

Culture, Power and Education

Author: **Timothy Alden**

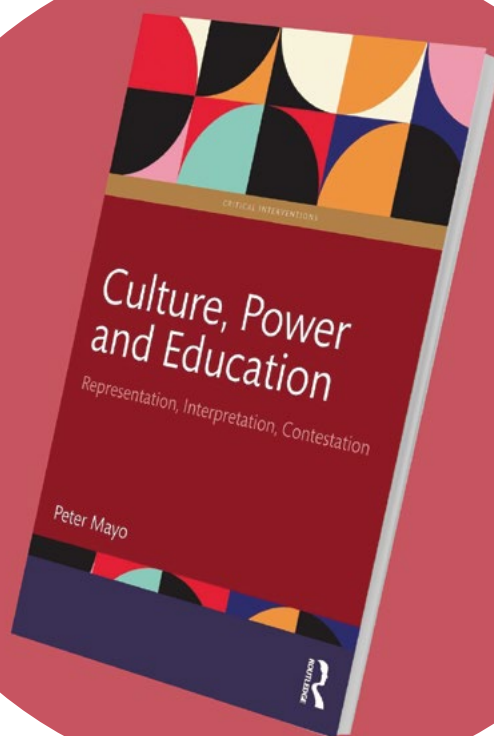
*Is education merely the passing on of information in a classroom, or does it play a central role in how power and control are exercised? Does education stretch beyond the classroom into lived culture in our daily lives? This essay analyses **Peter Mayo's** *Culture, Power and Education: Representation, Interpretation, Contestation*, focusing on how his expansion of pedagogy to cultural institutions reveals the subtle mechanisms through which power is reproduced and contested.*

Prof. Peter Mayo's recently released book, *Culture, Power and Education: Representation, Interpretation, Contestation*, offers a theoretical lens through which we can identify and interpret the power structures holding today's turbulent world aloft. Mayo draws on key thinkers in the field of education, such as Antonio Gramsci, to establish a foundation that recognises that education is itself political and plays a central role in hegemonic power struggles. Where Mayo goes further is by contextualising this within a wider understanding of education than the formal kind. In Prof. Bob Jessop's (Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK) words, Mayo 'shows how popular and elite culture are thoroughly embedded in

wider social relations.' As the UNESCO Co-Chair of Global Adult Education, Mayo has drawn attention to non-formal education outside the school system. It is in this spirit that Mayo examines the roles of museums, the fine arts, and cultural traditions such as 'Holy Week', when considering how education relates to power.

EDUCATION AND HEGEMONIC POWER

Mayo begins his book by introducing the thinkers who shaped his work, situating their literary contributions within the context of his own reflections. Gramsci is best known for his work on the concept of hegemony, which Mayo states is 'concerned with the exercise of influence and winning of consent' and thus that 'all aspects



of social reality are conditioned by or supportive of a single class or group'. This hegemony is then promoted or opposed by intellectuals, and thus, through education, which presupposes certain perspectives and values. As Gramsci developed his ideas, all around him were instruments of popular culture such as comics, radio, and football, which were instrumental in propping up what Michel Foucault described as 'regimes of truth'. Thus, Mayo fundamentally draws attention to those who benefit from certain power structures and explains why they emerge in the first place. To Gramsci, 'every relationship of hegemony is a pedagogical relationship'.

Separately, Mayo lauds Don Lorenzo Milani, whom he dubs 'one of Italy's most heralded educators'. Milani sought

to offer students of poorer status an opportunity for a robust education. On this, Mayo quotes one line from a survey on social-class bias in education that compares 'the public school to a hospital that treats the healthy and rejects the sick'. Milani established the School of Barbiana, which, through its operations, communicated a non-hegemonic set of values and principles. Nonetheless, Milani believed his school was unique to its place and context, and could not be reproduced elsewhere. A stark contrast is offered in this regard to the mass factory-farming approach of neoliberal education, which merely prepares students for the market economy in a one-size-fits-all approach.

Delving deeper into theory, Mayo introduces Paulo Freire, renowned for his usage of the term 'praxis', which

itself dates back to ancient Greece. Put simply, praxis may be understood as the application of reflection and theory to transformative human activity. Mayo states that 'praxis is geared to transforming the world as one intervenes in history to contribute towards its development'. It helps to identify possibilities for change and to understand social relationships.

PEDAGOGY AND RESISTANCE

To Freire, the pedagogical approach involves his concept of 'conscientização', which represents the process of coming into critical consciousness. For Freire, the pedagogical process is therefore inseparable from power, as education either reproduces existing social relations or enables their ➤



Prof. Peter Mayo (left) presenting a copy of his publication to the UM rector, Prof. Alfred J. Vella (right)
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

transformation. *Conscientização* involves not merely becoming informed but also developing the capacity to recognise one's position within structures of dominance and to act upon that knowledge. In this sense, education is never neutral. It either serves to domesticate or to liberate. Mayo adopts this Freirean position in order to argue that critical pedagogy must extend beyond formal schooling, as the

forces shaping consciousness are not confined to the classroom.

Mayo further develops this argument through his reading of Henry Giroux, whose contribution lies in foregrounding education as a central site of democratic struggle. Giroux extends Gramsci's concept of hegemony by focusing on how neoliberalism reshapes education into a depoliticised, market-oriented enterprise. Under such conditions,

schools and cultural institutions no longer cultivate critical citizens, but compliant subjects suited to economic productivity.

Giroux is particularly concerned with what he terms authoritarian populism, whereby culture and education are mobilised to legitimise inequality while discouraging critical dissent. Mayo draws on this framework to argue that contemporary education increasingly suppresses critical pedagogy in



Museums, works of fine art, and religious traditions function pedagogically by shaping what is remembered, celebrated, and rendered invisible.

favour of technical competence and managerial efficiency. This shift not only narrows the purpose of education but also erodes its democratic potential. Furthermore, there has been the emergence of a 'carceral state', which refers to governments investing in punitive control systems like prisons, prioritising control over investment in education.

Crucially, Giroux insists that educators retain a moral and political responsibility to resist neoliberal trends. Teaching, for Giroux, is an ethical practice that demands engagement with questions of power, history, and social justice. Mayo adopts this position to reinforce his central claim that education, whether formal or cultural, is always implicated in power relations, and that refusing to acknowledge this serves hegemonic interests.

CULTURE AS INFORMAL EDUCATION

It is at this point that Mayo broadens his analysis to cultural institutions and practices that often present themselves as apolitical or purely aesthetic. Museums, works of fine art, and religious traditions

function pedagogically by shaping what is remembered, celebrated, and rendered invisible. By framing culture as a site of informal education, Mayo demonstrates how hegemonic power is sustained not through coercion alone, but through the subtle cultivation of consent. These spaces, much like schools, become arenas in which dominant narratives are normalised and alternative interpretations are marginalised, thus reinforcing the very power structures that critical education seeks to challenge.

In examining these cultural sites, Mayo is particularly attentive to the ways in which claims of neutrality function as a mechanism of power. Museums, for instance, often present themselves as spaces of preservation and appreciation, yet the choices surrounding curation, display, and omission inevitably reflect broader ideological positions. What is framed as heritage or aesthetic value is therefore inseparable from histories of domination, exploitation, and exclusion. Mayo's intervention lies in insisting that such institutions should be read not simply as repositories of culture, but as active pedagogical agents within hegemonic formations.

This analysis extends to religious and cultural traditions such as Holy Week, which Mayo treats not merely as expressions of faith or communal identity but as practices through which values, hierarchies, and collective memories are transmitted. These rituals educate participants and observers alike, shaping understandings of suffering, authority, and belonging. In doing so, they can either reinforce existing power relations or, when critically engaged with, open up possibilities for contestation and reinterpretation.

Ultimately, Mayo binds the theoretical frameworks together with the goal of showcasing the 'contested nature' of 'cultural production'. According to Mayo, this production cannot be extricated from its context, and the 'selective structures in which they are embedded historically'. One is left, however, with a clearer vision of the role that education and culture play in the exercise and wielding of power, particularly in enforcing one hegemony or another. In today's increasingly hostile world, the technologies evolving at our fingertips and the information and narratives they communicate may be examined anew through Mayo's *Culture, Power and Education*. 

In addition to its English publication, Culture, Power and Education by Prof. Peter Mayo is available in Spain (in both Spanish and Catalan translations) and in Türkiye (in Turkish translation).