

In Defense of a Liberal Education: Criticizing the Critical

John Attard

Published online: 1 August 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

Not meant personally, but the use of the word “critical” by a subset of scholars always bothers me as leading to unconscious smugness? If I’m “critical,” your lot isn’t? Who, except flacks and twerps, isn’t critical? Can we criticize the criticalists?
—Barry Wellman, “Critical Theory”¹

Before I started my doctoral program in education at the University of New Brunswick, I had read extensively on the critical, postmodern orientation of humanities and social science departments in North American universities. I knew that polls had consistently shown that between 85 and 97 percent of faculty members in such departments had a left-wing orientation,² and that this would likely manifest itself in their support for critical and postmodern perspectives on education. I was also aware of controversial incidents on campuses around North America surrounding “politically correct” speech codes and thought control measures instituted at the behest of faculty and students of this ideological persuasion.

¹Barry Wellman, cited in P.J. Rey, “Critical Theory: Useful Distinction or Unconscious Smugness?” *Cyborgology* (blog), September 20, 2011, <http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/09/20/critical-theory-useful-distinction-or-unconscious-smugness>.

²Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

John Attard is a full-time doctoral student in education at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB E3B 5A3 Canada; jattard1@yahoo.co.uk. He has many years’ experience teaching language at college level and in the private sector in Europe and North America. He has a graduate degree in applied linguistics from the University of Leicester, UK.

A year in an education department at university confirmed just how pervasive this mindset is. Most subjects and research projects in the department carried a pronounced measure of critical theory, whether one was considering governance, funding, curriculum, access, subject matter, language, or any other aspect of education. Even professors teaching education in the natural sciences seemed compelled to add a sociopolitical dimension to their subject matter in order to conform to the overwhelming orientation of faculty and students to the social and the political.

As Barry Wellman, S.D. Clark Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto, says, everyone is critical at some point or another in his daily endeavors.³ But as a marked approach to education, with its own philosophy and methodology, critical theory goes beyond the “critical thinking” that forms part of a student’s tools of enquiry. Most especially, critical theory is distinctive for its a priori critical stance; it *assumes* deception and malevolence in public manner and discourse. It is also selective about its targets for criticism. For historical and political reasons, criticism is directed at particular persons, institutions, and concepts—usually Western civilization, white people (i.e., members of the Caucasian race), capitalism, heterosexuality, Christianity, men, and conservatives.

The illiberal nature of this approach to education is leading to generation after generation of benighted students, creating division among segments of society, and fomenting class warfare. The harsh and accusatory language of criticalism aggravates cultural divisions. Moreover, by bringing politics to the center of the mission of education, criticalism has replaced the search for knowledge and truth with a series of narrow perspectives. Here is a brief rundown of what is wrong with critical theory.

Selectiveness

Henry Giroux is one of the standard-bearers of critical theory. *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*, his recent book on education, is suffused with anti-Right/conservative rhetoric.⁴ Likewise, Joe Kincheloe, an equally high-profile critical theorist, makes tendentious remarks about the United States with ad hominem references to Americans of right-wing/conservative

³Cited in Rey, “Critical Theory.”

⁴Henry A. Giroux, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

persuasion in *Critical Pedagogy Primer*, a book designed for use in academic programs.⁵ In such publications, Western civilization receives significant criticism, while other traditions do not. In terms of religion, the Christian faith comes under attack, not any of the other religions around the world. In economics, it is the free market capitalist system that produces all the social misery. Command economies, or other types of economy, do not warrant criticism. One standard text on social research identifies only former *European* empires as “racist and oppressive.”⁶

University of Arizona professor emeritus of American literature John Harmon McElroy writes:

Ideas that should not be criticized, according to the Left, include racism among people of color (only Americans descended from European stock can be racists); the responsibility of the poor for some of the poverty in their lives; the exemption of politically correct persons (even if they are rich) from the charge of greediness (only the politically incorrect can be greedy, an attitude that makes it expedient for Hollywood celebrities and many other wealthy persons to be politically correct); the responsibility of addicts to overcome their self-destructive behavior.⁷

The Left’s animus toward business and the populism of political correctness allow the attack on the rich to be directed at those in the corporate sector—to the exclusion of the wealthy in popular culture, such as actors, musicians, and professional athletes. Furthermore, by proscribing the dominant groups in society on whose doorstep social ills can be deposited, the critical movement can exculpate the social groups within their constituencies, such as poor non-whites and single mothers, as well as other afflicted groups in society.

Which Culture?

In critical theory, the individual represents not himself but society as a member of a category within it.⁸ This creates a ghettoized view of society,

⁵Joe L. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁶Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin, eds., *Theory and Methods in Social Research*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2011), 327.

⁷John Harmon McElroy, *Divided We Stand: The Rejection of American Culture since the 1960s* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 52–53.

⁸Graham Good, *Humanism Betrayed: Theory, Ideology, and Culture in the Contemporary University* (Montreal, QU: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).

where cultural groups live a life divorced from that of other groups and society as a whole.

In contrast, through a liberal education, the individual is initiated into the shared values and common understandings of a true culture,⁹ not the “cultures” identified by critical theorists, which are essentialized by phenotypical attributes or social behavior. E.D. Hirsch Jr. identifies a common American culture that should serve as the foundation of education in the United States. Hirsch’s concept of *cultural literacy* requires curriculum content that gives students the knowledge to navigate the greater culture beyond their immediate one.¹⁰ Hirsch demonstrates how minorities and social groups can use common cultural tools to advance their causes. Figures ranging across the spectrum of black activism, from Martin Luther King Jr. to the Black Panthers, have adopted the language of the great literary works and personages in American history to disseminate their messages.

Black intellectual John McWhorter laments how political correctness coerces minorities to take an oppositional stance to mainstream culture rather than appropriate it to their advantage as Hirsch suggested.¹¹ According to Maureen Stout, professor of education at California State University, identity politics has created an unhealthy separatism in education.¹² Critical theory’s denial of universal human qualities results in balkanization and apartheid within society and the ghettoization of social groups. No less than prominent historian Tony Judt, who was no conservative right-winger, denounced the balkanization brought about by multiculturalism in the curriculum. Judt, who had served as dean of the humanities at New York University, observed of the current state of higher education: “You no longer have a university, but a series of identity constituencies all studying themselves.”¹³

⁹Patrick Keeney, *Liberalism, Communitarianism and Education: Reclaiming Liberal Education* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁰E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

¹¹John McWhorter, “Linguistics from the Left: The Truth about Black English that the Academy Does Not Want You to Know,” in Robert Maranto, Richard F. Redding, and Frederick M. Hess, eds., *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reforms* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2007), 175–91.

¹²Maureen Stout, *The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing Down of America’s Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2000).

¹³Cited in R. Donadio, “Revisiting the Canon Wars,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

Criticism as Attack

Calling someone a “racist” and using similar invective is a facile way of silencing an opponent. Sadly, this tactic is not limited to social disagreements but extends to academic discourse. For example, take Giroux’s comment on an op-ed by Charles Murray, a moderate and well-argued opinion on parental school choice for people of all socioeconomic classes.¹⁴ Instead of staying with the substance of the argument, Giroux wrenches Murray’s findings in *The Bell Curve* out of context and accuses him of having “argued for the inherent genetic superiority of whites.”¹⁵ Likewise, Giroux calls Dinesh D’Souza “racist,” presumably because of his vocal opposition to affirmative action.¹⁶

In *Critical Pedagogy Primer*, Kincheloe writes from a radical critical perspective that will not surprise anyone familiar with this strand of criticism.¹⁷ Of concern is that *Critical Pedagogy Primer* is a set text in education programs. The series, produced by Peter Lang Publishing, is advertised as a set of “primers” designed to introduce undergraduates and graduates in education to the theory and practice of the critical approach. This particular volume does so, but it also presents a blatant anti-Western—particularly anti-American—anti-capitalist, -male, -white, -Christian, -heterosexual bias, with ad hominem criticism of individuals of a particular political hue. In addition, Kincheloe uses unscholarly language to criticize epistemologies inconsistent with his view of knowledge. He repeatedly refers to positivist researchers as “zombies,” hardly useful terminology in making students truly “critically literate.”¹⁸

Noted historian and social critic Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. is accused of engaging in “extreme chauvinistic discourses”¹⁹ and holding “anti-immigrant sentiment.”²⁰ The references are to Schlesinger’s *The Disuniting of America*, a cri de coeur for unity in the United States that cannot fairly be characterized

¹⁴Giroux, *Education and Public Values*, 60. Charles Murray, “Why Charter Schools Fail the Test,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2010, A31.

¹⁵Giroux, *Education and Public Values*, 61. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁷Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer*.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 134ff.

¹⁹Jaime Grinberg and Elizabeth R. Saavedra, “The Constitution of Bilingual/ESL Education as a Disciplinary Practice: Genealogical Explorations,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 419–41.

²⁰Jim Cummins, quoted in Rosalie Pedalino Porter, *Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1999), 325.

in this manner.²¹ It should be noted that Schlesinger is a Kennedy liberal, hardly a nemesis of the critical Left.

Education as Politics

“When the search for truth is confused with political advocacy, the pursuit of knowledge is reduced to the quest for power.”²²

The problem with attaching politics to education is that if the term “political” is defined following the maxim “everything is political,” then it is rendered meaningless. If politics is defined in a narrow sense, then, like every other institution, education is influenced and affected by politics. However, this does not mean that the enterprise is inherently political, as the criticalists claim.

Criticalists see education as political: not just influenced and affected by politics, but an exercise in politics. They claim that their brand of politics is not about Right-Left ideologies but the politics of power relations, designed to expose and dismantle power. Stanley Fish, however, asserts that education is not a place for those who want to “[transfer] their disappointed hopes for political revolution to higher education and the classroom.”²³ In return, Giroux calls Fish “neoliberal and conservative.”²⁴ In fact, Fish is well-known for his liberal-Left views; he defends postmodernism and is critical of right-wing movements.²⁵

Cynicism

The criticalist perspective has encouraged a cynicism among students, as described by “Peter Sacks,” the pseudonym of journalist-turned-college-professor, in *Generation X Goes to College*: “As children of postmodernity, [students] seem implicitly to distrust anything that purports to be a source of knowledge and authority.”²⁶ In interviews with students, Sacks found them

²¹Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992).

²²Alston Chase, *In a Dark Wood: The Fight over Forests and the Myths of Nature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), 5.

²³*Ibid.*, 70.

²⁴Giroux, *Education and Public Values*, 99.

²⁵Fish, *Save the World*.

²⁶“Peter Sacks,” *Generation X Goes to College: An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching in Postmodern America* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1999), 124, discussed in John Leo, *Incorrect Thoughts: Notes on Our Wayward Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), 92.

“distrustful of reason, authority, facts, objectivity, all values not generated by the self.”²⁷

By embracing relativism and subjectivity, criticalists are doing a disservice to those students who are in search of knowledge and truth. But the critical camp’s biggest act of cynicism is its despair in the liberal tradition. Critical theorists and practitioners have lost hope in the liberal promise of equality, and this is clearly demonstrated in their abandonment of concepts such as personal responsibility, equality before the law, equal opportunity, majority rule, social cohesion, and reason. Critical theory has disowned the Enlightenment, to which it owes its origin in combating popular prejudice, religious superstition, and the arbitrary abuses of power.²⁸

Tilting at Windmills

The issue of power in education—like politics in education—is fraught with problems of definition. Inasmuch as layers of power in education exist, this is eminently unremarkable. It is hard to imagine a conception of education without a measure of governance. The issue is *how* the power is wielded and *by whom*. Power could well be exercised benevolently for the good of the students. When confronted with the question of who exercises the power they object to, criticalists make vague allusions to “dominant groups” in society. When pressed to be more specific, they trot out the “usual suspects” of whites, males, Christians, heterosexuals, and capitalists.

Such positioning derives from Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which extends to the discourse of all “dominant groups” and seats of power. Critical race theorists see racism everywhere. They claim that racism is systemic and institutional, and yet they always have to struggle to provide evidence of this, citing the “hiddenness” of oppression instead. Adrian Holliday, professor of applied linguistics at Canterbury Christ Church University, claims that education professionals suffer from the Marxist concept of “false consciousness” and are unaware of their ideological biases when they claim neutrality in their work.²⁹ Peggy McIntosh, associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women, famously coined the term

²⁷Leo, *Incorrect Thoughts*, 92.

²⁸S.E. Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²⁹Adrian Holliday, “Response to ‘ELT and the Spirit of the Times,’” *ELT Journal* 61, no. 4 (2002): 360–66.

“invisible knapsack” to point to the privileges of whites and males.³⁰ Kincheloe refers to the “*subtle* workings of racism, sexism, class bias, cultural oppression, and homophobia,” the “*hidden* politics of what is labeled neutral,” and the “*covert* political implications of...” (emphases added).³¹ In an act of sublime sophistry, critical theorists and practitioners cite the lack of evidence as proof of how subtle, invisible, and covert such oppression is.

Anti-Rationalism and Anti-Intellectualism

Journalist and historian Susan Jacoby warns that “Americans are in serious intellectual trouble—in danger of losing our hard-won cultural capital to a virulent mixture of anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism and low expectations.”³² The Enlightenment put reason at the center of human thought and launched an era dominated by science. The universalist principles propounded by rational thought and the scientific method do not fit well with the particularism endorsed by critical relativism. Indeed, the critical tendency now decries the Enlightenment for its rationalism and emphasis on truth and objectivity.

Conclusion

The capacity of Western culture to be self-critical and to absorb ideas and accommodate thoughts from all over the world is part of what Robert M. Hutchins called “the Great Conversation” of Western civilization.³³ Criticalists ought to remember that it is through the inclusive, self-reflecting, outward looking Western culture of which they are a product that they can criticize so robustly and eloquently.

Someone once said that we do not have a right to our opinion; we have a right to an *educated* opinion. It is only after we have acquired all the facts and studied the opposing arguments do we have enough information to form an opinion. This cannot be achieved if we follow the critical paradigm’s

³⁰Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in Paula S. Rothenberg, ed., *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 6th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004), 188–92.

³¹Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer*, 9, 10, 11.

³²Susan Jacoby, “The Dumbing of America,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/15/AR2008021502901.html>.

³³Robert M. Hutchins, “The Great Conversation” (1952), http://www.britannica.com/blogs/wp-content/pdf/The_Great_Conversation.pdf.

prescription of sectarianism, relativism, and political advocacy or yield to the fatalist temptation of saying that nothing is value-neutral or to the cynical view that everything is political.

Criticalists should take their share of responsibility for the impoverished education today's students get, one organized around politics, self-esteem, and rebellion rather than a commitment to the enhancement of knowledge. In an earlier book, *Teachers as Intellectuals*, Giroux directly argues that we should not be "organizing schools around the goals of raising reading and math scores....But our primary concern is to...[get students] to learn how to affirm their own experiences, and to understand the need to struggle individually and collectively for a more just society."³⁴ Elsewhere, Giroux accuses mainstream education of being "associated with the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition based on the virtues of hard work, industry, respect for family, institutional authority, and an unquestioning respect for the nation."³⁵ If the critical tendency is to remain relevant and not be seen as an interloper in the education enterprise, earning the scorn even of leftist and liberal intellectuals, it must temper its stance and rhetoric. In particular, it must:

- denounce the divisiveness of group chauvinism and identity politics
- rediscover its Enlightenment roots
- renounce "education as politics"
- see criticism as *reactive* to facts and opinions, not as a point of departure
- adopt a more civil discourse and spurn radicalism
- abandon its left-leaning political agenda

Giroux asserts that "intellectuals have a responsibility to unsettle power, trouble consensus and challenge common sense."³⁶ Educator and epistemologist Walter Terence Stace once said: "As a rule, only very learned and clever men deny what is obviously true. Common men have less brains, but more sense."³⁷ Intellectuals like Giroux are very learned and clever, but they lack (common) sense.

³⁴Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1988), 10.

³⁵Henry A. Giroux, "Literary and the Pedagogy of Political Empowerment," introduction to *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World*, ed. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 3.

³⁶Giroux, *Education and Public Values*, 107.

³⁷Walter Terence Stace was a philosopher, author, and professor at Princeton from 1932 to 1967.