

Book Review

Peter Mayo, *Culture, Power and Education: Representation, Interpretation, Contestation*, ISBN 978-1-0328-9847-6, 2025, London and New York: Routledge, 186 pages.

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One could argue that another sociological study that asserts that education and the arts are inherently political is unnecessary. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's classic *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977), originally published in French in 1970, convincingly demonstrated how social hierarchies and dominant cultural values are perpetuated by 'pedagogic actions' through a process of symbolic violence that reinforces existing power structures. Bourdieu and Passeron also showed how children from specific social origins lagged behind at school due to various perceived 'deficiencies', including linguistic capital, which serves as a tool for communication yet also determines the students' ability to make sense of logical and aesthetic structures throughout compulsory schooling and beyond.

On the other hand, one could also argue that both theory and research need to be revised or revisited on a regular basis, and that political and educational agendas and realities pass through previously inconceivable shifts from time to time. Nowhere, perhaps, is this latter possibility more in evidence than in the current swing that education is experiencing in the US. At the time of writing this review, President Donald Trump issued an order to dismantle the

Department of Education and dismiss almost half its workforce. One reason for this order is the perceived left-leaning ‘wokeness’ and identity politics that supposedly characterises public education. Along with a parallel turnaround on Diversity, equity and inclusion programmes that were previously supported by multiple campuses and companies following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, this attack on the Department of Education is seen by many conservatives as a return to sanity and reinstatement of ‘parental rights’.

In the current political climate, a book like Peter Mayo’s *Culture, Power and Education: Representation, Interpretation, Contestation* (2025) hence comes across as a relevant and even visionary volume, having been written before the recent developments in the US. It is significant that one of the few references to the current US President in Mayo’s book refers to Henry Giroux’s description of ‘Trumpism’ as a “pandemic” (p. 60) that, like a nightmare, resurfaces periodically in a revitalised fascist age of post-truth. Mayo’s book uses a Gramscian lens to argue that hegemonic social relationships are embedded in the everyday structures of society, from popular culture to schools and museums. While this spotlight on the value of a heightened awareness of the power dynamics that pervade contemporary life and education owes more to Gramsci and Freire’s notion of praxis (or to Socrates’ notion of the ‘unexamined life’) than the present push to shut down the Department of Education in the US, the book bears testimony to an ongoing encroachment on democratic life that is ignored at one’s own peril.

The book’s sub-title, referring to representation, interpretation and contestation, is arguably a good starting-point for readers to appreciate what the author seeks to do with this collection of chapters, many originally published as slightly different essays in other contexts. The issue of representation, popularised in academic circles by cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, demarcates a relationship between culture and the meanings we attach to cultural phenomena, almost always mediated via the use of language (or, to return to Bourdieu, ‘linguistic capital’). In artistic circles,

disputes about representation, especially national representation, have been rampant in discussions about national pavilions in global events like the Venice Biennale, which was created as a late-nineteenth century platform for nation states to show off whatever they considered to be ‘representative’ of their countries. Such wrangling over cultures, art and their meanings confirms that the three words in Mayo’s sub-title are actually interlinked and impossible to disentangle. While power may seek to fix meanings through specific systems of *representation* like language, language itself offers alternative routes that make possible multiple other *interpretations* (an example would be Hall’s notion of ‘decoding’) and simultaneously generate various forms of *contestation*. Mayo’s book is in itself a powerful exercise in ‘decoding’, as it relentlessly uses language to resist established forces that merely transmit and ‘define’ specific narratives and conventions.

The book’s rigorous analysis of Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony in the first chapter illustrates how dominant ideologies are maintained not only through repressive systems within formal education but also through various cultural institutions and economic conditions. Readers can join the dots between questions about coercion and consent in the chapter on Gramsci and the more Christian-inspired pedagogies of Don Lorenzo Milani, who strove for “a critical reading of the world as manifest in its day-to-day reality” (p. 37). Or between Freire’s radically transformative praxis and the need for people “to unlearn their privilege and to counter gender and racial oppression” (p. 82) in the chapter on bell hooks, intimately written in the second person. Or between Mayo’s discussion of Giroux’s analysis of authoritarianism and the ‘hegemonic apparatuses’ of institutionalised education in the chapter on Critical Pedagogy. Indeed, readers are constantly assisted in navigating the meticulous scholarly discussion and multiple geographic contexts referenced throughout the book by the author’s numerous comparisons between the book’s key thinkers in virtually every chapter.

The chapters that deal more directly with the arts, museums and popular culture examine the role of museums and fine art as spaces and objects that,

in the author's view, tend to encourage conventional pedagogies, focusing on "things of beauty" rather than "the tragic and violent histories that lurk beneath them" (p. 104). In the book, these conventional (apolitical) approaches to education (and curation) are paralleled by similar narratives reproducing existing (and largely hidden or disguised) power structures in works of art and architecture, such as the Cathedral of Seville, collections of silver artefacts in various museums, or the Orientalizing tendencies of Delacroix, Gauguin and other painters. The author makes frequent references to ecclesiastical contexts such as St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta and the undeclared stories of slavery and suffering that might have contributed to the bringing of gold and silver to Valletta's shores.

This insistence on a careful scrutiny of the political and historical culpability of art (or patronage) and the selectivity of museum collections is undoubtedly a vital component in a critical investigation of cultural representations. Mayo's concluding reference to Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" (p. 145) in the Epilogue could be interpreted as the book's central rallying cry, seeking out buried histories in educational practices, the arts and cultural institutions. From the perspective of art criticism or art practice, however, the book also possibly illustrates, unwittingly, the limitations of such an approach. While Mayo concedes that museums can become sites of resistance (rather than sites of cultural reproduction in Bourdieu's sense), the hope he strives for beyond monolithic interpretations lies in explicit questions that can be raised by the museums themselves, by critical pedagogues or other persons who care to contest official narratives. Bar some examples of popular culture discussed in Chapter 9 and a handful of artists like Basquiat referenced in Chapter 5, art always seems to be at risk of functioning mainly as a Eurocentric or hegemonic tool in the service of oppressive or imperialising forces. The absence of a real engagement with art from the perspective of art itself and its ability to resist forms of oppression as well as historical art practices through intuitive or deliberate forms of aesthetic dissonance risks turning the political argument in Mayo's book into a reductionist appraisal of what is really at stake in the aesthetic domain. Putting it differently, in Mayo's

book, liberation can be achieved through praxis or a sociological analysis of things and ideas but seems to be less feasible in the field of art practice itself.

The theoretical depth of Peter Mayo's book is commendable. It easily engages with Gramscian theory and significantly contributes to studies on Giroux's output over the years. Its discussions on education, culture, and power are not only a scholarly resource but constitute something like a call to action. In uncertain times like these, this call is more urgent than ever. It is imperative to oppose conservative voices that explain struggles for social justice simply as forms of radical indoctrination, and Mayo's illuminating book does that and more by engaging critically with the cultural forces that shape our contemporary world. Along with the voices of artists subversively transforming the way we see that world, the many authors brought together so eloquently in this collection of essays present a compelling case for refusing to accept that education and culture are apolitical. The book is essential for anyone interested in how power extends into the classroom and beyond—into museums, churches, and public discourse.

References

- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Sage Publications.
- Mayo, P. (2025). *Culture, Power and Education: Representation, Interpretation, Contestation*. Routledge.