

Revalorizing the Critical Attitude for Critical Education

Sarah S. Amsler

Aston University, Birmingham, England

Abstract

This article argues that at a moment of crisis in education, the defence of critical pedagogy is vitally important. However, it also suggests that such a defence should be more than a *cri de coeur* that asserts principles and methods of criticality against those of neoliberal or conservative education policy. Narratives of a totalising “crisis of critique” in education and the wider society are now ubiquitous in the critical pedagogical literature. But while these may mobilize the defence of critical education, they can also obscure tensions between different approaches to critical pedagogy, the history of “the crisis;” the co-optation of critical discourses; the proliferation of radical educational projects that do not draw inspiration from orthodox forms of critical pedagogy; the professional investments that critical educators may have in maintaining the status quo; and the possible relationships between formal education, popular education and broader “public pedagogies.” The article concludes by suggesting that, in addition to defending specific pedagogical projects, it is also important to cultivate a critical attitude that interrogates the politics of critical pedagogy itself, even as we work to defend its necessity for democratic public life.

Keywords: critique, critical attitude, education, neoliberalism, the university

What’s “critical” about critical education?

The critical attitude / Strikes many people as unfruitful / That is because they find the state / Impervious to their criticism / But what in this case is an unfruitful attitude / Is merely a feeble attitude / Give criticism arms / And states can be demolished by it / Canalising a river / Grafting a fruit tree / Educating a person / Transforming a state / These are instances of fruitful criticism / And at the same time instances of art.

Bertolt Brecht, “On the Critical Attitude”

Most critical educators do not need to be persuaded of the centrality of critique in any form of emancipatory pedagogy. Any education that seeks to demystify popular ideologies; expose the subtle ways that power works through language, bodies, and representations; facilitate the imagination of radically different modes of life; and produce knowledge to orient political action represents, in various forms, a broad faith within critical pedagogical politics that there is something inherently transformative about criticality. And it is the possibility to practice such forms of education, which is, in the ascendance of the uncompromising force of market logics throughout public life, being contracted (Kompridis, 2006), cramped (Grindon, 2007), enclosed, or foreclosed (Brown, 2005; Stivers, 2008). Indeed, the need for the critical attitude has become urgent in the face of declining levels of popular support for non-utilitarian education, and a wider tolerance for complexity and otherness within the public sphere is on the decline. The overarching mood in education, including in universities, is therefore one of crisis; the broad response, one of defence (Calhoun, 2006; International Sociological Association, 2010).

For educators working in formal institutions, this crisis is particularly acute when the relationships through which these processes might be challenged are themselves threatened with commodification and transformed into techniques of power. Hence, despite the vastly differentiated nature of the field, the general concept of “critical pedagogy” has become as much a political or professional position to be defended as it is a situated project of personal and social transformation. And why should it not be? The concept is something that educators pursuing otherwise diverse political projects can rally around, and the languages are in the right direction. Internal tensions notwithstanding, most forms of critical pedagogy are opposed to the commoditised, reductivist, hyper-managed and pseudo-empiricist forms of knowledge now being offered up as progressive in discourses of “teaching and learning.” As an identity badge, critical pedagogy signals alliance with longstanding traditions in democratic and radical education, which serve as evidence (or memory) of actually existing alternatives to neoliberal and neoconservative philosophies of education. In addition, many of these also prefigure broader political values of horizontalism, egalitarianism, autonomy, justice, diversity, openness, collectivity, dialogue, curiosity, etc. The goodness, rightness, and transformative potentiality of critical pedagogy have thus, not surprisingly, become sacred matters of fact for many educators who feel, again, that they, their students, and the prospects for transformative education itself are “under siege.”³¹

But how far can we affirm critical pedagogy as a self-explanatory good, or defend criticality as transformative simply because it is marginalised or repressed? As popular educator and activist Alice Cutler (2009) aptly points out, “there is no single political project behind the methods of popular education” (p. 108), and the language of critical pedagogy is increasingly spoken by the Right. Businesses capitalise on creativity and authenticity, corporations use popular education methods to motivate workers, student-led teaching practices in schools and universities appeal to a real but consumerised longing for autonomy, and discourses of participation have become ubiquitous in mainstream politics. From where I write in post-socialist Britain, a new conservative coalition government has encouraged the development of community collectives to build a “Big Society” whilst diminishing state responsibility for public services and non-market-based spaces for social life – and the Cabinet claims, in fact, to draw inspiration for its policies from the work of Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky (Bird, 2011). To encourage participation in what the Prime Minister calls this “people power revolution” (Grice 2010), for example, the government launched a populist website through which people were invited to recommend laws and regulations they believed infringed upon their personal freedoms, and to vote others’ suggestions either up or down in value (UK Government, 2010). In such exercises, the populist depoliticisation of public debate is obscured by the fact that criticality suddenly appears to be everywhere, open to everyone, and connected to mechanisms of painless democratic decision-making. Rather than being exhausted from overuse, the radical promises of critique have been emptied through its conceptual inflation (Shore & Wright, 1999, p. 558).

The blurring of discursive boundaries between critical pedagogy, neoliberal learning, and conservative public pedagogy does not mean that the inherited languages of criticality are no longer useful, or that they have been permanently occupied and transvaluated. It does mean that their meanings cannot be assumed to be self-evidently

³¹ For further discussion of why democratic education may be understood to be “besieged,” see Aronowitz & Giroux (1987, 1993) and Giroux (2006).

shared or convincing, and that the substantive content and normative purpose of critique in pedagogical work must be more carefully articulated than ever. In academic as well as popular education, it is thus “important to promote and reclaim some of the more radical strands ... which are rooted in defiance ... and struggle,” oriented towards “change and ... solidarity” (Cutler, 2009). Given the strength of neoliberal ideologies, and particularly the capacity of neoliberal discourses to close down interpretive complexity and contestation, the struggle to define the meaning of terms such as “critique” and “transformation” is thus a significant battleground for educators seeking to speak and teach what Henry Giroux calls a “language of possibility” (Gounari, 2006; Shore & Wright, 1999).³² However, even this does not constitute a single pedagogical or political project. If we accept that “there is no pure social space in which new practices and ideas will emerge from an ideal revolutionary subject that we only need listen to” (Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007, p. 31), then we must also be prepared to navigate a messy intellectual landscape in which there are no singular, predetermined definitions of “critical” practice or experience. We have much to draw on from past experience, but answering the question of what constitutes effective critical education in these particular times is a challenging pedagogical problem in itself.

Through a glass darkly, variously

What kinds of times are these? They are not critical or “dark” in any singular way, although often spoken of in these terms (Giroux, 2007, 2009; Macrine, 2009; Stivers, 2009). The forces of injustice and unfreedom that prevail today are complex and opaque, as indicated by the great diversity of social movements that have emerged to resist them: from environmental movements to the defence of economic rights, “no borders” and immigrant rights campaigns, projects in participatory democracy and anarchist publishing, and anti-Zionist activism, just to name a few (Cox & Fominaya, 2009; Starr, 2005). We witness rampant imperialisms, illegal wars, and new heights of corporate corruption and greed (Kincheloe, 2008). When we speak of struggles in critical education, which of these do we have in mind? More concretely, consider an online post made by one member of a recent student-led campaign to defend a philosophy programme being closed at a British university. “Just got home from the Middlesex occupation and found out that Farzad Kamangar, a 34 year old Kurdish activist, was finally executed along [with] four others. Friends in Paris being arrested after attacking the Iranian embassy in protest to this; and I cannot go to sleep, unable to forget Kamangar’s face and voice” (Alizadeh, 2010). Towards which oppression should his education have faced? Or turn westward towards California, where university students recently held a hunger strike to protest the signing of a new Arizona law aimed at deterring immigration from Mexico, which threatens to further oppress the state’s Hispanic population (Anderson, 2010). The governor of Arizona in his turn signed a bill (HB2281) to end ethnic studies in state schools, despite protests from UN human rights advisors, implicitly because the Mexican-American curriculum

³² Gounari (2006) defines neoliberal discourse as a form of “commodified, de-historicized language, where terms such as knowledge, skills, access, freedom, choices, opportunities, and so forth acquire a new content and are aligned with the logic of the market” (p. 78). For more on neoliberal discourse, see Fairclough (2002). Zygmunt Bauman (1999) has also commented that the “absence of questioning [and] surrender to what is seen as the implacable and irreversible logic of social reality” is a particular strength of neoliberal discourse (p. 127).

was said to teach Hispanic children that they are oppressed by whites.³³ Again, what, and who, should be learning in this situation, and toward what end? Here in the UK, the already gravely uneven balance of power has tipped even further as the new government has eviscerated budgets for childcare, schools, elder care, and disability support in a society where over 80% of children residing near my university live in poverty (Arnot, 2010), nearly 20% of teenagers leaving high school are only functionally literate (Shepherd, 2010), and the wealthiest people in the country can expect to live ten years longer than the poorest, with many of the latter living in regions devastated both economically and culturally by the last wave of conservative reforms in the 1980s (Campbell, 2010). As an educator, where should we begin?

Despite this evidence of crisis and decline, there are also palpable revolutionary energies in this society. In recent years, we have shifted from what a colleague once called a “dust-of-death” climate of political unconsciousness amongst young people to the proliferation of highly organised campaigns in schools and universities. In 2009, more than thirty British universities were occupied to protest their administrations’ silence over Israel’s bombing of the Gaza Strip and the power of commercial and political interests in education that were believed to inform this.

More recently, students and faculty occupied other universities (notably Sussex and Middlesex) to protest against losses of jobs and disciplines and increases in tuition fees, and to defend public education in the face of its radical devaluation in both government and public opinion; the autumn of 2010 saw a wave of protest in which nearly a third of the country’s universities were occupied (Amsler, 2011).³⁴ At local levels, students, teachers, and workers have united to defend university labourers against racism, sexism, repressive immigration laws, and exploitative labour contracts (e.g., the “Justice for SOAS Cleaners” movement; see Aked, 2009). There is also now a burgeoning global movement for free education, including autonomous spaces, free schools, and collectives (Edu-Factory, 2009; Mute 2010; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006; Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007). All of these struggles have included strong pedagogical components, and teach-ins and teach-outs, public lectures and reading groups, art exhibitions and concerts, articles in the popular press, media appearances, and social networking have all become integrated parts of institutional and political struggle. And in these contexts, rarely, if ever, is the term “critical pedagogy” invoked.

The general crisis of the university

The “crisis of education” and the uncertain future of the public university, is situated within this wider context. But it also has lesser-known, or at least less spoken of, histories of its own. Until recently, it was possible to interpret the marketization of education as a strong, but not entirely hegemonic or irreversible, social tendency. Earlier work in the field, for example, read this a struggle for critical education rather than a crisis of its impossibility. *Education under Siege*, for example, could point to a struggle between liberal, radical, and conservative discourses on education during the 1970s and 1980s (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1987). By the end of the twentieth century,

³³ For competing interpretations of this act, see “Arizona school district’s radical Mexican-American Studies program exposed” (Fox News, 2010) and “Arizona law targets ethnic studies” (Dylan, 2010). For condemnation of the bill by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, see UN (2010).

³⁴ For information on university occupations in the UK and US from 2009 to the present, see the Campaign for the Public University (<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/other-campaigns/>). For a European perspective on protests against the neoliberalization of education in and beyond universities, see the Edu-Factory site (<http://www.edu-factory.org>).

however, the global project to create a powerful “triple helix” of business, universities, and industry had been deeply consolidated. The 1995 edition of Michael Apple’s *Education and Power* reflects this new problematic:

Everyone stared at the department chair in amazement. Jaws dropped. Soon the room was filled with a nearly chaotic mixture of sounds of anger and disbelief. It wasn’t the first time she had informed us about what was ‘coming down from on high.’ Similar things had occurred before. After all, this was just another brick being removed. Yet to each and every one of us in that room, *it was clear from that moment that despite all of our struggles to protect education from being totally integrated into the rightist project of economic competitiveness and rationalization, we were losing* (p. vii, emphasis mine).

In Britain, government agendas to privatize and marketize universities had also been put into motion long before their effects could even register in departmental meetings or pedagogical practices. As early as 1970, the radical historian E. P. Thompson publicly condemned the commercialization of higher education in *Warwick University, Ltd.* before resigning from his post at the university in protest. Some years later, a report of the UK Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals formally asserted that universities should be considered “first and foremost corporate enterprises” (CVCP, 1985), and a 1996 report urged government ministers to encourage markets within higher education, expand access, embrace student loans and “accept that *professional academic sovereignty should not remain a barrier to the achievement of these objectives*” (Beck, 1999, p. 234, emphasis mine). By 2009, state responsibility for British universities had been subsumed into a newly formed department of Business, Innovation, and Skills, with criticism but little resistance from either academics or the wider society. The present “crisis” of education, in other words, has a history, the suppression and devaluation of critical pedagogy must be theorised more critically to be understood in this context. For, as Wendy Brown (2009) said of reforms at the University of California, “We cannot simply say yes or no to privatization, because the beast is already inside the house.”

Much of the discourse about the current crisis of education has an urgent quality, attributing problems to neoliberalism or neo-authoritarianism. But are these really explanatory causes that we can address in intellectual or practical terms? The concept of neoliberalism is itself neither singular nor coherent, and processes of neoliberalization articulate variously in situated ways (Larner, 2000; Peck et al., 2009). This is not the first time that education and business have become so strategically aligned with one another and with utilitarian epistemologies, to the dismay of those who regard teaching and learning as elements of the human condition. Thorstein Veblen’s warning in the *Higher Learning in America* (2004), published originally in 1918, is uncannily familiar in its observation that the “intrusion of business principles in the universities goes to weaken and retard the pursuit of learning and therefore to defeat the ends for which a university is maintained.” It is worth revisiting his description of how “business principles ... lead immediately to a bureaucratic organization and a system of scholastic accountancy,” and how “the underlying businesslike presumption accordingly appears to be that learning is a merchantable commodity, to be produced on a piece-rate plan, rated, bought, and sold by standard units, measured, counted, and reduced to staple equivalence by impersonal, mechanical tests” (p. 151). As one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper has suggested, the present crisis of the critical disciplines should not be regarded

as a simple repetition of this industrialising period, but rather part of a much longer ascendancy of scientism within education itself.

League tables, school and university ranking measurements, professional audits, modularised programmes for student-clients, key performance indicators for attendance and grades: here we are again. Today's teachers and students move within what Mark Fisher (2009) calls a "business ontology," a world in which it is presumed that "everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business" (p. 17). He calls this "capitalist realism," a delimitation of the field of possibilities and mode of existence, rather than simply a class ideology. Whether this conflation of business with everything results in a condition of political cramping or a more sinister sort of totalising alteration to consciousness and social organisation remains a matter of debate; neither would be historically unprecedented.³⁵ But the transformation itself is without a doubt both wide and deep. Many schools and universities now not only serve hegemonic business-states, but are increasingly organised according to market-like principles in their own right. After decades of clarifying the inherently political nature of education, it has again become necessary to challenge the framing of pedagogical work in politically neutral languages of "learning and teaching," "transferrable skills," "lifelong learning," and "value-added" education.³⁶ Given the vast experience of struggling to defend critical pedagogy against other forms of conservative and repressive education, we should be well prepared.

Surprised by power?

Interestingly, though, while educators have been vaguely aware of this shift for years, it still comes as a daily surprise to many in either moments of realisation, as described by Apple above, or through the "hidden injuries" of everyday life (Gill, 2009). There is incredulity that such changes are possible, even after they have already been made; there is surprise also that, to quote from Bertolt Brecht, there seems to be "only injustice and no resistance" to attacks on the very conditions of possibility for critical education. This surprise is often denounced as political naïvety. However, such moments of surprise can also be important moments of immanent critique — visceral judgements that a system has failed according to its own ostensible standards, or at least standards that those who invested in the system believed it had upheld. As John Holloway (2009) argues, such forms of embodied critique emerge not from academic research into one's condition, but dialectically through the experience of realising not just that things are not as they should be, but that you exist in the "wrong state of things" (p. 14). It is the dawning awareness of a dying regime, when people once relatively at home in their environments understand that their social world is already

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse described the latter type of transformation in a series of essays written during the 1940s, including "The new German mentality" (1998a) and "Some remarks on Aragon: art and politics in the totalitarian era" (1998b). In the second, he reflects on the difficulties and possibilities of counter-education in a society where "the revolutionary forces which were to bring about freedom are being assimilated to the all-embracing system of monopolistic controls," and "the intellectual opposition is thus faced with the apparent impossibility to formulate its task and goal in such a manner that the formulation breaks the spell of total assimilation and standardization and reaches the brute foundations of present-day existence" (Marcuse, 1998a, p. 201).

³⁶ For earlier influential work in the reproductive and repressive functions of formal education, as well as its potentially critical social functions, see e.g. Aronowitz & Giroux (1987, 1993), Ball (2006), Bourdieu (1996), Bourdieu & Passeron (1977), Freire (1970), Greene (1978, 1993), hooks (1994), Shor and Freire (1987), and Willis (1981).

inhospitable or that they have been othered and excluded by stealth. And, although this surprise may be expressed for a very long time in the form of privatised and disarticulated “grumblings,” it remains theoretically significant as a resource of critique (Gill, 2009).

It feels strange to suggest that some critical educators within universities, many of whom have always existed at the margins or in the interstices of institutional power, might have been less marginalised than presumed. Perhaps it is thus more accurate to argue that it is simply becoming even more repressed than it has in recent history (e.g., Frank, 2005; S. Giroux, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008). For while critical pedagogy has been isolated in mainstream educational studies and practice, many educators have also been recognisable “outsiders” working against, but from within, mainstream and often privileged institutions.³⁷ In recent years, it has been possible to maintain a particular imagination of the university as a place where even marginalised knowledges could be protected (an imaginary that Shukaitis & Graeber suggest was specific to the ephemeral radicalisations of the 1960s [2007, p. 16]). Increasingly, however, philosophies and practices of critical pedagogy fall outside the borders of legitimate or even recognizable educational discourses and practices. Even defending some of the most basic principles of critical pedagogy in formal teaching — for example, the critique of “banking education” or the centrality of dialogue and human relationships in educational process — has become a political act, and one that risks professional marginalization (Gill, 2009; MacKinnon, 2009; Shore & Wright, 1999; Smith, Salo & Grootenboer, 2010). Many educators thus face an unhappy choice to either maximise the economic “value” and “impact” of their work (e.g., by training community leaders in popular education style workshops or designing tuition-dependent graduate programmes in critical pedagogy or educational activism), or relinquish the remaining privileges of academic status to work outside the university — perhaps even to dismantle it.

However, there is also movement within some academic communities to develop third spaces where alternatives to complicity or abandonment might become possible. As one reader wrote in response to a recent article on the “re-valuing” of courses according to market criteria, “there is a storm coming and we need to prepare [...] let’s get the debate started” (THE, 2010, p. 22). The question is, can such debate be effective when so many people are still surprised by power, and where many still desire and pragmatically depend on dominant systems of formal academic recognition? Here is another political project, perhaps *the* political project; subterranean, and therefore harder to grasp: the systematic attempt to eliminate spaces within education where non-market political values, intellectual traditions, and pedagogies can possibly be articulated as alternatives, and from within which claims for their recognition can be made. As Fisher (2009) argues, in education as elsewhere, “what we are dealing with ... is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead their *preincorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture” (p. 9). Critical pedagogy is not exempt.

This is not the first time that pedagogies of power have outpaced pedagogies of critique, reflection, and resistance. They often do. In the 1940s, for example, Marcuse (1998b) wrote an excellent analysis of how education might be reconstructed to foster

³⁷ Here, I avoid using Patricia Hill Collins’ (1999) specific concept of the “outsider within” to characterise all critical educators, although it might apply to the structural positions of some, for reasons that she explains in “Reflecting on the outsider within”.

a culture of anti-fascism in a society where National Socialism had “changed the thought and behaviour pattern to the German people in such a way that it [was] no longer susceptible to the traditional methods of counter-propaganda and education” (p. 141). Marcuse’s problems were far from our own in many ways, despite the ascendance of neo-fascist and authoritarian tendencies in European and North American societies that imbricate deeply with capitalist hegemony (H. Giroux, 2005).³⁸ However, the resonance between the debilitation of critical thought and education in both contexts, and the sense that the reorganisation of society reflects and furthers the creation of antidemocratic social and political subjectivities, suggests that the simple critique of capitalism or any other politico-economic system cannot be the singular objective of critical education today. We must also address broader problems of public culture, of the censure of alterity and denial of otherness, which cannot be dealt with through pedagogical practices that depend to some extent on the existence of what Axel Honneth (2007) has called a “pre-theoretical” desire for emancipation within society (pp. 64-66, 69-72). Consumerized and utilitarian “modes of understanding [and] social being” are brought into classrooms by people who educate their political consciousnesses and subjectivities elsewhere (Shukaitis&Graeber, 2007,p. 31). The devaluation of desires that are taken as humanly given in so many classical theories of critical pedagogy — to be free from oppression, alienation, and control, and to create — is precisely what makes these times feel particularly dark for educators who believe them to be preconditions of learning. A different kind of pedagogical work is thus required to combat this sort of suffocation of criticality, and it must begin with the creation of spaces, relationships, and subjectivities that make critical pedagogical practices possible in the first place.

On the place of the critical attitude in critical pedagogy

The enormity of this task can easily grind people down into despair, or send them fleeing from critical education altogether into smaller, more autonomous spaces of non-alienating practice. Many are already making this route of escape — so many, in fact, that the lines of flight from formal educational institutions are creating networks of radical pedagogy that portend new, alternative or anti-institutions of counter-education and critical politics (see, e.g., the Edu-Factory Collective or Queen Mary Countermappers³⁹). However, there is still an argument for working from universities to “make known that which others would prefer to keep from public view,” and to much more publicly “name the systems” of power that compromise possibilities for critical education and democratic life today (Cox &Fominaya, 2009).

Naming these systems is not as straightforward as it sometimes seems it should be. However, it is possible to ground an analysis of these times in a more modest thesis that the privatization, marketing, and subordination of education to economic

³⁸ Whilst some authors are confident that neoliberalism should be considered a form of ‘proto-fascism’ (Giroux, 2005), others have queried the analytical robustness of the term in capturing the character of these contemporary forms of power (Brown, 2005, p. 51). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who suggested drawing attention to the contested nature of this debate.

³⁹ The Edu-Factory Collective (<http://www.edu-factory.org/>) coordinates an international network “for discussion of transformations to the university,” publishes critical analysis of educational policy, advocates the creation of a “global autonomous university,” and is active in political actions to resist the neoliberalization of education. The Queen Mary Countermappers (<http://countermappingqmary.blogspot.com/>), allied with the Counter-Cartographies Collective at the University of North Carolina (<http://www.countercartographies.org/>), are a “group of students, staff and researchers [who work] to map the ways in which migration, border technologies, surveillance and monetary flows intersect with the university as our place of work and study.”

power, along with the bureaucratic standardization and anti-intellectual control that make this subordination possible, preclude development of the ways of knowing, methods of inquiry, ethics of dialogue, habits of autonomy, and ethos of care and curiosity that are essential for challenging power in any context (these constitute what Maxine Greene [2003a, 2003b], following Alfred Schutz, calls “wide-awakeness”). The capacities to make informed judgements, arrive at independent conclusions, communicate freely with others in an open-ended manner, remain open to criticism and decentring, experiment with ideas and things, and sharpen one’s consciousness about the relationship between what one knows and how one lives — these are not the aims of all forms of critical pedagogy. But they are the foundations for critical learning, and are presently being devalued, delegitimized, and structured out of education — and, as popular educators have argued for some time, out of social life more generally. As educators we therefore need not only to defend these practices, but also to create cultural, political, institutional, and subjective conditions in which they might again make sense.

These truly are paths that we must make by walking. Given that so much work within the field remains focused on how to make formal educational experiences more “transformative,” there is a need for reflection on the implications of different practices now being articulated by minoritarian educators. People identifying as “critical pedagogues” draw on diverse and contradictory philosophical traditions; occupy different generational, class, gender, and racial positions; have multiple and uneven histories; and relationships to formal education and political activism (Cox and Fominaya, 2009; Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007). As Hill Collins (1999) points out, even those in genuine “outsider-within” positions “do not all arrive there via the same mechanisms” (p. 89). There is often a generally shared commitment to criticality that makes it possible to communicate across these differences, or even to regard them as learning opportunities in their own right. But at times the common ground is more rudimentary: a loose set of broadly similar encounters with social forces, and responses to what John Holloway calls the ‘common enemy’ of the ‘abstraction of doing into labour’ (2010, p. 918). In either case, the idea of “critical pedagogy” cannot simply be presented as the alternative to neoliberal or conservative education, nor defended uncritically. What we need now are more robust analyses of how particular forms of thought, communication, and action expand or contract individual and social possibility in practice.

Such work has already begun to emerge from within what appears to be an expanding, albeit still often invisible, movement of projects to create autonomous forms of educational institution and to transform the functions of the university from within. Surface-level catalogues of emergent ‘alternatives’ risk painting a haphazard picture of diverse social centres, university-level curricular reforms, collectives and occupied spaces which are connected only insofar as people are ‘trying to explore different, freer and more autonomous ways of learning’ (*Sociological Imagination*, 2011). But the experimental work going on within the lived spaces and times of these projects seems to me far more important than the sheer fact of their possibility, for it is here that some of the first principles about who and what education is for and how it might work are being dismantled and reconstituted. And it is in these more mundane, yet extraordinary practices of attempting to create autonomous forms of life that the serious potential of critique as a form of social struggle and the critical attitude as a mode of political praxis is really revealed.

Concluding reflections

Even this brief consideration of the state of critical education, therefore suggests that the crisis of education is not synonymous with the death of criticality, as is sometimes feared. On the contrary, there is a proliferation of practices and struggles that testify to its survival and importance. What is lacking is a worked-out understanding of how to connect these to everyday learning, and of what they mean for the role of critical pedagogy in formal educational institutions. It is from within this tangled web of knowledges, practices, and positionalities, and the antagonisms and agonisms they produce, that it must be asked: what is critical about critical education today? How can we articulate the purposes and processes of critical education in these contexts? Who are we speaking about, to, with, or for?

Even in some of the most inspired critical pedagogical literature, these questions appear to be closed, and “critique” is framed as a specific kind of practice, school of thought or political agenda that can be mobilised in mechanistic responses to known problems. But in situations where these answers – or even the questions – are not themselves clear, more imaginative and personally challenging forms of critique may be required. What if critique was understood not as an ability to denounce that which is undesirable, or as an instrumental form of knowledge that guides political actions, but as an ethos of knowledge production itself? What if critical pedagogy meant learning to make sense out of complex situations, or to become open to difference and contradiction, and to the unknown? This is not the only form of critique offered, but it resonates with what critical theorists have been arguing for some time: that in order to create possibilities for radical agency in social systems that discipline, thought and desire, as well as bodies and labour, we must cultivate forms of critique that do not simply “hand down sentences” and judgements, but that “multiply signs of existence” (Foucault, 1980) and empower us to “think the world rather than being *thought* by it, to take it apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus to re-appropriate it intellectually and materially” (Wacquant, 2004, p. 101). This is critique as ethos rather than technique; a pedagogical way of being in the world that questions both dominant truths and the conditions within which they are thinkable as true; a way of responding to crisis that is decisive, but that does not generalise too quickly; and a habit of thinking in which we continually seek to understand the mechanisms and limits of power in our own lives (Butler, 2002). It is through developing such an attitude towards the transformative potential of any educational work that we might revalorise the project to demonstrate, rather than simply defend, the role of critique in democratic public life; and it is through struggling to create conditions of possibility for this practice that we might breathe political life into education itself.

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Author details

Sarah Amsler teaches in the Sociology Department of Aston University, having gained her PhD at the London School of Economics (LSE). Her undergraduate and Masters' degrees were from (respectively) the University of Delaware, USA and George Mason University, USA. Her books are *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia: Social Science between Marx and the Market*, London: Routledge (2007) and *Theorizing Social Change in Post-Socialist Societies: Critical Perspectives*, edited with B. Sanghera and T. Yarkova, London: Peter Lang (2007). Email: s.s.amsler@aston.ac.uk.

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