Title: Differences that Make a Difference--Between Emancipatory/Transformative Learning Theories and Educational Theory that Addresses the Revitalization of the Commons

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There are a number of differences that separate the discourse of emancipatory/transformative learning theorists from the discourse that addresses the revitalization of the commons. The task of extending our own thinking about the importance of revitalizing the commons, as well as the contributions that can be made through educational reforms, can be made easier if we have a clearer understanding of these differences. Thus, the following is intended to serve as the foci of our discussions when we next meet in Victoria. This list of issues should not be viewed as exhaustive. If members of our group have other issues they want to add to the agenda, please let Rebecca know what they are—and whether you intend to present them in the form of a paper or as topics for discussion. And if any of the following issues motivate you to write down your thoughts in the form of a paper, that would be highly useful for all of us.

Differences that Separate the Two Discourses:

1. The emancipatory/transformative educational theorists (Dewey, Freire, McLaren, O'Sullivan, etc.) represent their culturally specific assumptions as being universally shared. That is, they view the educational goal of emancipation and transformative learning as the ideal that should guide educational reform in all of the world’s cultures. One of the differences between the emancipatory/transformative learning discourse and the discourse of the commons is that the educational reforms of the latter are understood as varying with the characteristics of the bioregion and with knowledge systems and practices of the cultures that inhabit these diverse bioregions. The former discourse ignores both of these aspects of the commons. Their proposals for educational reforms, in being addressed to a universal audience that does not
exist, retains the characteristics of the messianic and colonizing way of thinking of other Western ideologies. Revitalizing the commons is not achieved by following the prescriptions of theorists who ignore both the ecological crisis and differences in cultural ways of knowing, but is achieved through a grass roots approach. Thus, the task of educational reform efforts is to assist the younger generation in recognizing the mentors in the community, and to help them understand the many ways in which the commons is being enclosured, the forces that benefit from enclosure, and the consequences of becoming the autonomous individual who is dependent upon the system of industrial production and consumption.

2. The increasing reliance of educational theorists upon scientific theories that supposedly explain cultural developments is radically different from the educational discourse that addresses the revitalization of the commons. Educational theorists such as Bill Doll and Edmund O'Sullivan see in Prigogine’s theory of “dissipative structures” and the Brian Swimme/Thomas Berry interpretation of evolution the justification for a pedagogy that fosters change and thus social progress. Both expressions of “scientism” are based on the Western myth that equates change with a linear form of progress. The educational discourse that addresses the revitalization of the commons relies upon a different set of conceptual categories. Whereas the theories of dissipative structures and evolution requires thinking of tradition as being in opposition to progress, thinking about the revitalization of the commons relies upon the distinction between what is shared in common and what is being enclosed (privatized and monetized). What is shared in common as well as the industrial forces that are undermining the world’s diverse commons are both examples of traditions, and the task for educational reformers is to help clarify which traditions contribute to the self-reliance of communities and have a smaller ecological impact, and which traditions are anti-tradition traditions that degrade the environment and contribute to the spread of poverty. The reliance upon scientism to explain cultural developments reproduces the same radical reductionism about the nature of
culture that is a characteristic of the scientism that underlies the thinking of the educational theorists.

3. The emphasis on emancipatory/transformative learning is based on many of the same culturally specific assumptions that are the basis of transformative corporate capitalism. Because of these shared assumptions the educator’s criticisms of corporate capitalism should be viewed as like the arguments and sense of alienation that occurs within an extended family. When the assumptions shared by emancipatory/transformative learning theorists and transformative capitalism are made explicit we find that both assume that change is progressive in nature, that the immediate experience of the individual or social group should guide decision-making, that critical inquiry is the one-true approach to knowledge, that this is a human centered world, and that the differences in cultural ways of knowing and traditions of self-reliance are to give way to the expectation that change is the central feature of everyday life.

The educational discourse related to the revitalizing of the commons, in recognizing the diversity of bioregions, cultural ways of knowing, and the need to live within the sustainable limits of natural systems, views transformative capitalism as the major cause of poverty, environmental degradation, and the loss of cultural diversity. By extension, it views transformative learning as contributing to the spread of economic and technological globalization.

4. The difference between critical pedagogy and a revitalization of the commons critique of capitalism and globalization is that the former is unable to affirm the importance of the diverse cultural traditions of self-reliance that have a smaller adverse impact on natural systems. In short, critical pedagogy theorists are unable to identify cultural practices that are more ecologically sustainable, nor are they able to explain why differences in cultural knowledge systems are essential to preserving biodiversity. What they represent as the alternative to capitalism is process thinking, which may take the form of reconstructing experience, each
generation renaming the world, becoming, teachers as transformative intellectuals, consciousness raising, and students constructing their own knowledge. Educational theorists who addresses the revitalization of the commons, on the other hand, face the challenge of connecting the curriculum with the on-the-ground non-monetized practices and relationships within the community. While critical pedagogy relies upon abstract theory, and borrowing from theoretical traditions that have ignored both the differences in cultural ways of knowing and the Janus nature of traditions, the revitalization of the commons approach to educational reforms requires a more ethnographic approach to making explicit the relationships and practices of a community. Developing the students’ critical awareness of community and environmentally destructive forces is also dependent upon ethnographic accounts of continuities and changes within the community—and by outside economic and ideological pressures.

5. The criticism is often made that any reference to face-to-face, intergenerationally connected cultures (including indigenous cultures) is the expression of romantic thinking. The reality, so this argument goes, is that we cannot go back in time nor can we turn our backs on the many expressions of social progress. The charge of romanticism, which is surely to come up in any discussion of revitalizing the commons, should be viewed as the expression of ethnocentrism. The educational theorists who are so quick to pin this label on others are the real romantic thinkers. That is, they assume that the different cultures of the world will abandon their own mythopoetic narratives and traditions in order to embrace the process-thinking panaceas by turning their future over to teachers acting as transformative intellectuals, to the ongoing processes of reconstructing experience and value systems, to achieving the highest form of their humanity by becoming critical thinkers and renaming the world (which the following generation will rename), by changing their culture in response to the transforming possibilities of a perturbation, and by letting natural selection dictate which cultures are to disappear. Educational theory that takes account of the diversity of cultural
knowledge systems and that is informed by cultural practices that either strengthen or weaken the commons is the one that is dealing with everyday realities and complexities. And the focus on revitalizing the cultural practices that represent forms of resistance to the further expansion of industrial culture is profoundly different from the context free and highly messianic discourse that relies upon the godwords of liberalism to defeat the forces of oppression.

6. Educational studies programs are educating another generation of teacher educators and education theorists who will lack the ability to recognize the diverse cultural roots of the ecological crisis, including how their own theories and prescriptions for educational reform contribute to the twin problems of globalization and environmental degradation. The grafting of multicultural education onto the core liberal assumptions of emancipatory/transformative learning theories fails to take account of the differences in cultural knowledge systems. That is, just as Freire, McLaren, Giroux, and their many followers have failed to acknowledge that their liberal assumptions cannot be reconciled with the knowledge systems of most of the world’s cultures, the next generation of professors of education are being educated to ignore the contradiction that is inherent in advocating a Western form of democracy and individual freedom for the rest of the world. Furthermore, the next generation of professors of education are learning to think within the meta-cognitive framework that will make it difficult if not impossible to recognize that the question that should be asked today is not how to change the world, which supports the mind-set of the industrial culture, but “what needs to be conserved in this era of ecological uncertainties?” This is the question that leads to recognizing and renewing the cultural practices that represent on-the-ground resistance to the current efforts to transform the world to the requirements of the industrial culture.