Introduction

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Literacy in the age of "new times"

We are living in a "post" age, wherein intellectuals and other social commentators are consciously identifying the present historical moment in comparison with that which preceded it. This, of course, is not a wholly new phenomenon. Humans have often consciously portrayed their immediate times as being "post":postwar, postdepression, post-Hiroshima, post-Stalin, post-Kennedy, and so on. A notable feature of the post-age we have in mind here, however, is that the present is being set not against a more or less *specific* event, figure, dynasty or crisis, but rather against an enduring and *complex epoch,* and that this is being done scarcely from hindsight but in the very moment of transition itself. It is almost as if we are seeing the flowering of a conscious recognition of history as a social construction wherein structured relations and practices, ideologies and institutions, modes of production, distribution and exchange, and the like are seen as constituting the "stuff" of ages, and that more or less coherent and identifiable—but complex—amalgams of these are presently being superseded. Currents, themes, and modes from the age that was are set against the new history that is being made, lived, and lived through. We are beginning to recognize that history itself is quintessentially a semiotic process created, as Brooke Williams

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notes, in the relationship between mind-independent and mind-dependent orders of being. It is *enacted* through the mediacy of the sign through which the mind structures its experiences of the real. The postmodern challenge of historical knowledge is to participate in both past and present sign systems at once.[1]

And so, in different ways and on various dimensions, the age of modernity is set against the unfolding postmodern age,[2] the industrial social order is set against the postindustrial, the colonial and neocolonial ages against postcolonialism, and so on. Within academic discourse, modernist and structuralist currents are set against an emergent postmodernist and poststructuralist temperament.

Stuart Hall describes some of the hallmarks of these transitional "new times" as shifts in the technical organization of industrial-capitalist production toward information technologies and more flexible and decentralized forms of labor process, work organization, and increased product differentiation—what some critics are referring to as "post-Fordism."[3] Hall notes that post-Fordism is also concerned with broader social and cultural changes connected to the construction of new human identities associated with the politics of personal consumption, consumer ethics, and shifting economies of pleasure and desire. This had led, in Hall's terms, to a "return of the subjective," that is, to a return to a concern with subjectivity and identity as they have been culturally, ideologically, and historically produced.

The charred and consumptive iron smokestacks of the capitalist manufacturing plant set within the predatory, post-Holocaust landscapes of entropic American inner cities have been replaced by the high-tech boardrooms of the transnational corporate elite who oversee vast technocenters that extend the global neocortex through fiber optics and microchips. Visions for contemporary citizenship no longer depend as much on the grass-roots struggles of oppressed and peripheralized peoples but are conjured up in the chrome and steel offices of Silicon Valley. It is not so much the "time of the sign" as the "time of the cyn," as in *cyborg*, *cybernetics*, *cyberpunk*. A new cybercitizenry of specular beings is being produced through the interlocking forces of history, economics, politics, media, and gender in ways that allow the

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personal to be both informed by and calibrated against new modes of domination and surveillance.

The break is neither abrupt nor absolute, however. Themes and insights are carried over. Enduring concerns and projects take on new shapes. New ways of theorizing them, new vocabularies for conceptualizing them, and new strategies for addressing them are forged. No doubt epochal themes *are*, at some level, exhausted when the tasks called out by those themes finally prove adequate to their calling.[4] At such junctures, as Freire notes, we may indeed talk of one epoch being superseded by another. Yet certain historical threads have remained unbroken over successive epochs for as long as recorded history extends. These include, crucially, the distinctively human quests for liberation, emancipation, and justice.

The fact is that every age has its politics. History is always, necessarily, lived within relations, structures, and configurations of power. Hitherto, these have been characterized by inequalities. The dimensions and specifics of domination and subordination, elites and subalterns, change regularly: sometimes on grand scales, almost constantly in detail.

Conceptions of politics and the political dimension of human existence likewise change, and they are forever contested. Notions of what constitutes the political are irredeemably ideological. Conceptions of what are the political issues of the day and which groups are lined up in political contest are likewise disputed. What remains constant, however, is the *reality* of politics: the reality that human beings live, and endure the shaping effects on their *being* of so living, within social relations and practices in which opportunities to claim power for the end of achieving personal and collective fulfillment are structured unequally. And whether we limit our view of politics and the political to human interactions mediated by the state, or operate with a broader view which identifies the political with any human interaction conditioned by structured power, or take up some intermediate position, the conceptual kernel of politics is, precisely, *power*.

Our interest resides in the specificity of the means by which the "new times" have produced new economies of subjectivity and new regimes of desire through a proliferation of new literacies. If literacies largely inform how we read the world and the word, but also how such a reading produces

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who we are and how we dream our social present, then we need to explore the changing relationship between literacy and culture in the era of "new times."

During the past two decades scholars have paid increasing attention to the connections between literacy and power. We are now much more aware than previously of the nature and role of extant literacies within established configurations of power and advantage, of centers and margins, and how literacies impact on the satisfaction of human needs and interests. We understand more fully, but still imperfectly, how literacies are implicated in the shaping of human subjects, the ideologies they bear, and their placement within social hierarchies.

Literacy: Perspectives, promises, and politics

Burgeoning historical and sociological studies reveal how the forms taken by literacy in everyday life are shaped and defined *within* processes of competing social groups struggling to meet their respective interests and to have their voices heard and acknowledged.[5] We see how agents acting within established power structures and dominant ideologies effectively determine what literacy will be for others. Although, as in the case of most teachers, this is more or less unwitting, the political and ethical effects are real. More specifically, such studies trace how the varying ways that people are taught (and not taught) to use (and not to use) reading, writing, and publishing skills, the conditions or restrictions imposed upon their use, and prevailing conceptions of the legitimate or "correct" uses of reading and writing are important factors in shaping whose and which interests and aspirations are best satisfied and whose voices are heard within established daily routines.

A brief selection of typical examples will sharpen the point. Working from a historical perspective, Harvey Graff details the social construction of a particular form of school literacy in a selection of Ontario schools serving working-class children during the midnineteenth century. He examines the wider social, economic, and moral order and situates his analysis of working-class school literacy within this frame of values, practices, and expectations.

According to Graff, the distinctive form of literacy constructed on the school site was conditioned and shaped by identifiable sector interests and a

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value position and specific pedagogy consistent with those interests. The strong commitment of those who promoted schooling as a means to ensuring universal literacy was grounded in a clearly defined aim. This was to bring about moral development and social control through school learning, discipline, and order mediated by a "properly" conceived literacy.

Promoting literacy for its own sake, or in the interests of whatever ends individuals might choose to employ it, was never on the agenda of Ontario's promoters of working-class schooling. Indeed, "literacy alone . . . —that is, isolated from its moral base—was feared as potentially subversive."[6] The Christian ethos espoused by Education Superintendent Ryerson and the influential newspaper *The Christian Guardian* (formerly edited by Ryerson) stressed the need to control literacy in home and school alike. The "selection of proper books" was crucial. "Exciting works of fiction," along with politically subversive works of people like Voltaire and Paine, were especially feared. The Bible was seen as the best possible literature for guiding daily life.[7] Literacy was valued as a means for adjusting working-class children to a *morally restrained* social order and for establishing a hegemony attuned to industrial capitalism.

The actual physical characteristics and dynamics of the classroom, together with the pedagogy employed and the values associated with reading, contrived to produce a learning context admirably suited to promoting the required "moral" development and social control among working-class children. Teacher-pupil ratios of 1:70 by typical attendance made maintaining order a major priority. Heavy emphasis placed on sheer classroom management had obvious implications for the sorts of attitudes and habits each child had to develop for learning to proceed. Children were required to be docile and quiet, except when called on to recite their ABCs. The prevailing pedagogy was highly conducive to promoting obedience, quietness, and discipline. The method of rote repetition of letters militated against reading or writing with genuine comprehension. Consequently, it was "safe" in the sense that it was virtually impotent to foster a critical literacy that might encourage questioning social practices and arrangements or the values sought by ruling interests. The method did, however, assert teacher and adult authority, establish values and habits of drill, and promote passive attitudes and responses on the part of pupils.

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We see here the social construction of a particular form—a social practice and conception—of literacy. At the same time, in other sites, among other groups, quite different literacies were conceived and transmitted: for example, among students (of other classes) bound for professions, higher learning, careers as writers, and so forth. Such students learned within very different instructional settings from those described by Graff, via significantly different pedagogies—often more "open" or liberal. Of course, these other literacies all had their specific articulations with prevailing structures of power and hierarchies of interests. Some were well suited to the development of personal agency (although not necessarily *critical* agency), fluency, and individual advancement. This marks a major difference from the literacy described by Graff. The link between literacy and power in Graff's example is abundantly clear. So are its implications for whose interests were served (and whose were not), which interests were served, and how they were served.

The same broad theme can be approached from other angles. Freire's concept of banking education[8] has been useful in examining the political significance of literacy within school and nonschool settings alike. Freire claims that within pedagogies based on the model of a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students), the content, "whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified."[9] The "acts" of reading and writing are effectively robbed of their transformative potential. Teachers talk about reality "as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable."[10]

The political implications of making reading and writing into acts of receiving and re-presenting narrated (whether by voice or print) material are important. Social and cultural reality is reified into an extension or analogue of the natural world, which, as Freire reminds us (*and unlike the world of culture*), "humans did not make."[11] Reality is portrayed as something to be received, not as something which is to a crucial extent made and transformed by human action. "Facts" are approached as more or less fixed and given. Social phenomena like hierarchies of class and privilege, moral and social norms and values, stereotypes of race and gender, structured and patterned practices and routines of daily life, and so forth are received as natural and immutable realia. Banking pedagogy and the literacy it fosters encourages

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passive acceptance of the way things are: at the very least to the extent that it undermines conceptions and capacities conducive to a more active orientation. This has obvious import for preserving established structures and routines and the hierarchies of interests and satisfactions they ordain.

It must not be thought that this is a simplistic analysis applicable only to more elementary and less academic levels and tracks of education. It applies to the highest reaches of the academy. For trained and certificated college graduates, the habits of passive acceptance and responsiveness to given tasks and information frequently underwrite involvement in some of the most prestigious, well-paid, and politically potent pursuits of our times. The work of industrial scientists, who can blithely apply theory to great effect in the manufacture of consumerables and other products without foreseeing or having to consider the social and environmental corollaries of this work, is an obvious case in point. The burgeoning field of policy analysis provides a further instance. Dale says that the roots of policy analysis "lie not in trying to change the content of social policy in a particular direction, but in the search for ways of ensuring the efficient and effective delivery and implementation of social policies, irrespective of their content. It arises from studies that revealed how ineffective social policy is in bringing about its stated ends."[12]

Of course, the interest-serving directions of contemporary education policy are all too evident. Some of these are considered in detail in later chapters by Carlson, Harris, and Apple.

Other approaches also contribute to our understanding of how agents working within established structures of power participate in the social construction of literacies, revealing their political implications. One important body of work here deals with functional literacy initiatives.[13] Numerous studies now exist which analyze specific approaches to functional literacy, documenting their aims and content and seeking to understand them in relation to wider sociocultural practices and values. Such studies document conscious attempts to create discrete forms of reading and writing instruction which will, allegedly, make currently "dysfunctional" people functional. Most of these studies go on to identify interests at stake in functionalist programs and, in some cases, argue the propensity of such programs to promote the interests of certain groups or sectors at the expense of others.[14]

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A further corpus of studies focuses on the content of classroom literature and texts. In relatively early treatments of content, Anyon[15] and MacDonald[16] identify legitimated views of what students should read in school (the required texts and other literature defining the syllabus) and suggest their political implications for working people, ethnic minorities, and women. Writing in 1979, Anyon claims that even updated social studies texts used in U.S. schools portray native Americans, blacks, women, and the working class in terms that favor the interests of those who dominate over them. She argues that texts are replete with interest-serving omissions, stereotypes, and distortions. History schoolbooks "provide no label with which to identify as one group with a set of distinct concerns all those wage and salaried persons who are industrial laborers, craftspersons, clerical workers, or service, sales, and technical workers." School texts thus present an impediment to such people calling themselves to mind as a group, predisposing "workers and others against actions on behalf of the interests working people have in common."[17] At a similar level of analysis, MacDonald surveyed studies which examine the ways in which women in particular are represented in school and university texts. She concludes that the general impression conveyed in official texts "is one of woman's inferiority, her domesticity, her lack of adventure, ability, sense of adventure or creativity." The implication is that school literacy is submerged in ruling bourgeois, patriarchal, and ethnic majority views and values, with accordant implications for inequality, discrimination, and disadvantage.[18]

The limitations of such work for the analysis of school texts have been exposed from a range of positions, several of them nicely summarized by Geoff Whitty.[19] One line of criticism stresses the need to address the *form* as well as the content of specific texts.[20] Another notes the failings involved in assuming that literacies defined by specific content actually determine (or strongly shape) attitudes and values in their readers. In fact, "studies of texts . . . need to be related to the broader discursive contexts in which they circulate."[21]

A complementary line of argument insists on the importance of recognizing the mediating role of pedagogy in textbook use. Although "in some cases, there may be a . . . correspondence between the ideology of textbooks and the ideology of teaching style, in other cases the relationship may be a

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contradictory one."[22] Teachers using the most "reactionary" texts *might* use them to help students understand the nature and implications of the ideology on parade: and in so doing might engage students in reflection upon their *own* ideological investments.

The most recent developments in the line of progression from work like that of Anyon and MacDonald seek to understand the process by which human subjectivity is constituted and transformed through discourse, experience, and material practices: in education generally, and through literacy specifically.[23] In arguing that more limited, reproductivist, one-dimensional analyses of textual content cannot account for the "tenuousness, disjunction, interruption and possibility" inherent in educational practices at large, Wexler advocates a critical semiotics of texts.[24] More recently, Giroux has rejected the "reductionist . . . practice of limiting critique to the analyses of cultural products such as texts, books, films, and other commodities." The more narrowly defined views and theories of literacy tied to such critique "obscure the *relational* nature of how meaning is produced, i.e., the intersection of subjectivities, objects, and social practices with specific relations of power."[25]

In its positive contribution as well as through the critique it has invited, analysis of textbook content focuses attention on the extent to which differences in content may comprise different literacies. And given the links between content and wider human purposes, value systems, and modes of life and being, these differences can have great political significance. It is failure to recognize literacy as many and varied, which precludes the possibility of focusing closely on the significance of differences between various forms taken by reading and writing, that marks the main weakness of many technocratic views of literacy as "reading and writing." Analysis of textbook content both recognizes the multiplicity of literacy and documents important dimensions of difference. In so doing it helps remind us of points at which it is important to resist unreflective shifts from the language of reading and writing to that of literacy.

Let us turn now to recent developments in understanding and theorizing literacy, in its relation to structures and economies of power associated with various postmodernist and poststructuralist currents in social theory. In Chapter 13 Giroux claims that literacy "in its *varied versions* is about the

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practice of representation as a means of organizing, inscribing, and containing meaning."[26] Literacy must be approached as discursive practice, as discourse or, more accurately, as so many discourses which in inscribing meaning are crucially involved in the formation of human subjects. Literacy researchers must uncover the *relational* manner in which meaning is produced, unveiling the interplay between subjectivities, objects, and social practices within specific relations of power. Literacies, and knowledge more generally, are identified as forms of discursive production which organize ways of thinking into ways of doing and being. As discourse, literacies shape social practices of which they are mutually constitutive. This makes literacy inherently political. What does this mean?

The notion of *meaning* itself provides an important clue here. Meaning is central to *human* life and human *being*. This is not simply linguistic meaning, but the idea also that human life is meaningfully ordered: around concepts, purposes, values, ideas and ideals, rules, notions of reality, and so on.

Of course, linguistic meaning and meaning in the wider sense are mutually entangled. Language and communication are essential to human being. It is through the medium of language that biological human life becomes *social* (cultural, economic, and so on) life: that is, life organized into some form or shape (more or less consciously recognized and understood by participants) and within which human identities emerge. Meaning, and hence being and human subjectivity, are constituted within and through discourse.

Discourses have been defined as "modalities which to a significant extent govern what can be said, by what kind of speakers, and for what types of imagined audiences."[27] To draw out the concept of discourse we need to read phrases like *what can be said, by what kind of speakers,* and *to what kind of audiences* in a double way—parallel to the double reading of *meaning* mentioned above.

Discourse is like (and includes) language in the sense that only once norms and rules for use are established and observed can linguistic meaning be "stamped" and communicated, and people participate in speaking the language. Only with rules, norms, and meanings in place can language operate as a medium for giving shape to human life. Beyond the dimension of language—albeit the central dimension—*discourse* refers to the larger pro-

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ject of creating, shaping, and bounding social life, and this includes the metaphors that both live through us and give meaning to the flesh of our desire. From a strictly biological standpoint, human life has the potential to take on any of a vast array of shapes or none at all. A baby which dies shortly after birth has existed briefly as a biological entity but scarcely, in its own right, as a social being. It has been social only by virtue of having been, momentarily, a member of a family, a much-looked-forward-to arrival, and so on. Its death is a tragedy to the family and the wider network of kin and friends it would have entered. But this social status reflects the discursive ordering of human life into "units" like families, within and around which various ideas, hopes, dreamed-of futures, expectations, identities, relationships, and modes of living are centered.

Discourses are norm-governed practices and involvements around and within which forms of human living are constructed and identities and subjectivities shaped. Discourses of classroom learning, for instance, are by no means confined to the language of conducting lessons, in the narrower everyday sense of *language*. Rather, the "language" or discourse of the classroom is closer to what Wittgenstein meant by language and its place within "forms of life."[28] Classroom discourse, then, includes the norms and processes by which authority is established and exercised, discipline maintained, and decisions made about what will be learned, via what media, and how, plus the myriad other ingredients which collectively explain why what is going on at a particular moment in a given physical and social or cultural space—namely, *this* classroom and others more or less like it—*is* going on. Discourse, therefore, is often hidden and implicit. The discourses that police the body, shape desire, and mobilize consent will necessarily have a direct and discernible bearing on the process through which ideologies develop into specific teaching and learning practices.

'Discourse', then, is a large concept. At the level of research and study, discourses define what counts as doing research in an area or studying an issue or field "properly," and how such matters are determined. They also sanction "appropriate" activity. (In his chapter in this volume, Harris provides an elaborate case study of analytic philosophy of education as discursive practice.) At the level of child rearing, there are discourses of appropriate behavior, of procedures for nurturing children, of socializing them, and

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so on. Educational discourses consist in so many structured, ideologically informed, and sanctioned views about what should be done, how, and why it should be done. These make human activity in the name of education into so many forms, lending meaning to such activity and, in the process, shaping how educatees "turn out" and how they don't turn out.

A crucial point here is that meanings and the discourses through which they are inscribed—whether in research, child rearing, education, or whatever site of human practice—are never *givens*. Although they may be inherited by culture and sedimented by the dead weight of tradition into social facts that we mistakenly take for granted, they are neither ontologically nor epistemologically *prior* to human living in the sense of being natural or transcendent; nor are they fixed. Indeed, they are always in principle, and typically in practice, contested, since competing discourses are always potentially or actually in operation. Discourses are generated and lived out within political contexts, within structures and relations of power inherited by humans inhabiting a given cultural and social time and space, these themselves reflecting previous discursive production. But these contingent historical facts of discursive production and inheritance are precisely that: contingent and historical. And *contested*. To that extent, so also are the forms that human subjectivity takes on within the discursive economies of their formation. Human subjectivity, then, is never closed. It is never fixed. The particular forms it takes are never essentially or transcendentally dictated. What individual and collective human subjectivities reflect are the dynamics and processes of discursive production in their current historical and cultural *contingency*. At the same time, given the contingent facts of discursive production within a particular space and time, there is *that degree of historical "determination"* of human subjectivity. But that determination is, ultimately, a contingent matter. Three quotations from this book help concretize these matters.

> Discourses are not single-minded positivities but are invariably mutable, contingent, and partial. Their authority is always provisional as distinct from transcendental . . . Discourses may in fact *possess* the power of truth, but in reality they are historically contingent rather than inscribed by natural law; they emerge out of social conventions. In this view, any dis-

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course of conducting is bounded by the historical, cultural, and political conditions and the epistemological resources available to articulate its meaning . . . [P]eople do not possess power but produce it and are produced by it in their relational constitution through discourse.[29]

[Poststructualism places much emphasis] on meaning as *a contested event,* a terrain of struggle in which individuals take up often conflicting subject positions in relation to signifying practices [in both the narrower and the wider sense of "language" and "signs"]. Poststructuralists acknowledge explicitly that meaning consists of more than signs operating and being operated in a context. Rather, there is struggle over signifying practices. This struggle is eminently *political* and must include the relationship among discourse, power, and difference. Poststructuralists place much . . . emphasis on discourse and the contradictions involved in subjective formation.[30]

"The subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects . . . There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains 'integrity' prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there." . . . We construct our future selves, our identities, through the availability and character of signs of possible futures. The parameters of the human subject vary according to the discursive practices, economies of signs, and subjectivities (experiences) engaged by individuals and groups at any historical moment. We must abandon the . . . idea that we possess as social agents a timeless essence or a consciousness that places us beyond historical and political practices. Rather, we should understand our "working identities" as an effect of such practices . . . Our identities as subjects are . . . constitutive of the literacies we have at our disposal through which we make sense of our day-to-day politics of living.[31]

To approach literacy as discursive production, then, is to seek understanding of *how* literacies are created, what they are created *as* (undertaking, perhaps, some kind of "archeology" of extant literacy discourses), and what

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they entail for the shape and texture of human life and subjectivity. This throws us back on Giroux's idea of literacy as "a means of organizing, inscribing, and containing meaning." In doing this kind of work we have to bear in mind the sorts of challenges issued by Wexler, Whitty, and others noted earlier, and much more besides. For Giroux's conception of literacy is a complex idea to handle. An important part of handling it involves looking at earlier positions, such as those of Wittgenstein, Marx and neo-Marxists, advocates of hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches, and so forth, which have important historical and intellectual links to contemporary views. The real challenge of the postmodern turn in social theory, particularly as applied to literacy, involves coming to understand the similarities and differences that obtain between it and its theoretical forebears.

The colonization of culture

With that said, however, let us turn briefly to a theme which has been rehearsed by a number of literacy researchers operating from the broad perspective in question: namely, recent attempts within the United States to establish a discourse of *cultural* literacy. Attempts to define cultural literacy and to suggest broad approaches and programs schools should undertake to advance cultural literacy represent answers to the question of what kind of knowledge our young must acquire in order to be able to participate in society as active, informed citizens. As such, cultural literacy overlaps to some extent with functional literacy but goes beyond it to name a broad range of meanings, values, and views that students should come to bear. Being culturally literate has become synonymous with "acquiring a knowledge of selected works of literature and historical information necessary for informed participation in the political and cultural life of the nation."[32]

The foremost proponents of cultural literacy identified by writers intent on understanding and critiquing it as a discursive practice include Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Diane Ravitch, William Bennett, Chester Finn, and Nathan Glazer. Interpreters and critics of cultural literacy as discourse include Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Henry Giroux, and Peter

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McLaren. Since these writers typically identify their work as proceeding from a critical literacy perspective, this section will provide a bridge to subsequent discussion of what is involved in being critical and what should be understood by critical literacy.

The points we seek can best be made by referring to the enormously influential work of E.D. Hirsch, Jr. In *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know,* Hirsch maintains that students are unable to read and write adequately if they lack "the relevant background information, a particular body of shared information that expresses a privileged cultural currency with high exchange value in the public sphere." Moreover, students who do not have this "canon" will be unable "to function adequately in society." Hirsch sees the new illiteracy as "embodied in those expanding ranks of students who are unable either to contextualize information or to communicate with each other within the parameters of a wider national culture."[33]

Hirsch, then, argues for the transmission of a uniform cultural "canon"—a traditional literate culture—through the medium of standard English. He sees literacy as having declined because schools have emphasized process to the detriment of adequate content. Schools need to redress the balance by moving background knowledge to the center. The appropriate body of prescribed content will allegedly give students access to mainstream economic and political life, thereby becoming a route to greater social and economic justice for marginal groups. In Hirsch's view the requisite content is derived from "common culture." It is not so much information from *elite* culture (in the manner of Bloom) as information possessed by people Hirsch regards as "literate Americans." To this extent he defines the content of cultural literacy ostensively: by reference to what civically capable, culturally endowed Americans know.

Aronowitz and Giroux seize on a potentially disarming feature of Hirsch's position to reveal its real political character. This provides a springboard for a sustained unpacking and critique of Hirsch's version of cultural literacy. They say the prescribed content of cultural literacy

> is drawn from what Hirsch calls the common culture, which in his terms is marked by a history and contemporary usefulness that raises it above issues of power, class, and discrimination. In Hirsch's terms, this is "everybody's

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> culture," and the only real issue, as he sees it, is that we outline its contents and begin to teach it in schools. For Hirsch, the national language, which is at the center of his notion of literacy, is rooted in a civic religion that forms the core of stability in the culture itself. "Culture" in these terms is used in the descriptive rather than anthropological and political sense; it is the medium of conservation and transmission. Its meaning is fixed in the past, and its essence is that it provides the public with a common referent for communication and exchange. It is the foundation upon which public life interacts with the past, sustains the present, and locates itself in the future . . . Culture for Hirsch is a network of information shrouded in innocence and goodwill. [This interpretation is evident] in his reading of the relationship between culture and what he describes as nation building; "nation builders use a patchwork of scholarly folk materials, old songs, obscure dances, and historical legends all apparently quaint and local, but in reality selected and reinterpreted by intellectuals to create a culture upon which the life of the nation can rest."[34]

The legacy bequeathed to a nation's young by its nation builders is, allegedly, the promise of a basis for informed, adequate, and satisfying participation in social and civic life.

Whereas Hirsch represents the common culture to himself and his readers in this ideological manner, a reading of cultural literacy as discursive practice tells a very different story. Perhaps the most sophisticated analysis and critique of Hirsch's approach to cultural literacy as discursive practice is that provided by Aronowitz and Giroux. They argue that for Hirsch mainstream or American culture is simply "there." There is a common pool of information that defines what it really means to be American, a kind of "essence" of being an American citizen. To live and participate effectively as an American citizen presupposes possessing this canon of information and being able, with its assistance, to read, write, and speak effectively. This possession is simultaneously the *sine qua non* and the *guarantee* of automatic membership as a full citizen.[35] Hirsch presents this common culture as "existing beyond the realm of politics and struggle." It is somehow transcendental—like the ideas which, for Hirsch, seem to drive history itself—"'presenting' itself for all to participate in its meanings and conven-

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tions."[36] Hirsch acknowledges that we can distinguish between mainstream and ethnic culture(s), but in the end mainstream culture is a kind of transcendent American common denominator which is politically innocent. He does not conceive of mainstream culture as what has prevailed in a process of struggle between competing groups occupying positions of unequal access to power within the social structure to establish dominant meanings, knowledges, values, interpretations, practices, relations, and so forth, any more than he would see ethnic cultures as the outcome of struggles over collective memory and how to "live out and make sense of the given circumstances and conditions of life" within the various ethnic groupings that exist within a society.[37]

What, then, are the implications and consequences of asserting the existence of a transcendent, essential, apolitical shared culture of being American, and seeking to ground educational practice in such a discourse of culture? In the first place, education is represented as a neutral activity with the potential for fair and equal outcomes at the point that really matters. After all, culture is itself represented as divorced from "the struggle for moral and social regulation"; hence this struggle is not inscribed in mainstream cultural meanings.[38] For Hirsch there is no struggle, just a common culture. From this viewpoint, Freire's claim that education cannot be neutral but must be an instrument either of domestication or of liberation is mistaken. Education faces no such choice. From Hirsch's perspective, the only choice it faces is the technical one of whether schooling will promote or fail to promote among all learners an adequate grasp of what is involved in being what they "really" are. The common culture belongs to all equally and in principle is available to all. The problem simply is that at present it *is* excluded to some in practice. All that is required is a curriculum and a pedagogy adequate to the task of making available to all equally the heritage they share equally. The fact that different people will end up with different qualities of employment, different levels of qualification, different incomes, and the differences—inequalities—that these entail is no more than is inevitable given the natural transcendent historical order of things. As such, this is not a political outcome, and it in no way speaks to the lack of *educational* neutrality. The important educational outcome, which all *can*

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share equally, is satisfying participation in American society as full-fledged citizens.

The reality, however, is completely different. Cultural literacy, thus conceived, becomes an ideological mechanism which performs the same role as conventional approaches to functional literacy. It serves as a medium for recouping or further immersing those who are objectively disadvantaged economically, socially, and politically in a view of the world that leads them to accept as inevitable, and to participate actively in, the very social practices and relations that disadvantage them.[39]

Second, this educational discourse of cultural literacy implies the denial of cultural difference as educationally valid and legitimate. Hirsch's conception of culture "maintains an ominous ideological silence . . . regarding the validity and importance of the experiences of women, Blacks, and other groups excluded from the narrative of mainstream history and culture."[40] This has implications for silencing the voices of these groups, sentencing their lived meanings and their representations of their lives, conditions, and struggles to exile at the margins, while all the time they are measured by their "performance" against criteria and demands of the dominant culture. This is oppressive.

The educational implications are what are of immediate interest. These are implications of pedagogical exclusion. Hirsch's model of cultural literacy effectively excludes a practice of school literacy and learning which can take the voices and experiences of the Other as material for educational work. The rich possibilities for taking the histories, memories, and struggles of marginal groups as a basis for working toward understanding daily life, its demands, and its shortfalls in democratic terms are simply denied, if not made invisible, through a politics of exclusion. So also are the categories of meaning that Others bring to school learning, which offer them a basis, given an appropriate pedagogy, for producing and interpreting knowledge.

Hirsch's position is a decidedly antimaterialist and antiquarian theory of interpretation and the role of the citizen. Human agents are formed in the waxworks of history in which human capacity remains frozen in the shape of traditions, traditions that serve as the faceless curators of Western culture. The answer is not simply to take the voices and meanings of Others as givens,

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to be celebrated naively and accepted as educational knowledge in their own right. They have to be worked on responsibly and critically. The literacies they enfold are not to be assumed to have equal weight with any other literacy form(s). "On the contrary . . their differences are to be weighed against the capacity they have for enabling people to locate themselves in their own histories *while simultaneously establishing the conditions for them to function as part of a wider democratic culture*."[41] This, from a *critical* perspective, should be the educational test for all literacies. Like nationalism more generally, cultural literacy bolsters a social order which is unequal and oppressive, one that demonizes the Other and translates difference into deviancy. Where marginal and disadvantaged groups are made to think of themselves as Americans or Germans they will fight and die for what they believe to be the shared national interest. In fact, however, the shared national interest is no such thing. It is really an ideological umbrella for ruling or dominant interests. "The nation" is effectively the prevailing order, comprising the hierarchies, injustices, repression, denial of opportunities for full development of human potential, mistreatments, and so forth that inhere in it. The fact that many people are drawn to forms of nationalism as a route to vicarious identity precisely because their own has been denied, denigrated, or thwarted makes the point even more poignant.

Cultural literacy simultaneously distorts the true nature of what has been called the current crisis in education and democratic life and further entrenches it. It refuses to recognize that withdrawal from education and public life has much to do with being silenced and forced to engage in activities and modes of being that are profoundly alien, while at the same time having generations of history to draw on which attest to the fact that wholehearted and successful participation in the educational mainstream does not deliver on its promise of an enhanced quality of life. There is good reason for schooling having come to be strongly disvalued by those who have long experienced it as a route to inevitable failure and disadvantage.

Hunter and Harman relate this tendency to Collins's notions of education as a market for cultural goods and the inflation of education credentials since the middle of the last century. They note how groups at the bottom of the social and economic heap in the United States were led to believe that

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literacy and other educational achievements would enhance their life prospects. But as the number of people within these groups gaining educational credentials increased, so too did the level of qualifications demanded for the same jobs.

> Each time competing ethnic minorities reached the educational levels they had been told would lead to economic success and prestige, the game rules were changed . . . [Given] the resulting inflation of educational credentials . . . disillusionment is likely among those who purchase such credentials through school attendance when the promised pay-off fails to materialize. The disappointed groups may drop out of the difficult process of schooling.[42]

The problem in evidence here is deeply structural. It goes to the heart of a social order which is structurally unequal, and where the patterns of advantage and disadvantage are structured by social class, culture, race-ethnicity, and gender. Cultural literacy is impotent to address this structural malaise. At most it might put marginal groups back into the position of their forebears who gained credentials, only to find them inflate. To be sure, there are advantages for elite interests in having a culturally educated population. But the deeper structural—antidemocratic—realities militate against the interests of subordinate groups being promoted.

Moreover, it is no answer to say that cultural literacy does provide "hooks" for Others to connect with and relate to because Hirsch's canon of cultural knowledge contains items that appear to reflect the knowledge and experience of marginal groups. Tokenism does not constitute *recognition*. Culture is not a surface phenomenon only as "thick" as print on a page or as "deep" as a curriculum item (in Hirsch's case, one of 4,700 to be covered) treated verbally by a teacher or by reference to a bookish source. Cultural meanings, values, and experiences are deeply layered and have a complex texture. They are lived practices and representations, as deep as life itself because they *are* life. They are the outcomes of struggle, mediation, resolution, and creation. They whirl across the stage of history like a semiotic storm. To treat them as less than this, as a form of semantic inevitability, as in the literacy and pedagogy championed by Hirsch, is to deny and distort

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them. It is to risk premature closure on meaning. Worse, it is to practice pedagogy as domestication, to "shore up the status quo."[43]

What, then, is to be done? The answer provided by proponents of *critical* literacy is to create and practice forms of literacy that have genuine democratic and emancipatory potential. This involves recognizing the other side of literacy, which so far we have not addressed. In our discussion of recent developments in the politics of literacy we have focused on studies which reveal the nature and role of literacy as a buttress of prevailing social structures and relations and the hierarchies of interests inherent in them. Literacy, however, can be and has been made into forms which play an important part in attempts by subordinate groups to politicize themselves and to engage in action aimed at challenging existing structures of inequality and oppression and pursuing democratic alternatives. This theme has important contemporary associations with Paulo Freire and numerous lesser-known radical educators, as well as with a wide range of popular and community-based initiatives. The chapters by Bee, Jules, Searle, Rockhill, and Anderson and Irvine in this volume provide empirical examples of work in this tradition, which also has important roots in the past, notably within self-education initiatives undertaken by working-class folk in England during the nineteenth century.[44]

This is the tradition embraced by the emergent critical literacy project. To situate this project intellectually and politically and to distinguish it from other projects that might lay claims to the same name, it is helpful to consider a range of meanings that have been given to the qualifying term *critical*. Although the meanings that follow are by no means exhaustive, they are sufficient to distinguish liberal and conservative appropriations from emancipatory democratic versions and to account for the various positions represented in this book.

Critical literacy as paradigm and pluralism

The first meaning of *critical* we will consider is one which has long been associated with the idea of liberal education as an engagement aimed at promoting intellectual freedom or freeing the mind from error, delusion, or prejudice. Wider and narrower variations on this theme exist, but in both

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cases the critical ideal is typically celebrated as detached and politically neutral. After coming under sustained attack during the 1970s and 1980s, this view is currently being reasserted by liberal/conservative academics, some of whom, like Bloom, are couching their offensive in terms of literacy.[45]

The underlying notion is that in their attempts over the millennia to make their world meaningful and to discover truths about it, humans have fashioned public traditions of thought and reasoning which enshrine impersonal procedures and content. These are critical traditions, or "systematic developments of reasoning"[46] exemplified in the academic disciplines like science, philosophy, history, and mathematics. They are rule-governed modes of inquiry: *discourses*. To engage them is to follow those rules and meanings—concepts, principles of correct procedure, evaluation, testing, and inference—that define what it is to *think*. In the words of Richard Peters,

> Developed forms of reasoning, which involve criticism and the production of counter examples, can best be understood as the internalization of public procedures and the different points of view of others [arrived at by way of employing these same public procedures]. The individual who reasons in this developed sense is one who has taken a critic into his own consciousness, whose mind is structured by the procedures of a [critical rational] public tradition.[47]

In this way, humans are able to rise above arbitrariness, irrelevance, prejudice, distortion, and falsehood. Learners must be initiated, through schooling, into awareness of these critical traditions and the ability to work within them. In part this is a matter of mastering concepts, techniques, and standards. It also, however, involves imbibing a range of attitudes such as concern for truth, consistency, relevance, impartiality, clarity, and honesty in appraisal and interpretation of evidence, and avoiding contradiction in thought and action.

These discourses are not entirely fixed and static, as even the most cursory reading of their histories reveals. But within a given time-space there tend to exist dominant paradigms of each: roughly, what Kuhn refers to as "normal science"[48] and Harris as "mainstream or orthodox discourses."[49] Competing discourses typically exist alongside the dominant ones. But inso-

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