

CONCERNING THE “CRITICAL” IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Hanan A. Alexander starts by telling us that the concept of “critical pedagogy” was “originally coined by Freire to denote an educational philosophy that is grounded in neo-Marxist critical theory,” noting that the concept “has come to refer to pedagogic orientations associated with the whole spectrum of critical social theories including various strands of classical Marxism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism.”¹ He reports that “critical” has come to convey a “complex array of attitudes, suspicions, questions, and analyses connot[ing] awareness of the myriad ways in which people dominate one another,” pointing to possibilities to “amelioration,”² that last concept one of long-standing in U.S. curriculum studies.³ Echoing Freire, Alexander defines “pedagogy” as “the cultivation of a consciousness (...) associated with power [relations].”⁴ The implication for pedagogical practice is that “teachers should draw the attention of their students to the inequitable distribution of influence and privilege within the societies in which they live, on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and more, and cultivate capacities to overcome those inequities or limit their impact.”⁵

“Yet,” Alexander continues, “despite the best of intentions, it is often difficult to address concerns about social justice within these views.”⁶ He asks: “What is critical about critical pedagogy?”⁷ While “most philosophers and educators would agree that becoming educated involves the acquisition of some kind of critical attitude, they differ over what such an attitude should consist in.”⁸ For example, Alexander notes that for “critical rationalists, criticality entails being ‘appropriately moved by reasons’, not power,” but “esthetic theorists such as Eisner ... hold that criticism in education involves attention to neither reason nor power.” Instead, criticism “entails an artistic attitude grounded in cumulative personal experience.”⁹ He then “raises the related and perhaps broader question, namely ‘is education understood as initiation into a critical perspective, however conceived, possible altogether?’”¹⁰ He then characterizes the answer to this question as “crucial to the sort of curriculum that could prepare students for citizenship in open, diverse, democratic societies.”¹¹ He sidesteps the more interesting (and troublesome) issue - “If we cannot make sense of such a critical attitude, it must be admitted that all forms of inculcation are attempts to dominate or even violate the individual” – to admit what the reader suspected: Alexander knew the answer to his “broader question” all along: “education in a critical viewpoint is indeed possible, but not necessarily as conceived by radical, rational, or esthetic critics.”¹² Now the conceptual debris of the past has been cleared, Alexander announces that “we require a new concept of criticism in pedagogy, suitable to the education of citizens in diverse democracies,” calling “such a critical perspective ... a pedagogy of difference.”¹³

“Critical pedagogy and critical thinking,” Alexander explains, “ground the normative dimension in their conceptions of the cognitive conditions of criticism.” That is, both require “knowledge first—albeit with differing views on the nature of cognitive discourse—to ground any putative concept of ‘criticism’.”¹⁴ His view is that “educational criticism and pedagogy of difference hold that in order to engage worthwhile knowledge, one must begin with a conception of what it means to be worthwhile,” in which case “values [come] first—albeit with differing views on deliberation.”¹⁵ For Alexander, “ethics offers the most promising grounds for a critical attitude in pedagogy.”¹⁶ Espousing ethics over politics has been my move to pushback against the politicization of everything, including the canonical curriculum question: what knowledge is of most worth? For those who position politics as paramount, that question devolves into “whose knowledge is of most worth”? For Alexander – thus far bearing the bars of philosophical concept analysis¹⁷ – these are primarily questions of conceptualization, not moves to make in an ongoing complicated conversation concerning what knowledge is of most worth.

Oddly – given his earlier association of critical pedagogy with Marxism, crediting Freire (inspired by Catholicism as well as Marxism, a form of Liberation theology¹⁸) with its conception – Alexander now moves back the origin of “critical pedagogy,” associating it with Plato, specifically his concern to “establish the basis for a stable social order in an environment of constant political upheaval” – the contrary of contemporary critical pedagogy’s interest in causing political upheaval – adding that “Plato attested that pure ideas are clouded by the messiness of physical reality and [that] the purpose of the dialectical process, in which responses to generic questions are subjected to rigorous critique, is to eradicate that corruption and recapture our original pure understanding.”¹⁹ From Plato Alexander jumps to Hegel who, Alexander tells us, in “a version of Plato’s thinking ... inserted dialectical reason into history. The “cunning of reason” – Hegel’s phrase – is (in Alexander’s words) “constituted by the progress of particular nations, languages, and cultures toward absolute freedom, achieved through a process of inter-generational criticism,” as “theses proposed by one generation are opposed to anti-theses in the next generation, the synthesis of which in the third generation becomes a new set of theses.”²⁰ Alexander notes that “right-leaning Hegelians viewed nineteenth-century Western European civilization as the summit of social development and idealized the state to affirm established politics and orthodox religion.”²¹ In contrast, “left-leaning Hegelians (critical social theorists as they are often called today), followed Karl Marx in reconceiving dialectal reason in terms of socio-economic conflicts over power.”²²

Alexander continues this high-wire act by telling us that many “distinguish modern ... left-leaning Hegelianism [that posits “it is possible to overcome unequal distribution of power and achieve liberation and the utopian end of absolute equality”] from postmodern versions of left-leaning Hegelianism [that reject the “possibility of liberation, or any other metanarrative”], the latter associated with Foucault and

Derrida,” insisting “that awareness of the power relations inherent all human activity may ease, but cannot overcome, the extent to which we oppress one another, whereas the former contends that “resistance to colonial practices can be a cathartic experience that restores self-respect to subjugated indigenous peoples, even if their eventual extrication from the bounds of hegemony may not equalize the distribution of resources.”²³ At such an altitude and preoccupied with staying on the wire on which he’s walking apparently Alexander can’t see the difference between Foucault and Derrida – few would conjoin them with a conjunction – nor appreciate that each, in very different ways, assumed that critique and analysis could contribute to “liberation,” although neither would, I should think, invoke such an utopian term. Alexander does see what he terms “perhaps the latest development in critical social theory is the concept of ‘intersectionality’ ... [which has] led to an interdependent theory of disadvantage.”²⁴ Surprisingly, he concludes: “It may come as no surprise, then, that the conceptions of critique embedded in these various accounts of discrimination share four types of interrelated assumptions: political, ethical, epistemological, and pedagogical, each of which is subject in turn to a collection of separate but interconnected difficulties.”²⁵ Surely “share” is no verb any North American curriculum scholar would use to link critical theory with postmodern theory; in our review of curriculum studies in the United States separate chapters for each were obligatory, as each set of theories (loosely assembled under the terms critical theory and postmodern theory) differed from the other, contested the other – and never mind differences and conflicts within each.²⁶

Alexander then explains these “four types of interrelated assumptions,” the first being the “political,” which, he repeats, “follows Plato in conceiving power as absolute and tied to knowledge,” adding that the “fundamental question of politics is thought to be: ‘Who should possess power?’”²⁷ Anderson answers his own question: “Those who know how it should be justly distributed,” an answer, he continues, that works not only for “Marxists and neo-Marxists, who hold the utopian view that domination can be overcome by total equality but also of postmodernists and post-colonial theorists, who accept the dystopian position that oppression is inescapable, even if we can limit its effects by being ever suspicious of its influence.”²⁸ While the latter (very expansive) set of theorists may well be on the Left, a socialist redistribution of wealth and income is not – if one can even generalize about Foucault and Derrida (whom he pairs earlier) – the main idea driving them. Citing Popper,²⁹ Anderson seems to think that regardless of one’s main idea, “power necessarily corrupts, that absolute equality will ameliorate that corruption,” endorsing Popper’s “political theory of checks and balances which places limits on power,” as “the tendency toward corruption follows from lack of restraint, not from the nature of power itself.”³⁰ Alexander shows Popper’s influence again when he then moves to his second “assumption,” namely the “ethical,” asserting that “people can be held accountable only to the extent that their actions and attitudes are executed in accordance with their own choices and intentions” – to what extent

does that ever happen? – as “cries of injustice lose their moral punch when the institutions or people accused of acting inappropriately are in some sense compelled to do so by virtue of their belonging to a certain category.”³¹ Without (a relative) agency, then, there can be no (even relative) ethical action.

Alexander’s not necessarily “interrelated assumption” concerns the “epistemological,” which he links closely with the political, explaining that “since knowledge is thought to be inexorably tied to the corrupting influence of power, a properly critical attitude entails suspicions of all knowledge claims.”³² Does a “properly critical attitude” somehow escape “corrupting influence of power”? “Knowledge should consequently be deconstructed in order to uncover its underlying interests, which are very often hidden from view in latent presuppositions,” meaning that – this seems a leap in logic – “liberation is essentially impossible because *every critical perspective entails its own forms of oppression.*”³³ Such a “postmodern” crucial claim implies, then, that “the assumptions of critical social theory themselves should also be called into question,” as doing so “yields the paradoxical result that even critical social theory in all of its forms involves unequal power relations.”³⁴ (That verb – “involves” – is rather ambiguous, no?) Alexander’s final “interrelated assumption” he deems “pedagogical,” meaning “the critical task is to empower students with a mistrust of privilege in its many varieties by fostering the cognitive and practical capacities to identify, deconstruct, and resist it in order promote social justice,” but Alexander thinks the “conception of social justice undermines its own moral bite due to an overly rigid view of power that tends toward determinism and that eschews criticism, either because of an indubitable absolutism or a rampant and incoherent form of relativism.”³⁵ Ah, an acknowledgement of political correctness,³⁶ virtue-signaling,³⁷ and a liberal tendency to tolerate illiberalism.³⁸

Alexander then reviews philosophical analyses of “critical thinking,” defined in one tradition as “the capacity to apply formal logic and empirical inquiry to everyday problems,” thinking that is “formal” in nature, “independent of context,” and therefore “universal, applicable across cognitive contexts,” including “academic disciplines.”³⁹ To this view Alexander reports “two sorts of reactions,” one distinguishing “critical thinkers from critical thinking,” the questioning “the possibility of assessing the form of informal reasoning without also considering its content.”⁴⁰ Concerning the former, the idea is “becoming a critical thinker entails ... acquiring the capacity to employ the sorts of skills [e.g. identifying questions and formulating criteria for possible answers; analyzing the logic of arguments, etc.] [and a] willingness to [be critical of] one’s own life [and beliefs]”.⁴¹ Concerning the latter, the idea is “that there can be no critical thinking without substantive critical thoughts,” meaning that “critical skills are not, and cannot be, universal, therefore; they are tied to particular academic disciplines.”⁴² And a third response appeared, namely that “weaving these two “together into a unified approach” that could be called the “reasons conception of critical thinking [wherein] becoming a critical thinker involves both a knowledge and value component.”

requiring “acquisition of both subject-dependent and universal skills of critical analysis; on the other, it requires a normative commitment to conform belief and behavior to rational principles grounded in a love of reason,” what could be called a critical spirit.”⁴³ Finally, Alexander registers “objections” to “critical thinking, “one tied to ideology, the other to indoctrination,” the former alleging that “everything is political, including rationality itself, because power is embedded either in the structure of society or the very fabric of human relations.”⁴⁴ In addition to this “ideology objection” there is an “indoctrination objection,” according to which starts by posing “critical rationality” as “but one among many competing ideologies, assent to which is interested not neutral, grounded in power and privilege not reason,” meaning that “the very process of criticism would be learned uncritically, by means of indoctrination.”⁴⁵

In his review of “educational criticism” – he seems unaware of John Steven Mann’s curriculum criticism⁴⁶ - Alexander starts with Dewey, whose philosophy he summarizes as seeking “to overcome the tension between Kantian hypo-deductive objectivity and Hegelian historicist subjectivity, including the left-leaning version of critical social theory, by considering what happens when a human organism comes into contact with its environment,” a consideration that led him to emphasize “the pragmatic consequence of this meeting, experience, which encompasses both internal and external elements.”⁴⁷ From this sweeping summary, Alexander tells us that “critical thinking, in this view, entails solving problems that present themselves in experience through a process of trial and error to which he refers as experimentation,” not mistaken I suppose but somewhat simplistic.⁴⁸

Curiously, Alexander then tells us that “Eisner conceived pedagogy in esthetic terms following Dewey,” as “teaching, in this view, is an art form devoted to shaping perception.”⁴⁹ (I write “curiously” because Dewey’s conception, while aesthetic, is also social and political, these aspects interrelated but definitely distinguishable across his *oeuvre*.⁵⁰) Alexander thinks that Eisner “complemented Dewey’s pragmatic conception of art following Langer (1957), suggesting that it consists in just this sort of non-discursive expression of dynamic experience—Langer called it feeling—which comes to be organized into symbolic traditions that Eisner called ‘forms of representation’.”⁵¹ In a startlingly expansive epistemology, Alexander suggests that “eventually, more stable aspects of these experiences come to be articulated in terms of formal discourse, such as the mathematical, natural and human sciences,” implying that the “task of the curriculum, in this view, is to initiate students into as many artistic traditions as possible so as to enhance their capacity to experience the world intelligently.”⁵² Next comes Eisner’s signature concept when Alexander notes that for Eisner “criticizing this sort of expression involves re-educating our perception based on the personal artistic knowledge, or connoisseurship, of a properly qualified critic,” criticism occurring “on two levels, one having to do with instruction in a particular form of representation and assessment of student performance in that tradition, the other with the teaching of a particular mode of expression and the evaluation of pedagogic performance in initiating

students into that art form.”⁵³ Curiously again, Alexander concludes that “educational connoisseurship, then, is a form of understanding what goes on in classrooms based on personal experience” while “educational criticism, on the other hand, is a form of representing that knowledge,” involving “commenting on pedagogic activities in rich, metaphoric terms in order to transform how we perceive and do educational work.”⁵⁴ (I write curiously because connoisseurship is a form of assessment, implying “understanding” of course, but not its main point.)

Returning to his critique of the “critical” in critical pedagogy, Alexander wonders on “what basis can a critical perspective be established if one believes with James and Berlin (contra Plato), that the universe is plural, that human experience with transcendent values is varied, and that societies should therefore be comprised of multiple competing and often immensurable cultural interpretations of that universe and those values?”⁵⁵ “Therefore societies should reflect the plurality of the universe? Much of what constitutes this plurality is not what humanity would want, in the human sphere fascism for instance. He invokes Berlin’s distinction, “following an obscure fragment from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, between two sorts of intellectual types—hedgehogs who know one big thing and foxes who know many things.”⁵⁶ Alexander continues with his summary of Berlin: “Societies conceived by foxes encourage citizens to choose among competing paths to human fulfillment, provided they respect the choices of others, whereas hedgehogs assign privilege to those who follow one particular path.”⁵⁷ Alexander then points out that “hedgehogs are drawn to Berlin’s positive concept of freedom; foxes to negative liberty,”⁵⁸ the latter freedom *from* restriction, the former the freedom *to* choose forms of meaningful life. “Without insisting on a rigid classification,” Alexander concludes, “we would not go too far wrong to suggest that Plato and critical social theorists are more or less hedgehogs.”⁵⁹ One would want, I should think, both forms of freedom, albeit with relative restriction and ethically-informed autonomy.

Given these distinctions and definitions, I was surprised to then read that: “To define one’s self in the mirror of either inherited or chosen affiliations entails engaging people and views that are different from one’s own; but encountering difference also requires understanding the traditions to which one is heir or with which one chooses to identify.”⁶⁰ Self-definition as mirroring? While identification is surely an ongoing if sometimes self-contested psychological process, mirroring would seem no avenue to autonomy. Alexander calls this “this dialogical process” a “pedagogy of difference,” a pedagogy to be “conducted on two levels, initiation into traditions of primary identity, on the one hand, and engagement with alternative perspectives, on the other,”⁶¹ the former easily involving mirroring (if not coercion), the latter involving a degree of autonomy that mirroring would preclude. In Alexander’s view, the former – he terms it “the first level,” implying a Piaget or Maslow -like developmental stage theory – “involves inculcation into ‘intelligent’ traditions that nurture self-definition in the context of learning communities with visions of higher goods, ‘learning’ in the sense

that a community is prepared to adjust beliefs and customs according to engagement with alternative views and changing circumstances, and ‘higher’, not highest, because ideals are subject to revision based on experience,”⁶² an expansive even utopian (and empirically inaccurate) conception of “learning communities.” Invoking Levinas and Noddings, Alexander defines the “second level” as entailing “a willingness to engage perspectives with which one might disagree and a responsibility to care for others different from one’s self.”⁶³ He concludes:

Pedagogy worthy of the designation ‘critical’ must not only initiate into particular ethical viewpoints but also offer exposure to alternative perspectives. One learns to critique not only according to the internal standards of a tradition to which one is heir or with which one chooses to affiliate but also according to the criteria of at least one alternative, if not more. Dialog across difference is integral to teaching of this kind, which generates the possibility of a genuinely critical pedagogy.⁶⁴

Certainly, a plurality of perspectives is prerequisite to becoming “critical,” but not any “alternative” perspective will do. Not without risk of course, discredited alternatives – prominent among them fascism – promise not affiliation but disharmony, possibly violence, even genocide. There are differences across which dialog cannot occur.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ 2016, 903. Concerning Freire, see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paulo-Freire> Concerning curriculum as political text, see Pinar et al. 1995, chapter 4.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Concerning the ameliorative orientation of curriculum, see Kliebard 1970; Pinar et al. 1995, 199, 364, 548, 567, 593, 661, 669.
- ⁴ 2016, 903.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ 2016, 904.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid. For a survey of Elliot Eisner's influential scholarship, see Pinar et al. 1995, 3, 14, 17-19, 21, 27, 29, 30-31, 35, 44-45, 52-53, 58, 91, 101, 156, 171, 182-184, 189, 193, 200-201, 233, 320, 394, 412, 418, 515, 559, 562, 567, 569, 573, 580-581, 583-584, 604, 663, 680, 732, 734-735, 736-744, 751-752, 766, 850, 857, 863.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. In the United States, "deliberation" is a well-worn concept, often associated with Joseph Schwab (Block 2004; Pinar 1995, 35-36, 177, 196, 203-205, 237, 424, 584, 670, 851); in India, it is associated with Krishna Kumar: see Chacko 2015, 66.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concepts/> For a Canadian example, see research brief #112. Of course, clarification of concepts is one prerequisite to understanding curriculum, but only one: the extra-conceptual sphere of educational experience is another.
- ¹⁸ Pinar et al., 643-652.
- ¹⁹ 2016, 904-905.
- ²⁰ 2016, 905.
- ²¹ Ibid.

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- 22 Ibid.
- 23 2016, 905-906.
- 24 2016, 906.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Pinar et al. 1995.
- 27 2016, 906.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>
- 30 2016, 906.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 2016, 907.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness>
- 37 <https://theconversation.com/virtue-signalling-a-slur-meant-to-imply-moral-grandstanding-that-might-not-be-all-bad-145546>
- 38 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/#RelTol>
- 39 2016, 908.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 2016, 909.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Mann 1975.
- 47 2016, 910.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 2016, 911.
- 50 For a splendid overview, see Westbrook 1991.
- 51 2016, 911. “Complemented” is not equivalent to “following,” as the former implies some separation of view that “following” does not: odd for someone sounding like an analytic philosopher to blur the two concepts. Regarding Langer see: <https://iep.utm.edu/langer/> The 1957 reference is to her *Problems of Art*.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 2016, 912.
- 55 Ibid. For James, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/james/> For Berlin, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berlin/> For Plato: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>

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- 56 Ibid. concerning Archilochus, see:
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Archilochus-Greek-author>
- 57 2016, 913.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid. Concerning Levinas, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>
Concerning Noddings, see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nel-Noddings>
- 64 2016, 915.