbolic processes into societal contexts and their imbrication with power.”24 Douglas Kellner for years has also argued that any viable approach to cultural studies has to overcome the divide between political economy and text-based analyses of culture.25 But recognizing such a divide is not the same thing as overcoming it. Part of this task necessitates that cultural studies theorists anchor their own work, however diverse, in a radical project that seriously engages the promise of an unrealized democracy against its really existing forms. Of crucial importance to such a project is rejecting the assumption that theory can understand social problems without contesting their appearance in public life. At the same time, it is crucial to any viable notion of cultural studies that it reclaims politics as an ongoing critique of domination and society as part of a larger search for justice. Any viable cultural politics needs a socially committed notion of injustice if we are to take seriously what it means to fight for the idea of the good society. I think Zygmunt Bauman is right in arguing that “if there is no room for the idea of wrong society, there is hardly much chance for the idea of good society to be born, let alone make waves.”26

Cultural studies advocates need to be more forceful, if not committed, to linking their overall politics to modes of critique and collective action that address the presupposition that democratic societies are never too just or just enough, and such a recognition means that a society must constantly nurture the possibilities for self-critique, collective agency, and forms of citizenship in which people play a fundamental role in critically discussing, administering, and shaping the material relations of power and ideological forces that forge their everyday lives. Moreover, the struggle over creating an inclusive and just democracy takes many forms, offers no political guarantees, and provides an important normative dimension to politics
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as a process that never ends. Such a project is based on the realization that a
democracy open to exchange, question, and self-criticism never reaches the limits of
justice; it is never just enough and never finished. It is precisely the open-ended and
normative nature of such a project that provides a common ground for cultural
studies theorists to share their differences and diverse range of intellectual pursuits.

Second, cultural studies is still largely an academic discourse and as such is often
too far removed from other cultural and political sites where the work of public
pedagogy takes place. In order to become a public discourse of any importance,
cultural studies theorists will have to focus their work on the immediacy of problems
that are more public and that are relevant to important social issues. Such issues
might include the destruction of the ecological biosphere, the current war against
youth, the hegemony of neo-liberal globalization, the widespread attack by corporate
culture on public schools, the ongoing attack on the welfare system, the increasing
rates of incarceration of people of color, the increasing gap between the rich and the
poor, the increasing spread of war globally, or the dangerous growth of the
prison-industrial complex. Moreover, cultural studies theorists need to write for a
variety of public audiences, rather than for simply a narrow group of specialized
intellectuals. Such writing needs to become public by crossing over into sites and
avenues of expression that speak to more general audiences in a language that is clear
but not theoretically simplistic. Intellectuals must combine their scholarship with
commitment in a discourse that is not dull or obtuse but expands the reach of their
audience. This suggests using opportunities offered by a host of public means of
expression including the lecture circuit, radio, Internet, interview, alternative
magazines, and the church pulpit, to name only a few.

Third, cultural studies theorists need to be more specific about what it would
mean to be both self-critical and attentive to learning how to work collectively
through a vast array of networks across a number of public spheres. This might
mean sharing resources with cultural workers both within and outside of the
university such as the various groups working for global justice or those activists
battling against the ongoing destruction of state provisions both within and outside
of the United States. This suggests that cultural studies become more active in
addressing the ethical and political challenges of globalization. As capital, finance,
trade, and culture become extraterritorial and increasingly removed from traditional
political constraints, it becomes all the more pressing to put global networks and
political organizations into play to contend with the reach and power of neo-liberal
globalization. Engaging in intellectual practices that offer the possibility of alliances
and new forms of solidarity among cultural workers such as artists, writers,
journalists, academics, and others who engage in forms of public pedagogy grounded
in a democratic project represents a small, but important, step in addressing the
massive and unprecedented reach of global capitalism.

Critical educators also need to register and make visible their own subjective
involvement in what they teach, how they shape classroom social relations, and how
they defend their positions within institutions that often legitimate educational
processes based on ideological privileges and political exclusions. Making one’s
authority and classroom work the subject of critical analysis with students is important, but such a task must be taken up in terms that move beyond the rhetoric of method, psychology, or private interests. Pedagogy in this instance can be addressed as a moral and political discourse in which students are able to connect learning to social change, scholarship to commitment, and classroom knowledge to public life. Such a pedagogical task suggests that educators and cultural theorists define intellectual practice as part of “an intricate web of morality, rigor and responsibility” that enables them to speak with conviction, enter the public sphere in order to address important social problems, and demonstrate alternative models for what it means to bridge the gap between higher education and the broader society. One useful approach is for educators to think through the distinction between a politicizing pedagogy, which insists wrongly that students think as we do, and a political pedagogy, which teaches students by example the importance of taking a stand (without standing still) while rigorously engaging the full range of ideas about an issue. Political pedagogy connects understanding with the issue of social responsibility and what it would mean to educate students not only to engage the world critically but also to be responsible enough to fight for those political and economic conditions that make its democratic possibilities viable. Such a pedagogy affirms the experience of the social and the obligations it evokes regarding questions of responsibility and social transformation by opening up for students important questions about power, knowledge, and what it might mean for them to critically engage the conditions under which life is presented to them and simultaneously work to overcome those social relations of oppression that make living unbearable for those who are poor, hungry, unemployed, deprived of adequate social services, and viewed under the aegis of neo-liberalism as largely disposable. What is important about this type of critical pedagogy is the issue of responsibility as both a normative issue and a strategic act. Responsibility highlights not only the performative nature of pedagogy by raising questions about the relationship that teachers have to students but also the relationship that students have to themselves and others. Central here is the importance for cultural studies educators to encourage students to reflect on what it would mean for them to connect knowledge and criticism to becoming an actor, buttressed by a profound desire to overcome injustice and a spirited commitment to social agency. Political education teaches students to take risks, challenge those with power, and encourage them to be reflexive about how power is used in the classroom. Political education proposes that the role of the public intellectual is not to consolidate authority but to question and interrogate it, and that teachers and students should temper any reference for authority with a sense of critical awareness and an acute willingness to hold it accountable for its consequences. Moreover, political education foregrounds education not within the imperatives of specialization and professionalization, but within a project designed to expand the possibilities of democracy by linking education to modes of political agency that promote critical citizenship and engage the ethical imperative to alleviate human suffering. However, politicizing education silences in the name of orthodoxy and imposes itself on students while undermining dialogue, deliberation, and critical
engagement. Politicizing education is often grounded in a combination of self-righteousness and ideological purity that silences students as it imposes “correct” positions. Authority in this perspective rarely opens itself to self-criticism or, for that matter, to any criticism, especially from students. Politicizing education cannot decipher the distinction between critical teaching and pedagogical terrorism because its advocates have no sense of the difference between encouraging human agency and social responsibility and molding students according to the imperatives of an unquestioned ideological position. Politicizing education is more religious than secular and more about training than educating; it harbors a great dislike for complicating issues, promoting critical dialogue, and generating a culture of questioning.

Finally, if cultural studies theorists are truly concerned about how culture operates as a crucial site of power in the modern world, they will have to take more seriously how pedagogy functions on local and global levels to secure and challenge the ways in which power is deployed, affirmed, and resisted within and outside traditional discourses and cultural spheres. In this instance, pedagogy becomes an important theoretical tool for understanding the institutional conditions that place constraints on the production of knowledge, learning, and academic labor itself. Pedagogy also provides a discourse for engaging and challenging the production of social hierarchies, identities, and ideologies as they traverse local and national borders. In addition, pedagogy as a form of production and critique offers a discourse of possibility, a way of providing students with the opportunity to link meaning to commitment and understanding to social transformation—and to do so in the interest of the greatest possible justice. Unlike traditional vanguardists or elitist notions of the intellectual, cultural studies should embrace the notion of rooting the vocation of intellectuals in pedagogical and political work tempered by humility, a moral focus on suffering, and the need to produce alternative visions and policies that go beyond a language of sheer critique. I now want to shift the frame slightly to focus on the implications of the concerns addressed thus far and how they might be connected to developing an academic agenda for teachers as public intellectuals in higher education, particularly at a time when neo-liberal agendas increasingly guide social policy.

The Responsibility of Intellectuals and the Politics of Education

In opposition to the privatization, commodification, and commercialization of everything educational, educators need to define higher education as a resource vital to the democratic and civic life of the nation. At the heart of such a task is the challenge for academics, cultural workers, and labor organizers to join together in opposition to the transformation of higher education into commercial spheres, to resist what Bill Readings has called a consumer-oriented corporation more concerned about accounting than accountability. As Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, schools are one of the few public spaces left where students can learn the “skills for citizen participation and effective political action. And where there is no [such]
institution, there is no ‘citizenship’ either.”

Public and higher education may be one of the few sites available in which students can learn about the limits of commercial values, address what it means to learn the skills of social citizenship, and learn how to deepen and expand the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life. Defending education at all levels of learning as a vital public sphere and public good rather than merely a private good is necessary to develop and nourish the proper balance between democratic public spheres and commercial power, between identities founded on democratic principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive, self-interested individualism that celebrate selfishness, profit making, and greed. This view suggests that public and higher education be defended through intellectual work that self-consciously recalls the tension between the democratic imperatives and possibilities of public institutions and their everyday realization within a society dominated by market principles. If the public and higher education are to remain sites of critical thinking, collective work, and social struggle, public intellectuals need to expand their meaning and purpose. As I have stressed repeatedly, academics, teachers, students, parents, community activists, and other socially concerned groups must provide the first line of defense in protecting public and higher education as a resource vital to the moral life of the nation, and open to people and communities whose resources, knowledge, and skills have often been viewed as marginal. Such a project suggests that educators and cultural studies theorists develop a more inclusive vocabulary for connecting politics to the tasks of civic courage and leadership. In part, this means providing students with the language, knowledge, and social relations to engage in the “art of translating individual problems into public issues, and common interests into individual rights and duties.”

Leadership demands a politics and pedagogy that refuses to separate individual problems and experience from public issues and social considerations. Within such a perspective, leadership displaces cynicism with hope, challenges the neo-liberal notion that there are no alternative visions of a better society, and develops a pedagogy of commitment that puts into place modes of literacy in which competency and interpretation provide the basis for actually intervening in the world. Leadership invokes the demand to make the pedagogical more political by linking critical thought to collective action, human agency to social responsibility, and knowledge and power to a profound impatience with a status quo founded upon deep inequalities and injustices.

One of the crucial challenges faced by educators and cultural studies advocates is rejecting the neo-liberal collapse of the public into the private, the rendering of all social problems as biographical in nature. The neo-liberal obsession with the private not only furthers a market-based politics which reduces all relationships to the exchange of money and the accumulation of capital, but also depoliticizes politics itself and reduces public activity to the realm of utterly privatized practices and utopias, underscored by the reduction of citizenship to the act of buying and purchasing goods. Within this discourse, all forms of political solidarity, social agency, and collective resistance disappear into the murky waters of a biopolitics in which the demands of privatized pleasures and ready-made individual choices are
organized on the basis of marketplace pursuits and desires that cancel out all modes of social responsibility, commitment, and action. The current challenge for intellectuals is to reclaim the language of the social, agency, solidarity, democracy, and public life as the basis for rethinking how to name, theorize, and strategize a new kind of politics, notions of political agency, and collective struggle.

This challenge suggests, in part, positing new forms of social citizenship and civic education that have a purchase on people’s everyday lives and struggles. Academics bear an enormous responsibility in opposing neo-liberalism—the most dangerous ideology of our time—by bringing democratic political culture back to life. Part of this effort demands creating new locations of struggle, vocabularies, and subject positions that allow people in a wide variety of public spheres to become more than they are now, to question what it is they have become within existing institutional and social formations, and “to give some thought to their experiences so that they can transform their relations of subordination and oppression.”31 One element of this struggle could take the form of resisting attacks on existing public spheres, such as the schools, while creating new spaces in clubs, neighborhoods, bookstores, trade unions, alternative media sites, and other places where dialogue and critical exchanges become possible. At the same time, challenging neo-liberalism means fighting against the ongoing reconfiguration of the state into the role of an enlarged police precinct designed to repress dissent, regulate immigrant populations, incarcerate youth who are considered disposable, and safeguard the interests of global investors. As governments globally give up their role of providing social safety nets, social provisions, and regulation of corporate greed, capital escapes beyond the reach of democratic control, leaving marginalized individuals and groups at the mercy of their own meager resources to survive. Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult to create alternative public spheres that enable people to become effective agents of change. Under neo-liberalism’s reign of terror, public issues collapse into privatized discourses, and a culture of personal confessions, greed, and celebrities emerges to set the stage for depoliticizing public life and turning citizenship and governance into a form of consumerism.

The growing attack on public and higher education in American society may say less about the reputed apathy of the populace than about the bankruptcy of old political languages and orthodoxies and the need for new vocabularies and visions for clarifying our intellectual, ethical and political projects, especially as they work to reabsorb questions of agency, ethics, and meaning back into politics and public life. In the absence of such a language and the social formations and public spheres that make democracy and justice operative, politics becomes narcissistic and caters to the mood of widespread pessimism and the cathartic allure of the spectacle. In addition, public service and government intervention is sneered upon as either bureaucratic or a constraint upon individual freedom. Any attempt to give new life to a substantive democratic politics must address the issue of how people learn to be political agents as well as what kind of educational work is necessary within what kind of public spaces to enable people to use their full intellectual resources to provide a profound critique of existing institutions and to undertake a struggle to make the operation of
freedom and autonomy possible for as many people as possible in a wide variety of spheres. As critical educators, we are required to understand more fully why the tools we used in the past feel awkward in the present, often failing to respond to problems now facing the United States and other parts of the globe. More specifically, educators face the challenge posed by the failure of existing critical discourses to bridge the gap between how society represents itself and how and why individuals fail to understand and critically engage such representations in order to intervene in the oppressive social relationships they often legitimate.

Against neo-liberalism, educators, cultural studies theorists, students, and activists face the task of providing a language of resistance and possibility, a language that embraces a militant utopianism while constantly being attentive to those forces that seek to turn such hope into a new slogan or punish and dismiss those who dare to look beyond the horizon of the given. Hope is the affective and intellectual precondition for individual and social struggle, the mark of courage on the part of intellectuals in and out of the academy who use the resources of theory to address pressing social problems. But hope is also a referent for civic courage which translates as a political practice and begins when one’s life can no longer be taken for granted, making concrete the possibility for transforming politics into an ethical space and a public act that confronts the flow of everyday experience and the weight of social suffering with the force of individual and collective resistance and the unending project of democratic social transformation.

There is much talk among social theorists about the death of politics and the inability of human beings to imagine a more equitable and just world in order to make it better. I would hope that educators, of all groups, would be the most vocal and militant in challenging this assumption by making clear that the heart of any form of inclusive democracy is the assumption that learning should be used to expand the public good, create a culture of questioning, and promote democratic social change. Individual and social agency becomes meaningful as part of the willingness to think in oppositional, if not utopian, terms “in order to help us find our way to a more human future.” Under such circumstances, knowledge can be used for amplifying human freedom and promoting social justice, and not for simply creating profits. The diverse but connected fields of cultural studies and critical pedagogy offer some insights for addressing these issues, and we would do well to learn as much as possible from them in order to expand the meaning of the political and revitalize the pedagogical possibilities of cultural politics and democratic struggles. The late Pierre Bourdieu has argued that intellectuals need to create new ways for doing politics by investing in political struggles through a permanent critique of the abuses of authority and power, especially under the reign of neo-liberalism. Bourdieu wanted scholars to use their skills and knowledge to break out of the microcosm of academia, combine scholarship with commitment, and “enter into sustained and vigorous exchange with the outside world (especially with unions, grassroots organizations, and issue-oriented activist groups) instead of being content with waging the ‘political’ battles, at once intimate and ultimately, and always a bit unreal, of the scholastic universe.”
At a time when our civil liberties are being destroyed and public institutions and goods all over the globe are under assault by the forces of a rapacious global capitalism, there is a sense of concrete urgency that demands not only the most militant forms of political opposition on the part of academics, but new modes of resistance and collective struggle buttressed by rigorous intellectual work, social responsibility, and political courage. The time has come for intellectuals to distinguish caution from cowardice and recognize the ever-fashionable display of rhetorical cleverness as a form of “disguised decadence.” As Derrida reminds us, democracy “demands the most concrete urgency... because as a concept it makes visible the promise of democracy, that which is to come.” We have seen glimpses of such a promise among those brave students and workers who have demonstrated in Seattle, Genoa, Prague, New York, and Toronto. As public intellectuals, academics can learn from such struggles by turning the university and public schools into vibrant critical sites of learning and unconditional sites of pedagogical and political resistance. The power of the existing dominant order resides not only in the economic or material relations of power, but also in the realm of ideas and culture. This is why intellectuals must take sides, speak out, and engage in the hard work of debunking corporate culture’s assault on teaching and learning, orient their teaching for social change, connect learning to public life, link knowledge to the operations of power, and allow issues of human rights and crimes against humanity in their diverse forms to occupy a space of critical and open discussion in the classroom. It also means stepping out of the classroom and working with others to create public spaces where it becomes possible not only to “shift the way people think about the moment,” but potentially to energize them to do something differently in that moment,” to link one’s critical imagination with the possibility of activism in the public sphere. This is, of course a small step, but if we do not want to repeat the present as the future or, even worse, become complicit in the dominant exercise of power, it is time for educators to mobilize collectively their energies by breaking down the illusion of unanimity that dominant power propagates while working diligently, tirelessly, and collectively to reclaim the promises of a truly global, democratic future.

Notes


[12] Williams, Marxism and Literature, Ibid.


[23] Arif Dirlik, “Literature/Identity: Transnationalism, Narrative, and Representation,” Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies 24, no. 3 (July–September 2002): 218. One example of such work can be found in Marjorie Garber, Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses


