

Can Critical Pedagogy be Greened? [appeared in Educational Studies, Spring, '03]

C. A. Bowers, Adjunct Professor of Environmental Studies,
University of Oregon

Abstract

The question that frames the following analysis of critical pedagogy theorists is one that will become increasingly important as awareness of the connections between economic globalization and the ecological crisis become more fully understood. The following analysis brings into focus the deep cultural assumptions that critical pedagogy is based on, and how these assumptions are also shared by the forces behind the current stage of Western colonialism. The analysis also brings into focus the differences between advocating emancipation based on critical reflection and curricular reforms that take account of local non-monetized cultural traditions and eco-justice issues that can most easily be addressed through curricular reforms.

In reading the writings of Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux, among others, it is clear that there is no one interpretation of critical pedagogy. McLaren's call for a "revolutionary" critical pedagogy, along with his recommendation that Che Guevara become the model for radical teachers, appears quite different from the ideas that Freire promoted during the last years of his life. For example, in Mentoring the Mentor (1997), Freire warns against teachers imposing their ideas on students. He went further by claiming that teachers must respect the students' cultural identity and believe in "the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors." Freire also reiterated his long held idea that the "fundamental task of the teacher is a liberatory one" (324). Giroux echoes Freire's somewhat muted call for liberation in his appeal to teachers to become "transformative intellectuals"—which he repeats in an article that appeared in EDucate, (a new journal published in Pakistan.). Edmund O'Sullivan's book, while based on the Brian Swimme/Thomas Berry interpretation of evolution, also foregrounds transformative learning in the title of his book—thus presenting an interpretation of critical pedagogy that takes account of the ecological crisis. However, the differences

among these theorists are minor compared to the assumptions they share in common. Thus, the question, “Can critical pedagogy be greened?” is intended to bring into focus whether critical pedagogy can be used as the basis for educational reforms that address the cultural roots of the ecological crisis. That is, are the shared assumptions supportive of global educational reforms that will have a smaller ecological impact?

To ask whether the core assumptions underlying the various interpretations of critical pedagogy can be greened also requires a brief explanation of how the term “greened” is being used. I am not using it in a way that raises the question of whether the agenda of critical pedagogy might be more effectively advanced within the various state level green political parties. Rather, I am using it in a more general way; one that encompasses a wide array of ecologically informed concerns that range from the cultural causes of global warming, the loss of cultural languages that encode local knowledge of biodiversity, the impact of economic and technological globalization on different cultural traditions of self-reliance, and the need to develop an ecologically based form of consciousness as an alternative to the modern, individually-centered form of existence. Any discussion of whether a theoretical position can be greened must also take account of the fact that many of the world’s cultures have developed knowledge and moral systems that have kept environmentally destructive market practices subordinate to principles of moral reciprocity within communities and between humans and Nature. Other cultures have well-developed traditions of economic and technological self-reliance but have failed in the area of creating moral norms that prohibit the unjust treatment of certain groups, such as caste systems and patterns of economic exploitation. While these are important concerns, the focus here will be on the shared characteristics of ecologically-centered cultures, and the culture practices that represent alternatives to the western model of the technological and consumer dependent individualism.

The answer to whether critical pedagogy can be greened requires comparing the shared core assumptions of theorists such as Freire, McLaren, and Giroux, with the core assumptions underlying the earlier and current phase of the Industrial Revolution—and which are now the basis of modern consciousness. The suggestion that critical pedagogy theorists share more with the traditions of western colonialism and the industrial ravaging of the environment is made with full recognition that they are critics of capitalism,

globalization, and the industrial model of production. While Marx was also a critic of capitalism, he shared many of the deep cultural assumptions it was based on: the need to think in universal terms, the disdain for peasant and indigenous cultures as backward and thus in need of being brought into the industrial age, a linear view of progress that also assumed the West's leading role in establishing the new revolutionary consciousness that would replace the backward traditions of other cultures—and in supplying the elite vanguard of theorists, and an anthropocentric way of thinking that reduced Nature to an exploitable resource (in the interests of the masses rather than for profit).

If we examine the shared core assumptions of critical pedagogy theorists we find the same contradictions. Their arguments against capitalism as a global economic system of exploitation distract attention from the deeper taken-for-granted assumptions they share with this environmentally and culturally destructive tradition. Unfortunately, as these assumptions are also shared by the largest segment of American society, and are promoted by universities and public schools, most followers of critical pedagogy do not recognize that they are like the disruptive members of an extended family that have radically different priorities and thus can never get along with each other despite their common heritage.

A more careful examination of the shared core assumptions underlying critical pedagogy yields a negative answer to the question of whether they can address the cultural roots of the ecological crisis—and to recommending curricular reforms that classroom teachers will put into practice. Theorists such as O' Sullivan may take seriously environmentally informed educational reforms, but then the question becomes whether he is still in the critical pedagogy camp or has moved beyond. There are efforts by other critical pedagogy theorists to address the anthropocentric basis of critical pedagogy thinking that offers hope for further change. But if these efforts continue to leave unchanged the other core assumptions the result would not be similar to the way the language of sustainability has been embraced and distorted by corporate culture.

The following core assumptions underlying critical pedagogy need to be compared with the assumptions that underlying the current state of Western colonization. One of the primary purposes of this comparison is to make explicit the contradictions and double binds that lie behind the rhetoric of emancipation and social justice.

1. Critical pedagogy is based on the assumption that there is only one approach to non-oppressive knowledge and cultural practices: namely, critical reflection or what Freire called conscientization. While critical pedagogy theorists represent critical reflection as their contribution to the fight against human oppression, an entire book could be written on the different ways in which the value of critical reflection has been understood and practiced in the West since the time of Socrates. Another book could be written on how the mythopoetic narratives of the world's cultures have privileged different approaches to knowledge, including how to encode and renew it in ceremonies, the communal arts, and in technological practices. As the writing of critical pedagogy theorists focus exclusively on critical reflection as the basis of a "liberatory praxis" and to becoming a fully developed human being, these other approaches to knowledge production and intergenerational renewal are to be ignored. Critical reflection is also central to the scientific method, and to the scientism that is now giving further legitimacy to the current spread of neo-liberal thinking. University trained experts working to create new technologies and markets also rely upon critical reflection in order to go beyond traditional ways of doing things.

In addition to there being other cultural ways of knowing, which are brought out by Third World writers in such books as Wolfgang Sachs' The Development Dictionary: The Guide to Knowledge as Power (1992) and Frederique Apffel-Marglin and PRATEC's The Spirit of Regeneration: Andean Culture Confronting Western Notions of Development (1998), there is the problem of whether individually-centered critical reflection moves people to act in new ways and to reach consensus. Universities continue to be the main centers of critical reflection and there is little evidence that it leads to consensus except when everyone shares the same assumptions. The last point that needs to be brought out is that the project of imposing on other cultures this Enlightenment way of thinking, with all its other culturally specific baggage, is no different from universalizing the Western industrialized approach to food production and consumption, forms of entertainment, and consumer-based subjectivity. I will say more about critical reflection when the issues related to eco-justice are taken up.

2. Critical pedagogy theorists share another assumption with industrial/corporate culture, and that is that change is a progressive force that requires the constant

overturning of traditions. The industrial process succeeded by undermining community traditions of self-reliance, and by reinforcing the myth constructed by educational institutions and certain traditions of theology that represented autonomy as the highest expression of individualism. The irony that is still generally ignored is that the autonomous individual was (and continues to be) seen as being more dependent upon the market to meet the needs of daily life. Critical pedagogy theorists echo Freire's injunction that each generation should rename the world—that is, free themselves from the traditions of their community. In an interview with the editor of EDucate, McLaren restates this central theme of Pedagogy of the Oppressed when he states that “I see the role of the teacher as that of transforming the world” (2002, p. 22). He goes on to identify concerns I can easily agree with, such as world hunger and homelessness. But he does not recognize that addressing these issues within different cultural settings and bioregions requires relying on the intergenerational knowledge of local agricultural practices and ecologically informed approaches to the building of dwellings—most of which have been destroyed by the western model of production and consumption. To repeat, the industrial model requires replacing local traditions of self-sufficiency with a world view that represents change and individual autonomy as expressions of progress. This process is carefully and insightfully documented in Helena Norberg-Hodge's book, Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh (1991). The emphasis on change, transformation, liberatory praxis, and the continual reconstruction of experience—to bring Dewey into the discussion, has led critical pedagogy theorists to ignore what needs to be conserved, which is a question that each culture is best qualified to answer in terms of their own understanding of what contributes to self-reliance and moral reciprocity within their bioregion. Instead of learning from other cultures such as the how the Quechua people have resisted European colonization and the tragic case of the modernization of Ladakh, critical pedagogy theorists who enjoy the material comforts and safety of a university environment continue to make pronouncements that are to be applied across the world's cultures-- pronouncements that actually represent the high-status pattern of thinking within the West.

3. Critical pedagogy is based on an anthropocentric view of human/Nature relationships. While they correctly criticize the industrialization of Nature, they continue

to represent the critically reflective individual as the highest expression of life. What is needed is a different set of core assumptions that would enable them to explain, as Gregory Bateson as done so well and as many indigenous cultures have worked out in daily practices, how humans are nested in cultures and cultures are nested in and dependent upon natural systems. This silence on the part of leading critical pedagogy theorists contributes to the widely held view that humans can impose their will on the environment, and that when the environment breaks down experts using an instrumentally based critical reflection will engineer a synthetic replacement. Any attempt to eliminate the anthropocentric basis of critical pedagogy will need to take account of Gregory Bateson's ecological view of intelligence as well as how non-anthropocentrically based cultures such as the Quechua and the Northern Cree rely upon intergenerational knowledge as the source of self-reliance and as a defense against being subjugated by the forces of modernization. The silence of leading critical pedagogy theorists on the issue of anthropocentrism also prevents them from aligning themselves with Third World cultures that are attempting to resist the Western model of development. McLaren and the others can write about emancipating cultures from domination, and even give interviews in a journal published in a Muslim culture on the importance of adopting the western model of revolutionary socialism, but behind the façade of their rhetoric is a hidden process of colonization to a western way of thinking.

4. Critical pedagogy reinforces the western idea of the autonomous individual who, after critical reflection, can engage in a praxis free of oppression. While the idea of the autonomous individual has been criticized in critical pedagogy literature, they overlook the fact that critical reflection, even when carried on in group settings, ultimately reinforces the western idea of oneself as being an autonomous thinker. The emphasis on a western approach to literacy, according to linguists and anthropologists such as Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, and Jack Goody, reinforces the western experience of being an autonomous individual by creating a spectator relationships to accounts of events and ideas that are presented in the abstract form of the printed word. Literacy, as they argue, reinforces patterns of social relationships not found in orally-based cultures. In orally-based cultures, participation is the central feature of life rather than the analytical and decontextualized judgment that fixed texts make possible. The point here is that the

emphasis of Freire and his many interpreters on the importance of critical reflection reflects their bias toward literacy-based cultures and their view of predominately oral-based cultures as backward. Freire, for example, once referred to orality as “regressive illiteracy.” As many people recognize, oral cultures are more centered on intergenerational traditions which tend to get in the way of the supposedly free-play of the laws of supply and demand and the constant introduction of new technologies. Literacy, in addition to its many positive attributes, enables producers to get their message to individual consumers. It also enables individuals to think for themselves (as the myth has it) and thus to act independently of the norms and customs of their community. A point that Ivan Illich made years ago is that literacy, and the critical mode of thinking it reinforces, creates both individual autonomy and dependence upon markets. He also observed that literacy was essential to extending the political power of the state in ways that undermine vernacular cultures. To sum up, critical pedagogy theorists reinforce a form of individualism that is more supportive of global markets and the agenda of the WTO than the orally based and intergenerationally connected cultures that are resisting the western model of development. As this criticism is likely to be dismissed because it does not fit the messianic Freirean vision of universal emancipation I suggest that support for my criticism can be found in the writings of Third World activists such as Vandana Shiva, Gustavo Esteva, Grimaldo Rengifo, and Ashis Nandy.

5. The critical pedagogy emphasis on critical reflection as the only legitimate source of ideas and values upon which behavior can be based, along with Western scientists such as E. O. Wilson and the late Carl Sagan who are claiming world hegemony for their brand of empirically based critical reflection, contributes to undermining the mythopoetic narratives that are the basis of a culture’s moral system, ways of thinking about relationships, and its silences. Some mythopoetic narratives, as we are witnessing in the Middle East and elsewhere, are the source of domination within their own culture, and over their neighbors. But many of the world’s mythopoetic narratives are the basis of moral reciprocity and living within the limits of natural systems. The exclusive emphasis on critical reflection contributes to ignoring the importance of knowing the constitutive role that mythopoetic narratives play in the formation of cultures that have been able to limit market activities to a constructive though not dominant aspect of daily life. Some

mythopoetic narratives have led cultures to define wealth in terms of relationships, while other mythopoetic narratives have led to defining wealth in material terms—and as an unlimited quest that undermines the well-being of others. By ignoring the nature and importance of mythopoetic narratives, and by focusing only on those that reinforce patterns of domination, critical pedagogy theorists fail to provide criteria for recognizing which mythopoetic narratives need to be reinforced. McLaren continues to suggest that Marxism should replace all other mythopoetic narratives, while E. O. Wilson wants to replace the conceptual and moral basis of other cultures with the scientific story of evolution—and neither McLaren nor Wilson acknowledge that they really are proposing the foundations be laid for a world monoculture based on a conflict model of politics. Again, we see the problem of imposing a way of thinking, in the name of emancipation guided by experts, on a world where biodiversity is becoming increasingly dependent upon the survival of cultural languages and knowledge systems—including the environmental ethic that many indigenous cultures have already developed.

These criticisms of the core assumptions shared by the different critical pedagogy theorists have to be balanced by an equally brief discussion of areas in which I as well as other environmentalists are in agreement with them. McLaren and Giroux are essentially correct in seeing globalization as a continuation of western colonialism. And their criticism that globalization creates poverty while enriching corporate elites, and that the agenda of the WTO to privatize the commons (public water systems and other services—including education) are also to be taken seriously. But these areas of agreement, along with agreement that social justice issues of class, race, and gender remain largely unsolved, is undermined by the core assumptions they share with the modern form of consciousness that equates economic globalization with progress.

The critical pedagogy theorists' commitment to universal prescriptions on such important cultural issues as equating change with progress, the individual as the critical and transforming agent, anthropocentrism, and so forth, puts them on a different pathway of development than is reflected in the sub-title of the book edited by Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith, The Case Against the Global Economy and for a Turn Toward the Local (1996). Resistance to globalization, as well as efforts to live less environmentally destructive lives, are taking many forms at the local level—and within different cultures.

The Chipko movement in India, the introduction of local currency in communities in North America and Australia, the recovery of small farms where traditional chemical-free agriculture is practiced, the movement toward relying on ecological principles of design of buildings and manufacturing processes, and the revitalization of cultural ceremonies and mutual support practices within communities, are all examples of the local and culturally diverse nature of resistance. Within indigenous cultures in Mexico greater emphasis is being placed on relocating learning within intergenerationally connected communities. And among the Quechua of the Andes, government sponsored schools are being pressured to incorporate into the curriculum the ceremonies and relationships to the chacra that characterize life in the community. In effect, Quechua communities are no longer accepting the idea that the school is the source of modern knowledge that is superior to their own culture-- which goes back thousands of years and has created one of the most diverse varieties of edible plants. Resistance is local among other indigenous cultures in other parts of the world. And it is in these face-to-face, intergenerationally connected cultures that we find the strongest resistance to the new biotechnologies (such as the terminator seed program that Monsanto was forced to abandon), the patenting of local knowledge of medicinal plants, and the pressure to adopt the industrial model of production and consumption.

Ironically, it is the university-based theorists who have had no direct experience with the resistance movements within indigenous cultures, and the theorist in Third World universities who have studied under supposedly radical western professors who view these cultures as backward—and in need of emancipation, that are giving support to globalization even as they criticize it. The double bind in the thinking of these theorists is that their core western cultural assumptions prevent them from contributing to the different expressions of resistance taking place at the local level. Calling on teachers to be transformative intellectual, which is the main messianic message of Freire, McLaren, Giroux, and lesser known advocates of critical pedagogy such as Ira Shor and Svi Shapiro, is too abstract and thus disconnected from the solutions that various local groups, here and in other cultures, are trying to work out in the face of corporate pressures to commodify all aspects of daily life.

An Eco-Justice Approach to Teaching and Curriculum Reform

Instead of the tendency to represent educational reform in terms of different processes (Dewey's method of intelligence, Whitehead's process approach to the creative moment, Doll's romanticized interpretation of dissipative structures and chaos, Freire's emphasis on conscientization, and the constructivist theories of learning that are now widespread in teacher education programs and public schools), I would like to suggest on-the-ground reforms that will enable teachers to incorporate local culturally practices in ways that contribute to resisting the spread of hyper-consumerism and the industrial mode of production that it depends upon. Both are a scourge on the environment, the viability of families and communities, and destructive of cultural identities. But first I want to explain the aspects of eco-justice that educational reforms can most effectively address, and how these reforms relate to global issues.

In *Educating for Eco-Justice and Community* (2001) and in a later journal article (2002) I identify four eco-justice issues that have particular relevance to greening the classroom that go far beyond what is learned most environmental education classes. They include: (1) helping students understand the causes, extent, and political strategies necessary for addressing environmental racism; (2) clarifying the nature of the ideological and economic forces that are perpetuating the domination of the South by the North; (3) revitalizing the non-commodified forms of knowledge, skills, and activities within the communities represented by the students in the classroom— thus enabling them to participate in mentoring relationships that will develop their talents and interests, and to experience other community-centered non-monetized relationships and activities that will develop a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the community; and (4) helping students recognize the many ecologically informed changes in individual lifestyles and uses of technology that will help to ensure that future generations will not inherit a degraded environment.

Helping students recognize and participate in community alternatives to industrially-based consumerism, as well as to helping them to understand the legitimating role neo-liberal ideology (which is generally mislabeled as “conservatism”), needs to be the focus of educational reform if the rate of environmental degradation is to be reversed. This approach to reform is also vital to helping to preserve the diversity of the world's

cultures. A small segment of the world's population now consumes many times its rightful share of the Earth's resources, while the majority of the world's population sinks further into poverty—which at the same time is being exposed to media images of excessively materialistic lifestyles. These images of material success deepen the plight of the poor by the delegitimizing their cultural traditions that previously were the basis of their self-reliance. With few exceptions, public schools and universities in the West promote the ideas and values that equate a consumer/technology dependent lifestyle with success and with becoming modern—and the belief that these values should be spread to the rest of the world. If this process of cultural imperialism is to be reversed, it will be necessary to implement educational reforms that go beyond a process approach to learning. Students need to learn about specific aspects of their own culture, as well as those of other cultures, which are currently left out of the curriculum. And what they need to learn is directly related to reducing their dependence upon consumerism, to enhancing democratic decision-making through an understanding of how new technologies often undermine traditions of intergenerational knowledge that range from the preparation of food to how to preserve the biodiversity of the forest, and to developing an ecological form of consciousness that is aware, as Gregory Bateson put it, that “no part (or culture) can have unilateral control over the whole” (1972, p. 316).

Revitalizing the commons, that is the community-based alternatives to the growing individual addiction to consumerism requires a different mind-set than the one critical pedagogy theorists share with the promoters of globalization. The suggestion that one of the front lines of resistance to globalization is in the vitality of communities should not be interpreted as an appeal to turning the clock back to the Norman Rockwell romantic images of simpler and less materially driven communities. The role that education can play in contributing to the revitalization of the non-commodified aspects of community life requires helping students recognize the differences between commodified and non-commodified relationships, activities, and forms of knowledge. Second, students need to understand the importance of the non-commodified dimensions of community life—which will involve critical inquiry and participation. It will also involve asking the question: what aspects of intergenerational knowledge needs to be conserved and renewed because of its importance to leading more community self-reliant lives?

Engaging students in these aspects of community revitalization is profoundly different from the cultural mind-set promoted by critical pedagogy theorists where everything is to be subjected to critical inquiry on the assumption that all intergenerational traditions have to be transformed in ways that fit the limited time perspective and, therefore, judgment of the teacher and students. Criticizing capitalism, the WTO, and other out-of-control aspects of western culture are important educational activities, but they do not help students recognize the constructive face-to-face alternatives that exist within the various cultural traditions that make up their communities, and within non-western cultures. Unless students learn about the many forms that community self-reliance can take, they will have little basis for recognizing that there are alternatives to being dependent upon shopping malls and media-dictated personal identities.

The last point I want to bring out is that revitalizing the face-to-face intergenerationally connected traditions and practices that represent points of resistance to the incessant drive to expand markets will require the rectification of our political language. As both Confucius and, more recently, Wendell Berry have pointed out, language should accurately represent relationships and what one stands for. The rectification of our political language requires that asking the question “what needs to be conserved in the face of relentless technological change and the monetizing of every aspect of daily life?” not be interpreted as reactionary. If we are to hold accountable such people as President George W. Bush and Rush Limbaugh, we need to ask what it is that they want to conserve. The answer is that they want to conserve the agenda of Classical Liberal thinkers. That is, while they want to be identified as conservatives, they are actually reactionary thinkers who want to impose on the world the ideas of 18th and 19th century British thinkers who were laying the conceptual foundations for colonialism. And if we ask the individuals and groups often mislabeled as liberal—environmentalists, labor unions, people engaged in community renewal, Third World activists—we find that they want to conserve habitats, diversity of species, linguistic diversity, living wages and gains in the protection of workers, community traditions of mutual support for even the most vulnerable members, and the ceremonies that are the basis of renewing cultural identity and patterns of moral reciprocity.

If critical pedagogy theorists are to “green” their proposals for educational reform, they will need to address how critical reflection can play a constructive role in determining which non-industrial and non-monetized traditions need to be conserved and renewed at the local level. They will also need to recognize that the members of different cultural groups may have a better understanding of the traditions within communities that are the basis of self-reliance and source of resistance to globalization, and that their voices should not be dismissed as the voices of oppressive traditions that need to be overturned by “transformative teachers” –or by teachers who take Che Guevara as their model. We need to remember that Che was unable to speak the language of the indigenous groups in Bolivia he was trying to liberate, and as a speaker of Spanish he represented the language of five centuries of European oppression. For critical pedagogy theorists to join the discourse surrounding the environmental crisis, which will have an even greater impact on the billions of already poor and marginalized people, it will also be necessary to recognize how the deep conceptual patterns reproduced by their language corresponds to the deep conceptual patterns of the neo-liberals who are pushing the agenda of globalization. If they can make these changes, the rectification of language may require abandoning the idea that critical reflection is the only source of knowledge. It may also require contributing to the language that will more clearly articulate how to integrate social justice issues into a eco-justice framework.

References

- Apffel-Marglin, Frederique. Editor with PRATEC. 1998. The Spirit of Regeneration: Andean Culture Confronting Western Notions of Development. London: Zed Books.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1972. Steps to an Ecology of Mind. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bowers, C. A. 2001. Educating for Eco-Justice and Community. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Bowers, C. A. Winter, 2001. “Toward an Eco-Justice Pedagogy.” Educational Studies. Vol. 23, No. 4. Pp.401-415.
- Freire, Paulo. Editor with James W. Fraser, et. al. 1997. Mentoring the Mentor: Critical Dialogue with Paulo Freire. New York. Peter Lang.

- Giroux, Henry. July, 2002. "Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals". EDucate. Vol. 2. No. 1. Pp. 46-49.
- Mander, Jerry, and Edward Goldsmith. 1996. The Case Against the Global economy and for a Turn to the Local. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- McLaren, Peter. July, 2002. "An Interview for EDucate." EDucate. Vol. 2, No. 1. Pp. 19-23.
- Norberg-Hodge, Helena. 1991. Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- O' Sullivan, Edmund. 1999. Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21st Century. Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press/Zed Books.
- Sachs, Wolfgang. Editor. 1992. The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power. London: Zed Books.
- .