

Critical Theory and the Human Condition: A Book Review Symposium

Peters, Michael, Lankshear, Colin, & Olssen, Mark. (2003). *Critical Theory and the Human Condition: Founders and Praxis*. Series: Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education, Vol. 168. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. Pp. viii + 288. ISBN 0-8204-5168-1. \$ 29.95 (softcover)

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Overview and Critique

This book addresses the thirst for knowledge of both beginner and advanced ‘screenage’ students of Critical Theory (CT), as it both provides a history of CT and develops a multitude of themes that relate to socioanalysis, politics, and philosophy. Throughout the 15 essays there are several common themes that reflect on CT and several other themes that use CT as a venue for questioning the status quo. The shared themes stem from the work of the founders and met primarily in the first part of the book, Part I – Labors of the Dialectic, and of which I will highlight selected few.

The Critical Theory movement began in the 1920s with a group of thinkers, also part of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt am Main, hence the alter name of the group, the Frankfurt School. Due to the rise of Nazism, the founders, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm, Frederich Pollock, Franz Neumann, and Leo Lowenthal fled first to France and then to the United States, where more joined, such as Jürgen Habermas and Maxine Greene. CT started as a Marxist critique of capitalist society, but it expanded to include non-Marxist ideas and objections to the traditional and meant to bring about change into the society rather than just understanding it. Critical Theory represents a shift in perception from traditional philosophy, for which “the subject was unitary, ideal, universal, self-grounded, asexual, and the foundation for knowledge and philosophy” to “the poststructuralist and postmodern critique [for which] the human being is corporeal, gendered, social, fractured, and historical with subjectivity radically decentered as an effect of language, society, culture, and history” (*Kellner, 2003, p. 67). Postmodern CT is an interdisciplinary and supradisciplinary ideological narrative, reinforcing the idea that theory is not neutral and that the values that guide its discourse are primarily connected to human reality and designed to serve, as Horkheimer would put it, “a happier humanity” (*Gur-Ze’ev, 2003, p. 19).

The dialectical nature of CT, the notions of liberation and transformation, subjectivity and agency, heterogeneity and concretism taken to cynicism come to light in all Part I essays. Ilan

Gur-Ze'ev notes that CT abandons a utopian view on theoretization and develops an approach on negative utopia, anti-positivism, and philosophical pessimism, while forcing us to think about *possibilities* and *critique*. Although not tackling educational theory, CT promises the possibility of progressive, revolutionary, and anti-oppressive pedagogy due to its liberating underpinnings. Thus, critical schooling is necessarily rooted into social and political realities, reconstructing and recreating ways to serve social interests towards a transformative education. Counter-education surmounts itself by questioning all its principles, methods, and outcomes. Robert A. Davis focuses on Walter Benjamin's "strategic and enabling" (*Davis, 2003, p. 41) approach to the end of modernity and his view that traditional cannot co-exist with the techno-virtuality in artwork. Colin Lankshear's defines Fromm's *having* and *being* as "two fundamental human orientations toward the self and the world" (*Lankshear, 2003, p. 55). Douglas Kellner notes that Marcuse's search for corporeal subjectivity prevails over the mind-body dualism, emphasizing "its aesthetic and erotic dimensions" (*Kellner, 2003, p. 81). James C. Conroy focuses on Arendt's belief that philosophy is necessarily political, and he illustrates with comments on the relationships between Jewishness and assimilation, labor and action, and happiness and democratic engagement. Grant Gillett talks about the necessity of social constructivism and consciousness through language. Robert Young looks at Habermas' meta-critique, its differentiation from skepticism, and the "structuration of discourse" (*Young, 2003, p. 125). Deborah P. Britzman and Don Dippo recognize the existence of multiple realities, and, extrapolating from the work of Maxine Greene, relate the shaping of the "existential problem of being and becoming" (* Britzman & Dippo, 2003, p. 135) to the practice of teaching, by creating situations in which students can ask the critical question of "Why?"

Part II of the book, *Projects and Movements*, challenges the hegemonic knowledge and its standards, and it advocates for transformative pedagogy and human agency in the hope of a humane and democratized future. Emphasizing that human freedom is a pre-requisite to critical thinking, Henry Giroux politicizes education in the context of power, values, and social relations. Peter Roberts' remarks on Freire's notions of humanization and liberation; Laurence Parker's warning about the dangers of color-blindness in legal and educational settings; Stephen May's arguments that cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism are not adequate solutions for minority and ethnic group rights; Erica McWilliam's remarks on subjectification and objectification of the

feminine; Tom Steele's statements about the influence of British Cultural Studies on CT starting with the Marxist criticism of the British capitalism; and Timothy W. Luke's critique of the relationship Nature – Human, as well as his differentiation between environmental and ecological trends in the context of informational ways of production and sustainable development are just several possible ways of illustrating the recurrent themes from Part I.

Far from being comprehensive, but neither pretending to be an encyclopedia of Critical Theory, this volume is a conversation starter for how the postmodern culture, pedagogy, and society is and should be shaped to support subjectivity and difference, democracy, decentralization of power relations, connectionism, transformationism, empowerment, self-advocacy, self-creation, emancipatory rights, social justice, and equity.

The recurring themes of this book are intertwined with our everyday lives. For example, Amartya Sen's approach on capabilities, which is reminiscent of Fromm's view, reunites "*being* and *doing* activities that people value and have reason to value" (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 32) under human functionings. Functionings and opportunity freedom, i.e. the opportunity to achieve and benefit from functionings, make up the Human Capabilities Approach, a critical conceptualization of welfare economics, that underline people's freedom "to enjoy some combination of functionings, allowing them to expand their capabilities" (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 36). *Having*, seen as entitlement and as a consequence of *being* and *doing*, does not limit its notion to materialistic substance, but expands to social networks and knowledge as internalized power. All these functional actions, based on freedom and hence democracy, elevate the human condition to a more humane existence in such a social order. However, all CT supporters denounce the centralization and hegemonization of free-market capitalism or neo-liberalism that usually functions in a democratic state, and not only. And yet, Muhammad Yunus, has developed an emerging new economic order and has won the Nobel Peace Prize for envisioning this possibility. The social business or the futuristic capitalism works with human multi-dimensionality and human drives to free the world from poverty. Will it? The society can always use the work of critical theorists, like the editors and authors of this book, to signal the trends and outcomes of continuous societal experimentations.

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On “Having” and “Being”

Critical Theory and the Human Condition by Michael Peters, Colin Lankshear and Mark Olssen is a collection of essays, in two parts, in relation to critical theory. As a scholar new to the field, the book offered an interesting and palatable introduction to the ideas associated with critical theory. The authors pay particular attention to the philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School in Germany, established in 1923 (*Peters, Lankshear &Olssen, p. 2). These philosophers, according to the authors, have not received proper consideration due to an academic shift to focusing upon later philosophers such as Foucault. The first half of the book focuses on various contributions made to the field of critical theory by various students of the Frankfurt school. The focus of this essay will be on Colin Lankshear’s assessment of the involvement of Erich Fromm in the field of critical theory.

Chapter three, entitled *On Having and Being: The Humanism of Erich Fromm*, investigates the contribution of Fromm to critical theory through his work associated with the study of human nature and its relationship to humanity in general. Lankshear looks at Fromm’s brand of humanism with particular attention paid to the way in which Fromm distinguishes the various ways in which people live their lives as related to the expectations of society. Fromm claimed that “the human unconscious ‘represents the entire person . . . and all of humanity’” (*Lankshear, p. 55). Fromm believed that the type of person somebody becomes is directly related to “which possibilities are cultivated and which are hindered and repressed” (ibid). Fromm, who was largely influenced by the work of Karl Marx, paid particular attention to what type of individuals society created in an industrial capitalistic society. Fromm divided people into two categories, as dictated by society, those in the “having mode” and those in the “being mode” (Lankshear, p. 56). Lankshear’s goal in his piece is to expose Fromm’s belief that people living in an industrial capitalistic society are in a highly “destructive, debilitating, and dangerous” (ibid) having mode of existence.

According to Lankshear, Fromm believed that “being” was the most enriching way to live and was the only viable choice for people looking for “self-actualization, fulfillment, and abiding peace” (*Lankshear, p. 56). Lankshear identifies aptly that Fromm’s belief that individuals who constantly look to finding happiness by the accumulation of things, whether material, physical, psychological prowess or otherwise, is key to understanding the relationship between human beings living within a particular culture. With an ever increasing globalized world, Lankshear identifies the prevailing shaper of humanity, in our day in age, as neo-liberal philosophy which is buttressed by laziness, greed and fear, as instilled by society to promote a culture of “having”. Lankshear pulls from two of Fromm’s beliefs that human beings have a “biological urge to survive” and “minimal instinctive determination” replaced with “maximal development of the capacity of reason” (*Lankshear, p. 57). While Lankshear claims that biological needs might further the “having” mode, the “being” mode is fueled by emotional desires, and therefore both forms are present in human beings and the form that prevails in society will be victorious due to the cultural norms and regularities fostering a particular type.

Lankshear uses two examples to expose the current state of affairs in terms of “having” and “being” in society today. He looks at this issue through the lens of what it means to “have” something in society today. Lankshear points out that the language that we use directly impacts the way in which we experience the world around us. The first example that he uses is an everyday headache. When a person says “I have a headache”, they are transforming “an experience into something [possessed]” (p. 58). As Lankshear points out, “The *I* of experience is replaced by the *it* of possession” (ibid). Instead, Lankshear points out, saying sore in the head would make more sense from a “being” perspective. This example seems to be a matter of semantics and misses an opportunity to explain in more detail the point that is being made. Saying *I have a headache* does not seem to be the best possible example, however it does demonstrate how language plays a role in the way that we interact with the world.

In English we often say *I love you* to express to a loved one the feelings that we are experiencing in relationship to them. We would not consider saying *I want you* to express our love to a family member or to anybody unless the usage suggested sexual desire or lust. On the other hand, in the Spanish language the phrase *te quiero* is used to describe love of all types including familial

love. *Te quiero* literally translates to *I want you*. Looking at this example, one cannot help but wonder the extent which “having” and “being” is influenced by the language that we use and to what extent this varies across cultures. An in depth analysis of this issue would be valuable and deserves further research.

Lankshear’s second example was, in my opinion, a better one. He discussed how the acts of “having” and “being” play out in the educational arena (Lankshear, 59). Historically, knowledge has been looked upon as a commodity, as a powerful entity that can be used to assert control over a population or has the potential to liberate people from oppression. Being a “knower” has historically implied possession of knowledge (ibid). This model of education has worked well from the standpoint of a “haver”. On the other hand, Lankshear discusses how much better education becomes when the experience of those involved in the process is that of “being” (ibid). Knowledge and the examination of it should be a shared goal of constant learning, unlearning, and relearning. Perhaps instead of looking at education as a competitive enterprise, one can look at it as a process that leads in various directions in which we are ultimately seeking consensus with those around us who are also experiencing the process and the interaction of the educational journey.

Lankshear offers some valuable insight into these issues in critical theory and has brought to light, yet again, the work of Erich Fromm. Some issues that merit further discourse would be the way in which culture plays into these issues. In addition, more discussion on the ways in which language shapes our understanding and our interactions with humanity and the world around us would be an attractive discourse. Furthermore, a deeper discussion on the ways in which capitalism and neoliberalism play into the concepts of “having” and “being” would be justified. Overall, Lankshear’s account of Fromm’s ideas helps bring to light ideas that may have been brushed aside unjustifiably.

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Inclusive Possibilities

The essays in Part 2 of this collection deal with Critical Theory: Projects and Movements, exploring critical theory's potential for 'deciphering the hieroglyphics of domination' (*Luke, p. 242), and challenging that domination from such vantage points as critical race, critical education, critical feminism, and critical environmentalism. Insisting upon the constructedness and fluidity of identity while simultaneously laying claim to sociohistoricized embodiments, these critical theorists unravel prevalent modernist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist discourses in and on their fields, ranging from the far Left to the far Right and generally recommending the continued mainstreaming of heretofore largely marginalized critical perspectives. These authors link various modes of critical theory to the practical social justice agendas they suggest, "from mass social programs like literacy and health campaigns, civil rights, feminist programs, and the like to more modest and localized efforts at the level of schools, communities, and classrooms" (*Peters, Lankshear and Olssen, p. 14).

In "Critical Race Theory in Education: Possibilities and Problems," Laurence Parker examines the tensions between color blind approaches and critical race theory. Referencing numerous studies exposing the former as "pretexts for racial discrimination" (p. 188), Parker argues that it leaves the status quo unchallenged. He explains that critical race theory, by contrast, "has emerged from the legal arena to uncover the deep patterns of exclusion and what is taken for granted with respect to race and privilege" (p. 193). While Parker builds his case persuasively, several of the specific examples he chooses raise key questions that he leaves unasked and unanswered. He references a "study of white Canadian preservice teachers as they professed antiracist attitudes, yet engaged in unknowing racist actions" (p. 196). Parker does not suggest that non-white subjects might also be examined for evidence of "unknowing racist actions" (p. 196), or that students have agency, too: They are not mere passive recipients of racist or nonracist teaching, but rather, they are capable of facilitating or obstructing such teaching, and they are capable of racism in their own right. Parker recommends the exploration of critical race theory's "connections to life in schools and communities of color" (p. 196), and moving beyond

the “black-white paradigm” to develop “a more ‘layered’ research discussion” (p. 196), without mentioning the significance of economic layers such as wealth, middle-class, working class, or poverty. People might have more in common with other people with similar socioeconomic situations than they do with people who share comparable skin pigmentations. He welcomes possible contributions from “various forms of feminist research from scholars of color” (p. 197), thus mainstreaming a group that might struggle with marginalization, but also possibly marginalizing scholars not categorized as being “of color.” Although Parker argues persuasively that the role of race must be acknowledged for effective research into the human condition, his implicit endorsement of the marginalization of the “dominant ideological racial context” (p. 197) remains incomplete without a just and sustainable challenge to the status quo.

Steven May and Erica May McWilliam interrogate many of these same themes of marginalization, completing the image that Parker began to sketch. In the following essay, entitled “Critical Multiculturalism,” May, demonstrates a greater awareness of the wider historical and economic context in which critical race, critical multiculturalism, or any critical theory must be understood. Presenting widespread “antiracist” criticisms of “idealistic, naïve” interpretations of multicultural education, May cites “the late Barry Troyna, who argued that ‘benevolent multiculturalism constituted an irredeemably ‘deracialized’ discourse, an approach that reified culture and cultural difference, and that failed to address adequately, if at all, *material* issues of racism and disadvantage” (* May, 2003, p. 200). May further cites Kalantzis and Cope to suggest that “diversity might become a positive resource for access rather than a cultural deficit to be remediated by affirmation of difference alone” (p. 201). May warns against the essentialism that has plagued liberally inspired multiculturalism: “This naïve, static and undifferentiated conception of cultural identity, and the allied notion of the incommensurability of cultures end up being not that dissimilar from the new racisms of the Right” (p. 203). He goes on to explicate the postmodernist critique of cultural hybridity, as well as its cosmopolitan alternative, before going on to develop a critical multicultural paradigm. May recommends that this paradigm must theorize ethnicity, acknowledge unequal power relations, critique constructions of culture and maintain critical reflexivity. With this four-pronged approach, May suggests that “critical multiculturalism provides a defensible, credible and critical multiculturalist paradigm that can act as a template for a more plural, inclusive, and democratic

approach to nation state organization in this new century” (p. 212). May’s critical theory thus emerges as far less essentialist and more inclusive than Parker’s.

In “The Grotesque Body as a Feminist Aesthetic?” Erica McWilliam brings a feminist perspective to the critical theory discussion. Challenging “Western epistemological traditions” (*McWilliam, 2003, p. 214) that have denigrated the body “as the excess baggage of human agency” (p. 214), McWilliam reviews feminist literature from the 1980s and 1990s that conversely, and sometimes even perversely recommended a “feminist imagining of the space of a freakish pedagogy. . . the grotesque body of carnival” (p. 218). McWilliam’s brief survey leads to her tentative conclusion that “the female grotesque [may draw] us to the edge of identity and the collapse of meaning – to a place that, as feminists, we would not go” (p. 220). While McWilliam’s limited literary review does support this contested conclusion, Martha Nussbaum’s extensive writings about the politics of the female body might complicate it and ever offer radical alternatives to it. For example, in *The Class Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future*, Nussbaum analyzes the Gujarat anti-Muslim program of 2002 to reveal the tendency for “shame and revulsion at the signs of one’s bodily humanity” (p. 189) to be turned by politically emasculated or otherwise disempowered groups outward into violence against symbols of human frailty, such as women and bodies:

Humans also typically need a group of humans to bound themselves against, who come to symbolize the disgusting and who therefore insulate the community even further from its own animality. Thus, every society ascribes disgust properties – bad smell, stickiness, sliminess, decay – to some group of people, who in this way further insulate the dominant group from what they fear facing in themselves. . . Women in more or less all societies are assigned this role: they are the bodily (smelly, sticky) part of human life from which males distance themselves, except when they cannot help being drawn by the lure of the disgusting. (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 206-207).

Perhaps if McWilliam were to incorporate Nussbaum’s insights, she might rethink her general rejection of “the grotesque body as a feminist aesthetic,” recasting it as leading not to “the edge of identity and the collapse of meaning” (p. 220), but rather to the necessary adult acceptance of the ultimate vulnerability of all human beings. McWilliam says, “So what women make of the

grotesque body is dangerous, given what it can make of women” (p. 220), but the same can and must be said of what critical theorists make of all bodies, male or female, grotesque or “normal.” We must avoid the temptation to insulate ourselves against those parts of ourselves we fear most, including our femininity, our frailty, our grotesqueness, our foreignness, our otherness, or any manifestation of our final human frailty.

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* all references marked with an asterisk are extracted from the book reviewed herein.

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