



JOURNAL OF CRITICAL THOUGHT AND PRAXIS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY DIGITAL PRESS & SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Volume 6

Issue 3 *Everyday Practices of Social Justice*

Article 9

Book Review

The Critical Turn in Education: From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race

By Isaac Gottesman

Stephanie Masta

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/vol6/iss2/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Repository @ Iowa State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis by an authorized editor of Digital Repository @ Iowa State University

Book Review

The Critical Turn in Education:

From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race

By: Isaac Gottesman. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. 176 pp. ISBN: 9781138781351

Stephanie Masta*
Purdue University

In *The Critical Turn in Education: From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race* (2016), Isaac Gottesman provides a historically informed understanding of key issues in critical educational theory and research. Although this book does not define critical theory as a concept or practice, it does provide readers with a deep perspective on the conversations that took place and are currently taking place within the field. From the beginning, Gottesman makes clear that the purpose of his book is two-fold: 1) to demonstrate how and why critical educational ideas emerged and how those ideas developed within a specific socio-historic context and 2) to illustrate how reflecting on these ideas may offer insight into struggles currently experienced in contemporary educational and social spaces. Organized into six different “critical turns,” Gottesman outlines how key figures (and their ideas) build on and confront one another as the field of critical educational theory developed. By arranging the book in this manner, Gottesman not only achieves his purposes for writing the book, but also documents what Apple describes as “the increasing sophistication of the field from its early emphasis on education as only a mechanism of class and economic reproduction to its attention to education as a site of resistance...” (p. xv). Given the current landscape in education and ongoing dialogues around the purpose of school and educational reform, Gottesman’s book is an important contribution to the field and something all educational scholars should read.

Gottesman begins *The Critical Turn* by discussing Paulo Freire and his contribution to the field of critical scholarship. This is not surprising—Freire is often considered the originator of critical scholarship in education (something Gottesman later points out, is not wholly accurate) and his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is widely read in education courses across the United States. Therefore it is not uncommon for scholars to invoke his name in their own critical work. However, this chapter disrupts the narrative built around Freire’s role and offers a closer understanding of how Freire came to be a leading figure in critical educational theory. By detailing the intellectual path of Freire’s work, Gottesman demonstrates that while the ideas of Freire are often invoked, they are rarely invoked in a way that reflects Freire’s ideology. As Gottesman posits, Freire’s work is helpful for “articulating how and why schooling, and education more generally, should be harnessed in the push against an (increasing theorized and understood) unjust social order” (p. 26). And this harnessing occurs in the development of radical social movements that place education at their center, not by challenging the structural foundation of education.

* Correspondence regarding this review can be directed to Stephanie Masta at szywicki@purdue.edu

The second chapter of *The Critical Turn* focuses on another canonical text in the field of critical educational theory—*Schooling in Capitalist America*, written by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. By contextualizing the production and reception of *Schooling*, Gottesman connects the emergence of Marxist thought in education with the rise of an Academic Left. He does this, for one, by providing biographies of both Bowles and Gintis, highlighting that the ideas brought forth by Bowles and Gintis derived from their own intellectual backgrounds. Secondly, Gottesman details how *Schooling* revealed the importance of “cross-field and cross-disciplinary support for the emergence of radical scholarship in the field of education...” (p. 33). The connections made through this interdisciplinary work are significant because they point to the necessity of intersectionality in the field of critical educational scholarship. While somewhat challenging for readers unfamiliar with Marxist ideology, Gottesman uses this chapter to highlight how *Schooling* introduced Marxist social analysis in the field of education. More importantly, Gottesman situates how later figures (such as Apple and Giroux) move away from a political and economic Marxist approach, instead focusing on a cultural Marxist one.

Following the chapter on Bowles and Gintis, Gottesman centers the third chapter on the work of Michael Apple. Referring to *Ideology and Curriculum*, Gottesman documents how *Ideology* “helped initiate a broad turn in the field of education in the United States to critical Marxist thought as a lens through which to analyze the relationship between school and society” (p. 52). To do this, Gottesman provides the reader with a timeline for understanding how certain scholars and theorists influenced Apple’s thoughts on Marxism, and in turn, influenced his work. Examining this particular intellectual history is necessary because, as Gottesman writes, “it offers insights into the contexts and traditions that underpin many of the ideas our current critical scholarship both embraces and struggle with, it offers us a reflective window into our own theoretical work” (p. 71). Throughout this chapter (really, throughout the entire book), Gottesman encourages this type of reflection. He even asks us to consider reading Apple’s work alongside Gramsci and how this might push scholars to develop different types of analytic tools necessary to engage societal change. Gottesman reminds us that understanding the historic past of critical educational theory is vital for thinking through contemporary issues in the field.

Gottesman continues his focus on the early beginnings of critical educational theory in chapter four, which centers on Henry Giroux. This is where Gottesman challenges the idea that critical pedagogy originated with Freire and instead presents a compelling argument that critical pedagogy emerged from the academic work of Giroux (who, to be fair, was heavily influenced by Freire). As Gottesman points out, knowing this has significant implications for our understanding of history, and our current conception of critical work. This chapter illustrates Giroux’s attempt to “theorize the relationship between schools and society and the possibilities of schools as sites of radical democratic social reform in western-nation states” (p. 75), which is important in understanding how Giroux differed from Freire and how Giroux’s emphasis on schools as the sites for this reform is what started the critical pedagogy movement in education. And much like in previous chapters, Gottesman highlights why is it important to understand the socio-historical context in which these key figures emerged. As he writes, “locating the history of critical pedagogy in Giroux’s scholarship, and by extension in a particular post-Marxist intellectual and political milieu, is a helpful step in untangling critical educational approaches...” (p. 91).

Knowing the origins of critical pedagogy is essential, as Gottesman documents, to knowing how critical pedagogy arguments are influenced and framed today.

The final two “turns” focus on the emergence of situated knowledge and standpoint epistemology (chapter 5) and critical race theories (chapter 6). As Gottesman accurately points out, the beginning of critical educational theory might have considered abstractly the importance of social identity as factor, but did not do so in practice. In chapter 5, Gottesman introduces the role feminist thought played in the history of critical educational scholarship. He offers a short, but detailed, overview of the role of feminist thought in the academy, before moving specifically to education. Within this chapter, Gottesman focuses primarily on Elizabeth Ellsworth, who in 1989 critiqued the notion of “teacher as intellectual,” a primary concept in Giroux’s critical pedagogy. Her main argument was that “critical pedagogy does not theorize a self-reflective teacher as intellectual, one that unpacks his or her own assumptions and recognizes their own subjectivity” (p. 101). Instead, Ellsworth claimed, the teacher in Giroux’s critical pedagogy is never implicated in the structures they are trying to change. As one might assume, this critique of Giroux was not well-received. Gottesman highlights some of the responses, many of which had little to do with Ellsworth’s argument and focused more on her daring to challenge a key figure in the field. However, as Gottesman also points out, this marked a change in critical educational theory as more postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars (such as Patti Lather and Kathleen Weiler) pushed the conversations in the field to “understand the social situatedness of the knower” (p. 111). Related, Gottesman ends this chapter with a postscript stating while feminist work did engage issues of race, initial critical feminist work was written by white women. This acknowledgement is important and serves as a nice introduction to the final turn.

The last turn Gottesman discusses is the emergence of critical theories of race. As Gottesman notes, this turn marked a shift because “race became a central focus of scholarship” (p. 117). The question was no longer focused on *if* race played a role, but instead, *what* role it played. In this chapter, Gottesman provides “a narrative arc...into core debates and conversation flows that remain central to critical race scholars” (p. 117). This arc is important and Gottesman does an excellent job at parsing out the various lines of thought within the narrative, particularly within Critical Race Theory (CRT). By outlining the differences between Daniel Solórzano/Tara Yosso and Gloria Ladson-Billings/William Tate, Gottesman demonstrates how CRT evolved within the critical educational landscape, and how CRT continues to influence critical race theory development. As Gottesman points out, the nuance of the arguments with critical race theories has implications for analysis and advocacy within education.

Gottesman concluded the book by reminding readers that while the previous chapters offer a historic perspective on critical educational theory, we must continue to situate those perspectives in the current conversations in the field. He argues that scholarly research in this area is often “poorly crafted, from thin readings of ideas, to shoddy polemical pronouncements” (p. 139). To combat this, Gottesman suggests that scholars engage in four practices: read broadly, read closely, publish broadly, and focus on teaching and learning. While Gottesman acknowledges these practices do occur, undertaking them more extensively is essential if we want critical educational scholarship to significantly contribute to the fight against social injustice. It is these practices and how Gottesman

applies them that create the link between the historical conversations in critical educational theory and turn toward education-as-liberation.

As Apple acknowledges in his introduction, *The Critical Turn* is an important contribution to the field of critical educational theory. *The Critical Turn* does indeed illuminate the different historic “turns” in critical educational theory. It also challenges us to think through how these turns influence contemporary educational scholarship. But this is not just another history of education text. It is a call to engage with the past, present, and future of critical educational work. Gottesman ends by stating, “If we are to prepare scholars, practitioners, and activists who are working in solidarity towards the goal of radical social change, we must do so with all of the analytical and conceptual care that we hope a more just society might offer” (p. 146). *The Critical Turn* is an excellent place for us to start.

Author Notes

Stephanie Masta, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Purdue University. Her research centers on the contemporary Native American educational experiences in P-20 schools and the application and use of critical and indigenous methodologies in qualitative research. Stephanie’s most recent project focused on academic colonialism in university settings.