

# A Theoretical Framework for a Critical Analysis of Schooling: The work of Henry A. Giroux

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## Introduction

**H**enry Giroux can be considered to be in the mainstream of the so-called "new sociology" of education which, since the 1970's, and specifically since Michael Young's *Knowledge and Control* (1971) was published, has dominated most of the critical thinking about schooling and education. One of the few writers from North America who has dedicated himself to theoretical rumination at the macro abstract level rather than empirical investigation, Giroux's work provides a broad survey of the leading ideas of the new sociology of education, as well as a critique of the main trends within the field.

In Paolo Freire's words in a Foreword to a collection of articles (Giroux, 1983) there is "an undeniable power of thinking" behind Giroux's wide-ranging analysis leading to a critical view of education theory in the past decade. His theorizing can be thought of as a critical immersion in history, and is informed by the idea that though experience may provide us with knowledge, it is also indisputable that knowledge may distort rather than illuminate the nature of social reality. In a reply to a critique by McNeil, Giroux (1981) affirms his belief that the real value of theory lies in its ability

to establish the possibilities for reflexive thought and practice on the part of those who use it: that is, it must be seen as an instrument of critique and understanding. As a mode of critique and analysis, theory functions as a set of tools inextricably affected by the context in which it is brought to bear, but it is never reducible to that context. (Giroux, 1981, pages 220-221).

Giroux builds his theorising on a broad base including the Frankfurt school, the work of French education theorist such as Pierre Bourdieu, the ideology critique of Antonio Gramsci, whose categories "hegemony", "common sense", and the place of education and intellectuals in the formation of political blocs informs Giroux's understanding of the role of schools in society. In his attempt to provide a theoretical framework that illuminates the relationship between schools, knowledge, and the ideological interests embedded

in various modes of pedagogy and citizenship education, Giroux breaks new ground, moving away from merely "reproductive" critiques of education which posit a rigid socialization model geared to the labour market or the perpetuation of leading ideological precepts of American society. He sees schools as complex organisations whose relation to the larger society is mediated by, among other things, social movements. He moreover shows that the sites of social and ideological struggle, particularly the classroom, are spaces of genuine change, modification, and unintended consequences. Giroux argues that students do not merely refuse the compulsory ideologies and their practices: they form a separate culture and public sphere within which a different set of practices is reproduced. Giroux therefore agrees with the concept of "culture production" as set out by Willis (1977), but goes one step further than the author of *Learning to Labour* who conceived resistance as turning back on itself and simply reproducing the occupational hierarchy. What Giroux sets out to show is that while variants of ideological and social reproduction are going on, something else is also happening in the interminable struggle of students against school authority. He argues that the "surplus" resistance presented by students opens up tiny but significant spaces for new forms of power.

## Domination and Emancipation.

**T**hroughout his writings, in fact, Giroux constantly emerges hopeful that emancipation will occur. He considers our epoch to be characterised by domination, and this not only in terms of class, but also with regard to race and gender. Yet he goes beyond the failure of Marxist orthodoxy by bridging structure and agency. By refusing to develop analyses of everyday life in which subjectivity and culture were treated as more than a reflex of the needs of capital and its institutions, orthodox Marxism doomed the critical ideas of self-reflexivity and social transformation to be subsumed under the overbearing "weight" of capitalist domination. Thus, those versions of

radical schooling in which orthodox Marxist assumptions were accepted, critique seemed to give way to descriptions of the mechanisms of domination as they operated in schools and other social sites. The power of capital and the weakness of human beings to struggle or resist is a familiar theme in the discourse of theorists like Bowles and Gintis (1976). In a central article called "Ideology, Culture and Schooling" (1983) Giroux considers two tendencies developing from orthodox Marxism in an attempt to break from the restraints of the base-and-superstructure metaphor. Giroux talks about the culturalist paradigm which "focused on the moment of self-creation and lived experience within the class-specific conditions of everyday life" (page 123). The structuralist paradigm, on the other hand, "forcefully interrogated the question of how subjectivities get formed within the material practices of society so as to sustain capitalist social relations." (page 123).

Giroux criticises both paradigms, but shows that in the selectively combined insights of the two traditions, there are the necessary theoretical elements to reconstruct a more precise understanding of culture and ideology and to begin to see the full extent of their usefulness for radical pedagogy. Culturalism rescues Marxism from an orthodoxy that threatens to strip it of all radical potential and possibilities. The nature of class domination is viewed not as a static, one-dimensional imposition of power by ruling classes. Instead, ruling-class domination is seen as an exercise of power that takes place within an area of struggle — continuous and shifting element of contestation rooted in historically specific tensions and conflicts. Giroux also incorporates culturalism's stress on historical consciousness and critical intentionality as the most important terrains on which to begin the struggle to break through rigid and burdensome structures of oppression. The structuralist tradition on the other hand provides a powerful analysis of the complex ways in which dominant institutions and practices function in the interest of ruling-class formations. Giroux however considers that the view of domination that underlies such analysis threatens to strip it of its critical possibilities. Domination appears in structuralist accounts as an all-embracing, one-dimensional construct that exhausts the possibility of struggle, resistance and transformation. It denies the possibility that between the moment of determination and effect lies the sphere of consciousness and reflexivity. In his theorising about an emancipatory, transformative rationality, Giroux engages both the culturalist and structur-

alist traditions, but by reworking the notions of ideology and culture within a problematic that takes seriously the notions of agency, struggle and critique, he invests the dialectical relationship between structure and agency with a critical potential which both traditions had stripped it of.

Giroux's hope and "concrete utopianism" (as he calls it in "Towards a new Public Sphere"; 1983) are reflected in his constant opting to recognize, at least at a theoretical level, emancipatory possibilities in man's every day lived experiences. He chooses authors like Marcuse and Heller (as representatives of those whose view is that even the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy) over Althusser and Bourdieu, for instance, whose view of power and ideology is seen simply in terms of domination, imposed rather than constantly fought for, struggled against, and continuously modified in the arenas that constitute the terrain of everyday life. Even when he relies heavily on aspects of the work of critical theorists from the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse for theoretical insights in developing a critical theory of education, Giroux finds fault with their logic informed by a belief in the power of capital to control all aspects of human behaviour. He feels that underlying such a logic is a disdain of human agency, leading to a view of capital which industrializes the mind, so that "human thinking becomes mechanized and the mind corresponds to the machine - a technicized, segmented, and degraded instrument that has lost its capacity for critical thought, especially its ability to imagine another way of life." (Aronowitz, 1978).

### Structure and Agency in Neo-Marxism.

**T**hroughout his critical analysis, in fact, Giroux takes great care not to succumb to a too strictly monolithic, one-dimensional or reductionist view of reality, something which orthodox Marxism has often been accused of. In an article "Rationality, Reproduction and Resistance: Towards a Critical Theory of Schooling", (1983) for instance, he not only points out that "students from all classes and groups bear the logic of domination and control in different degrees, and the latter plays a constituting as well as a repressive force in their lives" (page 74), he also emphasises the reality of contradictions within the working class itself. Thus, he criticizes other theories of resistance with having failed to distinguish politically viable forms of resistance, whether latent or overt, from acts of behaviour that are either one-sidedly self-indulgent or are linked to the dynamics of fascism. "It must be understood," points out Giroux, "that it is theoretically incorrect to view working class

cultural capital as all of one piece, just as it is equally important to remember that while the diversity within the working class is far reaching, it is formed within economic, political and ideological contexts that limit the capacity for self-determination." (page 74). Giroux therefore steers clear of the risk of both romanticising the culture of subordinate groups (something which Dennis Lawton (1975) warned about with reference to Michael Young's (1971) collection of readings: (page 69), and mystifying how the dynamics of hegemonic ideologies and structure work. The crucial issue for Giroux therefore becomes the need to acknowledge the contradiction in working class culture, and to learn how to discard those elements that are repressive, while simultaneously re-appropriating those features that are progressive and enlightening.

Giroux does not want to present a "blueprint of society". He himself declares that his critical appraisal of the concepts of culture, ideology, knowledge and common-sense leads to a recognition of the forces of domination which exist not only around us, in the structures and institutions we inhabit, but also within us, deeply embedded in our personality. He recognizes that the image of transformation he presents is purposely vague because the goals of emancipation must respect the specificities of the struggle from which they emerge and the ability of the oppressed groups to define for themselves the object of their struggle. (cf "Pedagogy, Pessimism, and the Politics of Conformity." Giroux, 1981, page 220).

### Correspondence, Reproduction or Transformation?

**G**iroux applies this theoretical framework for emancipation to education, where he describes schools as social sites marked by competing cultures and ideologies, all of which exist in a particular relationship to modes of technocratic rationality (which, informed as it is by a positivist approach, sees knowledge as situated above and beyond the social realities and relationships of the people who produce and define it: (cf "Critical Theory and Rationality in Citizenship Education." Giroux, 1980). He moreover shows how none of these competing cultures and ideologies function simply as an imprint of the technocratic rationality's logic and discourse. In my discussion of Giroux's fundamental ideas about resistance and the generating of a radical pedagogy (or "Pedagogy for the Opposition": 1983), some of the key concepts referred to above, such as ideology, culture, consciousness and domination, will be further clarified since they form part of the critical

discourse which sees schools as sites of resistance. In various articles (cf "Beyond the Correspondence Theory: Notes on the dynamics of Educational Reproduction and Transformation" [1980]; "Hegemony, Resistance, and the Paradox of Educational Reform" [1981]; "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis" [1983]; and "Marxism and Schooling: The Limits of Radical Discourse" [1984] among others) Giroux claims that while it would be naive and misleading to assume that schools can create the conditions for social change, it would be equally naive to argue that working in schools does not matter. And it is not simply a question of going beyond the functionalist paradigm of education which sees schooling as essentially passing on values and skills necessary to function productively in the larger society. Giroux, as set out earlier, develops a theoretical foundation which goes beyond what the radical critics are saying about the political nature of schooling. He therefore puts as a problematic not only the liberal theorists' position that public education offers possibilities for individual development, social mobility, and political and economic power to the disadvantaged and dispossessed. By positing his own resistance theory, Giroux also goes beyond many radical theorists who have argued that the main functions of schools are the reproduction of the dominant ideology, its forms of knowledge and the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labour.

Thus, though he integrates into his theory the contribution made by Bowles and Gintis (1976) and other correspondence theorists, Giroux does not accept the overly determined model of causality evident in their views, their passive view of human beings, their political pessimism, and their failure to highlight the contradictions and tensions that characterize the workplace and school. For Bowles and Gintis, the causal and determining force for reproduction are the structure, relations and patterns of the workplace. Thus,

..the hierarchically structured patterns of values, norms and skills that characterize the workforce and the dynamics of class-interaction under capitalism are mirrored in the social dynamics of the daily classroom encounters... The social relationships of education - the relationship between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and their work replicate the hierarchical division of labour. (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: page 131).

Schools are thus exposed as sorting and tracking institutions that treat and teach minorities of class and colour in ways vastly different from middle-class and upper-class counterparts, so that ultimately working-class students are socialised for low-level jobs that require minimal skills and

cognitive competence. But Giroux considers the fact that the locus of domination appears to exist primarily within the economic realm (i.e. the workplace) to be a crucial theoretical flaw because it tends to rest on a base/superstructure model of reproduction in which politics and ideological institutions such as schools appear as secondary forces that have not autonomous or semi-autonomous existence of their own and which end up being absorbed by the imperatives of capitalist production. He therefore argues that the notion of hegemony provides a theoretical basis for understanding not only how the seeds of domination are produced, but also how they may be overcome through various forms of resistance, critique, and social action.

In essence, the correspondence theory has failed to develop a socio-cultural component that would re-define the meaning of domination and reproduction and point to the spheres of culture and ideology as important hegemonic elements that reach deeply into the crevices and texture of daily life... the failure of the correspondence theory to extend the realm of political struggle beyond the workplace vitiates the possibility for political action in ideological institutions such as schools. (Giroux, 1980 [iii]: page 230).

### The Notion of Resistance

**G**iroux is therefore interested to know how the dominant ideology is often resisted, rejected, and redefined by the set of meanings that students and teachers carry around with them. He attempts to analyse how the meanings generated in different types of cultural settings such as family cultures, work cultures, and class-specific peer cultures generate their own forms of resistance when they come up against institutions that embody and disseminate hegemonic ideologies. Such oppositional behaviour, which conservative educators analysed through psychological categories which served to define such behaviour as "deviant", "learned helplessness", as well as disruptive and inferior, a failure on the part of individuals and social groups that exhibited it, is redefined by radical theorists in terms of resistance, having a great deal to do with moral and political indignation. While Giroux criticizes radical educators for ignoring how teachers, students and others live their daily lives in schools, and consequently overemphasizing the way structural determinants promote economic and cultural inequality, and underemphasizing the way human agency accommodates, mediates and resists the logic of capital and its dominating social practices, he recognizes their contribution and improvement on mere correspondence. Bourdieu (1977) for instance argues against the notion that

schools simply mirror the dominant society. Instead he claims that schools are relatively autonomous institutions that are influenced only indirectly by more powerful economic and political institutions. Rather than being linked directly to the power of an economic elite, schools are seen as part of a larger universe of symbolic institutions that do not overtly impose docility and oppression, but reproduce existing power relations more subtly through the production and distribution of a dominant culture that tacitly confirms what it means to be educated. Following Bourdieu, Giroux rejects the functionalism inherent in both conservative and radical versions of educational theory, analysing curriculum, for instance, as a complex discourse that not only serves the interests of domination but also contains aspects which provide emancipatory possibilities. There is thus a realisation that though "schools operate within limits set by society... they [nevertheless] function in part to influence and shape those limits, whether they be economic, ideological or political". (Giroux, 1983 [viii]: page 260).

Giroux therefore develops a theory of resistance which celebrates a dialectal notion of human agency that portrays domination as a process that is neither static nor complete. There is a recognition of the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the connection between their own experiences and structures of domination and constraint. Central categories which emerge here are intentionality, consciousness, the meaning of common sense and the nature and value of nondiscursive behaviour. His concept of resistance entails a revelatory function that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation. To the degree that oppositional behaviour suppresses social contradictions while simultaneously merging with rather than challenging the logic of ideological domination, it does not fall under the category of resistance but under its opposite - accommodation and conformism. For Giroux, the ultimate value of the notion of resistance goes beyond the degree to which it promotes critical thinking and reflexive action. Resistance is useful in so much as it galvanizes collective political struggle among parents, teachers and students (in an educational setting) around the issues of power and social determination.

As has already been stated, Giroux is not claiming for the schools an absolute possibility for them to transform society. They are just one site of struggle, and in fact he urges radical pedagogues to join social movements outside the school environment and participate actively in what he calls the "public sphere" (cf Giroux, 1983 [ix]:

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pages 237-238). He however stresses the need to politicize oppositional behaviour, which, in the classroom as well as outside it in bourgeois society, has been depoliticized by hidden economic and political interests which exploit the masses (ibid. page 237). Because of these hidden interests,

..radical education cannot rely on existing institutions to promote emancipatory change. The power of such institutions to set and limit the agenda for debate, the disrespect they exhibit for the oppressed, their willingness to take economic and political action against oppositional voices make them unreliable as primary institutions for social change. Oppositional public spheres, on the other hand, provide the possibility for using collective aspirations and criticisms in the development of alternative cultures. (Giroux, 1984: page 133).

Although Giroux, in making a distinction between "schooling" (which takes place within institutions that are linked through the state through public funding or state certification requirements, embodying the legitimating ideologies of the dominant society and "education" (referring to forms of action and learning based on commitment to the elimination of class, racial, and gender oppression), seems at first glance to despair of real emancipatory possibilities in the school, he does generate some ideas and directions for a radical pedagogy. According to Giroux, theories of resistance point to ways of constructing a radical pedagogy by developing analyses of the ways in which class and culture combine to offer the outlines for a "culture politics". At the core of such a politics is a semiotic reading of the style, rituals and language, and systems of meaning that inform the cultural terrains of sub-ordinate groups. Through this process it becomes possible to analyze what counter-hegemonic elements such cultural fields contain, and how they tend to become incorporated into the dominant culture and subsequently stripped of their political possibilities (a process excellently documented by Willis' classic ethnographic study, *Learning to Labour* 1977). Implicit in such an analysis is the need to develop strategies in schools in which oppositional cultures might be rescued from the processes of incorporation in order to provide the basis for a viable political force.

## Radical Pedagogy

**A**s has already been discussed, Giroux adopts a view of theory put forward by the Frankfurt school... though he says that the first attempt to fight against the forces of domination rests with recognising them, and hence the role of critical theory in conscientising educators and students

alike, yet Giroux goes on to show the need to translate this understanding into political struggles in many sites and at a variety of levels of action. In "Rationality, Reproduction and Resistance" (Giroux 1983) the author addresses radical pedagogy to the depth psychology of personality, where "unfreedom reproduces itself in the psyche of human beings" (page 74). Alienating need structures represent one of the most crucial terrains on which to address a radical pedagogy:

..The question of historical genesis and transformation of needs, in my mind, constitutes the most important basis for radical educational praxis. Until educators can point to the possibilities for the development of radical needs that both challenge the existing system of interest and production and point to an emancipated society, it may be exceptionally difficult to understand how schools function to incorporate people as well as what it might mean for establishing the basis for critical thinking and responsible action... without a theory of radical needs and depth psychology, educators have no way of understanding the grip and force of alienating social structures as they manifest themselves in the lived but, often, nondiscursive aspects of every day life. (Giroux, Ibid.: page 74).

This is of course based on Marcuse's notion of depth psychology, but my reading of it seems to incorporate it with Gramsci's concern with putting the present "common-sense" reality in its totality and its historical relation. Thus, historical consciousness, as an instance of ideology critique and radical pedagogy in this perspective, functions so as to perceive the past in a way that makes the present visible as a revolutionary moment.

Giroux therefore argues that radical pedagogues would help students view their own ideologies and cultural capital as meaningful, so that they then can critically probe their strengths and weaknesses.

..Students cannot learn about ideology simply by being taught how meanings get socially constructed in the media and other aspects of their daily life. Working-class students also have to understand how they participate implicitly in ideology through their own experiences and needs.. an essential aspect of radical pedagogy is the need for students to critically interrogate their inner histories and experiences. It is crucial for them to be able to understand how their own experiences are reinforced, contradicted and suppressed as a result of the ideologies mediated in the material and intellectual practices that characterize daily classroom life. (Giroux, 1983 [ix]: page 237).

A radical pedagogy informed by a transformative discourse is moreover not only taken up by a critical analysis of the ideology underlying the explicit and hidden curriculum, or to an exposition

of the hierarchically organised bodies of knowledge, or to the way in which this marginalizes or disqualifies working-class knowledge as well as knowledge about women and minorities. Giroux calls for an appropriation of the useful material and skills within this framework, to restructure them as part of the production of new ideologies and collective experiences. Such a transformative perspective would promote the development of texts for pedagogy which "contain interests that may promote modes of schooling based on the critical dimensions of an emancipatory ideology". (Giroux 1983 [ix]: page 160).

## Applications

**G**iroux applies the above theoretical framework to two areas. One is an approach to citizenship education based on an emancipatory rationality perspective which retains the model of man as active, with intentionality, while socially locating him within a context which may resist, block or distort his projects (cf Giroux 1980 [ii]). Giroux redefines citizenship as a central element in the struggle for self and emancipation, and citizenship education as the theoretical lens for analyzing the depoliticization of the masses in contemporary society as well as their possible self-transformation toward a conscious and active citizenry. A citizen should demonstrate "civic courage", a form of behaviour in which one thinks and acts as if one lived in a real democracy... a form of bravery aimed at exploding reifications, myths and prejudices.

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  - (i) "Mass Culture and the Rise of the New Illiteracy". In *Interchange* Vol. 10, No. 4, 1979-80.
  - (ii) "Critical Theory and Rationality in Citizenship Education". In *Curriculum Inquiry*. Vol. 10, No. 4, 1980.
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  - (vi) "Pedagogy, Pessimism, and the Politics of Conformity". In *Curriculum Inquiry*. Vol. 1, No. 3., 1981.
  - (vii) "Hegemony, Resistance, and the Paradox of Educational Reform". *Interchange*. Vol. 12, 1981.
  - (viii) "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis". In *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol. 53, No. 3, August 1983.

Another area Giroux discusses in a number of articles is literacy (cf "Mass Culture and the Rise of the New Illiteracy: Implications for Reading" [1980]: "Literacy, Ideology and the Politics of Schooling" [1983] among others), where, like Freire he goes beyond functional literacy, making it a tool to bring critical awareness to the oppressed of their situation and motivate them to act as beings in their own and overcome their state of oppression. For Giroux, "radical literacy" informs the way in which people critically and politically embrace the concept of citizenship and the task of demonstrating civic courage. Literacy in this case not only provides the tools for "reading" oneself and the world critically... it also becomes the vehicle for demonstrating that education has broader implications that creating an educated and skilled labour force. In terms of what we have discussed above, critical literacy means developing a deeper understanding of how knowledge gets produced, sustained and legitimated and most importantly, it points to forms of social action and collective struggle (cf Giroux 1984: page 132).

This theoretical framework can of course be applied to many other areas relating to the schooling process. Indeed, I am finding Giroux's work very useful in my analysis of the process of transition from school to work and "non-work" in a period of labour market contraction. One relevant direction for research in education in Malta using this perspective would be a study of education and privilege, the dynamics of which have received a lot of attention within the "new sociology" of education, and which certainly need to be discussed at this theoretical level locally.

- (ix) "Ideology, Culture and Schooling". In *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Collection of Readings* by Giroux. London, Heinemann. 1983. (pages 119-167).
- (x) "Literacy, Ideology, and the Politics of Schooling". *Ibid.* 1985. (pages 205-232).
- (xi) "Toward a New Public Sphere". *Ibid.* 1983 (pages 233 - 242).
- (xii) "Rationality, Reproduction and Resistance: Toward A Critical Theory of Schooling". In *Critical Perspectives in Social Theory* Vol. 4., 1983.
- (xiii) "Culture and Rationality in Frankfurt School Thought". In *Theory and Research in Social Education*. Vol. 9, No. 4; 1983.
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