

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM: AN INTRODUCTION

THE DISCOURSES OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Reform has been a continuing feature of the history of education in the United States. Even a casual analysis of education in this century reveals numerous shifts in the focus of reform including: scientific management, progressive education, "life-adjustment" curriculum, teaching the structure of the disciplines, critical thinking, values education, career education, accountability, the "back-to-basics" movement, and, most recently, education for "excellence." The constant and often conflicting shifts in the focus of educational reform appear to have left the public confused, angry, and somewhat disillusioned (Goodlad 1984). Nevertheless, and despite the perceived failures of public education, there remains a persistent faith in education's potential to improve society and help solve social problems (Adler 1982; Bloom 1987; Giroux 1988c; Hirsch 1987; Lasch 1979; Pinar 1988; Raywid, Tesconi, and Warren 1984).

In the 1980s education again became the focus of an intense national debate that is still in progress. The current debate has been largely dominated by a "mainstream" discourse reflected in various research reports, commission reports, and popular books (e.g., Adler 1982; Bloom 1987; Boyer 1983; Cuban 1984, Goodlad 1984; Hirsch 1987; Presseisen 1985; Ravitch and Finn 1987; Sizer 1984). Many of the current educational concerns raised by mainstream reformers were embedded in the proposals for accountability, career education, "back-to-basics," Competency-based Teacher Education (CBTE), and other reforms of the 1970s (Shor 1986). The reform proposals of the 1980s involve more complex arguments as displayed in the scholarship related to "teacher effectiveness," "education for excellence," and "cultural literacy."

The mainstream reform movement is not monolithic, as any comparison of the work of Adler, Bennett, Berliner, A. Bloom, Boyer, Brophy, Cheney, Cuban, Finn, Good, Goodlad, Hirsch, Ravitch, Sizer, and Shulman,

among others, would reveal. Liberal and conservative views are represented, and some of the reform proposals would involve significant social change and expenditure. Nevertheless, there is a certain underlying consistency to the discourse of mainstream reform that tends to preclude the serious consideration of certain approaches to research and educational change (Apple 1986b; Aronowitz and Cherryholmes 1988; Giroux 1985, 1988c; Grumet 1988; Stanley 1985).

Mainstream educational discourse is, by and large, constructed within the parameters of our dominant social, economic, cultural, and political arrangements, including the limits of certain research traditions. These characteristics of contemporary educational reform are neither surprising (in a wider historical context) nor intrinsically sinister. However, to the extent these characteristics are typical, they reflect a concern raised by Nelson, Carlson, and Linton (1972) who argued that the failure to give adequate attention to "radical" ideas denies educators a major source of knowledge and unduly limits the process of social inquiry and change. In a democratic culture, "[t]he intellectual energy required to reject a radical idea is more important to . . . social vitality than the passive acceptance of the status quo" (p. 15). Furthermore, it is often the case that radical ideas from the past have eventually been incorporated into the mainstream perspective. One could argue, therefore, that in a democratic society educators have a fundamental obligation to explore divergent ideas, including those that are radical.

In addition to the discourse of mainstream educational reform, another discourse of "critical pedagogy" exists that challenges the basic assumptions of current reform proposals, draws on other research traditions, and poses a rather different educational reform agenda. During the past two decades, a substantial body of critical pedagogical scholarship has emerged (e.g., Apple 1979, 1982, 1986b; Aronowitz and Giroux 1985; Beyer and Apple 1988; Cherryholmes 1988; Ellsworth 1989; Giroux 1983a, 1988c; Giroux and McLaren 1989; Grumet 1987; Pinar 1988; Roman, Christian-Smith and Ellsworth 1988; Wexler, 1987). As we will see, like the mainstream reform discourse, the critical scholarship on educational reform is far from monolithic and has been characterized by serious internal disputes over theory, approaches to research, and interpretation of data. Critical pedagogy is a general term that refers to, among other things, revisionist education history, the "new sociology" of education, reconceptualist curriculum theory, cultural studies, feminist scholarship, Critical Theory, and various forms of postmodern and poststructuralist analysis. This scholarship now represents a significant knowledge base to orient the critical analysis and reform of education. Yet this discourse tends to remain on the periphery of the debate over educational reform, and as mainstream educators have demonstrated (e.g., Cuban 1984; Goodlad 1984; Sirotnick

1989), there has been a persistent resistance to radical education reform proposals throughout this century.

The resistance to critical pedagogy has deep roots in our national history and the history of education in particular (Kliebard 1986). There are, of course, formidable structural and cultural obstacles to any kind of radical change in our society. In addition, the periodic failure of critical educators to develop a consensus regarding the direction educational reform should take has also been a major problem. Some have argued that radical educators have focused too much on a negative critique without formulating a moral vision or proposal for a preferred society that might motivate widespread opposition to the dominant order (Giroux 1988c).

The analysis of earlier radical educational reform efforts can help provide a rich source of knowledge and examples to inform current attempts to construct a theory of critical pedagogy. Too often, the anti-intellectual, ahistorical, and narcissistic temper of our present culture has tended to undervalue or ignore the past (Lasch 1979, 1984). Such tendencies must be resisted, and it is especially vital that critical educators highlight the history of struggle against domination to counter the oppressive practice of ignoring or distorting the history of radical educational reform. One recent example of such distortion is the reductionist attempt to blame progressive educational theory and the education reforms of the 1960s for the current educational "crisis" as defined by certain conservatives (e.g., Bloom 1987; Hirsch 1987; Ravitch and Finn 1987).

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST LEGACY

A radical educational reform of potential relevance to today's critical pedagogy is the social reconstructionist movement that began in the 1920s and was most influential in the 1930s. Reconstructionism was an indigenous radical movement that has been defined in several ways. Disagreement remains regarding the nature of reconstructionism and which specific educators should be considered members of the movement (e.g., Bowers 1969, 1970; Cremin 1961; Kliebard 1986; Stanley 1981b, 1981c). Still, there is some agreement as to the general characteristics and goals of the movement. Social reconstruction is particularly interesting, because it anticipated many of the methods, concerns, and theoretical perspectives of the critical pedagogy scholarship that has emerged over the past twenty years. Consequently, a comparative analysis of social reconstructionism and critical pedagogy should enhance our understanding of both movements as well as the more general quest for radical educational reform.

The following definition of social reconstructionism, although oversimplified, does convey some of the major concerns of social reconstructionism during the 1930s.

The concept of reconstructionism evolved from the basic notion that social change is inevitable: (1) The course of social change may result from undirected "drift" or it may be led in more-or-less directed fashion by some group or cooperating groups in the society. (2) It is better that social change be directed. (3) Since the future decrees some sort of collectivism—the choices being authoritarian (Communism, Fascism) or democratic—some groups need to push for democratic collectivism. (4) There are many groups eager to direct social change, most of them in an authoritarian direction; and in the presence of a vacuum in leadership, they will do so. (5) The group most dedicated to democratic values, most knowledgeable about cultural trends, and in the most strategic position to direct social change, is school teachers. (6) School teachers, therefore, should be the architects of the new social order. (Hunt and Metcalf 1968, 278)

The social reconstructionist "movement" emerged in the decade after World War I and reached its peak in the 1930s. Several factors contributed to the rise of reconstructionism. New developments in educational, social, and political theory from 1880 to 1920 were very important, especially the work of Henry George, Edward Bellamy, William Graham Sumner, Albion Small, Lester Frank Ward, Thorstein Veblen, C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, William James, Charles Beard, and Upton Sinclair. These writers questioned the prevailing views of social Darwinism and laissez-faire capitalism. Peirce, Dewey, and James developed the influential philosophy of pragmatism, and the writing of these and other critics often complemented the populist and progressive political movements of the times. The result was the generation of a large body of ideas and literature to stimulate thought about alternative social, political, economic, and educational models. Another factor was the concrete model for radical change provided by the success of the Marxist revolution in Russia in 1917.

Kleibard (1986) argues that social reconstructionism was rooted in the social meliorism that has been one of the major curriculum reform impulses of the twentieth century. An early exposition of this view is found in the work of Albion Small who had been strongly influenced by Lester Frank Ward. Small (1896) was critical of the 1893 *Report of the Committee of Ten* because it lacked any social philosophy and offered instead a "catalog of subjects" to study. The report appeared to seek the individuals' adaptation to the present society and placed too much emphasis on intelligence while neglecting other aspects of the individuals' personality. The school subjects were also presented as distinct bodies of knowledge with little sense of their role as interactive parts of a total reality. For Small (1896), it was this reality and not conventionalized abstractions that was most important to education. Students must come to grasp this whole reality to help them organize their thought and action. In the spirit of Lester Frank Ward, Small endorsed social meliorism and urged educators

to be "makers of society" (p. 182). Teachers, he believed, held the leverage for timely and radical social reform (p. 184). Often, however, teachers were too timid and reluctant to take political action. Small believed that teachers need to execute their true role in helping to bring about a better society. George Counts, a leading reconstructionist, studied with Small while getting his doctorate at the University of Chicago.

When the U.S. economy faltered and appeared on the verge of collapse in 1929, many social critics, including some educators, turned to the literature on alternative social, political, and economic systems for possible solutions to the economic crisis. The social reconstructionists emerged as one of the groups who were highly critical of the traditional socioeconomic system in the 1930s, although they were not the most radical critics of the period. In fact, the reconstructionists were bitterly attacked by the American Communist party as apologists for capitalism (Bowers 1970). Still, the reconstructionists were clearly on the left in terms of the U.S. political tradition. Their most unique characteristic was a commitment to education as the vehicle for bringing about the reconstruction of society along the lines of social justice and the extension of democracy.

The reconstructionists were more specifically a very small faction within the much larger and more popular Progressive Education Association (PEA). In terms of the general reform movements of this period their numbers were minuscule. According to C. A. Bowers (1970):

compared to Upton Sinclair's "End Poverty in California" program, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, and the large following of Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Francis Townsend, their movement seemed insignificant indeed. Yet, they were taken seriously by political groups on both the Left and Right. This was in marked contrast to the large body of classroom teachers, who remained indifferent to the Promethean role they were being called upon to perform. (p. 221)

The reconstructionists seldom realized any of their goals except on a small scale and for a rather short time. Yet, they did manage to engender a great deal of controversy and to leave a legacy of ideas and questions that have had some impact on curriculum and are worthy of further consideration. The movement all but vanished under the pressure of censorship (e.g., the attacks on Harold Rugg's social studies textbook series in the late 1930s and early 1940s), the needs of a nation at war from 1941-45, the subsequent "Cold War," McCarthyism, and the conservative restoration in educational thought after 1945. For these and other reasons, the ideas of the reconstructionists have received only limited attention by curriculum theorists. Yet, reconstructionist scholarship has continued over the past four decades (especially the work of Theodore Brameld), and, more recently, critical pedagogy has begun to give attention to and

extended the analysis of issues raised by the reconstructionists (e.g., Giroux 1988c).

Although there is still controversy regarding the nature of social reconstructionism, few would disagree that among the most prominent reconstructionists were the educators Harold O. Rugg, George S. Counts, and Theodore Brameld. It is primarily their work and the reaction to it that forms the basis of the reconstructionist perspective used in this study. Each was a prolific writer and together they have contributed a substantial body of work over almost six decades. The work of these educators, especially the synthesis provided by Brameld, contains the essence of the reconstructionist philosophy of education and approach to curriculum theory. But, as we shall see, each of these writers held significantly different views regarding curriculum. What they shared was a conviction that education can and should be employed to help solve social problems and reconstruct the sociocultural order to create a more ideal society.

As noted earlier, the social reconstructionist position was not entirely new. The concern over whether the schools should function to reflect or reform society has deep roots in the history of education. In America, progressive educators had long been concerned with the creation of the "good society." According to Lawrence Cremin (1961), "progressive education began as part of a vast humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life—the ideal of government by, of, and for the people—to the puzzling new urban industrial civilization" that emerged between 1850 and 1900 (p. viii). It was "the educational phase of American Progressivism," that is, a multifaceted attempt "to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals" (p. viii). This effort necessitated a revised and expanded view of the role of the school which included attempts to improve the quality of family and community life, health, and the workplace. Education should also be based on the best available research and adapted to the needs of the new groups and classes entering the schools in the last half of the nineteenth century. And, finally, the progressives assumed that our culture could "be democratized without being vulgarized" (Cremin 1961, vii-ix).

Yet, when one moves from the pedagogic rhetoric of the child-centered progressives to an examination of what the new society would be like, only the vaguest of outlines are to be found. The prevailing assumption was that the kind of individual produced by the child-centered school would be sufficient to create the good life and that its creation should be left to these "new" individuals. Progressive educators tended to focus their attention on the needs of the child and avoided the development of a particular social program. As the president of the PEA explained in 1930:

Although our association has never promulgated or approved anything like a program. . . we do endorse, by common consent, the obvious hypothesis

that the child rather than what he studies should be the center of all educational effort and that a scientific attitude toward new educational ideas is the best guarantee of progress. (Fowler 1930, 159)

Those progressives who supported a child-centered approach did see themselves as contributing to a new and better society by correcting and reversing more traditional formalistic approaches to education. In their view, these traditional approaches had tended to promote the regimented and normative socialization of our youth. The child-centered progressives, by focusing on the child's interests and the enrichment of his powers of observation, believed they were contributing to the creation of citizens with scientific attitudes capable of handling new problems as they arose. In this sense, they believed they were helping to create a new society of independent, free-thinking individuals.

Most progressives also shared Dewey's commitment to experimentalism and democracy. Those progressives favoring a child-centered approach believed that both of these ends could be served by their approach to curriculum design. Furthermore, since experimentalism and democracy required an open-ended curriculum, no question was ever settled and no course content was ever fixed. Most of all these child-centered educators, reacting again to the formalism of the past, tended to oppose any form of imposition or indoctrination. While they did promote democracy, this was seen as the imposition of a process and not a content of fixed truths to be learned. One sense of this approach to education is captured in Marietta Johnson's (1926) comment that "childhood is for itself and not a preparation for adult life" (p. 349).

The activities and goals of the social reconstructionists posed a direct challenge to the child-centered progressives who tended to dominate the PEA throughout the 1920s. Social reconstructionism, however, was not the first challenge to the child-centered approach. Prior to the reconstructionists, critique of the child-centered progressives led to a split in the PEA. Many who considered themselves progressives were concerned that the emphasis on child centeredness was evidencing a growing disparity between Dewey's educational philosophy and the way it was being applied in child-centered classrooms. Dewey (1928) himself spoke out at the 1928 convention of the PEA and criticized some of his followers for maintaining a pedagogical approach that seemed to regard "the organized presentation of school subjects as antithetical to freedom and the needs of students" (p. 200). Dewey (1962) believed the schools to be an "embryonic community" whose activities and occupations reflected the life of the general society (p. 29). He proposed the study of a wide range of social problems that the child-centered classrooms tended to ignore. Dewey believed that we could neither derive the curriculum from the child's needs

nor restrict it to such needs. Teachers not only had the right but also the professional obligation "to suggest lines of activity, and to show that there need not be any fear of adult imposition" (p. 203).

The reconstructionists agreed with Dewey's critique of child-centered progressivism and wanted to go even further in terms of organizing the curriculum to help direct the future course of society. While Dewey would only impose what he called the method of intelligence on students, the reconstructionists were concerned with using schools to challenge directly the dominant social order and to achieve specific changes in our social, cultural, and economic institutions. Since socialization was essential to being human, the reconstructionists believed that we should use education to socialize our young in ways calculated to expand and reinforce a democratic culture (Counts 1930, 1932).

Approximately three decades after the decline of social reconstructionism, a new radical reform movement began to emerge in educational discourse. For the purpose of our discussion, I refer to this movement as critical pedagogy, while recognizing that this terminology will not be acceptable to some of those theorists to whom the label is applied.¹ While critical pedagogy appeared to have much in common with reconstructionist theory, it was also significantly different in several ways. In particular, critical pedagogy has been more strongly influenced by European theoretical perspectives including: the new sociology movement in Great Britain, Critical Theory, neo-Marxism (especially the work of Gramsci and Althusser), structuralism, phenomenology, and more recent developments in postmodernism and poststructuralism. Nevertheless, in the U.S., critical pedagogy also retains a strong neopragmatic orientation mainly rooted in the work of Dewey and it has also forged some direct links to social reconstructionist thought (e.g., Giroux 1988c). A second major difference between reconstructionism and critical pedagogy is the powerful influence of feminist thought on the latter. While some feminists have taken very different positions regarding the status of a feminist pedagogy versus critical pedagogy (e.g., Brennan 1989; Ellsworth 1989), it is clear that what I am calling critical pedagogy has, to a great extent, been influenced and shaped by feminist thought.

Finally, critical pedagogy has developed in what some have called the postmodern era, while the reconstructionist movement was largely part of the earlier modernist discourse. Now there is a great danger in oversimplifying the break between modernism and postmodernism (e.g., see

1. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), for example, contends that feminist pedagogy is a distinct approach with significantly different theory and aims from those of critical pedagogy. For the purpose of this study, I will include feminist pedagogy within the rather broad category of critical pedagogy. Ellsworth's position will be presented in Chapter 4.

Cherryholmes 1988; Giroux 1988c; Habermas 1987; McLaren 1988a, 1988b; Montag 1988; Poster 1989). Still, while a clear break between modernism and postmodernism is an exaggeration, we can discern a dramatic shift with important implications for pedagogy. Postmodernism has questioned the central assumptions of the Enlightenment legacy, including the possibility of reflexive rationality, the existence of the human subject required for agency, claims for an objective ground for knowledge, any metanarrative or totalizing critique, and the very possibility of human progress via education. These dimensions of postmodernism have caused many to question its political potential and whether or not it undermines any possibility of building an educational theory oriented by the goal of student emancipation. In short, some fear that postmodernism is, or will lead to, a new form of radical relativism, nihilism, and a flight from political possibility (e.g., Dews 1987; Giroux 1988c; Habermas 1987; West 1988 and 1989). On the other hand, postmodernism (more particularly poststructuralism) can be understood as constituting a new critique that gives us a much better sense of the nature of knowledge, modes of domination, the relation between power and knowledge, and the limits of critical inquiry (Culler 1982; Derrida 1988; Norris 1985, 1987; Poster 1989; Wexler 1987). We will explore the distinctions between postmodernism and poststructuralism in more detail in Chapter 6.

The reaction to critical pedagogy has been mixed, including rejection, ambivalence, and strong endorsement. Since social reconstructionism was grounded in the Enlightenment tradition, any assessment of its current relevance must be located within the context of the postmodern challenge to critical pedagogy.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2, I present a summary of the major theoretical perspectives and policy recommendations of the social reconstructionist critique. This summary is drawn mainly from an analysis of the work of Harold Rugg, George Counts, and Theodore Brameld. Particular attention is given to Brameld's work as the most radical and developed example of reconstructionist theory. In Chapter 3 I discuss the critical reaction to social reconstructionism and examine some of the traces of reconstructionist thought in mainstream curriculum theory.

In Chapter 4 I present a summary of several major approaches to critical pedagogy over the past two decades and how these approaches relate to reconstructionist curriculum theory. Some of the critical reaction to critical pedagogy as well as a number of major disputes among different approaches to critical pedagogy also are discussed, including the critique

by some feminists who understand critical pedagogy as a largely male-dominated approach to critical educational reform.

In Chapter 5 some recent developments in postmodern and poststructuralist theory are examined in terms of their relation to critical pedagogy and social reconstructionism. As noted above, many critical educators are concerned that postmodern theory has undermined the theoretical basis for critical curriculum theory, and this issue is examined in some detail by an analysis of recent work on neopragmatism and the poststructuralist theory of Jacques Derrida as these relate to political criticism and reform. I also examine how a critical pragmatism informed by poststructuralism might contribute to a theory for critical pedagogy.

Finally Chapter 6 presents a summary of the conclusions we might draw from the present study. This summary includes a consideration of the current relevance of reconstructionist theory and some suggestions regarding how critical pedagogy and educational reform should evolve as we move toward the twenty-first century. In brief, the argument presented here holds that reconstructionist theory remains relevant to current efforts to develop an approach to curriculum based on critical pedagogy. However, the relevance of reconstructionism to contemporary approaches to critical pedagogy will require an extensive reconceptualization of reconstructionist theory. Some form of critical pedagogy that incorporates the insights of poststructuralism and critical pragmatism appears to offer the most promise. But to say this is only to offer a brief sketch of an argument to come. I leave it to the reader to consider the relevance of this argument over the next five chapters.