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ARTICULATING REFORM AND THE HEGEMONY GAME

The basic tool for manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words. —Philip K. Dick

Last summer I was one of five doctoral students in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who had nothing better to do than spend the hot and humid dog days of summer reading social theory. Twice a week our group would meet inside the well-air conditioned, newly refurbished, and entirely too plush, Johnston Center for Undergraduate Excellence. We would endeavor to make sense of texts that we thought represented the dominant paradigms in social theory today. Our enthusiasm for this pursuit stemmed from a couple of frustrations with our existence as educators and PhD students trying to make that proverbial difference. First, we were dissatisfied with what we perceived to be a general lack of depth and recklessness with which social theory seemed to be wielded in most educational circles. Secondly, we were frustrated with the apparent lack of influence K-16 educators seemed to have in shaping policy, institutional curriculum, and most importantly, “reform” in their own environments. We thought that by theorizing we might in some way be able to come up with meaningful critique and a bias for action to address these concerns and “take the power back.” Here’s what I walked away with.

Reform as a Concept

2.1 Within the field of education there has been much discussion focused on the definition and nature of progress. This discussion is always tied to articulation of objectives and goals that should be achieved when endeavoring to educate young people for success in society. Of course, all of these concepts are debated and interpreted eternally with little consensus reached on exact objectives and roles. Out of this discussion does come action, albeit action met with resistance, compliance, or ambivalence; but action does come. For the purpose of this paper and accompanying analysis, I will refer to this action as reform. The aim of this inquiry is to theorize how contemporary notions of reform appear to be driven by discourses emanating from the corporate-media-state with the result being a public endorsement of overt (but misleading) tenets stated in “fast-capitalist” texts.

2.2 The notion of reform has been around in society since 1663. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a definition of reform as “ The amendment, or altering for the better, of some faulty state of things, esp. of a corrupt or oppressive political institution or practice; the removal of some abuse or wrong” (Reform). With this definition and with the implications that it connotes the tendency is to associate reform with movement in an improved or better direction, maybe even synonymous with progress. Regardless, it seems that the basic meaning of reform should be a change for the better, specifically a change more suited for the achievement of goals outlined by decision makers in a particular field of play. For this paper the field of play is education, but it is important to re-cognize education as something that happens outside the physical boundaries of school buildings as well as inside. I stress this because there appears to be a resistance by many academics to acknowledge this in any meaningful way, in any way really other than a boutique affinity for the occasional foray into cultural studies or by infusing innocuous pop culture touchstones into the curriculum. While this insistence on where the educational play space is situated manifests itself, forces outside education (i.e., private sector interests) exert influence in any realm where entry is possible (such as vocational or technology training/certification). In our current educational environment this point of influence usually appears just about anywhere economic power can gain access. Later I will outline a model of praxis for changing this increasingly unbalanced relationship, but now back to the notion of reform.

2.3 The peril tied to assuming a universal meaning for the concept of reform is that the word (or any word really) is context and practice specific. The word has multiple identities and the basis for differentiating between them is not always clear. The very identity of reform hinges on analysis of factors surrounding the application of the term. Looking back at the twentieth century and various movements in education, all of these movements with the moniker of reform incorporated into their mandate, one notices different conditions that precipitated these reform movements. Acknowledging the reality that these paradigmatic shifts were over determined, and not simplistically tied to one factor, there seems to be a common factor propelling change although it did vary depending on movement. Some reform movements were fueled by changes in social and philosophical sentiment (i.e., early twentieth century), while others were pushed forward by demographic shifts (1950s). The Civil Rights Movement, driven by a confluence of factors, fostered an emphatic legal context for reform. In the 1960s, 1980s, and 2000s society witnessed the moral panic that the Right created by stating that America had been left behind due to an ill-focused and less than rigorous curriculum; “reform” has been invoked here as well.

Reform and Fast-capitalist Texts

3.1 Specifically this type of “reform” is epitomized and evidenced by the proliferation of fast-capitalist texts which are a “mix of history and description, prophecy, warning, proscriptions and recommendations, parables (stories of success and failure), and large doses of utopianism” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, p.25). Examples include books such as *Reengineering the Corporation* by Michael Hammer and James Champy, *X-Engineering the Corporation* also by Hammer and Champy, and *The Road Ahead* by Bill Gates. (In fact, I would consider the “No Child Left Behind” initiative more of a fast-capitalist text than legislation informed by actual needs and best practices in education.)

3.2 There are many more but examples can serve as touchstones for anyone trying to get an idea of what texts seem to speak to the American psyche when talking about progress and how to achieve it. In big ways these texts have impacted how people think about relationships in business, education, and government by directly lauding and advocating awareness “of the forces of competition in the new global capitalism and of the need for ‘quality’” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, p.144).

3.3 The reference to being left behind was at its core a reference to economic strength (or weakness) and nothing more. The right was effective in establishing a link between economic productivity and the focus of education. The logic was, and is, that as a nation we must tighten up in school as we might tighten up in business. Supposedly, when American business was down and out in the early 1980s and early 1990s,

business came back strong only because of mandates for accountability and rigor in prescribed areas and zero tolerance for anything not aimed at achieving the objectives (i.e., profit) of management. The rhetorical moves made by business leaders and management gurus (i.e., Management By Objectives, Total Quality Management) insinuated autonomy and creative “outside the box” thinking in an effort to gain a competitive edge, but the real mandate was clear: “Do as you are told. Achieve my objectives or be left behind.” The packaging (i.e., flexible production, worker as decision maker, radical change, processes not tasks, technology’s empowering potential) alluded to autonomy and empowerment, but the reality was that this new way of being for workers and soon-to-be workers in this new capitalism was just “...an acceleration and heightening of the effects of the old capitalism” (p. 145). With American business having supposedly weathered the storm and emerged stronger than ever the logic of business leaders ultimately became the logic of policy makers eager to gain support from these business sages and this eagerness ultimately has brought us to the current conclusion that since business had buckled down and done these things, it was now time for school to do the same.

3.4 All of these measures of reform were driven by the guise or belief that said measures would transport education to a better and more appropriate place. Once this cycle of reform movements started it becomes clear, maybe intuitive, that since each reform was in effect responding to conditions and results created by a previous reform that a difference in conceptualization and effect exists. Some reform movements were meant to create better societies and communities with opportunity for all and others were geared toward closing a perceived gap between nations. Some movements stressed the humanities and social sciences. In the 1960s and with most recent reforms there has been an articulation and insistence on mastery of a core body of knowledge that gives credence to quantitative and mathematical/scientific/technological areas of expertise. What are the distinguishing marks here, if any? How can we separate the types of reform?

3.5 To accurately define what I would consider (and advocate as) desired universal marks of reform one should probably look to the goal of education situated in a specific broader context. In fact, this broader context determines the goal of education and consequently of reform in any setting. If one takes democracy to mean certain things, just as communism or socialism means distinct things, then the goals for and of the citizenry are context specific. A mark of democratic education is that it creates in its future citizenry a penchant and sense of responsibility for openness, informed public scrutiny, and equal participation at all levels (Scheffler, 1997, pp.436-437). Subsequently, a mark of reform aimed at achieving this goal is that expected outcomes will create this sort of citizenry. If one can come to accept Scheffler’s concept of education in a democracy then one could accept a notion of reform predicated on the expectation of certain outcomes. By this logic, reforms like the ones seen in the past decades ushered in by the American Right do not really seem to create these outcomes. In fact, these reforms have equated pursuit of economic gain, individual success, and privatization with the definition of democratic practice. It seems that somewhere along the way educational reform for democracy has been transformed into reform for capitalism. The outcome creates a relation of citizen as consumer which should, in theory, be distinctly different. When writing about the current project of the Right (and even the neoliberal Left) Michael Apple (2001) states,

Thus democracy is turned into consumption practices. In these plans, the ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser. Rather than democracy being a political concept, it is transformed into a wholly economic concept. The message of such policies is what might best be called “arithmetical particularism,” in which the unattached individual-as-consumer is deraced, declassed, and degendered. (p. 39)

This has momentous implications for progressive education in that it changes the goal from educating for social justice to educating for stable and efficient production and constant consumption.

3.6 The reason it becomes so difficult to grasp this gap or difference is because in an effort to continue benefiting from historical hegemonic structures, the Right, working primarily through the apparatus of the media and government via corporate economic influence, has made the rhetorical move of issuing and propagating certain social and futuristic vision discourses (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, p. 32). These discourses work to unite and socialize individuals into a collective or “community of practice” where the unifying espoused goals and values are really in no way tied to actual practices logically connected to points established in said vision discourse. The public is saturated at home, work, and school by texts proclaiming these visions; there is no opportunity to step outside these related social practices or Discourses (capital “D” to differentiate it from ‘discourse’ which means ‘a stretch of spoken or written language’ or ‘language in use’). Consequently, it becomes difficult to construct any sort of oppositional consciousness, much less one that is bi-Discoursal (much less multi-Discoursal) and empowered with the potential to effect liberatory change by being aware of other (possibly more just) social possibilities and practices.

3.7 Part of the project in this creation of a New Work Order is the generation of new social identities, which revolve around distinct conceptualizations of language, learning, and literacy (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, pp. 3-6). This plays directly into reform movements in education that stress a culture of individualized performance and success. Additionally, the emphasis on certain achievement levels on end of year tests (i.e., “high stakes testing”) fundamentally shifts, even co-opts the purpose of education in our times. The rhetoric of high-stakes testing demands concentration on the individual and propagates a learning environment devoid of any notion of publicness or common good. It mirrors the logic of capitalism in that ultimately one must make a decision that benefits the individual over the group; any way of knowing or conceptualizing must also follow this logic. This way of knowing is familiar—we see it daily as we engage in the performative practices that are our lives in a capitalist society.

3.8 For contemporary educators concerned with this articulation of citizenship a sort of relational mapping might be in order. For instance, it might be fruitful to agree on a broad definition of a term like democracy (separate from capitalism) then establish a relation to educational practice that fosters democratic ideals and inclinations (the practice and ideals being the second and third points in the triangulation). One could even juxtapose this theoretical relationship with capitalism (broadly defined) and link it to educational practice that aims to achieve goals associated with terms like capitalism, competition, and individualism. The comparison makes it possible to schematize relations and state rather lucidly that one does not necessarily equate to the other, thereby yielding a usable and identifiable concept of reform practices likely of generating positive movement toward a stated end.

The Hegemony Game

4.1 The discussion up to this point is my impression of our summer reading group’s dialogue on reform movements and where it took us as far as conclusions about broad sentiment in policy making circles. As the group struggled through the hot summer days our reading was framed by this context of subordination as educators, subordination to a group that we thought had little compassion for truly democratic aims of education. While working through Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* we came across a passage that, in grand reductionist fashion, we came to refer to lightheartedly as advocacy for playing the hegemony game. Leading to construction of this coinage is the commentary from Spivak (1999),

When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony. Unless we want to be romantic purists or primitivists about ‘preserving subalternity’—a contradiction in terms—this is absolutely to be desired. (p. 310).

In many ways, the power to provide a dominant articulation of reform has been ceded to interests tied closely to the interests of the corporate-media-state. In broad strokes, the Left has become content to critique and claim non-participation in activities that encourage practices and reading counter to their desired ways of knowing; I am concerned here with either large-scale or strategic proactive and sustainable measures, not just reactionary periodic performances. By refusing to act and articulate, one is not outside of the hegemony; in actuality it is worse in that one is complicit to the dominant articulation in the hegemonic structure. The spirit of this call seems in line with Raymond Williams' (1985) claim that by creating a recognition or critical oppositional consciousness of hegemony,

it thus affects thinking about Revolution in that it stresses not only the transfer of political or economic power, but the overthrow of a specific hegemony: that is to say an integral form of class rule which exists not only in political or economic power, but the overthrow of a specific hegemony...This can be done, it is argued, by creating an alternative hegemony—a new predominant practice and consciousness" (p. 145).

Despite the overt rhetoric of competition and progress, fast-capitalist texts, by their very nature, discourage revolution and rearticulation not in line with the historical capitalist project. This makes the task much more formidable, but impossible to ignore, for any teacher vested in the project of democratic and liberatory education.

4.2 While progressive educators may not possess direct access to the tools of mass articulation owned by the corporate-media-state, the opportunity for decontextualization and “deterritorialization” does exist. Most educators are familiar with decontextualization as a pedagogical practice but ultimately deterritorialization is essential for the project at hand. Jameson (1998) forwards that deterritorialization decodes terms of previous capitalist coding systems and liberates these coding systems for new and more functional combinations. Deterritorialization is more permanent than decontextualization in that it does not just aim to present something outside of its original context, but that it is more absolute in reconfiguring it into a system more concerned with form than content. This system ultimately becomes a marketing pretext convenient for accelerated capitalism's need to constantly create new consumer identities, fresh untapped target markets, and uninterrupted consumption. Jameson thinks about this in an inquiry into the evolution of finance capital in an increasingly globalized world and his argument identifies the primary forces driving this deterritorialization to be the same globalizing forces that facilitate the abstraction of money, which seems to be more aptly represented as the owners of production versus the consumers. Looking back at our argument concerning the articulation and reading of reform, it is easy to see how the Right has deterritorialized previous codings of reform in order to cement new ones beneficial to their cause; this has impacted education as the influence of capital has shaped policy in education. Playing the hegemony game means that the Left must start to participate in deterritorialization as well.

Interstices

5.1 There are four particular conditions, or fronts, of engagement that I envision as examples of playing the hegemony game. The first three will probably be recognized as practices associated with some form of decontextualization, leaving the fourth as what I view to be the most radical and challenging option for progressive educators on the Left.

5.2 First, at the very least K-12 educators can use the classroom to decontextualize current meanings/readings of articulated terms and practices such as patriotism, knowledge, and power. For instance, in the high school classroom the move to decontextualization might be one of critical literacy curricular practices closely tied to the teaching for that ever-absurd beast, the high-stakes test. Working as a dialectic, the knowledge for achievement on the test is imparted but also critiqued at the same time;

consider Howard Zinn's work as an option for a text to aid in this instruction. This approach is familiar to educators aiming to "subvert," but we have also witnessed the call for this sort of pedagogy previously and have been privy to declarations of its failure as well. Oftentimes this approach gets caught up in the rearticulation machine of the public school bureaucracy ending up like the innocuous initiatives of mainstream multicultural education or cultural studies (I do not dispute that these are important trajectories, but it is difficult to do them effectively and remain employed by the state).

5.3 The second approach is probably the one most prevalent in schools of education operating around the notion that they are instruments built for the achievement of social justice. It is the practice of conducting teacher education with subversive intent and it is a worthwhile approach (and is the exact sort and nature of interaction that progressive educators must establish and propagate with fast-capitalist texts, which do most certainly include high-stakes testing, the standard course of study, end-of-year test, etc). When continuing to engage in this practice teachers should aim for a decontextualizing experience with the texts of fast-capitalism that strives to elucidate exactly what is wrong with the Right's articulation. Directly, it is the creation of a myopia that focuses only on the micro-setting and not "...the bigger picture—the larger frame—of global and nation-state politics, historical exploitation, access to information and education, the complex workings of technology, and the winner-take all nature of contemporary capitalism" (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, p. 145). This radical contextuality could also employ the relational mapping exercise discussed earlier and could be applied for any number of concepts or ideals, not just democracy. The hope here is that at the local level, the classroom, teachers can start down the "road to hegemony" with a re-presenting of the content mandated by our public schools. I like the notion of advocacy for this approach but it fails often (and is ineffective globally), especially when we see a majority of these newly minted subversives leave the teaching profession after only two or three years of service.

5.4 Point three of these four-points advocates the embracing of adult education. In fact, this might even be a call to revisit the initial focus, even alternative intellectual practice, of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. In lieu of focusing (and funding) so heavily on traditional undergraduates, a shifting should take place. The new focus, Stuart Hall might label it as "popular pedagogy," ought to be centered on non-traditional students in open college or university settings (definitely community and junior colleges too). This practice of decentering (or at not focusing so intently) on the stereotypical and often elite college student is beneficial for several reasons. First, and most appealing, is that practices of critical literacy tend to resonate more strongly with individuals who have had the benefit of life experiences, specifically experiences not associated with the elite class and privilege, ultimately creating a foil or point of negation from which critical awareness can emerge. While the previous two points can manifest in the teacher striving to "convert" members of an elite class to a different way of thinking and different attitude toward class privilege, this point is less likely to end in such a fashion as the majority of adult education students are not members of upper socioeconomic strata. If teachers aim to resuscitate the notion of liberatory education that starts with working with students who are aware of life's gritty materialities (Apple, 2001, p. 64), it seems to make sense for progressive educators to leave research one universities (hopefully with their grant money) and meaningfully advocate the mandate for adult education.

5.5 The fourth, and most controversial, aspect associated with playing the hegemony game endorses overt and deliberate participation in the capitalistic enterprise. This does not sit well with most on the Left because it seems akin to joining the dark side; in fact, I have wrestled with this point myself. But, potential critics should be reminded of two things here: (1) just because one criticizes the oppression, domination, exploitation, articulation, etc. does not mean that you are situated (or even able to be situated) outside of the hegemony (i.e., hegemony is a process and not a fixed placement). (2) Business has ventured into education and rearticulated concepts like reform so critical educators should be willing to journey into business to take the power back.

5.6 Ethics and logics are inscribed by corporate entities dominant in hegemonic relations, the same entities whose discourses and values manifest themselves in fast-capitalist texts are touchstones for reform movements in schools. Again, from an educator's vantage it seems more likely that Bill Gates' books influence school board members and legislators than John Dewey's works on education. Because the rhetoric and logic of the corporate model is so pervasive, schools offer no solace from the pressure to assimilate to and appropriate the ethos of the market mentality. The real and felt presence of corporate influence (i.e., funding) on schools, public and especially private, inscribes the mindset of individual achievement, consumption and exploitation on the captive audience of schoolchildren. Additionally, with the prevalence of teacher and student accountability, individual performance, and high-stakes testing, education is being used as a tool to ensure that regression to the mean is institutionalized, with the mean being a white middle to upper class capitalist male. It is difficult to find rhetorics or texts in the popular discourse that theorize the aim of education in any way other than that provided by the purveyors of fast-capitalist discourses.

5.7 If the worldviews created by these ethics and logics are to change, critical educators must become participants, if not leaders, in the institutions that propagate these ethics (it is debatable as to whether or not school is currently one of these institutions or merely an apparatus of corporate interests). As intellectuals, be it urban or "traditional" in Gramscian terms, contemporary educators are charged with the task of "articulating the relationship between the entrepreneur and the instrumental mass and to carry out the immediate execution of the production plan" (Gramsci, 2000, p.308). This relation provides opportunity for intervention. Educators could use the classroom to interrupt corporate hegemonic discourses (i.e., my first three points), but I believe educators should also be willing to consider direct participation in the private sector in an effort to more directly influence the creation and articulation of discourses emanating from this realm. This, of course, requires that one resist the inclination to privilege classroom education and its discourses over education in the workday world. So, if one is willing to trouble the notion of education, pushing it to mean many things happening inside and outside the halls of academia, it becomes possible to identify corporate entities working to rearticulate ethics and logics. I do not want to think of agency as reduced solely to practices of consumption, but I do think that for an example of how corporate values can work to shape social practices and perspectives we can start "education" and interaction at points of consumption.

5.8 For instance, the world's number one natural foods chain Whole Foods Market (i.e., Wellspring Grocery Store) has had near 20% five year sales growth rate and 52 week stock price high that is impressive in any market, but especially an extended bear market. The national discourse, for better or for worse, is obsessed with investment and wealth accumulation and preservation. When institutions are successful financially they garner attention of investors, big and small. Even if our agency has been reduced to what we consume, by shopping at Whole Foods Market and supporting their practices of sound environmental stewardship and employee equality we are engaging and experiencing different possibilities driven by different ethics and logics. The responsibility of the progressive in organizations of any kind is to direct the discourse to areas of importance, especially ones not predicated on the benefit of the minority at the expense and exploitation of the few. If this sort of economic participation is not palatable, one should entertain the possibility of supporting multiple economies on a community or local level (i.e., co-ops or alternative currencies). Regardless, it would be a mistake not to consider all possibilities (even ones with the "enemy" or "oppressor") when one is precariously positioned in undesirable hegemonic relations.

5.9 In conclusion, I encourage other educators concerned with issues of reform and teacher agency in reform to view my argument as a potential step toward serious considerations of practices in critical literacy and pedagogy; terms that without radical reconsideration are dead and useless. Having been inserted down that "long road to hegemony" there really is no choice but to focus intently on social practices and their connections across various social and cultural sites and institutions including sites outside of the classroom. New conceptualizations of pedagogies and texts must emerge independent of

present-day corporate agendas if we are to succeed in building viable communities and identities based on dialogic civility, and not predicated on exploitation and individual profit.

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