PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS AND THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

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In opposition to the corporatizing of everything educational, progressive 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 and oppose 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.[1] 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] institutions, there is no "citizenship" either."[2] Public and higher education may be one of the few sites left 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 higher education as a vital public sphere 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 higher education be defended through intellectual work that self-consciously recalls the tension between the democratic imperatives or possibilities of public institutions and their everyday realization within a society dominated by market principles.. If the university is to remain a site of critical thinking, collective work, and social struggle, public intellectuals need to expand its meaning and purpose. That is, they need to define higher education as a resource vital to the moral life of the nation, open to working people and communities whose resources, knowledge, and skills have often been viewed as

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1. Bill Readings, The University in Ruins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp, 11, 18.

2 Zygmunt Bauman, In Search of Politics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 170.

marginal. The goal here is to redefine such knowledge and skills to more broadly reconstruct a tradition that links 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.

There is more at stake here than recognizing the limits and social costs of a neoliberal philosophy that reduces all relationships to the exchange of goods and money, there is also the responsibility on the part of critical intellectuals and other activists to rethink the nature of the public. There is also the need to address new forms of social citizenship and civic education that have a purchase on people's everyday lives and struggles expressed through a wide range of institutions. I believe that academics and others bear an enormous responsibility in opposing neoliberalism by bringing democratic political culture back to life. Part of this challenge suggest 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."[3] In part this suggests resisting the attack on existing public spheres such as the schools while simultaneously creating new spaces in clubs, neighborhoods, bookstores, schools, and other places where dialogue and critical exchanges become possible.
As public intellectuals, educators need to revitalize the language of civic education as part of a broader discourse of political agency and critical citizenship in a global world, and to ground such a call in defense of militant utopian thinking as a form of educated hope. Utopianism in this context suggests that any viable notion of the political must address the primacy of pedagogy as part of a broader attempt to revitalize the conditions for individual and social agency while simultaneously addressing the most basic problems facing the prospects for social justice and global democracy.

Educators need a new vocabulary for linking hope, social citizenship, and education to the demands of substantive democracy. I am suggesting that educators need a new vocabulary for connecting how we read critically to how we engage in movements for social change. I also believe that simply invoking the relationship between theory and practice,

[3]. Lynn Worsham and Gary A. Olson, "Rethinking Political Community: Chantal Mouffe's Liberal Socialism," Journal of Composition Theory 19:2 (1999), p. 178.

critique and social action will not do. Any attempt to give new life to a substantive democratic politics must address both how people learn to be political agents and, what kind of educational work is necessary within what kind of public spaces to enable people to use their full intellectual resources to both provide a profound critique of existing institutions and struggle to create, as Stuart Hall puts it, "what would be a good life or a better kind of life for the majority of people."[4] 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, we face the challenge posed by the failure of existing critical discourses to bridge the gap between how the 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.

The growing attack on public and higher education in American society may say less about the reputed apathy of the populace than it might about the bankruptcy of the old political languages and the need for a new language and vision 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. Along these lines, Sheldon Wolin has recently argued that we need to rethink the notion of loss and how it impacts upon the possibility for opening up democratic public life. Wolin points to the need for progressives, theorists, and critical educators to resurrect and raise questions about "What survives of the defeated, the indigestible, the unassimilated, the 'cross-grained,' the 'not wholly obsolete'."[5] He argues that "something is missing" in an age of manufactured politics and pseudo-publics catering almost exclusively to desires and drives produced by the commercial hysteria of the market. What is missing is a language, movement, and vision that refuses to equate democracy with consumerism, market relations, and privatization. In the absence of such a language and the social formations and public spheres that make it 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.

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[4] Stuart Hall cited in Les Terry, "Travelling 'The Hard Road to Renewal," Arena Journal, N0. 8 (1997), p. 55.

[5] Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," in Jason Frank and John Tambornino, eds. Vocations of Political Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 4.

Against neoliberalism, critical educators need to resurrect 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 look beyond the horizon of the given. Hope, in this instance, is the precondition for individual and social struggle, the ongoing practice of critical education in a wide variety of sites, 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 and its ability to mediate the memory of loss and the experience of injustice as part of a broader attempt to open up new locations of struggle, contest the workings of oppressive power, and undermine various forms of domination. At its best, civic courage as a political practice begins when one's life can no longer be taken for granted. In doing so, it makes concrete the possibility for transforming hope and politics into an ethical space and 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.

I believe that academics must combine the mutually interdependent roles of critical educator and active citizen. They must find ways to connect the practice of classroom teaching to the operation of power in the larger society. I think Edward Said is on target when he argues that the public intellectual must function within institutions, in part, as an exile, as someone whose "place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations."[6] In this perspective, the educator as public intellectual becomes responsible for linking the diverse experiences that produce knowledge, identities, and social values in the university to the quality of moral and political life in the wider society; and he or she does so by entering into public conversations unafraid of controversy or of taking a critical stand. Intellectuals who feel an increased sense of responsibility for humanity may not be able to and do not necessarily have to explain the problems of the world in terms that purport to be absolute or all encompassing. On the contrary, public intellectuals need to approach social issues mindful of the multiple connections and issues that tie humanity together; but they need to do so as border intellectuals moving within and across diverse sites of learning as part of an engaged and practical politics that recognizes the importance of "asking questions, making distinctions, restoring to memory all those things that tend to

[6] Edward Said, Representations of the Intellectual (New York: Pantheon, 1994), p. 11.

be overlooked or walked past in the rush to collective judgment and action."[7] Within this discourse, the experiences that constitute the production of knowledge, identities, and social values in the university are inextricably linked to the quality of moral and political life of the wider society.

If educators are to function as public intellectuals they need to provide the opportunities for students to learn that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what students say and do counts in their struggle to unlearn privileges, productively reconstruct their relations with others, and transform, when necessary, the world around them. More specifically, such educators need to argue for forms of pedagogy that close the gap between the university and everyday life. Their curriculum needs to be organized around knowledge of communities, cultures, and traditions that give students a sense of history, identity and place.

At one level, this suggests pedagogical practices that affirm and critically enrich the meaning, language, and knowledge that students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives. Unfortunately, the political, ethical, and social significance of the role that popular culture plays as the primary pedagogical medium for young people remains largely unexamined. Educators need to challenge the assumption that popular cultural texts cannot be as profoundly important as traditional sources of learning in teaching about important issues framed through, for example, the social lens of poverty, racial conflict, and gender discrimination. As I mentioned previously, this is not a matter of pitting popular culture against traditional curricula sources as it is a matter of using both in a mutually informative way.

Although it is central for university teachers to enlarge the curriculum to reflect the richness and diversity of the students they actually teach, they also need to decenter the curriculum. That is, as Stanley Aronowitz points out, students should be actively involved in governance, "including setting learning goals, selecting courses, and having their own, autonomous organizations, including a free press."[8] Not only does the distribution of power

[7] Edward Said, Representations of the intellectual (New York: Pantheon, 1994), p. 52-53.

[8] Stanley Aronowitz, "A Different Perspective on Educational Equality," The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies (forthcoming), p. 24.

among teachers, students, and administrators provide the conditions for students to become agents in their learning process, it also provides the basis for collective learning, civic action, and ethical responsibility. Student agency primarily emerges from a pedagogy of lived experience and struggle not from mere formalistic mastery of an academic subject.

At the risk of being too bold, I have suggested that educators need to become provocateurs; they need to take a stand while refusing to be involved in either a cynical relativism or doctrinaire politics. In part, I mean that central to intellectual life is the pedagogical and political imperative that academics engage in rigorous social criticism while becoming a stubborn force for challenging false prophets, deflating the claims of triumphalism, and critically engaging all those social relations that promote material and symbolic violence. At the same time, such intellectuals must be deeply critical of their own authority and how it structures classroom relations and cultural practices. In this way, the authority they legitimate in the classroom (as well as in other public spheres) would become both an object of self-critique and a critical referent for expressing a more "fundamental dispute with authority itself."[9]

Central to my argument is the need for educators to define themselves less as narrow specialists, classroom managers, or mouthpieces for corporate culture than as engaged public intellectuals willing to address those economic, political, and social problems that must be overcome if both young people and adults are going to take seriously a future that opens up rather than closes down the promises of a viable and substantive democracy. There is a lot of 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 of all groups, educators would be the most vocal and militant in challenging this assumption by making it clear that at the heart of any form of critical pedagogy is the assumption that learning should be used to expand the public good and promote democratic social change. Individual and social agency becomes meaningful as part of the willingness to imagine otherwise in order to act otherwise. And knowledge can be used for amplifying human freedom and promoting social justice, and not for simply creating profits. I realize this sounds a bit utopian, but we have few choices if we are going to fight for a future that

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[9] R. Radhakrishnan. "Canonicity and Theory: Toward a Poststructuralist Pedagogy." in Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, eds. Theory/Pedagogy/Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 112-135.

does not endlessly repeat the present, a future that enables teachers, students, and others to work diligently and tirelessly in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical for all members of society.