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Critical Humanism and Problems of Change

Arturo Rodriguez
Boise State University

Kevin R. Magill
Baylor University

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Abstract

Guest editors' introduction to special section, Investigating Education, Class Antagonisms and Solidarity: Toward Critical Humanist Democratic Societies. This collection details how critical educators contend with alienating conditions as students and teachers investigate social issues, direct knowledge, their exchanges, and personal agency toward democratic participation to secure their everyday needs, human freedom, and dignity.



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Investigating Education, Class Antagonisms and Solidarity: Toward Critical Humanist Democratic Societies

Class Struggle

The origins of domination in societies are rooted in the control of social values and systems, those directed toward the development of the commons. We have mentioned elsewhere that education has always been political, a negotiation between those who seek to control societies and persons deciding how to direct their own labor. Human beings work to satisfy their everyday needs, in the immediate their subsistence, and for the long term to derive happiness or satisfaction, value from their interactions with the world and with others. Class struggle, then, is a byproduct of those in pursuit of hegemony, the power to ensure particular outcomes from the education students receive, and the antagonisms present in the everyday collisions of culture. As politicians collude with one another to dominate the working classes, we the working classes make sense of our lives as we reject or accept prescriptions of conduct, those with which we are inoculated in our education, and those we negotiate in our everyday interactions.

Mutual struggle unfolds from the recognition, transformation, and resolution of the competing claims of individual and social values, as well as our willingness to stand for what we believe in. Our position must be as much for the child down the street as it is for our own children or for ourselves. Our stance toward others demonstrates our belief in justice and democracy. The purpose of education is, therefore, in part, to foster recognition of humanness with one another and to ensure that education is not simply a place of control but one that promotes a shared ethos of mutual solidarity toward continual transformation toward the social good. In this way, education is a moral activity that involves deeply considering analytical frameworks and methods, engagement in social analysis, ways we participate in praxiological resistance, and the challenges we levy against the dominance of a cultural memory constructed by power. Education, then, requires consistent transformations of our perspectives on labor norms, titles, ranks, and community. How we understand these conditions impacts all our lives and reveals what we believe about others, ourselves, and society. Our willingness to engage with them shapes how we perceive our roles, negotiate our identity, and address systemic inequalities. We argue that democratic participation and social justice are not activities limited to formal political spheres. Instead, they are reflections of educational practice and the daily interactions that shape how we live, and how we perceive collective approaches to being part of the world. Education a dynamic space where we struggle over meaning and power and are deeply intertwined with our pursuits of human freedom and personal value.

As Guest Editors for *Critical Education*, we are excited to publish this special issue titled *Investigating Education, Class Antagonisms and Solidarity: Toward Critical Humanist Democratic Societies*. This collection details how critical educators contend with alienating conditions as students and teachers investigate social issues, direct knowledge, their exchanges, and personal agency toward democratic participation to secure their everyday needs, human freedom, and dignity (Freire, 2018; hooks, 2014; West, 2004).

In “The emergence of narrative and the discovery of Humanism: research lessons from the Italian Renaissance,” Saville Kushner explores the roots of European Humanism through Renaissance Florentine art. He illuminates the moral and methodological foundations for contemporary narrative inquiry, especially in education and social research. Kushner argues that

Humanist personal knowledge, autonomy, and critical engagement have an important place in challenging traditional and authoritative curricula. He also asks readers to adopt a curriculum and research approach grounded in narrative methods. He provides examples of Renaissance paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, Masaccio, and others that include early stylized religious images and other complex/layered works, to trace how narrative evolved to portray human elements like psychology, social dynamics, and moral agency. Kushner suggests that inviting forms of active interpretation can transform how narrative forms of social analysis occur. He suggests such artistic developments are connected to Ricoeur's typology of narrative grammar. Here, Kushner emphasizes shifts from description to intentional interpretation and layering. In summary, Kushner advocates for a critical Humanist curriculum (e.g., Magill & Rodriguez, 2014) and inquiry for democratizing knowledge, embracing complexity, and utilizing humanism for fostering moral progress as disciplined idealism. These, he claims, must be considered while recognizing the contemporary challenges posed by technocratic and algorithmic educational systems. Kushner recommends that scholars and educators develop solidarity with artists and storytellers outside their respective fields. He further suggests this will allow them to advance narrative methods. Furthermore, this will require acknowledging the ongoing challenges in gaining wider influence for such work.

In "[The Point is to Transform the Hood](#)," Joaquín M. S. Noguera explores the formation and early years of the Roses in Concrete Community School (RiC) in East Oakland – published in *Critical Education* 16(2). The charter school was created with the goal of honoring the humanity and cultural identity of Black and Latinx children while attending to them as holistic humans within forms of systemic oppression. This approach demonstrates what is possible by embodying a living praxis where organic intellectuals live their philosophies. Inspired by the legacy of the Black Panther Party with critical humanist pedagogy (Magill & Rodriguez, 2015), the RiC demonstrates a community-responsive institution prioritizing social justice, a healing-centered education, and culturally sustaining curricula (Paris, 2012). The program importantly includes components of Ethnic Studies and dual language immersion approaches. Noguera suggests the founders of the program envision students as "Warrior-Scholars," in the philosophical tradition of the Greeks, who are capable of philosophical success that will allow them to succeed academically within challenging and unjust systems, as philosopher-leaders for social change. He notes that the school was, to a degree, successful in fostering pride and critical awareness. However, it faced challenges. Teacher burnout and leadership changes impacted the success of the program, which underscores the importance of continual resources and support for educational communities and their members. Noguera articulates how RiC exemplifies an exemplary effort to transform schooling through a community-driven project. This work shows how schools can provide spaces for countering dehumanization and places where advocates can work with students toward collective liberation. Noguera notes that, for those interested in this work, educational transformation is a gradual process. It requires pedagogical and visionary flexibility (Magill et al., 2024) to address obstacles that could hinder community and scholastic efforts. He argues that future efforts include a critical humanist approach to educators, staff, and students, which he believes is required to sustain education for community revitalization.

Joanna Batt, Anthony L. Brown, and Michael Joseph study how two critical moments in recent U.S. history have reshaped American national identity. They do this by challenging earlier, idealized notions of the nation as a racially, religiously, and culturally equitable nation. The authors argue that September 11, 2001 (9/11) and the beginning of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement reveal a dual American identity. They draw on W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double

consciousness and the idea of cultural memory to demonstrate how identities, one patriotic and exceptionalist, the other cynical and influenced by systemic inequities, shape public memory. They note how newspapers like *The New York Times* have played a role in shaping public discourse and memory, using narratives of these events to fundamentally influence how Americans understand themselves and their country. The paper highlights the contradiction and bifurcation of these narratives and identities, for example, how 9/11 galvanized unity while simultaneously intensifying Islamophobia. Similarly, they highlight how BLM exposed ongoing racial injustices while also narrativizing the promise of equality. The piece suggests implications for social studies education, namely, critical engagement with media narratives for helping students grasp both the complex and evolving nature of American identity and that there is often a gulf between US national ideals and its material realities. The authors of this article propose that educators can build classroom environments where students critically analyze historical events, focusing on the pluralistic nature of American identity. They argue that examining events such as 9/11 and Black Lives Matter critically enables teachers to explore larger themes about America, particularly the links between what it appears to be as part of cultural memory and its relation to social justice. The authors argue that inquiries with primary and secondary source documents have the potential to provide a foundation for having discussions about the evolving, contested, and unique gaps between blindly patriotic narratives and the lived realities of many communities. Such work has the potential to develop critical consciousness of the impact of these forms of consciousness on constructs like race and equity. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates the importance and possibility of using critical historical moments as pedagogical tools toward more transformative education.

In Sam Dibella's "Meet-and-Defer: The Rhetorical Unmaking of Grad Academic Labor at the University of Maryland" is a labor history study in which he analyzes the rhetoric and institutional strategies used by University System of Maryland (USM) administrators and the "meet-and-confer" process, to undermine the efforts of graduate assistants' to unionize over the past 25 years. The work reveals how the institution used different frames of reference to understand students, for example, calling graduate assistants "students receiving education" rather than employees. Such classifications denied the students worker status and ultimately collective bargaining rights. He utilizes the 2009 USM workgroup report, which was heavily influenced by administrators, to illustrate how graduate concerns were dismissed. Administrators promoted the idea of meet-and-confer to create a nonbinding alternative to unionization. The impact of this was the effective dispersing of organizing energy into advisory bodies without any real power, suggesting shared governance, while rendering it impossible. Institutional rhetorical and bureaucratic maneuvering, union conflicts, political challenges, and an inability to organize led to repeated legislative failures for the graduate students. Dibella's study situates these dynamics within the broader neoliberal trends in the U.S. and in higher education. The result has been increased academic labor precarity and contested definitions of academic labor. The author concludes that expanding shared governance to genuinely include graduate workers and adjuncts is required for meaningful change. Rather, the conditions were a structural part of a largely symbolic system for maintaining institutional control and purposefully perpetuating ignorance about labor rights. DiBella suggests several steps to address the meet-and-confer system at the University System of Maryland (USM). He discusses how the USM report led to moves toward implementing the meet-and-confer process as an alternative to collective bargaining for graduate assistants and adjunct faculty. This included soliciting input from graduate students and faculty in 2012, formalizing policies through the Board of Regents in 2012 and 2013, and promoting meet-and-confer to address graduate assistant concerns. DiBella reports that recent developments

include legislative testimony in support of meet-and-confer. He shows how there is consideration for concessions such as paid parental leave. However, to date, there has been no substantive expansion of collective bargaining rights. Nor have there been significant structural changes to shared governance.

Making Change

The future is not certain; we can only enact the present albeit and oftentimes dictated by the past. For those of us who directly and indirectly influence or affect education, in every act, we ensure political outcomes. Our labor can be one of solidarity with each other and with our students as we contend with the politically defined lines of control we encounter in education and in the commons. Our imagining may be of enacting our freedom, an act of creativity as we design our lives and our mutual future, imaging our lives beyond subsistence toward our own and our fellow person's mutual happiness.

Educational transformation and critical humanism are commitments to solidarity and collective action (Magill & Rodriguez, 2021). However, change is neither instant nor guaranteed, nor does the complex landscape of power and resistance in education and society lend itself to simple answers. Imagining and praxis require ongoing reflexivity about our role within it, a commitment to collaboration, and a willingness to accept the uncertainty that comes from rejecting limited approaches to reality and working toward a new world. As we strive to create new learning environments that respect the humanity of participants, we require experiences that embody the social ethos we aim to reflect. By centering student labor in shared purpose and mutual care, we practice with students living the democratic society we envision, where freedom, personal and social value, and justice are not just symbols or ideals, but the educational experiences, core foundations, and intentions of our society.

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Authors

Arturo Rodriguez is Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture at Boise State University whose teaching and research interests include critical theory/pedagogy, critical humanism, multiculturalism, and social justice issues in education.

Dr. Kevin R. Magill is an associate professor of curriculum and teaching and director of graduate programs for the Department of Curriculum & Instruction in the Baylor University School of Education. In his research, Dr. Magill examines the social relations of production in teaching and learning and its impact on the ideology and ontology of social studies/civics teachers and teacher education candidates. He is interested in how teachers live/work in intellectual solidarity with students and local communities, how they employ critical humanism, and how/why education results in personal and social transformation.

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