

**Book Review Symposium: Spyros Themelis.** (ed) (2021) *Critical Reflections on the Language of Neoliberalism in Education*. New York. Routledge. ISBN 9780367629564

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In ‘Public Intellectuals, the Politics of Clarity and the Crisis of Language’ (2009) Henry Giroux discusses the presupposition that academics have been silenced and no longer have many opportunities to speak out on public issues, paving the way for Neoliberal (henceforth known as NL) critics such as Stanley Fish to make statements against the academic’s role in politics. Giroux has concerns regarding the oversimplification of language and how this favours NL. NL argues that using such dense, opaque language is unnecessary and if anything, is meant to confuse the general public, which is why it is seen as beneficial when language is simplified. Thus, unintelligibility became synonymous with the complexities of language, and simplicity was seen as the key to society. However, by disregarding the complexities of language or nuance, there is no room for debate. Debates create space for new social, political and educational realities. Without this though, we do not have sufficient room for change.

*Critical Reflections on the Language of Neoliberalism in Education: Dangerous Words and Discourses of Possibility* demonstrates, though, that society and

change are anything but simple and in order to see significant changes to advance society, we need to understand this complex language used, particularly in the context of Higher Education (henceforth known as HE). This book is a selection of essays with contributions from over 20 academics that could offer Giroux some peace of mind, demonstrating that not only have academics not been silenced, but they are very much involved in imagining alternatives to resist NL policies in Higher Education. This selection of essays invites the reader to understand that simplifying language isn't beneficial to society in any way, shape or form. If anything, it leads to more confusion and it enables NL to implement its policies.

The book is divided into two sections: the first part discusses 'Endangering Words' while the second examines 'Words of Possibility'. This selection of essays brilliantly demonstrates that we are encouraged to exercise criticality when examining the discourse in the context of HE. One overarching issue between both segments is understanding the nuance of language and that oversimplifying these words will not foster change. We must seek to understand what this ubiquitous but nuanced language means. This notion of nuance and why it's important to evaluate it is brought to our attention by Joss Winn and Yannis Pechtelidis. They are almost in dialogue with one another, provoking the reader to think how important it is to understand definitions, contexts and highlighting what Giroux desires of educators/academics to do. On 'Commodity' Winn offers an insight that 'an explanation is not a definition.' (2021. p. 55). Pechtelidis in his chapter 'Educational Commons' teases this idea out even further by stating that 'such concepts are created in the context of everyday life and thus are never final and fixed' (2021, p. 205). It is simply not enough to understand a definition of certain words used in a specific context, but we must analyze the meaning, hypothesize the significance, and actively engage with terminology Language is alive: it is everchanging, ever evolving,

and moves develops parallel to society. Social contexts offer definitions to words, and it is our duty to examine just how specific jargon has grown, changed and evolved. If we fail to do so and fail to understand how it has developed, we fall victim to exactly what NL has at the core of its agenda: lack of criticality due to the use of oversimplified language enabling NL to apply its policies with ease (Giroux, 2009).

Giroux states ‘clarity today too often legitimates not only simplistic writing but an absence of rigorous analytic thought. Clarity, with its appeal to simplicity and common sense, has become an excuse for abusing language as a marker of the educated mind.’ (2012, p. 105). Giroux advocates for the use of complex language, nuanced language because this encourages critical thinking. The endangering words section offers a lexicon that is ubiquitous and although in any other context seems unharmed, in this context it embeds a process of neoliberalization that ultimately shifts the meaning of these words from seemingly innocent to detrimental and complex.

This section demonstrates the dangers of the oversimplification of educational jargon and why we should probe these definitions even further. For example, while words like ‘social mobility’, ‘league tables and targets’, ‘employability’ and ‘ability’ are used as indicators to help students choose a university of their choice or think about how their education will be benefited as much as possible, authors Spyros Themelis, Patrick Yarker, Tom G. Griffiths and Bill Robertson demonstrate they allude to notions and concepts that perpetuate inequality. Upon further examination of these words, each author highlights how this lexicon promotes exclusion, inequality, the implementation of the human capital approach to humanity, reducing students to statistics, figures and exacerbating financial and social inequalities, all because of NL policies that are being implemented.

While ‘Endangering Words’ brings to the reader’s attention how nuanced language can be, there is a shift in tone when reading the ‘Words of Possibility’ section. The narrative in this half offers a discourse that enables the reader to envision just how they can resist NL. The reader is invited to understand *what tools* can be used to resist NL (such as ‘Revolutionary Pedagogy’), *what ways* these tools can be implemented (through ‘Alternative Education’, ‘Post-Critical Education’), in *what context* these alternatives can be found and cultivated (‘Utopia’, ‘Social Movements’) and *who* can enable these alternatives (as offered in the chapter ‘Educators’).

This section doesn’t focus solely on understanding how complex language is, but it offers a roadmap to readers by analysing the concepts each of these words reflects. Juan Ramon Rodriquez Fernandez captures the essence of this half by stating ‘a major goal in the world of education should be to analyse the multiple processes of dialog, interaction, and connection between the various discourses in the social and educational sphere’ (2021, p. 197). Every author who has contributed to this section has offered multiple meanings that open up room for dialogue. They are inviting the reader to interact with each word defined to understand just how important it is that all these bodies exist in this utopia that we dream of that will loosen the NL grip on HE. The reader is invited to engage with marginalised voices ‘beyond educational contexts’ where ‘alternatives attempt to define safe spaces through which the collective work of dismantling can begin’. (2021, p. 172). It isn’t enough to resist NL as individuals, we must unite as a collective to offer our personal insight to ensure that change can happen.

As the introduction states ‘nothing is inherently ‘dangerous’...however, the context within which they have emerged and the historical processes they allude to, make them dangerous to the participants’ (2021, p.6). This selection of

essays is an excellent tool for students and educators to have on their shelves as it encourages criticality, conversation, and ample examples to understanding how seemingly simple language needs to be analysed from every perspective possible. After the first step of understanding, we can then move forward to the next step, which entails imagining ways we can change our place in society and how we can actively resist the threats of NL. To quote Peter McLaren the readers of this text, alongside any educator use their vocation to create a society that is free from capitalist reign by using revolutionary pedagogy and understanding the nuances in language (2021, p.165). By understanding the complexities of language, we are able, as educators and activists, to understand the NL undertones used in the academic discourse and how we can oppose the implementation of NL policies.

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Since reading this book I have re-opened it various times to re-read and cite, in my work, several author's(s') definitions of terms I have come across many times and have not. In many ways, unfortunately, the increased frequency of me reaching for this book indicates the intensifying stranglehold of neoliberal ideologies in education globally. The normalization of neoliberalism within *and* from education due to top-down globalization (Santos, 2018; Torres, 2009)

highlights the crucialness of using this book to linguistically deconstruct the terms we use as critical academics and by the general public.

The entries' authors provide clear definitions of the terms and frames them within various key issues that are important for socio-environmental justice, as well as their contested histories. For example, Alpesh Maisuria gives a rich but condensed history of Gramsci in defining "hegemony" and provides key arguments of fatalism and false commonsense for readers to better understand the term. Many authors also provide various pragmatic, real-world examples. For example, Richard Hall discusses "immiseration," by discussing how current university systems' creating economic impoverishment for most students and employees outside of tenured(-track) professors and middle-to-high level administrators. Not using the term "immiseration" previously, I would have benefited from reading Hall's entry in my ecopedagogical work on how teaching that separates environmental violence from social injustice inherently leads to immiseration and, more directly paralleling his examples, writing on how economic crises due to neoliberalism systematically utilize university systems to further public spheres' immiseration (see Misiaszek, Jones, & Torres, 2011).

### **Part one: Dangerous**

Divided into two parts, the first part is "endangering words" (or "dangerous words" in the book's subtitle) and the second is "words of possibility" ("discourses of possibility"). The first part's terms are dangerous to anyone who believes education should be rooted in social justice and - I would ecopedagogically argue as inseparable - environmental justice and planetary sustainability without domination of Nature. The terms sustain and intensify *hegemony* (the book's fifth entry) while the second part gives terms of possibilities to counter hegemony. Many terms in Part One are inherently dangerous on their own without explanation or contextualization needed (e.g.,

“crisis”, “alienation,” “hegemony”). These terms’ meanings and intended goals are most-frequently veiled within hidden curricula to entrench neoliberalism most effectively. Other terms are touted and celebrated by neoliberals (e.g., “social mobility”, “employability”, and “ability”). In both categories, educators who truly understand, knowingly manipulate, and hide/tout the terms systematically have the same dangerous goal – hegemony through teaching ideologies of neoliberalism.

The latter touted ones are dangerous to socio-environmental justice and sustainability when specifically taught *through* neoliberal ideologies, *as* apolitical language, and *without* alternatives to either their (Northern) ways of knowing and intended outcomes. For example, Tom Griffiths and Bill Robertson define “employability” by building, in part, on the neoliberal premise that more *quality* education will directly lead to “better” employment. They problematize neoliberal rationality that bearing the increasingly high economic burdens of funding education should be placed squarely on students’ and parents’ shoulders rather than funded as a public good. Of course, as the authors indirectly argue, the (non-)ability to pay currently and/or in future loan student payments is purposely hidden within neoliberal rhetoric, as well as sustaining associated socio-historical oppressions (e.g., coloniality, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity).

Throughout the book, the entries’ authors explain words that we, as critical educators, often discuss and know but are often difficult to describe without utilizing additional difficult academic language. The book’s readership can be both those unfamiliar to most of the terms, as well as those very familiar with them. Placing myself in the latter group, reading entries had me often rethinking and reinventing my own reflections on my usages of the terms. Frequently I found myself asking “why dangerous?” – or, to be specific, dangerous to the

masses but touted by hegemonic entities. In the same regard, Part Two had me asking Why possibilities? and How can we teach *through* the terms to become utopic possibilities? I write this recognizing that the terms are often ignorantly spoken by many regarding education without recognizing that what they are touting is hurting them the most. Populist movements for Trump and Brexit comes to my mind here with Marx's argument that the best way to control people is to falsely teach them ideologies to believe that what actually has them suffering is opposingly "beneficial" to them.

### **Part two: Possibilities**

An interesting aspect of Part Two's title "words of possibility" is that the included terms could instead be named "endangering words" if the intended audience was (educational) neoliberalists. However, none of the current entries' writings would remain the same and neoliberalists would probably know better than to openly provide some of the terms that intrinsically provide possibilities to counter oppressive neoliberalism (e.g., "utopia", "reflexivity", "hope"). Other terms are open targets against neoliberalism, hidden or not, such as "social movements", "revolutionary pedagogy", and "socialism". The need for clear defining of these terms is crucial, exemplifying again this book's importance. One obvious example is needing to understand what "socialism" is to have any authentic dialogue on this often contentious term inside and outside of education. Coinciding with the previous Marxist argument given, this need can be exemplified by some lower socio-economic persons being interviewed on news channels proclaiming that Democratic U.S. presidential candidates (i.e., Obama, Hillary Clinton, Biden) must not be elected because they are "socialists" and they will take away their social benefits. Looking past the obvious arguments of the degrees these candidates are actually socialism-grounded (e.g., Bernie Sanders not becoming a final candidate is very telling), a key question is how does such taught ideologies that disconnects such basic



groundings to terminology lead to further oppressions and domination, as well as the thinning of democracy. Dave Hill's simplified defining of socialists' seeking "more equality for the working class... more 'equal opportunities' to climb up the ladder of educational success and occupational/economic success into an unequal society/economy" is essential to know. However, I recognize that their willingness to listen is far from guaranteed. Authentic dialogue and thick democracy are impossible without having shared agreements on what foundationally the terms we use mean, rather post-truthism is regrettably furthered.

### **Selection and Organization: Additions and reinventions**

There is no doubt that there are missing terms, but the book's selection of terms is very comprehensive. For example, I would argue, "accountability", "commonsense", and "development" (or, specifically, "Development" with uppercase "D" (see Misiaszek, 2020)) would be great additions to Part One. I write this acknowledging that there is an endless list of terms that could be added, with differing contextualities, languages and linguistic differences, specific disciplines and fields, historical positionalities, and other factors that would both add to the entries' list. It is important to note that my suggested terms are discussed throughout the entries quite extensively, except for "ecopedagogy" in which its essence is indirectly discussed without using the specific term itself. Again, I re-emphasize that no book, whatever the length, can have an all-inclusive list of terms.

One word that is discussed throughout the book but would have been interesting to include is "critical" itself. Current issues in the past few months in the U.S. have emphasized this need. This is a clear example of contextuality and historical positioning that make any selection of terms seemingly endless. "Debates" on the inclusion, or not, of critical race theories (CRT) in curricula

have been growing in intensity and, I would argue, in ignorance. The quotation marks around *debate* signify the large lack of any basic understanding of CRT by too many, but ignorance seems not to restrain such “debates.” I view this as an overall ignorance in understanding of what does *being critical* mean. As I have written previously on being a critical scholar in China (see Misiaszek, 2018), I have had colleagues tell me they are “critical”, but say the word is rooted in “criticizing” and, thus, against *being harmonious*. Such discussions are well beyond China. Recently in the U.S. I had a discussion with someone who recently learned about CRT but writes anti-racism outside of traditional academic publishing in very critical ways. This person argued that “critical” and CRT should be changed to be more accessible within public spheres. I argued that taking away “critical”, “critical race theory”, or similar terms from the public’s lexicon demonizes *being critical* and the histories of essential work upon and emergent from these terms.

In these cases, I have argued that what is necessary is dialogue on what “critical” and similar terms, including those in the book, means to “them” and to “others,” especially from those who are oppressed by what injustices the theories are countering (i.e., bottom-up approaches, stand-point theories). In addition, discussing what are ‘our’ shared goals, such as what does *harmony* and *being harmonious* actually mean, is essential to begin with. If this book was written specifically for readership in Asia, I would argue that “harmony” would be an essential addition.

### *Pedagogical possibilities of the book*

The book’s two opposing parts of danger and possibilities place terms, as well as the writing within each term, dependent on the epistemological foundations of the editors, writers, and targeted audiences. While reading I continuously problematized how the terms could be switched, reworded, and reframed by

differing these characteristics. Beyond being an invaluable source to read specific terms for emerging-to-expert scholars, I would argue the book is excellent to assign students to read entirely. There is limitless rich dialogue that can emerge in learning-spaces with these questions I have posed throughout this review, as well as many more. Some pedagogical questions with students assigned this book include the following: How did the author(s) framing of the term differ from yours?; Are there words that could be switched between parts if framed differently?; What are your examples and possible experiences of these terms?; and, What additional terms would you add and why?

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