

Antonio Gramsci's Impact on Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of Antonio Gramsci's impact on the area of critical pedagogy. It indicates the Gramscian influence on the thinking of major exponents of the field. It foregrounds Gramsci's ideas and then indicates how they have been taken up by a selection of critical pedagogy exponents who were chosen on the strength of their identification and engagement with Gramsci's ideas, some of them even having written entire essays on Gramsci. The essay concludes with a discussion concerning an aspect of Gramsci's concerns, the question of powerful knowledge, which, in the present author's view, provides a formidable challenge to critical pedagogues.

Keywords

capitalism, class, collective, colonialism, commodification, communism, criticality, education

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci (1891 -1937) wielded a great influence on the critical education field.

The concepts he elaborated and themes broached such as those of hegemony, the intellectuals' roles, the factory council theory and the integral state have had a great impact on educational

thought. They have become central concepts in most discussions on the relationship between education and power. Education, from a Gramscian perspective, is viewed in its broadest context and not just in the context of the ‘Unitarian School’ (Gramsci’s notes on schooling in *Quaderni* 4 and 12 –Gramsci, 1975), therefore incorporating all elements of the hegemonic apparatus.

Gramsci’s major pedagogical philosophy would be the ‘pedagogy of praxis,’ inferred from his elaboration of the ‘philosophy of praxis’. Other issues concern the role of education and the ‘Integral State,’ the latter encompassing the heuristic political/civil society divide.

A number of writers/educators, who engage in a critical approach to education and who underline the political nature of education, subscribe to that movement of educators known as critical pedagogy. Gramsci is included in a major critical pedagogy website as a key source of influence on the area.ⁱ Focusing on schools, Peter McLaren (1997), who authored a piece with Argentinean collaborators on Gramsci (McLaren et al, 2002), defines critical pedagogy as being ‘fundamentally concerned with the centrality of politics and power in our understanding of how schools work’. (p. 167). This definition certainly applies to the broader area of critical education in general and would equally apply to the domain of adult learning, especially of the emancipatory type (English and Mayo, 2012). Critical pedagogy is basically concerned about the relationship of education and power. It deals with power/knowledge relations. Questions that arise within critical pedagogy include: Whose interests are represented by schooling and formal education? Whose history? Whose future? Whose ‘cultural arbitrary,’ to adopt Pierre Bourdieu’s term?

Broadly speaking critical pedagogy attempts to:

- create new forms of knowing, placing emphasis on dismantling disciplinary divisions and creating interdisciplinary knowledge.
- pose questions concerning relations between margins and centres of power in schools, universities, throughout society as a whole.

- encourage readings of history as part of a political pedagogical project that tackles issues of power and identity in connection with questions of social class, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, colonialism.
- refute the distinction between 'high' and low' culture with a view to developing a curriculum that connects with the people's life-worlds and everyday cultural narratives and gradually moving beyond that.
- give importance to a language of ethics throughout the educational process.
(adapted from Giroux, 2011)

This paper

In this paper, I shall deal with some of the main ideas, connecting with Gramsci's views, which recur throughout the critical pedagogy literature. I will do this with reference to a selection of exponents of this field. The list is by no means exhaustive and the main criterion for selection in this piece is the authors' engagement, and, at times, sustained engagement, with Gramscian concepts and writings. This would be in addition to their identification with the critical pedagogy field or, in the case of some, the strand of critical education which comes close to critical pedagogy; one cannot work to absolutes in this fluid area.

I include some of those exponents who are among the best known and widely published in critical pedagogy. They have often engaged with Gramsci's ideas in a sustained way and associate themselves with his concepts and influence. The figures to whom I shall be referring are Michael W. Apple, Antonia Darder, Paulo Freire, Henry A. Giroux, D. W. Livingstone and Peter McLaren. This discussion, however, focuses on ideas from Gramsci rather than individuals. The names and work of these exponents are therefore mentioned only in direct relation to these ideas and conceptual tools.

Politics of Education

The obvious distinguishing aspect of Gramsci's work and that of exponents of critical pedagogy is the emphasis on the politics of education. For Gramsci, education, viewed in its broader context, incorporates activities carried across the whole spectrum of 'civil society'. In Gramscian terms, this refers to the complex of ideological institutions buttressing the state (separations between state-civil and political society, and the ideological and repressive, are provided by Gramsci for heuristic purposes). Education, viewed this way, plays an important part in the process of political consolidation and contestation. This naturally lends itself to the work of people engaged in critical education and more specifically in critical pedagogy, as the earlier definitions from McLaren and Giroux would suggest. As Freire and others have argued, education is not neutral and is political. I am mentioning Freire here because it is no exaggeration to say that he is the most heralded exponent of critical pedagogy worldwide. And he was strongly influenced by Gramsci (Allman, 1999; Mayo, 1999, 2008, 2013). Another major exponent, Henry A. Giroux (see interview in Torres, 1998) heralds Freire as one of the primary exponents of a historically specific understanding of critical pedagogy.ⁱⁱ For Freire, in concert with other critical pedagogues, one must constantly ask: on whose side are we when educating? (Freire, 1970, 1993). Gramsci, for his part, sees education in its broader context as lying at the heart of the workings of hegemony itself, that major political theoretical concept which he elaborated and with which he is strongly associated, albeit without his ever having provided a systematic exposition (see Borg et al., 2002: 2).

Hegemony

Hegemony, a much used word in critical pedagogy, is not one of Gramsci's original concepts (few really are) since it dates back to the ancient Greeks and was later used by revolutionary political figures such as Lenin and Plekhanov. There are those who argue that it

made its presence felt even in the linguistics debates to which Gramsci was exposed, thanks to his mentor, Matteo Bartoli, when Gramsci was a *laureando* (first degree student) with a focus ('indirizzo' in Italian) on Philology at the University of Turin (Ives, 2004: 47). In the words of D.W. Livingstone, editor of an important compendium of writings on critical pedagogy, hegemony is 'a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class' (Livingstone, 1976: 235). Rooted in Marx's theory of consciousness (Allman, 1999, 2010), the Gramscian notion of hegemony is concerned with the exercise of influence and winning of consent. There are, *prima facie*, ambiguities in Gramsci's writings as to whether hegemony refers solely to this aspect of power or combines this aspect with the coercive elements as well. Readers need to bear in mind that Gramsci was simply jotting down notes (some more expansive than others) in prison for a future work and not preparing a manuscript for publication. This renders these ambiguities understandable, and yet they have given rise to different uses of this term by different writers and commentators. In short, hegemony is often said to refer to either one of the heads (consent) or both twin heads (coercion and consent) of Macchiavelli's Centaur. I personally favor the more comprehensive conception of hegemony, i.e. consent + coercion, since it is very much in keeping with Gramsci's notion of the 'Integral State'.

Gramsci presented hegemony as the means whereby social forces, manifest throughout not only civil society but also what is conceived of as political society (they are interrelated facets of an 'integral state'), are, as Peter D. Thomas (2009) underlines, transformed into political power within the context of different class projects. I would also add to this conceptualization the view that the integral state has a strong relational dimension.

Relational aspect of hegemony, pedagogy and the State

The relational dimension is basically evident in Gramsci's conceptualization of every relationship of hegemony being a pedagogical relationship. It is this aspect of hegemony, in Gramsci's conceptualization, which makes this concept ever more powerful for anyone engaging in a critical pedagogy. At its most basic level, it is a notion which deals with the social relations of capitalist production, the understanding being that changing these relations will enable us to go some way towards changing the mode of production itself. Gramsci's early and later writings on the factory councils are instructive here. These factory councils were intended to supersede the trade unions in terms of enabling workers to transcend the capitalist wage relation, to usher in a new conception of workers' control at the workplace. This view led to workers occupying the Turin factories and in so doing brought that part of the Italian peninsula close to a revolution. The factory councils were conceived of as educative agencies intended towards industrial democracy *tout court*. In Gramsci's view, they were to constitute the basis of the new workers' socialist state. In doing so, Gramsci emphasizes the relational aspect of that construct called the State. Transforming social relations of production constitutes an important step towards transforming the relational aspect of the State.

The Socialist State already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class. To link these institutions, co-ordinating and ordering them into a highly centralized hierarchy of competences and powers, while respecting the necessary autonomy and articulation of each, is to create a genuine workers' democracy here and now ... (Gramsci, 1977: 66; see Italian original in Gramsci, 1967: 206, 207).

Within critical pedagogy, this aspect of Gramsci's ideas is best taken up by D.W.

Livingstone (2002) with respect to his research and that of others in the Work and Adult Learning (WALL) project concerning paid education leave (PEL) involving Canadian automobile workers in Ontario. This research provides insights into, among other things, the sort of learning which workers derive from the plant and from PEL with potential for their

empowerment. I also took up this aspect (Mayo, 2005) with regard to my analysis of a centre for labour studies and its adult education work in my home country and university.

Hegemony, the curriculum and schooling

In terms of Livingstone's definition of hegemony, on the other hand, we notice its immediate relevance to the issue of schooling as a means of socialization into the current hegemonic relations and its potential for offering one of those spaces where these relations can be contested. The latter is even more relevant to education in its broadest context, also in terms of radical adult education which carves up spaces for people to challenge predominant hegemonic relations. It also offers potential for the work of educators and other cultural workers operating against the grain by being, as Freire and other Brazilians would put it, 'tactically inside and strategically outside the system'. The work of Freire, Giroux and Apple come to mind here. Freire comes to mind with his notion of non formal education offering spaces to challenge the status quo. Giroux, for his part, provides us with the notion of the mediating and potentially disrupting / reconstructing influences of cultural workers engaged throughout various institutions (schools, cinema, theatre, youth centres etc) that are viewed as agencies of what he calls 'public pedagogy'. Apple comes to mind with his work regarding which knowledge is ordained as 'official knowledge' and which remains subaltern, not least his early influential work on the curriculum as a contested terrain.

Michael W. Apple, a key figure in critical curriculum studies, is a self-declared neo-Gramscian. He also appears as a key figure in critical pedagogy on the Paulo-Nita Freire International Project of Critical Pedagogy website. He was one of the original group who

gathered together at OISEⁱⁱⁱ/University of Toronto in the 80s from where the term critical pedagogy is said to have been coined.^{iv} He would nowadays be more connected with the broader critical education field. His work is, however, a constant source of reference - almost de rigueur - among critical pedagogues. Among other things, Apple argued for the democratization of the curriculum (Apple, 1990; 1995) which he presents as a site of contestation mirroring other sites of struggle such as the state and the domain of textbook-publishing (Apple, 1986). All this relates to the notion of hegemony being constantly in flux and open to negotiation and renegotiation. The curriculum, according to Apple, is one space where dominant groups render their knowledge hegemonic and where also hegemonic contestation and renegotiation are carried out. He has been detailing the economic, political, and ideological processes that enable specific groups' knowledge to become 'official' (Apple, 2000) while other groups' knowledge is 'popular'. There are clear echoes of Gramsci here especially with regard to the Italian Marxist's constant fascination with and exploration of the interplay of the popular and 'established' forms of cultural production and how each draw from each other; suffice to mention Gramsci's fascination with Dostoyevsky's novels, partly because they draw on the popular serial novel.

Over the past two decades, Apple has critically examined those social movements that exercise international leadership in educational reform, viewing them also for their role in challenging existing hegemonic relations and providing possibilities for their renegotiation. His entire oeuvre denotes Gramscian influences, not least his most recent work (Apple, 2006, 2012), as the author uses such conceptual tools as 'hegemonic [social, historical] blocs,' 'good sense/bad sense,' and 'organic intellectuals,' besides discussing religious forms and content, among others.

One aspect worth highlighting here is what I would call the reconstructive nature of hegemony as opposed to simply ‘ideology critique,’ the latter associated with certain authors from the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Gramsci called for an ‘intense labour of criticism’ that must occur both before and following the conquest of the State:

...every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism and by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas among masses of men (sic)... (Gramsci, 1977: 12; see original Italian quote in Gramsci, 1967:19)

Apple echoes this approach through his work on the curriculum and on other aspects of critical teaching. Cultural action plays an important role here, being not an epiphenomenon that is confined to a superstructure and simply an emanation from an economic base constituting the sum total of the social relations of production. That would be quite reductionist in its orthodoxy and, in Gramsci’s words, could lead to that paralyzing sense of ‘grace and predestination’ (Gramsci, 1957: 75) which he associated with Maximalism (Gramsci, 1926/2012). On the contrary, it plays an important part in ushering in a new set of social relations and can contribute to creating a different social condition in which more, if not all, aspects of reality are supportive of a new class or social grouping. This has ramifications for a whole array of historically subaltern groups in society.

Despite his tremendous respect for the work of the Frankfurt School, particularly that of Adorno and Marcuse, Henry A. Giroux, a frequent writer of published essays on Gramsci (e.g. Giroux, 2002), subscribes to a clearly Gramscian conception of culture. He regards it as providing ample spaces that accommodate multiple agencies for change. In Giroux’s work, echoing the Gramscian influence on cultural studies, and in particular, the different waves of the British Cultural Studies tradition associated with the work of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Richard Johnson and Stuart Hall, the cultural is political in the same

way that the political is cultural. In this regard, he strongly echoes the importance given by Gramsci, influenced by Angelo Tasca, to the cultural within a socialist strategy: 'Socialism is organization, and not only political and economic organization, but also, especially, organization of knowledge and of will, obtained through cultural activity' (Gramsci in *Il Grido del Popolo*, reproduced in Clark, 1977: 53).

Giroux echoes Gramsci even further by emphasizing the political basis of pedagogy and the pedagogical basis of politics: every relationship of hegemony is a pedagogical relationship. It is for this reason that Giroux, like Gramsci, scours the broad terrain of cultural politics including children's beauty pageants, mass media, publicity boards and other adverts (notably Benetton adverts), the Disney Empire, films, popular music and art. He examines the way these forms of cultural production provide ruptures to or connect with the dominant discourses of the military-industrial complex (Giroux, 2007) and neoliberal-economic thinking (Giroux, 2008). He presents neoliberal thinking as often being allied with conservative values (this connects with Apple's writings on the New Right).

Culture and language

In this respect, the role of language becomes important and this might partly explain why critical pedagogy has attracted people from the language field or who engage with issues concerning the politics of language. They emerge not only from critical pedagogy (e.g. Alastair Pennycook, Jim Cummins) but also from beyond (e.g. Peter Ives, Tulio De Mauro, Franco Lo Piparo). Language was of primary concern for Gramsci (a philology student at the University of Turin before opting out because of physical ailments, declaring himself a full time revolutionary instead). He wrote extensively about the notion of linguistic hegemony and the nation state in his quest for a

‘national-popular’ language. Darder’s work on biculturalism, within critical pedagogy (she is the co-editor of an important Critical Pedagogy reader, Darder et al, 2008), comes to mind.

Parallels with Gramsci’s thinking regarding subaltern (‘spontaneous grammar’) and standard (‘normative grammar’) languages are invited through some of Antonia Darder’s writings over the last 20 years (Darder 2011), although she does not use these specific Gramscian terms. Darder, who is Puerto Rican and therefore an English/Spanish bilingual, insists on a need for a different way of preparing teachers in their work with bicultural students in the USA. This entails engaging the primary cultures of minority students in a process that does not remain at a superficial level (this has been one of the major critiques of multicultural experiences in education, seen as a form of containment) but which must go deeper. As Darder (2012) posits, educators must seek to create the conditions in which bicultural students can learn how to navigate critically in both cultures, recognizing the dominant / subordinate dialectic and ideological formations inherent in the colonial context. This recognition, however, should not be facile. Colonialism has always been complex and the colonized have often been skilful in appropriating aspects of the dominant culture for their own ends, something which connects with Gramsci’s thinking on wars of position. Instead, this recognition underscores the need for subaltern learners to not remain, as Gramsci would put it, at the margins of political life. What emerges from this kind of work is once again the importance of the cultural in the struggle for social change. Cultural work is perceived as a key element in a ‘war of position’ involving advances and retreats, transformative and survival strategies, part and parcel, once again, of negotiating relations of hegemony

Freire’s Cultural Action for Freedom.

Like Gramsci, Apple, Giroux and Darder, Paulo Freire too placed emphasis on the role of cultural work in the process of social transformation, with special emphasis on Latin American influenced popular education as an important vehicle in this regard. This position is best captured in his term ‘cultural action for freedom’ (Freire, 2000), the sort of action which precedes the seizure of official political power which, as Gramsci would argue, applying this to east and west, must be followed by what Freire calls ‘cultural revolution’. In Gramsci’s terms, the latter would entail the consolidation of the revolutionary gains by developing the apparatuses that form civil society, that civil society which buttresses the ‘Integral State’.^v

The role of intellectuals

The potential for change lies within these broad terrains. The role of organic intellectuals, including subaltern cultural workers (e.g. the teachers mentioned by Darder) and public intellectuals (quite evident in Giroux’s work), is analyzed in terms of their function in this regard. This echoes Gramsci’s examination, in his prison writings, of the role of intellectuals not for some immanent features they have but for their function in sustaining and consolidating or rupturing the current hegemonic state of affairs. This entails an examination of their role in the process of that ‘war of position’ in which many of them have to engage in order to be effective.

Readers acquainted with Gramsci’s ideas need no reminding that the subject of intellectuals was meant to be given a prominent place in the work he had in mind when jotting down notes and elaborating on others in what came to be known as the *Prison Notebooks*. These were preliminary ruminations for a work which was to last forever, ‘für ewig,’ the German phrase he adopted from Goethe.

Gramsci wrote copiously even before his imprisonment (see, for instance, his inconclusive piece on the ‘Southern Question’) about intellectuals and their role in directly or

indirectly sustaining hegemony or modifying it. He wrote about the grand intellectuals and the purposes they serve throughout Italian cultural and political life and in the cementation and disruption of social blocs such as the Agrarian Southern Bloc. He wrote about Benedetto Croce, Giustino Fortunato and ‘noblesse oblige’ Luigi Pirandello. He wrote about Filippo Marinetti and the Futurist movement, all part of a search to explore their function in society in terms of either blocking possibilities for change or, to the contrary, their questioning of assumptions concerning bourgeois society and ‘fin de siècle’ cultural residues. This was very much the case with his interest in Pirandello’s theatre, which he reviewed as theatre critic for *Avanti*, and the futurists, despite his basic political differences with them. In the Futurists’ case, he highlights the differences in a letter to Trotsky.

Gramsci however also looked at the subaltern intellectuals, namely teachers, notaries, priests, lawyers, medical doctors and literati, on the one hand, and engineers, managers, on the other, and their function on their respective sides of the North-South (‘meridione’ in Italian) Italian divide. The theme of intellectuals is an important one in critical pedagogy. Freire was among the first to take up a decidedly Gramscian approach in a Third World /Southern context. We see this clearly in his letters to Guinea Bissau (Freire, 1978) and most notably in letter 11 where the notion of organic intellectual is taken up, a notion which was quite widespread in the kind of popular education found in his native Latin America, especially among popular educators in the Christian Base Communities – ‘Comunidades Eclesiales de Base’ (the Spanish term used there).

As in other writings, Freire tackles, in this letter, the issue of the Portuguese colonial legacy in education which was very elitist. It restricted the attainment of qualifications to a small cadre of people who served as urban intellectuals having close links with and supporting the

colonial powers. He adopts Amilcar Cabral's notion (see Cortesão, 2012) of the elitist intellectual, in such a situation, having to commit 'class suicide'. In doing so, the elitist intellectual is 'reborn' as a revolutionary worker who identifies with the aspirations of the people. Freire's Guinea Bissau discussion of intellectuals is set in a context that is far removed from the first world contexts of most critical pedagogy academics. The issue of committing suicide is key to changing one's view of oneself as pedagogue to become a critical pedagogue. One begins to grapple here with the disturbing question, posed earlier, regarding the political stance we take when educating.

This immediately recalls Gramsci's notion of the revolutionary party (the 'Modern Prince') and movement assimilating traditional intellectuals to render them organic to the struggle for social transformation. In Gramsci's view, this struggle takes the form of a lengthy process of 'intellectual and moral reform'. The transformation of traditional intellectuals is an important revolutionary task for Gramsci. He might have seen himself, a product of a classical though incomplete formal education, as someone who could easily have ended up fitting the traditional intellectual category. His dropping out of university, owing to his physical ailments which made him miss exams, despite his billing by Matteo Bartoli as the 'archangel destined to defeat the grammarians' (see Mayo, 2009: 601), and early immersion in radical socialist politics, steered him in a different direction. He is however under no illusion regarding the task at hand, that of converting traditional intellectuals to ones who are organic to the subaltern cause and the party or movement supporting it. Despite acknowledging the virtues of the classical school, he knew that the intellectual education of the middle class reinforces the class position of its recipients. As he explained, with regard to the function of Southern intellectuals in Italy and the role language plays in this process (see Ives, 2004), this education can make them 'absolutize'

their activity (and make it appear disconnected from its social moorings). They can conceive of this activity as being superior to that of those who did not benefit from the same opportunity. His broadening of the concept of the intellectual, which can include foremen, party activists, trade union representatives and adult educators, since they perform the intellectual role of influencing opinions and worldviews, allows him to believe in the potential of subaltern groups in generating, from within their ranks, their own intellectuals. And Freire argues likewise in letter 11 of the Guinea Bissau book, namely that it is also necessary to generate from within the ranks of the subaltern a new type of intellectual whose thinking and activity help generate a new 'weltanschauung', a new world view. The lines he provides to this effect could easily have been lifted verbatim from translations of Gramsci's notes, in the *Quaderni*, on intellectuals and the organization of culture.

I would argue however that, if there is one critical pedagogue who has consistently taken up the issue of intellectuals and has even activated a project in this regard, then that is Henry Giroux. Gramsci is well known for his reviewing of the role of persons engaged in intellectual work. He views them as either being organic to a particular movement or set of relations, within a deeply entrenched 'historical bloc' (not to be confused with simply an alliance) or as persons whose organic function dates to a previous historical epoch that has been superseded (traditional intellectuals). This seems to have had a bearing on Giroux's thinking. Giroux's notion of a transformative intellectual (Giroux, 1988) is very much conceived of within the context of subjects who think and act in terms of transforming present unjust social relations. In short, they would be organic with regard to movements for social justice-oriented social change; intellectuals influencing the emergence of a set of more socially just relations, prefiguring a new form of society.

Public Intellectuals

Henry Giroux goes even further than that. In his more recent work and projects, Giroux calls for the return, in this age of infotainment, neoliberal acquiescence and ‘dumbing down,’ of transformative organic intellectuals who avail themselves of or carve out different democratic public spaces, including social media, print media, broadcasting, in addition to any possible teaching position they might have (unlike Gramsci, Giroux has written a lot on higher education). As noted, he writes about the ‘public intellectual’. In this regard, he is directing a project for one of the main progressive online reviews, *Truthout*. This entails exhorting progressive academics and other writers to share their ideas with a broader public in a manner that is not too academic but neither simplistic - shades here of Gramsci and his commitment to the media of his times, notably such outlets as *Avanti*, *il Grido del Popolo*, *L’Ordine Nuovo* and *L’Unità*.^{vi} The point to register here, once again, is that education occurs in a variety of spaces and not just in formal or non-formal learning settings.

The media in the form of community radio, online reviews and blogging spaces offer wonderful opportunities for cultural workers, in their broader role as educators, to act organically to the cause of political and social transformation. They would thus transcend their role as specific and organic intellectuals in a confined space to assume that of public intellectuals targeting a larger audience or readership. Giroux’s former colleague at Miami, Ohio, Peter McLaren, undoubtedly one of the most Marxist exponents of critical pedagogy, takes up the issue of intellectuals in his essay on Gramsci co-authored with Argentineans, Gustavo Fischman, Silvia Serra and Estanislao Antelo (McLaren *et al*, 2002). This chapter takes up Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual juxtaposing it against post-Marxist and postmodern interpretations of intellectual work and positing of the non-sutured nature of the social (echoes of Laclau and

Mouffe, 1985). They do this to discuss committed intellectual work within the context of a totalizing view of capital, indicating how ‘discourses are never immune from a larger context of objective labor practices or disentangled from social relations arising from the history of productive labor’. (McLaren, et al., 2002: 175) They foreground social class in the contemporary critical education debate, given its disappearance in the vogueish postmodern or post-structural literature that tends to throw out the class baby with the class bathwater (Livingstone, 1995). In another piece, McLaren and Fischman also critique the postmodern tendency to faddishly appropriate Gramsci to serve postmodern arguments, prioritizing language and representation over class politics and class struggle (Fishman and McLaren, 2005: 17). This is quite an interesting stricture given how much critical pedagogy itself took a postmodern turn in the writings of a number of exponents in the 90s. McLaren himself produced works in this vein prior to his later revolutionary Marxist orientation. He and his colleagues contend that the various forms of oppression, especially race, class and gender, are refracted through the international capitalist division of labor. What one deduces from these writings is that the committed organic intellectual needs to reconcile the various concerns of social movements with those of the ‘old’ Marxist movement to which Gramsci once belonged, given, once again, the totalizing, structuring force of capital.

The Question of Knowledge

One final issue worth dealing with in a discussion on Gramsci’s influence on critical pedagogy is the question of knowledge. Like Gramsci, critical pedagogues draw on a huge terrain of knowledge often focusing on the popular, something which Gramsci did not eschew certainly with regard to popular literature. Before one accuses him of restricting himself to the written word (a common criticism), one ought to note that Gramsci also saw revolutionary potential in

manifestations of what he regards as the ‘popular creative spirit’.^{vii} This includes forms of popular expression, including artistic and folkloristic expression (not to be confused with his more negative notion of folklore), which, in his time, could well have existed outside the sphere of capitalist economic production. It remains to be seen how much of these forms of production, for example games played out by political prison inmates involving regional teams during his period of incarceration, besides jazz and blues in the USA (see McLoughlin, 2009), for which he held a fascination, have retained their popular rural or proletarian character in this age. Critical pedagogues and especially Giroux, once again, have been illustrating how this age is characterized by specific forms of capitalist encroachment on and commodification of different aspects of our lives, focusing on one time public spaces and popular forms of creativity (Giroux, 2001).

The notion of a cultural war of position, as Gramsci indicated, works both ways. While Gramsci spoke of the need for a critical appropriation of the dominant culture, the capitalist hegemonic class, through its political and cultural think tanks and intellectuals, is ever so ready to prey on popular sensibilities and tastes in its quest for the search for new markets and products and therefore in its fetishization of new commodities. Nevertheless, the fascination with the contradictory nature of these activities, especially popular activities and leisure commodities, still appears in contemporary critical pedagogical literature where Gramsci’s influence, via the impact of Cultural Studies, has remained strong.

The notion of critical appropriation implies a critical interpretation of established cultural products against the grain. This is very much a recurring feature of Cultural Studies and other areas such as Postcolonial Studies –all dear to critical pedagogues. It also has implications for a recurring feature of Cultural Studies and another Gramscian-inspired area, Subaltern Studies,

which involves reading history against the grain. This connects with the point, adapted from Giroux (2011), made earlier regarding the task of critical pedagogues to ‘encourage readings of history as part of a political pedagogical project that tackles issues of power and identity in connection with questions of social class, ‘race’/ethnicity, gender, colonialism’. Cultural Studies has provided excellent specimens of this through work emerging from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, especially works such as Andy Green’s history (Green, 1990) of education and state formation in various contexts, the subject of a Ph.D thesis there. The Subaltern Studies group in India (Guha, 2009) engaged in reading, against the grain, the history of the country, during and especially after the British Raj. The inspiration from Gramsci, in most cases, derives from his own reading, against the grain, of Italian history and especially that of the Risorgimento and its aftermath. The so-called ‘unification’ of Italy is presented as a form of internal colonization leading to a ‘third world’ co-existing alongside a ‘first world’ within the same nation state, the industrialized North and impoverished ‘Meridione’.

Critical pedagogy can do with more work of this type. Non-Gramscian examples of this type of pedagogical approach appear in the work of the recently-deceased critical pedagogy exponent, Roger I Simon (Simon, 1992) and that major Italian critical educator, don Lorenzo Milani (1988). In Milani’s case, this is especially so in those letters where he articulates a strong defense of the right to conscientious objection to the draft.

Praxis

At the conceptual level, one notion remains prominent in the critical pedagogical field connecting Gramsci’s work with that of Freire in particular. This is the notion of praxis. Gramsci’s major pedagogical philosophy, inferred from his overriding philosophy, is the ‘Pedagogy of Praxis’. This is meant to connect with people’s ‘common sense’. Common sense,

as conceived by Gramsci, contains elements of good sense that however need to be rendered more coherent, less contradictory. The 'Philosophy of Praxis' must transcend 'common sense' in a manner, as Thomas (2009) and others explain, that is neither doctrinaire (a definitive system of ideas) nor speculative.

Praxis was also the process with which Gramsci was engaged because of his separation, through incarceration, from the world of direct political action (although political debates with political inmates also occurred within the prison precincts). Incarceration provided him with a critical distance from this world of action just as exile did to Freire, removing the Brazilian from an area which, he felt at the time, was 'roused for transformation' (Shor, 1998: 75). Gramsci's 'Philosophy of Praxis' implies a pedagogical approach given, as already indicated, that hegemony is an ensemble of pedagogical relations. The pedagogical philosophy to emerge from this body of writing by Gramsci is similar to Freire's pedagogy. It constitutes a 'Pedagogy of Praxis'. (Gadotti, 1996)

Like Gramsci, Freire too was isolated from his own political milieu: this was the Brazil of the early sixties, his homeland from which he was forcibly estranged by being sent into exile. He frequently spoke, especially in his conversation with Antonio Faundez (Freire and Faundez, 1989), a fellow exile in Switzerland from Chile (and the Pinochet regime), of exile as a form of praxis, of gaining critical distance from what he knew, the land that he knew. But, as with Gramsci, Freire adopted praxis as his central philosophical concept and key pedagogical tool for the coming into critical consciousness or 'conscientização'. This is the means whereby one can stand back from the everyday world of action to perceive this world in a more critical light. It is the sort of approach from Freire which another critical pedagogue, Ira Shor, calls 'Extraordinarily Reexperiencing the Ordinary' (Shor, 1984: 93). The common fount of

inspiration for both Gramsci and Freire here is Karl Marx and especially Marx's early writings, some of which were not available to Gramsci. It would not be amiss to assume that many critical pedagogues adopted this pedagogical approach not so much from Gramsci, at least not directly so, but from Freire whose influence even reached fellow Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal who would also influence critical pedagogy through his forms of communal theatrical representation, especially his 'Forum Theatre'. This theatre provided the means of enabling community learners to re-experience the ordinary extraordinarily.

Powerful knowledge

The question of knowledge, however, raises another important challenge for critical pedagogy, especially if we bring Gramsci into the equation. His notion of education extends beyond his discussions concerning the 'Unitarian School' in the two notebooks mentioned at the outset. Those notes, however, have stirred and continued to stir much controversy and debate. One of the challenges, in my view, is to grapple with the task of imparting and learning what Young and Muller (2010) call 'powerful knowledge'.

Gramsci deals with it in his notes on the 'Unitarian School'. In the words of Mario Alighero Manacorda, these notes can be read as an epitaph for the old classical school which was but cannot be any longer since the times for making it totally relevant had changed by the time Gramsci wrote them (in Gramsci, 1972: xxix). This school was considered wayward enough by Gramsci to justify the struggle for its replacement (Gramsci, 1971: 36; Gramsci, 1975: 499). He was however disappointed by the fact that the Gentile reform introduced by the Fascist regime struck him as being retrograde. There were skills and a kind of rigor which the old school gave and which, if democratized in terms of access, would stand people from a class aspiring to become a 'classe dirigente' (class which directs) in good stead, even if they might have to be

conveyed in a manner different from the traditional one. Latin had to be replaced, according to Gramsci, but there was need for a different and more culturally relevant body of knowledge that was equally effective to impart rigor, clarity of thinking and logic. The concern is with a type of education that does not sell working class children short in comparison with middle class pupils who can still obtain these skills, irrespective of whether they are offered by the school, through their materially rewarding cultural capital and what are nowadays referred to as ‘invisible pedagogies’.

This aspect of the curriculum debate is often conspicuous by its absence or given token presence in the critical pedagogy field. There is a lot of emphasis on popular culture, deriving from the influence of cultural studies. This is fair enough and important given its role in hegemony building or disruption. There seems to be little, however, on what, for want of a better term, we can call ‘powerful knowledge’. How do working class learners acquire this knowledge which equips them to stand their ground, without allowing this knowledge to become an object of domination? How does one appropriate this knowledge critically to recognize both its strengths and limitations and its historically contingent underpinnings? Freire partly dealt with this in his discussions on language in postcolonial settings. It is here that the challenge remains. As Gramsci argued with regard to language and other forms of the dominant culture (basic knowledge deemed essential, despite its historical origins and ideological underpinnings), mastery of this knowledge, albeit critically, one would add, is key to enabling subaltern groups not to remain at the periphery of social, political and economic life. Disciplinary border crossings, as mentioned in the earlier list of characteristics adapted from Giroux (2011), are important at one level to enable the learner to establish critical connections. In so doing, the learner avoids becoming a ‘learned ignoramus,’ as Donaldo Macedo (1994:21), another critical

pedagogy exponent closely connected to Freire, emphasizes, borrowing from José Ortega y Gasset.

On the other hand, excessive hybridization of the curriculum, allowing for little if any in-depth mastery (with strong classification, in Bernstein's terms) of knowledge that is powerful (Young and Muller, 2010: 16), would serve to shortchange learners. They can thus be fobbed off with a watered down curriculum. And this can come across as one of the major pitfalls of critical pedagogy, unless we heed Gramsci's strictures in the notes on the 'Unitarian School', those of others such as Lorenzo Milani in Italy and more recently Michael Young and Johan Muller.

Michael Young and Johan Muller (2010) are among two contemporary curriculum specialists who have been arguing along similar Gramscian lines, having critiqued different forms of progressive discourses on education that can easily translate into a watered down version of education for those who do not obtain the benefits (see Young, 2004), from elsewhere, of 'invisible pedagogies' (learning deriving directly from one's cultural capital).

Excessive emphasis on hybridization to the detriment of an in-depth study of certain subjects that have overcome the test of time regarding their being the key to power, can lead to superficiality. This can therefore deny access to the kind of knowledge that really matters in the real world. Young and Muller (2010: 16) argue for a future curriculum scenario, called Future 3 characterized by 'Boundary maintenance as prior to boundary crossing'. Future I is marked by strong classification and sharp disciplinary boundaries while Future 2 entails loose classification of study areas and hybridization. In 'Future 3,' it is 'the variable relation between the two that is the condition for the creation and acquisition of new knowledge'. (2010: 16) This scenario allows for some flexibility in crossing boundaries but retains some fixed ones around key disciplines.

Young and Muller argue that ‘access to powerful knowledge is a right for all not just the few, with a theory of “powerful knowledge” and how it is acquired and the crucial role of formal education in that process’. (Young and Muller, 2010: 24) They are somewhat tentative in their proposals just as Gramsci is when writing about his proposed ‘Unitarian School’. They connect their feelings towards Futures 2, a reaction to Futures 1, with Gramsci’s feelings towards the Rousseau-inspired ‘child-centred’ approach, prevalent in his time and that partly influenced the ‘Riforma Gentile’ (Gentile Reform), and traditional schooling. Young and Muller end their 2010 paper by quoting the famous statement by Gramsci to the effect that the active school is still in its romantic phase as it serves as a logical and radical alternative to the mechanistic Jesuitical school; it must eventually enter the classical phase (Gramsci, 1971: 32-33). In presenting what they call Futures 3, Young and Muller argue for an attempt at a rational balance between the traditional and the more ‘progressive’. They obviously found in Gramsci what, on Young’s admission (Young, 2013: 103), they did not find among educationists (and they criticize both ‘new sociology of education’ and ‘critical pedagogy’ exponents for this), namely insights for a new curriculum that is promising in preventing alienation and at the same time provides ‘really useful’ knowledge. It would be useful not in a reproductive sense but in enabling pupils from subaltern sectors to step up to a higher level of education. This education cannot be acquired solely from life itself. While a school can relate to life and make this the starting point of several learning experiences, it ought to do more than that if it is to serve its purpose. It ought to provide the next step that can take “students beyond their experience and enable them to envisage alternatives that have some basis in the real world...” (Young, 2013: 107). This requires mastery of some potentially powerful skills and knowledge, as augured by Gramsci in Notebooks 4 and 12.

Young was ironically instrumental in the rise of the ‘new sociology of education’ in the early 1970s (Young, 1971) which so much influenced critical pedagogues. His work has however recently taken a very different turn, emphasizing the issue of ‘powerful knowledge’, for children from subaltern social strata, and the epistemological questions it raises.

Conclusion

Critical pedagogy can ill afford to avoid the challenge posed by the need to acquire ‘powerful knowledge’, which is, after all, the political pedagogical challenge posed in the 1930s by Antonio Gramsci, and much later, in curricular circles, by the likes of Lisa Delpit (1988) with regard to Afro-American schooling in the USA and, as I have shown, Michael Young in the UK. On the other hand, it has much to offer in terms of complementing this rigour and mastery of powerful knowledge through its emphasis on the politics of schooling. One can impart this knowledge differently from the way it has been taught thus far (see Delpit’s interview – Goldstein, 2012).

Gramsci was under no illusion regarding the ideological bases of the very same knowledge he considered ‘really useful’. So, just to give one example, while he harped on needing to learn the standard language not to remain politically marginalized, he constantly demonstrated that the established Italian language was imposed in what amounted to ‘passive revolution’ (not rooted in popular consciousness). He harped on the need to help develop a ‘national popular language’ born out of a synthesis of all the other ‘spontaneous grammars’ existing throughout the peninsula. The challenge is to enable the learner or learners understand the ideological basis of language while mastering it. Learners thus become aware of the political ramifications of this choice of language.

Uncritically imparting and reproducing the dominant forms of knowledge would remain problematic for a democratic education. Gramsci was opposed to this. In the ‘Unitarian School’ notes, Gramsci refers to teachers who limit themselves to delivering facts as ‘mediocre’ (Gramsci, 1971: 36). He prefers this to simply a laissez faire approach which he feared the reform of his time would encourage, especially among working class kids. This however does not mean it constitutes the desired form of alternative teaching. He had no place for the mediocre in his life as confirmed by his letter concerning the dross apparent in his own initial education, which influenced his curricular choices (Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo: 4). He is well aware that, no matter how useful subjects such as Latin are in inculcating rigour, they have to be replaced (Gramsci, 1971: 39, 40) because times have changed. This connects with his views regarding established forms of culture and emerging or popular ones. The existence of one type does not preclude the other, with ‘synthesis’ being the desideratum for cultural renewal and development. The point to register for critical pedagogy, and which was well captured by Gramsci’s sense of a classical phase (conceived of as balance) needing to replace the romantic phase in education, is that any change, with a democratic purpose in mind, should be carried out warily. Otherwise it can result in throwing out the knowledge baby with the knowledge bathwater, with calamitous ramifications for democratic access, singularly and collectively, to power.

Notes

ⁱ See website of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Centre for Critical Pedagogy: <http://www.freireproject.org/content/antonio-gramsci-1891-1937> Accessed 14 June 2013.

ⁱⁱ That Gramsci wielded an important influence on Freire should not come across as much of a surprise. Antonio Gramsci had a great impact on the Left in Latin America from the ‘60s onward and continues to do so today, with a literature about this to boot (Coutinho, 1995; Fernández Díaz, 1995; Melis, 1995). Gramsci also exerted a tremendous influence on popular education, a major source of ideas for critical pedagogy (Ireland, 1987; La Belle, 1986; Torres, 1990; Kane, 2001). In the mid-eighties, Gramsci was heralded as “probably the most frequently cited Marxist associated with popular education” (La Belle, 1986: 185).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

^{iv} I am indebted to Edmund O'Sullivan, an OISE academic who was present at that meeting, for this information.

^v As Thomas (2009) underlines, Gramsci argued that different historical formations are at different levels in terms of their development of civil society. These formations differ in the quality of the relationship between state and civil society. This applies to both east and west and north and south. The hegemonic apparatuses need to be built and consolidated to become the channels of the ruling class's life-world (*lebenswelt*), "the horizon within which its class project is elaborated and within which it also seeks to interpolate and integrate its antagonists." (Thomas, 2009: 225). Thomas rightly points out that the ascent of this vision needs to be consolidated daily, if the class project (in Gramsci's view, the proletarian class project) is to continue to assume institutional power. (ibid) The implications for critical educational activity are enormous.

^{vi} Gramsci himself chose the name '*L'Unità*' for the Italian Communist Party's (PCd'I) representing a unity of all popular forces in a new historical bloc. His founding of the daily is recognized in each issue beneath the masthead.

^{vii} See the 1994 documentary 'New York and the Mystery of Naples: A Journey through Gramsci's World' produced by G. Baratta, distributors : Le Rose e I Quaderni. Features, among others, Dario Fo, Edward Said, Cornel West, Joseph A. Buttigieg, Giuseppe Fiori. <http://www.internationalgramscisociety.org/audio-video/index.html> Accessed 31 December 2012

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