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Critical Pedagogy and Participatory Democracy: Creating Classroom Contexts that Challenge “Common Sense”

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Abstract

In this response to “The Political Nuances of Narratives and an Urban Educator’s Response,” the authors applaud Pearman’s critical approach to deconstructing and challenging narratives of heroic figures who single-handedly change the world and agree with him that these narratives restrict the sense of agency that may propel citizens to become actively involved in social change efforts. We argue that it is important to question why these narratives exist and to understand them in light of the hegemonic capitalist structure that exploits the masses in service to the capitalist class. Although we agree with Pearman that democracy is best served by the participation of every individual in society, we question that common sense coupling of democracy and capitalism and argue that this coupling is integral to the success of the ruling class to maintain the status quo. We find his work of critical importance such that teachers may create classroom contexts that enable students not only to desire to take part in civic responsibilities but also to feel capable of making important contributions that shape society, including challenging the relations of domination across antagonisms: poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, et cetera.

In response to:

Pearman, F. A. (2014). The political nuances of narratives and an urban educator’s response. *Democracy & Education*, 22(1), Article 1. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss1/1>

TODAY MORE THAN ever it is imperative that we as educators take seriously our role in preparing the next generation of citizens who will lead us into the future. The catastrophic state in which the world exists under global capitalism cannot continue without permanent damage. Humanity is suffering through the terror of war, poverty, racism, sexism, and other antagonisms; animals and other life forms are facing torture and extinction; and the Earth is spiraling toward apocalyptic disaster as a result of the plundering of our natural resources (Smith, 2013). Our unbelievable complacency and resignation at the atrocities that occur in the service of capital has paved the way to a “culture of cruelty” (Giroux, 2011a) in which we find violence and suffering to be exciting, even entertaining. Within this hyper consumer culture,

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oppression and dehumanization are rationalized through a Darwinian ethos that claims inequality as “natural” and “just.”

Pearman (2014), in his article “The Political Nuances of Narratives and an Urban Educator’s Response,” provided critical insights into the ways society’s narratives render us powerless to change the world we live in even when we recognize injustice. In this short response to Pearman, we highlight the important contributions of his article and link his work to the critical tradition, specifically the coupling of democracy and capitalism and the making of “common sense.”

Pearman pointed out that the narratives of social movements that we internalize (his article dealt specifically with the civil rights movement) are told in children’s books, in the media, and in other hegemonic sources, creating heroic figures admired for their extraordinary courage and other presumed unique qualities that mark them as superhuman. He argued that the image of a singular hero who saves the day can be counterproductive to a democracy because it discourages political participation and civic duty among the general population who may feel deflated by the need to meet the standards established by these larger-than-life figures. He pointed out that, in fact, the real stories of social movements do not start or end in the moments of triumphs that are often highlighted, nor are they the result of the actions of one or even a few key individuals. Rather, he argued, the events that are often romanticized in the narratives of the civil rights movement were the result of long-term efforts that involved the participation and hard work of many courageous individuals working collectively.

Ideologies of heroic figures who single-handedly change the world serve to maintain the hegemonic structure of society by restraining any sense of agency that may propel citizens to become actively involved in social change efforts. When we are led to believe that change occurs as a result of extraordinary heroism, most of us are unlikely to believe that we may be capable of meeting such a challenge, especially when the figures we wish to emulate, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., have been built up to superhuman status. Instead, top-down narratives suggest to the average citizen that “there’s nothing we can do” about society’s injustices except to wait patiently for the superhero who will fly in and change the course of history with his (and to a lesser extent, her) magical powers. Consider the multibillion-dollar industry of superhero comics and films, which sell the same narratives. Indeed, we observe a lack of personal agency and sense of impotence in our own students in social justice classes at our universities. Further, frequently absent among them is the ethos of collective agency and organizing in solidarity toward common goals that is so necessary for social change.

In our view, narratives of hyper-heroes that are bigger than life, sanitized, and flawless also align with narratives that vilify others, giving credence to ideologies that dichotomize human beings as either all good or all bad. Yet human beings are much more complex than these simplistic tropes suggest. In order to further advance the gains of the civil rights era, it is imperative to break down such tropes that often fuel negative race relations and pit racialized groups against each other. While narratives of the civil rights movement present the great heroes of the Black

community, it is likely that within this framing, Whites may be perceived as the villains, which may push them away from participating as powerful allies to people of color and other marginalized groups. This would be a great loss to the civil rights movement, but even more detrimental is the dichotomizing effect that takes place outside of the context of the civil rights movement. Stock stories primarily vilify people of color in contrast to the White community that is presented as intelligent, courageous, and moral. The crediting and/or blaming of specific individuals is an approach that reduces structural phenomena to simplistic problems that may be easily remedied without confronting broader systems of oppression.

An important point is that the depiction of the civil rights movement as having to do with the rights of the Black community excludes the fact that the civil rights movement included numerous other marginalized groups seeking social justice for themselves and working in solidarity with the Black community. The absence of these stories is not an accident but rather a way in which to circumvent continued solidarity among diverse marginalized communities that together could present a significant challenge to the status quo.

These narratives that seemingly tell the truth but create ideological distortions rob us of our agency through a focus on key figures, concealment of the stories that reflect the collective nature of social change, and distortions and half-truths. These and other approaches evidence Gramsci’s (1971) argument that what is perceived as “common sense” are ruling-class ideologies to which society is so thoroughly socialized that they are internalized as “normal” or “natural” and rarely questioned. The common sense notion that there is something very special and unique among those who are associated with social change efforts allows most of us to simply accept this idea as “obvious, natural, and true,” without investigating if there is evidence to support this claim. Such common sense creates consent among the majority of people who believe themselves incapable of making changes because they lack such extraordinary characteristics. The atrocities that persist in the world are, thus, merely accepted as inevitable, as we believe most of us cannot do much to change the large-scale oppressions that exist in the world. Pearman’s strategies for breaking down the narratives, developing counter-narratives, and bringing in new stories that are often left out of narratives are, in effect, breaking down the common sense notion that social change is a hero’s charge. Students who understand these lessons well will no longer simply assume this to be the case in new efforts or social issues they learn about; they will likely ask who else was involved, what facilitated the hero’s rise, what organizations made the hero the spokesperson and why, and who were working behind the scenes to make things happen.

According to Gramsci, hegemony is maintained through a combination of consent and coercion. However, he argued that in most advanced capitalist nations, such as the United States, consent was crucial since the people would be unlikely to accept extreme overt coercion or any sort of police state, since this would bring into question another very important common sense notion—that although not perfect, the United States is the greatest and most

democratic nation in the world. If a critical mass of people were to question the coupling of the United States and its hypercapitalism with democracy, we would see significant economic, social, and political upheaval. The reason why we are a relatively politically stable society even though we are, among industrialized nations, one of the most unequal, is because of this belief that even though capitalism may not be perfect, it provides the greatest freedoms and the best standard of living across the world.

There is ample evidence that what is foundational to democracy is the antithesis of capitalism. The coupling of capitalism and democracy was created by a well-orchestrated campaign to discredit the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Dean, 2012). While important to encourage participation in the political process and civic responsibility in order to improve our current conditions of life in the United States and across the world, we must also vehemently decry the notion that capitalism, which by definition is founded on unequal relations of domination, could ever hold up to democratic ideals. Democracy embeds the idea that every human being has both the right and the social responsibility to participate in the decisions that affect him or her as members of a society and that the neglect of even one person's contribution is a unique loss to that person and to the whole of society. This ideal for equal participation is not possible within a capitalist society where inequality precludes equal participation. However, the coupling of democracy and capitalism has been made into common sense by a strategic bombardment through all media outlets to develop a sense of national pride, expound the virtues of capitalism, and redefine its Darwinian ethics into entitlement, as well as to vilify any communist states or any other socialist regimes or movements. The same effort to challenge the common sense notion that capitalism and democracy are closely aligned is crucial so that we may unravel the narratives that together create a structure of consent that works at macro and micro levels of society.

We agree with Pearman that every citizen must participate in a democracy and find his or her work of critical importance to teachers. It is educators who can create classroom contexts that enable not only the desire in students to take part in their civic responsibilities but also the sense of agency, such that they feel capable of making important contributions that will shape the future of our society and the world we live in. We would go further and argue not only that students must be able to recognize the hidden ideologies within narratives about specific movements, such as those of the civil rights, but that they must also be led to understand how social movements can be co-opted and made to be understood in ways that are linked to the broader capitalist structure of our society. For example, it has been argued that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1969) call for a "radical reconstruction of society itself" (p. 315) has been strategically domesticated into a call for moderate reform (Street, 2014). In this way, he could be made into the Black American hero who would evidence progress in the struggle for racial equality without any real challenge to the White supremacist capitalist structure of society.

Deconstructing historical narratives in classrooms in order to reveal the hidden ideologies that limit democratic participation, as well as the instructional practices of naming, recovering, comparing, and transforming, offers clear examples of critical pedagogy at work. Critical pedagogy, based on Freirian principles (1971) and advanced through the vast scholarship of Giroux (2011b), McLaren (2015), and others, aims to develop among students and others a critical consciousness of the social conditions of the world and the role of the oppressed and oppressors. Central to critical pedagogy is the idea of transformation and a praxis of liberation—the notion that through theory and action, the oppressed must lead the process of transforming the world and liberate both the oppressed and the oppressors. We believe that it is most fruitful for critical scholars to stand together in solidarity and to name their work as critical in order to build a strong base for social change that will help us collectively challenge capitalism, racism, sexism, and other antagonisms that are inexorably linked and that we must work in concert to eradicate (Gimenez, 2005; Monzó & McLaren, in press). Our goal to challenge oppressive structures requires the democratization of all our institutions and all our citizens. Toward this end, Pearman's work makes an important contribution.

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