Dialogic Action for Critical Democracy[1]

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Abstract

In this essay, the author discusses schooling in the context of war, privatization, and the general neo-liberal shift in education. Specifically, the author reflects on the experiences of three schools in Medellin, Colombia, that are found in the cross-hairs of an ongoing civil conflict. In contrast to the prevailing ideologies and social conditions that limit the full range of possibilities made available to youth to develop their full human potential and participation in civic life, the author makes an argument for critical democracy based on Freire's notion of dialogic action. Liberal and deliberative models of democracy grounded in Western social theory are also discussed.

Introduction

I begin this essay with a series of reflections following an excursion to my native Colombia, where I had the opportunity to visit three different schools near the city of Medellin. Colombia has a unique history of ongoing conflict and civil war, whose origins date back to the late 1940's, a period of time known simply as "La Violencia." What began as a deliberate class struggle and a political clash between the 'left' and the 'right' has undergone several iterations, and today Colombia finds itself in the midst of a complex ensemble of social relations configured around the central tensions of an ongoing class war, guerrilla warfare, capitalist development, a fecund narco-trafficking industry, and indigenous and afro-Colombian social movements (among others). Adding to this already complicated past, is the financial support that Colombia has received in the form of U.S. military aid totaling over $5 billion since 2000 as part of a larger 'counterinsurgency' against guerrilla groups embattled with the government (Amnesty International, 2010). Increased militarization and the escalation of violence over this time period have resulted in approximately 4.3 million displaced persons across the country (Yacoub, 2009), many of whom are single mothers and their children, fleeing the violence of the remote areas of the jungle. Schools occupy a peculiar position within this social trajectory which often precipitates an ongoing crisis. For the most part, educators have neither been immune from the conflict (over 18 educators have reportedly been killed for political reasons in 2008) nor have they remained passive in their approach to teaching their students. As I intend to detail in the following descriptions, educators and communities from both the privileged and marginalized sectors of society, can and do attend to these historical consequences in meaningful ways. It is important for those of us who work in the critical education tradition to think about how, in a society as divided as Colombia, education can serve as a mediating tool to transcend the central class-ethnic-gendered antagonisms (within obvious limits) that continue to destroy communities, limit the possibilities of human development across class lines, and threaten our conceptions of democracy.

These brief recollections about Colombia will serve to anchor my ensuing discussion on democracy in relationship to dialogic action, concepts that I am re-visiting from Paulo Freire's foundational preoccupation with dialogue, based on the ethos of "revolutionary action" (2007, p. 135) My argument is that the case of Colombia, and the struggles that educators deal with in

community settings such as these, illuminate the multiple layers, axes and interstices of domination that critical pedagogues confront in their work with communities facing intensely difficult social and economic conditions. Poverty, ethnic and racial strife, religious 'difference,' the gendered differentiation of conflict, and the militarization of social life are several of the issues raised in these Colombian schools. I suggest that these conditions need to be understood in their contextual specificity but that they also expose the internal contradictions of both evolving and advanced capitalist societies, where social antagonisms enter into a furious dialectics that in turn shape our relationships to one another, to 'nation' and to the global social order. Secondly, in order to advance a notion of 'critical democracy' grounded in Freire's work, I begin by revisiting the 'liberal' and 'deliberative' models of democracy found in Western social theory. My engagement with these models will necessarily be brief for the purposes of this essay, but my intent is to advocate a model of 'democracy-making' in the context of education, that re-imagines and re-configures the broader implications of critical democracy based on dialogic action.

Soleira, Colombo Frances and La Independencia

A brief bus ride from downtown Medellin led us to the elementary school, Soleira (Portuguese for windowsill) and its accompanying high school, Colegio Colombo Frances. These schools sit only a few kilometers apart on top of jungle crested hills populated by hanging clusters of banana plants and ten-foot high birds of paradise. Located in a moderately-sized city called La Estrella, most revered for its afternoon and after hours 'sex shacks' set aside for clandestine lovers and for-profit liaisons, Soleira and Colombo Frances are poised outside the view of the city's neon-shaped hearts and salacious legs flickering in the daylight to signal guests. The motels are found as you wind your way down the hill, near the Levi-jeans *maquila* that employs hundreds of low-wage, primarily female, garment workers from the city's outskirts. Medellin has one of the largest textile industries in Latin America that employs hundreds of thousands of female workers, as well as a growing presence in the multi-billion global sex trade industry. It wasn't so much that the factory-motel pairing constituted an odd appearance in and of itself -- in a city populated by a female, working-class majority-- but that the primarily middle-class families who began these schools have kept these spaces for the schooling of their children. The middle-class and wealthy have historically maintained their distance from the poor in this strictly class-divided Colombian society.

Sectors of Medellin's professional class – teachers, doctors, etc. – founded Soleira and Colombo Frances several decades ago. They established a collective bank account, purchased *fincas* for school buildings, and pursued a secular, anti-authoritarian, multi-lingual (English, French and Spanish), multi-cultural and eco-sensitive pedagogy for emerging generations growing up in a country marked by Catholic rule, corruption, drug trade and civil war. Unlike all public and a majority of private schools in Colombia, these schools teach the history of religions, and do not emphasize allegiance to any one Man - priest, cardinal, bishop, pope - or holy doctrine or sacerdotal social order. Soleira and Colombo Frances stress autonomous development and pedagogical programs and projects that connect students with the natural environment, in pursuit of developing knowledge(s) that maintain sustainable living as central to the formation of the self, collective, and nation. Here autonomy should not be confused with the neoliberal concept of 'individualism.' Autonomy, as expressed by the teachers, allows youth to develop their capacities separate from religious dogma and the disciplining of the body that accompanies orthodox Roman Catholic worship. A pedagogical distance from institutionalized religion allows these educators to create spaces for learning through active inquiry, rather than passive acceptance of a higher, uncontrollable fate or destiny over 'being.' The traditional school bell does not ring in Soleira, neither is there any chime or chirp to demarcate public and private experiences; students are themselves encouraged to monitor time. Educators in Colombo Frances have designed a needs-based curriculum, resulting in a pedagogy attuned to environmental waste accumulation and disposal. Youth are encouraged to engage the environment, guided by an ethic of collective responsibility and care. Neither school mandates a school uniform or deference to authority. Faculty hold regular discussion groups with students, in which the topics of violence and political conflict are openly discussed. The library in Colombo Frances is particularly engaging, given the range of philosophies, languages, and literature that educators encourage students to read. Both school sites serve as a temporary reprieve from the drama of city life; the noise, traffic, pollution and the concrete urbanization of space. There, in Soleira and Colombo Frances, children are surrounded by lush vegetation and the opportunity to explore the natural environs.

Approximately an hour away from Soleira and Colombo Frances is La Independencia, a large

elementary and high school also in the hills, but a nestling made out of dizzying sequences of hybrid concrete-brick and cinder block housing structures. La Independencia is located in Comuna 13, a community serving a large Afro-Colombian population with a history of social mobilization and social unrest, and one which spawned some early recruits for the revolutionary armed guerrillas (FARC). It is also a community stricken by paramilitary violence, the object of 'social cleansing' in addition to the violent conflicts that have emerged between opposing civil war factions. It is one of the most economically, socially and politically vulnerable communities in Medellin, with over seventy-five percent of the population living on minimum wages, sixty percent of children under the age of five suffering from malnutrition, and close to forty percent of households led by single women. Memories of loss and oppression link one generation to the next in this community providing both a sense of 'place' and 'coherence' among people caught in the cross-hairs of intra-state violence (Riano-Alcala, Pilar, 2002). Comuna 13 has an indefinite state police presence, following former President Alvaro Uribe's "Plan Orion," a military initiative subsidized by Plan Colombia and supported by paramilitary forces commissioned to root out so-called terrorists. The military, state police and masked men dressed in military fatigues but lacking legal status, initiated 'urban-style' combat (with the help of tanks, helicopters and artillery) during the waking hours of October 16, 2002, leaving an undisclosed number of civilians dead and hundreds of others detained for 'investigation.' Since that time, violence has continued in the community, fueled by the narco-trafficking industry as well as by new criminal gangs that have emerged since the 2003 peace deal arranged between the Colombian government and the umbrella paramilitary organization in the country, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, or the AUC. Today, former members of the paramilitary are recognized by the moniker *Black Eagles*, bands of criminals who violently target the socially-destitute in places such as Comuna 13.

In the face of intra-community and state violence, La Independencia launched its own offensive entitled "Plan Gorrion (sparrow)." Their mission was simple: to develop "*la inteligencia emocional,*" the emotional and affective 'intelligence' necessary to help students overcome the daily trauma of living in the community, of engaging in civil conflict, and of being the subject of state sponsored violence. The "road within, the way into the interior self" (to borrow a phrase from Hesse's *Siddartha*) is the main educational focus in this school; at the most basic level the

school's pedagogical initiatives operate to guarantee students the opportunity to co-exist, to develop tolerance, self-awareness, self-motivation, respect, resilience, solidarity and empathy. Rather than ignoring the relationship between the political climate of the community and the children's experiences in the school, this faculty has developed strategies to respond to the social problems that have resulted from the conflict, and to implement educational activities that can improve social relations among and between different community actors. They began by identifying the socio-economic characteristics of the community, and by determining the affective components associated with the militarized conflict. The faculty have provided the children with the conditions to imagine 'new selves' as a counter-point to brute violence that had come to characterize everyday life and what it meant to be human, which for the children had come down to one choice, to be a victim or to victimize. The core subjects of math, science, reading and so forth are not considered in isolation of the affective skills and capacities of the children. Rather, educators recognize the need to address simultaneously the affective and cognitive dimensions of youth's development. The Cartesian split between mind/body does not gain scientific traction in this school site; educators focus on endogenous development that attends to the entire human organism. When asked about the political affiliation/approach of the school, an educator replied 'our political position is the right to live.'

La Independencia has denied the FARC and the paramilitary access to school grounds for recruitment or other propaganda campaigns and they have maintained a right to their own sovereignty. The school is public and thus abides by state-mandated uniforms and curricular policy, but they have also pursued funding from various organizations (both private and public) to help subsidize the cost of their programs on affective education. Art, folkloric dance, sport teams for girls and boys, cultural activities, and a cohesive mission among faculty and staff to protect the rights of the students to a safe and stable school environment drive the school's pedagogical programs. Faculty and staff write extensive plans of study in the main subject areas that demonstrate their commitment to the central values of dialogue, cooperation and understanding of the 'other.' Dialogue, one of the central competencies for civic learning, is described as instrumental to human development, in the realm of communication, cognition, and the affective dimensions constituting a coherent and critical 'self.' Settling disputes peacefully and the practice of conviviality are integrated as a way for youth to express their feelings and

emotions, as mediated by other 'languages' (i.e., words, play, theater, gestures). Democratic participation and responsibility is supported in the expression of ideas, feeling and interests. Active listening is encouraged for collaborative activities intended to build solidarity as well as for respecting differences in opinion that normally arise in the act of dialogue.

Inside the school building children and carry out their daily school exercises with a sense of relative security. Outside the school two young men, with eighteen year-old faces and decorated in calf-high laced-up boots and AK47s, monitor the entryway. They give new meaning to the Foucaldian idea of "theatres of punishment." The presence of these militarized youth – many who very likely only recently graduated from a high school such as La Independencia – serves the dual purpose of giving the State a constant presence from which to monitor and 'punish' the criminal activity associated with the community as well as opening a space for the community to resent the very social actors who conceivably 'brought' this level of militarization to the school site. The reality, however, is that the presence of these militarized young men carries much deeper consequences, especially in relation to the gendered dynamics that characterize war and conflict. A broad schism is created between the goals of peace, affective development, cooperation and solidarity practiced inside the school walls contrasted with the presence of the young wardens of the state who 'protect' them from the world 'outside' as they perfunctorily perform their roles as part of the repressive state apparatus

Soleira, Colombo Frances and La Independencia are physically, affectively and socially kilometers apart. While in some ways each campus attempts to construct a pedagogy that explores outer reality through 'inner' life, they also reflect a vision of the 'self' and 'community' that coalesces with the ideals of their particular social histories and experiences. For one group, the Enlightenment ideals of reason and the independent pursuit of truth as the primary basis of authority prevail as an act of resistance against autocratic-religious rule. And for La Independencia, the daily affront of militarism and civil warfare has consequences that run deep into the layers of the subconscious. The educators and youth of these schools are in a process of critical reflection about an engagement with the immediacy of their communities, but the generative relations (the politics of land ownership and class war) that underlie such processes are considered either 'directly' or 'indirectly.' In the face of ongoing class warfare, these schools

advocate tolerance of the 'other' and autonomous social development; the realities of life versus death mitigate the extent to which pedagogy is overtly politicized. And yet in similar ways, the educators and staff of these respective school environments have made a commitment to respecting and honoring the life pathways of the children and youth. Not only does their commitment bring these educators together, but so does their daily activity – their praxis – predicated on directed and meaningful experiences that connect with students' lives, and with a vision – albeit altruistic – about how to nurture humanity in a society that is seemingly over-determined by inhumanity. The polarities between peace and violence, practical reason and theistic belief and lovingness and hatefulness, establish the limits of movement. In other words, the ways in which pedagogy, curriculum, school policies and so forth approach one polarity over another, guides the decisions made at each school site about how to configure social relations within relatively autonomous school settings.

In the highly contentious political climate of Colombia, it is difficult for some educators to directly confront political questions that impact society's formation. This difficulty is not entirely unlike that faced by educators in other regions of the world, including in the United States, where students oftentimes do not have the opportunity to interrogate democracy's meaning. The difficulty partly arises from a general assumption that in the 'modern' West and Global North, democracy is in full force, and that the schools – as public institutions of the state – have been aligned with the ideals of the Republic from their inception, namely, since the French and American Revolutions. A lack of critical engagement with democracy in U.S. schools can also be attributed to a narrowing of curriculum, culture of standardized assessment and evaluation, disconnect between schooling and society, and a general apathy that many youth express toward the institution of schooling. Even so, within the popular register there exists a general belief that Western, representative democracy equals real democracy, and that other nation states, either in the East or in the Global South that do not adopt similar parliamentary processes can be labeled as 'tyrannical.' Rather than arguing on behalf or against any particular or pre-established model of democracy, I would like to engage the topic of democratic schooling, critical democracy specifically, given the conditions of social conflict and tension that mark the schooling experiences of youth, similar to those described in the context of Colombia. To begin, I review some of the central tenets and ideas found in 'modern' and 'deliberative' democratic models.

Modern and Deliberative Democracy: Recuperating the Enlightenment Ideal

Since the decline of the welfare state and the onset of prevailing media monopolies and power-ridden corporate entities in the West, educators and critical theorists alike have become increasingly preoccupied with the changing face of democracy. The increased standardization of curriculum and educational practices has been identified as a threat to democratic schooling (Noddings, 1999), as well as the growing disenchantment and apathy among youth in poverty and violent-stricken settings (see Jaramillo, 2010). The parasitic corollaries between the standardization of teaching and learning that do not empower youth or children in the schooling process, and the inordinate super-profits made from a multi-billion dollar test-publishing industry (see McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007) have ushered in an era of concern. In addition, the growing presence of corporate entities in everything from the morning news aired in schools worldwide to the kinds of advertisements that accompany theme-specific curriculum packages (see McLaren and Fahramandpur, 2005) causes alarm and discomfort, when the balance between 'private' interests in 'public' life seem to tip overwhelmingly in the direction of corporate profit. In addition, there is now the militarization of youth culture, enabled in part by a government's complacency with militarizing education. Henry Giroux (2009) describes this scenario thusly, "There is also the culture of militarization, which permeates all aspects of our lives - from our classrooms and the screen culture of reality television to the barrage of violent video games and the bloodletting in sports such as popular wrestling - endlessly at work in developing modes of masculinity that celebrate toughness, violence, cruelty, moral indifference and misogyny."

The political right seizes on the link between corporatization, militarization and public schooling as a model of democratic intervention, where the 'free market' outside of governmental control can ameliorate social ills and nourish youth's democratic sensibilities based on a crude individualism and where youth themselves can 'defend' this way of life. To a significant degree, the 'left' sees the corrosion of public life and the corporate encroachment on public social institutions that were, at one time, key indicators of the degree of healthy development and sustainability that constituted a democratic society. Underneath these direct corporate and military incursions in schooling is the underlying logic of capitalist society that ideologically rejuvenates itself in an ideological assemblage of news shows, print media, mainstream entertainment, and so forth. This mix between the capitalist prerogative of profit over people and

the ways in which social institutions – such as schools and media – shape public opinion and discourse about the kinds of values that people should support, work towards minimizing the amount of debate that can take place in the public sphere around issues related to *democracy*. The sheer strength of the corporate structure and its accompanying media conglomerates in the shaping of public opinion and perceptions of social life is considered by many on the left as a direct assault to modern democratic formations based on the enlightenment ideal of 'reason'.

The most notable contemporary social theorist writing on these issues is arguably Jurgen Habermas[2]. As Douglas Kellner notes (2010), for Habermas, 'the function of the media have thus been transformed from facilitating rational discourse and debate within the public sphere into shaping, constructing, and limiting public discourse to the themes validated and approved by media corporations" (p. 4). In Habermas' work, we see a concern with the decline of the public sphere that accompanied the democratic revolutions of the 19th century, where "ordinary citizens could participate in political discussion and debate, organize, and struggle against unjust authority, while militating for social change" (Kellner, 2010 p.6). Here, media and public institutions played a significant role in providing a public space for dissent and intervention. This, in the Habermasian optic, is becoming increasingly circumspect, given the seemingly indomitable power that corporate entities have exercised to secure public consent by distraction. In other words, the public are tutored by the media to misrecognize current social relations as advantageous to their social and material well-being. They fail to grasp that under wage labor the appearance of the relations of production in the marketplace is actually an inversion of what

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[2] Limitations of space prohibit me from engaging the work of Habermas on new social movements (1981; see Edwards, 2004). I do maintain, however, that dialogic action as critical democracy departs from Habermas's work on social movements. Habermas's "colonization thesis" (as discussed in Edwards, 2004) refers generally to those central antagonisms surrounding culture, identity and lifestyle that emerge in the bourgeois public sphere associated with liberal-progressive democratic formations in "advanced capitalist societies." The questions I intend to pose for dialogic action presuppose the inherent 'colonial' character of modern state formations. In other words, those social movements from 'below' that I have in mind for the purposes of this article not only negate the incursion of state authority, money and power into their "lifeworld" but they are addressing fundamental epistemological concerns. These concerns relate to conceptions of self, community and nation that stem from the inherent colonizing function of a state apparatus in the process of integrating into the 'advanced capitalist' social order. The context and historical legacy for these struggles from the South are specific and unique, which afford us an opportunity to examine the making of democracy in varied ways.

they are at the point of production. What is actually a relation of inequality—between those who sell their labor power for a wage in order to survive and those who purchase it for profit—is presented by the media as 'commonsense knowledge' that is, as a relationship of equality, so that the public unwittingly adopts the views of those who exploit them.

It so follows, that critical theorists and educators have advocated for a linguistic and communicative *turn* in the struggle to reclaim democracy in order to develop the "norms for critique" (Habermas, see Kellner, 2010) and "educational governance" (Gutmann, 1993) for citizens to actively reproduce their society. A focus on communicative action dates back to the critical pragmatics of the educational philosopher John Dewey, who stressed the relationship between knowledge, community and solidarity (Englund, 2000; Jaramillo, 2010). Dewey's philosophy was most concerned with the exchange of ideas and conjoint student activity as a form of democratizing *communication*. The argument so follows that by reflecting on the development of ideas that takes place in everyday activities we approach clarity of thought (Jaramillo, 2010). With clarity of ideas "understanding cannot be subservient to anything but the truth that we recognize by dint of our growth and by which we lay claim upon an open-ended form of reflective thinking through the development of our own dispositions. Truth, therefore, does not emerge from a grammar of clarity. Rather, any grammar of clarity emerges from the dispositional truth by which humans exercise their power of reasoning" (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 151).

 Here, reason as a discovery of truth is grounded in a reflection of one's surroundings and experiences. In Dewey's words, "reason affords the basis of certainty…we ascend from belief to knowledge only by isolating the latter from practical doing and making" (1929, p.26). This model of democratic schooling, with its emphasis on rationalist thought and meaningful knowledge that links students' practices in the classroom with the experiences they bring from the 'outside,' seeks political autonomy based on a shared exchange of knowledge and understanding (Englund, 2000).   For education philosophers such as Amy Gutmann (currently an advisor to the Obama administration's special commission for the study of bioethical issues), educational practices that are based on intelligent, conscious and collective action can support "the basic liberties of all adult members of a society" (1993, p. 1). In Gutmann's view, educators

should support a set of practices to which citizens, acting collectively, have consciously agreed, provided that those practices also prepare future citizens for participating intelligently in the political processes that shape their society. The ideal of democratic education-- what Gutmann calls "conscious social reproduction" – is what she considers the bedrock of a democratic society (1999, p. 6). In many ways, such conscious thinking serves as a system of 'checks-and-balances' that may be necessary when representative members of government fail to heed the call of their constituents. Further, questions of difference (both in thought and in ways of living) can be resolved through "sharing the goods (and bads) of a society together" (1993, p. 6). The key for Gutmann (see Gutmann and Thompson, 2004), is in forging the relationship between the development of a conscious, intelligent and respectful citizenry in our schools and *deliberative* democracy. Deliberative democracy:

> …affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return. But no all issues, all the time, require deliberation. Deliberative democracy makes room for many other forms of decision-making (including bargaining among groups, and secret operations ordered by executives), as long as the use of these forms themselves is justified at some point in a deliberative process. Its first and most important characteristic, then, is its *reason-giving* requirement (italics in original; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 7).

While there are important differences among the work of the authors cited above – from Habermas' theory of communicative action that relies on rational discussion found in the communicative relations of everyday life (Kellner, 2010) to Dewey's social pragmatist views on democracy and education, to Gutmann and Thompson's revival of the Jeffersonian ethos (i.e., "we hold these truths to be self-evident") from a *deliberative perspective*, what also holds these thinkers together is a focus on shared communication strategies and consensual practices to meet the democratic ideal. It is also on this point that I argue that critical democracy based on dialogic action departs.

 Radical Democracy

The notion of radical democracy has also taken a linguistic turn in postmodern theoretical frameworks. Chantal Mouffe, for example, describes radical democracy as a new political

philosophy that can "link together diverse democratic struggles." This task, Mouffe suggests, "…requires the creation of new subject-positions that would allow the common articulation, for example, of antiracism, antisexism, and anticapitalism" (1989, p. 42). For Mouffe, the diversity of communities and subject-positions that can be assumed in this social world, require a "democratic equivalence" that can link one struggle to the next, without privileging or ranking in hierarchical order the struggle that deserves more attention than the rest. Within this paradigm, individuality becomes synonymous with plurality and democracy in ways that we have not seen in social struggles as of yet. Admittedly, Mouffe discusses radical democracy on philosophic terms, and she does not claim either a rational foundation for the democratic principles she sets forward, or answers to questions concerning the best possible regime of governance. For Mouffe, radical democracy abandons the ideals of the enlightenment, the myth of a 'unitary subject' and essentialist concepts of the social totality. In a similar vein, Peter Selg (2010) writes of the typological features of radical democracy as,

"1) prevalence of questioning the constitution of freedoms, rights and obligation sin the public communication; 2) public orientation towards general audience (including non-citizens, minorities etc); 3) the "adversary" is addressed in terms of "common grounds" and values that in turn are deemed as contingent; 4) the deconstruction of central public facts, arguments and values into their (rational, historical, contingent, etc) conditions of possibility" (p. 12)

Freed from any pre-determined "institutional formula" (Selg, citing Laclau, 2004), radical democracy becomes 'radical' in its efforts to give voice to the "underdog" while at the same time avoiding populist rhetoric that "presupposes an essential asymmetry between the community as a whole…and the undergdog…the latter is always a partiality that identifies itself with the community at large" (Laclau, 2005, p. 224 as cited in Selg, 2010). Selg extends Laclau's fair warning of populist tendencies in radical democracy, and engages a discussion of 'totalitarian' and 'authoritarian' populism. The point for Selg is to draw out the "processual movement" of democratic formations, that in and of itself requires an empirical and theoretical explanation (Selg, 2010, p. 15).

Dialogic Action as Critical Democracy

Critical democracy as dialogic action departs in important ways from both the liberal, deliberative models of democracy-making and the postmodern conception of radical democracy. For example, in the conception of critical democracy that I am putting forward, dialogic action moves beyond the sphere of communicative exchange or consensus building (with its emphasis on human praxis) to transcend and transform the institutional mechanisms and social relations that have limited the full advance of human sociability and development. Conflict and tension are necessary to the act of consensus, which is a process that by nature cannot be eliminated. In deliberative models of democracy consensus implies a fixed referent or end point in the decision-making process. In other words, consensus implies a subject-neutral communicative process in which the 'good' and the 'bad' can be resolved in a manner that distributes benefits equally across affected populations. Presumably, the moral imperative and preference for consensus is deemed strong enough to diminish tension between competing social actors. Critical democracy's model of dialogic action, on the other hand, begins with an understanding that human existence depends on the "right and the duty to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political" (Freire, 2001, p. 53). When action stems from those who have been denied the opportunity to exercise their human rights, or when it begins from the position of critique, then we can predict with relative confidence the difficulties such groups will encounter in achieving consensus. In both cases, dialogic action moves within and against the dominant social order because people are directly involved in democratizing the production and outcomes of knowledge processes. Not only will their activity be disruptive, but it will challenge the seemingly sublime principles upon which democracy has gained meaning over the years. It will also challenge prevailing conceptions and stereotypes about who can speak and under what conditions. Communication alone will not alter the configuration of these principles. Directed activity must accompany the shared exchange of ideas to achieve the democratic ideal.

Inherent in this notion of critical democracy is a need to address the partiality (versus impartiality) of social actors engaged in the processes of dialogic action. For example, Iris Marion Young (1990) has argued compellingly for addressing the underlying motive of "impartiality" in liberal-progressive models of democracy, a motive that often disguises a tacit support for hegemonic social relations. Impartiality, for Young, "should be understood as a

regulative ideal of reason…" (1990, p. 112), which Young rightly claims is "impossible." In Young's words,

> Impartiality legitimates bureaucratic authority…as long as decision makers strive for impartiality, democracy is unnecessary; their decisions will best serve the interests of all. The ideal of impartiality thus helps legitimate the hierarchical organization of most workplaces, and the idea of merit allocation of its positions. Insistence on the ideal of impartiality in the face of its impossibility functions to mask the inevitable partiality of perspective from which moral deliberation actually takes place. The situated assumptions and commitments that derive from particular histories, experiences, and affiliations rush to fill the vacuum created by counterfactual abstraction; but now they are asserted as "objective" assumptions about human nature or moral psychology. The ideal of impartiality generates a propensity to universalize the particular. (p. 115)

Instead of advocating for 'impartiality,' critical democracy as dialogic action begins from the standpoint of partiality. In other words, the voices of those subaltern subjects who have been traditionally excluded (and exploited) in the construction of so-called democratic states reveal the normative structures that underlie seemingly 'impartial' modes of governance and sociability. This echoes Young's support for "real participatory structures" (p. 116) in which people voice their perspectives from the ethnic-gendered-class locations that they occupy, what Walter Mignolo (2009) would call "geopolitics of knowledge". This is also similar to the position expressed by the late Argentine philosopher, Rodolfo Kusch (2008), who advocated for the 'irrational' thinking of the oppressed as a necessary counterpoint to the practices of domination that emerge from the governing sectors of society. The point here is to question the very paradigms upon which we determine our *reasonable* understandings of democracy as an act of social justice.

Importantly, as part of a broader educational project, dialogic action does not pre-determine the limits that children, youth, and adults will confront in their evolving thought-action processes. Freire wrote of this in terms of an "epistemological curiosity" needed to obtain a complete grasp of the object of our knowledge (2001, p. 35). We cannot incite curiosity when the outcome of the knowledge process is already pre-defined. This is not to suggest that dialogic action is purely antagonistic, or that the production of scientific knowledge does not include some given conclusions. It does suggest, however, that dialogic action has a subjective dimension that is

most adequately characterized as a 'relational ontology' in the neo-Vygotskian sense (Stetsenko, 2008a; 2010) or in Freire's terminology, a sense of "being-with" that makes one's relationship to the world essential to the process of becoming (Freire, 2001, p. 55). This 'being-with' the world was central to Freire's dialogic focus; it implied an active and sensuous subject who intimately connected with her/his surroundings. In this sense, democracy translates into a relationship that one develops with her broader community, rather than a 'thing' one absorbs as part of the educative process.

It is precisely in this way that dialogic action as critical democracy needs to be understood from a learning/cognitive perspective. Oftentimes those who read about the critical education tradition presume that Freire offered us only a manifesto for social dissent. While it is true that Freire and the writers who inspired his thinking about teaching and learning articulated their points of critique from various positions (i.e. Karl Kosik's extension of Marx's critique of capitalism at the level of consciousness-formation; Amilcar Cabral's anti-colonial and pro-nationalist theorizations) that maintained the importance of "revolutionary action" (read as action that was transformative and that stemmed from the oppressed), Freire was ultimately concerned with approaching a liberating form of 'reason' and 'truth' in the dialogical process. This process necessarily entailed dialogue between different positions in a discussion (Stevenson, 2010), requiring that student and teacher alike engage in a rigorous interrogation of the historical and material conditions from which they articulated their points of view.

We can find parallels between Freire's dialogic action and the neo-Vygotskian notion of relational ontology. According to Anna Stetsenko, relational ontology implies that "…social and psychological phenomena are processes that exist in the realm of relations and interaction –that is, as embedded, situated, distributed, and co-constructed within contexts while also being intrinsically interwoven into these contexts (2008a, p. 477)." These processes are based on a shared existence, which precedes shared communication. To quote Stetsenko further,

> "Within this logic, for example, development and learning are not seen as products of solitary, self-contained individuals endowed with internal machinery of cognitive skills that only await the right conditions to unfold. Instead, they are seen as existing in the flux of individuals relating to their world, driven by relational processes and their unfolding

logic, and therefore as not being constrained by rigidly imposed, pre-programmed scripts or rules." (2008a, p. 477)

Relational thinking (see also Paula Allman, 2007) aims at overcoming the subject-object dualism "by replacing it with an emphasis on development being in constant dialogue and relation with the world" (Stetsenko, 2008a). In Freire's view, such thinking was aimed at transcending the central antagonism faced by the world's poor, the capital-labor contradiction that generated people's alienation and dehumanization in both agrarian and industrialized societies. In both Vygotskian and Freirian schools of thought, relational ontology is further understood in the context of human action. In the cognitive psychology of Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1993) this is referred to as the "embodied mind;" in Vygotsky and Freire, we can conceive of 'embodied human action.' In either case, the mind is conceptualized as a dynamic system, "formed and carried out in and as actions by individuals who, through these actions, realize their relations in and to the world" (2008a, p. 479). Action implies a relation between subject and object. If, then, we consider democracy as the object of learning, it necessarily depends on how the learner acts upon it. This action will not only give 'democracy' its meaning, but it will expose other social conditions relevant to the 'object' of knowledge production, insofar as students' experiences reveal the cultural, historical, and linguistic attributes that have informed their relationship to 'it.'

In the Freirian sense, activity that begins in educational settings has to be related to the wider social order that frames student experience. It so follows, that the social totality is understood as inter and intra-related human activity within the wider capitalist social order that cannot be isolated into fragments or autonomous parts; our social existence is unequivocally interconnected, a world of reality based on the activity of humankind to realize truth, a world in which truth is not given, but one in which truth "happens" (Kosik, 1976, p. 7). For Karl Kosik, understanding how truth can be aided by the concrete cognition of reality is derived from the processes of *concretization*. In Kosik's assessment, concretization implies a process which proceeds from the whole of social life to its parts and from the parts to the whole (1976, p. 23). This 'spiral' movement in our thinking of, in and about the social world can be found in Freire's own dialogical propositions, from his frequently cited preoccupation with generative themes to

his discussion of codification/de-codification as processes that function as a way to apprehend reality as "interacting constituent elements" of the "whole." Only in understanding the fragmented aspects that characterize individual experience (i.e. as a gendered-ethnic-racialized body) in relation to the totality of social relations in which such experience is embedded does Freire suggest that one can "truly know that reality" (2007, p. 104). As Freire suggests, knowledge of the totality must occur before one can separate and isolate its constituent elements as part of the total vision of concrete reality. In other words, Freire calls for the development of a form of reasoning that can supersede the immediacy of "personal experience" to approach a critical awareness of the specificity of domination and oppression (Jaramillo and McLaren, 2009). And it is on this final point that critical democracy based on dialogic action is set apart from radical democracy. In the latter case, theories of difference, concrete particulars, and a reliance on language as the main conduit for addressing social change, do not cohere around the central principles of oppression and domination that Freire articulated. The concepts of oppression and exploitation are deemed overly intrusive and 'totalizing' – relics of a time past when the universal category of 'socialism' had supplanted 'democracy' in various parts of the world.   The issue remains, however, that language itself is subject to the controlling mechanisms of over-determining and over-powering systems of governance and social production. Arundhati Roy says it best when she critiques the use of words like progress, development and even resistance in the global sphere (Roy, 2004; 2009). She writes:

> This theft of language, this technique of usurping words and deploying them like weapons, of using them to mask intent and to mean exactly the opposite of what they have traditionally meant, has been one of the most brilliant strategic victories of the tsars of the new dispensation. It has allowed them to marginalize their detractors, deprive them of a language to voice their critique and dismiss them as being "anti-progress," "anti-development," "anti-reform," and of course "anti-national" – negativists of the worst sort. (2009, p. 2)

Emanating from the bottom up or the top down, language circulates within historical social registers and apparatuses that continue to evolve, change, and respond to a range of social conditions and antagonisms. Instead of seeing Freire's concepts as essentialist in terms of qualifying human experience, dialogic action for critical democracy can recuperate the particulars of social struggle within a wider project of participatory democracy. The 'essence' of human interaction is understood in relationship to the social, historical, and economic

contingencies that frame sociability. The central idea is to maintain the dialectic in motion – between thought and action, knowing and being – in ways that allow for self-reflection and directed activity to produce protagonist models of democracy. In Vygotsky's terms, "the word itself being a deed" (cited in Stetsenko, 2008b, p. 531).

Concluding Thoughts: Revisiting the Colombian Example

There is no question that the 21st century has ushered in an era of increased polarization, not only in terms of the distribution of economic benefits within and across societies (with some notable exceptions, of course) but also with respect to the world of ideas, religious beliefs, and political doctrine. The case of Colombia strikes a particularly sensitive nerve, given the degree of militarization and violence that continues to plague the country's youngest generations. And while the educators of Soleira, Colombo Frances and La Independencia did not pronounce their work in terms of dialogic action for democracy, they offer us a unique look into how educators negotiate the machinations of civil conflict and its privileging hierarchies of oppression among different sectors of society. More importantly, they also show us how educators navigate the messy terrain of socio-political economies and nation-state formations impacted by a multiplicity of factors, not least of which is dependence on a global superpower for military aid and training. As educators contemplate the meaning of democracy in schools and society, what needs to be given priority of place is the inter-relatedness between nations in an era distinguished by multi-lateral wars spanning almost a decade, the globalization of capital that has reconfigured people's relationship to the natural environment, to their 'nation-states' and to each other, and the monolithic views we maintain at the level of knowledge production itself. These Colombian educators began with discrete acts that sought to connect learning with doing, student agency with social empowerment, and feeling with knowing. These acts were systematically developed and carried out given the contextually-specific conditions of communities experiencing sundry degrees of distress. In all of these cases, the aim was to create the opportunities and the conditions for youth to develop their critical agency and capacities in ways that would otherwise be denied to them. They demonstrate the interdependence between structure-agency, and the role of education in mediating and intervening in that dialogic process. Given the experiences of the children and youth who attended these schools, the educators challenged the dynamics of

rationalization that accompany military conflict.   A new process of developing reason (strongly connected to attending to the affective dimensions of human development and group solidarity) and a critical reflection of one's existence and surroundings has taken its place. They are, in the simplest terms, democratizing the educational encounter, and doing so critically.

Making the path towards critical democracy in our schools and communities depends upon an epistemological break with the reigning ideologies of schooling that view education merely as a function of the nation-state (which in many cases becomes synonymous with capital and militarization) or that ascribe strict roles and functions to teachers and students alike. Central to critical democracy is recognition of the need for educational sovereignty – a release from the military- corporate-industrial complex (that has been so presciently described by the Habermasian notion of democracy) and connecting the language of democracy with democratic acts. It is time for communities and schools in so-called advanced capitalist democracies to answer the question posed by Roy, "…is there life after democracy?" And it is also time to learn from those defying the world as it 'is' and working towards a more just and humane social existence.

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