CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND BEYOND
AN INTERVIEW WITH PANAYOTA GOUNARI

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Felipe Ziotti Narita: In your recent book From Twitter to Capitol Hill*, you argue that education is still political to the extent that it remains a struggle over meaning. Could you talk about this view?*

Panayota Gounari: Let me start with the "still political" part of the question. It is interesting that in 2022 with so much literature in the field, with a wealth of studies exploring and documenting the political nature of schooling, with work coming out of the Sociology of Education and Critical Pedagogy, and with the amount of activism in schools, people are still ambivalent about using the term "political" next to education. In a graduate seminar that I am teaching on the Foundations of Critical Pedagogy, it takes (very well-intentioned and politically active) students time to feel comfortable with the "politics of schooling." Students often start the semester with statements like "politics should be kept out of schools" which is, in fact, a very political comment. We are still debating today whether schools are political sites when the educational edifice at all levels is inextricably connected to capitalist relations of production, reproducing a hierarchically organized labor force and its ideological legitimation. The myth of schools as both a neutral happy place and a social leveler has had a pervasive endurance, possibly because it resonates with human beings' desire to believe in the goodness and unlimited potential of education. Along these lines, schools are still presented as neutral temples of knowledge and skills, disconnected from a broader sociopolitical and

historical context where decisions are largely taken independently of the students' best interests in mind. Historically, too many hopes have been placed on the schooling process—this rhetoric is also always part of all education reforms, the whole notion of "student success"—while capitalism adds thousands of people to the ranks of poor, unemployed, low-waged exploited workers daily. Schools are not neutral sites of learning, or temples for the production of "objective" knowledge—whatever that may be. Public education is not the mechanism that opens the doors of social mobility, individual development, and political and economic power to disadvantaged and oppressed students. Instead, as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux insist, school knowledge is instrumental for the reproduction of capitalist social relations which are not confined to preparation for hierarchically arranged occupational and class structures, but also transmit the discourse of domination (ARONOWITZ; GIROUX, 1993).

I want to talk about the ongoing debate and struggle over meaning in the context of the capitalist neoconservative educational agenda of usefulness, pragmatism, and evidence-based results that is needed to maintain a highly stratified society. Education produces, reproduces, contests, confirms, and rewards a range of meanings. I am thinking here of all the ways classrooms serve as sites of social, political and cultural reproduction in alignment with the capitalist market. I am also thinking about the fragmentation of knowledge into decontextualized chunks that don't make up a meaningful whole; the commodification of the curriculum with the unchecked power and control of big publishing companies; the ways standardized tests impose a business model in learning and the production of knowledge; and how the credentialling process for teachers artificially specializes them in their subject matter while the structure of schooling and educational policies (through austerity, high stakes assessments, authoritarianism and surveillance, etc.) totally robs these educators of their autonomy.

The struggle over meaning is, then, a core dimension making up education's deeply political character. Schools are battlegrounds for the struggle over meaning: what counts as knowledge, who produces official legitimate knowledge and for what purpose, how does official knowledge represent dominant ideological configurations, what kind of knowledge finds its way into the curriculum and how specific forms of curricular knowledge reflect these configurations; how is the control of culture and meaning related to the reproduction of our socioeconomic order; how do educators and students create meaning and make sense of their world through schooling and the official curriculum. The struggle over meaning is twofold: it is understanding and contesting the hegemonic meanings produced in schools but also transforming and producing liberatory meanings through a revolutionary praxis, as Paulo Freire would claim.

The task, then, for Critical Pedagogy is to bring politics back to schools as a way through which people intervene in the world that necessarily signals a sense of agency, a force for awareness, conscientization, and transformation. Against traditional educational theory's long-standing emphasis on the management and administration of knowledge, Critical Pedagogy positions a critical concern with the historical and social determinants that govern the selection of such knowledge forms and attendant practices. However, Critical Pedagogy posits that against training for skills and competencies, knowledge and competitiveness in the job market, schools should be first and foremost places for developing critical agency and historical thinking, for socializing individuals into radical forms of social organization where exploitation, symbolic and material violence, authoritarianism and unequal distribution of wealth and power have no place. Schools should teach a discourse of inquiry and analysis not consensus, dissent rather than complacency, and they should encourage students to explore the translation tools necessary for their developing agency. Deconstructing schools as neutral training sites is part of Critical Pedagogy's critique of positivism and instrumental rationality as it is manifested in schools through the fragmentation and standardization of the curriculum, high stakes testing, the instrumental pragmatic character of public education, and the quantification of all aspects of school life. Critical Pedagogy contests the conservative language of positivism and the emphasis on 'excellence' and 'success' via more punitive evaluation or 'rigorous' science and math curricula as if the mastery of technique is equivalent to knowledge. The struggle over meaning is then the struggle over who controls the educational agenda and for what purposes.

Felipe Ziotti Narita: From social media to the streets, social movements have embedded diffuse spaces for political action. Public pedagogy, as educational projects transcending institutional spaces, may be committed to activism and collective action. How can social movements be spaces for learning and critical pedagogy?

Panayota Gounari: Public pedagogy is an interesting conceptual construction and a material and symbolic field that includes multiple sites of practice as pedagogical spaces. It can be further understood as educational activity and learning in extra-institutional spaces and discourses. The kind of public pedagogy I am talking about here sees public spaces as sites for political action, that have the potential to disrupt common sense, inertia and passivity and to create opportunities for the expression of complex perspectives and the organization of political interventions around common problems, goals and aspirations. I also want to make the point that public pedagogy should not be limited to making

pedagogy public, but also to make the "public" an integral part of pedagogy. In the same way learning can take place in so many public sites, including social movements, the "public," what is going on in public life should be part of learning. The public, the "streets," social movements must enter schools and classrooms, instead of building high walls to block out any "non-school" discussion. I am rather thinking of a dialectical relationship here between public (symbolic and material) and institutionally-based pedagogy.

Occurring beyond formal education at all levels, public pedagogy involves learning in material and symbolic spaces such as other institutions like museums, zoos, and libraries; in informal educational sites such as popular culture, media, commercial spaces, and the Internet; and through figures and sites of activism, including public intellectuals and grassroots social movements (SANDLIN et al., 2010; SANDLIN et al. 2011). Social movements in that sense, are ideal sites for a public pedagogy of opposition because they host activism outside institutionalized structures—activism that is embodied in collective action.

Social movements are by definition sites of struggle. But these struggles are always situated historically as is the knowledge of this world. And only by knowing our social world, can we act upon it. We are writing and re-writing the knowledge of this world and this is an inherently pedagogical process.

Thinking of social movements as grounds for critical public pedagogy helps us to think of a pedagogical process that is explanatory, practical and normative. First, social movements are making history in the here-and-now. They are borne out of real social issues and identify wrongs in current social reality. Their emergence and existence is anchored in reality, in everyday life, in the daily struggles of different groups and collectives to confront a social issue. But this here-and-now is also historically situated (explanatory). Second, social movements are entities that employ specific means and strategies to change social reality through collective action (practical). Finally, social movements as public pedagogy sites, can provide both norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for redressing inequities and work towards social transformation (normative). This social movement public pedagogy is critical because it brings to the fore questions of power, access to and distribution of material and symbolic resources, political organization and interventions that may lead to reform and hopefully at transformation. Social movements as public pedagogy sites can further help us develop an honest, consistent, humble radicalism or as Freire (2005, p. 39) notes: "the radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it".

Through their mobilizations, social movements bring attention to, create and promote information and knowledge and raise awareness about pressing social issues, and the public good. Social movements as public pedagogy have the potential to help imagine and plan future orientations, but also to understand why all of us can and should be involved in the struggle: they situate social problems in the here-and-now and connect them to ordinary people's lives giving shape to a developing collective consciousness.

Jeremiah Morelock: In your book you talk about 'one-dimensional discourse,' and use ideas from Herbert Marcuse to develop your model of discourse analysis. Can you explain what is 'one-dimensional discourse,' and what is it about Marcuse's ideas in particular that you find important to bring to the practice of discourse analysis?

Panayota Gounari: I have always found inspiration and ideas in the work of the Frankfurt School. I remember reading Adorno's *Minima Moralia* in my first year as a doctoral student for pleasure. I was captivated by the language and the darkness (the abyss) of the work. I still remember a passage: "Every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated, and does well to acknowledge it to himself, if he wishes to avoid cruelly apprised of it behind the tightly-closed doors of his self-esteem. […] He is always astray. […] His language has been expropriated, and the historical dimension that nourished his knowledge, sapped." This resonated so much with my condition and state of mind at the time as a foreigner in the United States who was trying to grasp a reality so removed from my experiences until then. I read Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* in Greek first and then in English. It was a revelation for me, again because of its timeliness and eerie relevance.

When I got deep into Critical Discourse Analysis, I was surprised to see how peripheral the work of Herbert Marcuse was in the field. Granted, the influence of the Frankfurt School on the critical program of what started as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is uncontested and widely acknowledged in the existing literature. Ruth Wodak who is a central figure in Critical Discourse Studies` has affirmed how CDA "adheres to the socio-philosophical orientation of critical theory. And literature in CDS acknowledges a theoretical debt to critical theory, but has relied mostly on Horkheimer and Adorno. While Herbert Marcuse is the only scholar from the first generation who explicitly discusses the workings of language (discourse, really) in advanced industrialized societies, and who raises linguistic questions and even presents his concept of "one dimensional discourse," his work does not seem to have found its way into CDS. What I did in my work was to read Marcuse's theoretical work from a linguistic/discursive perspective, to

structure a frame of reference for the understanding and analysis of authoritarian discourse, as it manifests in different realms of human life. Marcuse's work related to discourse offers theoretical, conceptual, and analytical tools that can support and enrich inquiry into far-right authoritarian discourses, as they manifest in social media. In this framework, I have identified six features that can be used in the analysis of authoritarian discourse: *dehistoricization*, *instrumentalism/ operationalism*, *digital aggressiveness*, *discourse as commodity*, *self as a brand*, and the *discourse of amusement*.

But what exactly is this one-dimensional discourse? I will unavoidably cite Marcuse here: It is the flattening of discourse, "the pervasive repression behind a veil of 'consensus', the lack of recognition for perspectives and alternatives beyond the dominant frame, the closure of the dominant universe of meaning, the corrosion of established liberties and lines of escape, total mobilization against a permanent Enemy built into the system as a basis for conformity and effort…." One-dimensional language is a 'rational' language, it has a pre-determined repertoire of meanings, has no depth or layers of meaning-making. One word means one thing. It is a functionalized language that has fully integrated conformism, unfreedom, even opposition; a language that "militates against the development of meaning" where concepts are absorbed by the word. The closed universe of discourse unifies the opposites in perfect harmony: The Constitution is unconstitutional, breaking the law is legal, democracy is oligarchy, science is unscientific, humans are non-human, the truth is a lie (think "fake news" here), war is peace. Finally, one-dimensional discourse is flat and de-historicized. It has been stripped off the meanings' historical dimensions.

Marcuse talks about *Language of Total Administration*: a 'rational' language, permeated by magical, authoritarian and ritual elements, deprived of mediations. He claims that, the loaded language proceeds according to the Orwellian recipe of the identity of opposites: in the mouth of the enemy, peace means war, and defense is attack, while on the righteous side, escalation is restraint, and saturation bombing prepares for peace. A great example of one-dimensional language is the discourse of the far-right authoritarian populist ideological construction known as Trumpism

Felipe Ziotti Narita: In Latin America there is a strong grassroots tradition of progressive, critical education based on popular movements – it is the Latin American popular education, which is particularly relevant in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. In recent years, Latin American popular education has been concerned with a decolonial turn, that is, an attempt at producing new epistemologies and knowledges from local communities and

peripheral countries vis-à-vis the hegemonic Western canon. Do you think this approach can be useful for critical pedagogy?

Panayota Gounari: A decolonial turn is long overdue in the Critical Pedagogy literature in North America, beyond a few notable exceptions (I am thinking here the work of Noah De Lissovoy, in particular and Catherine Walsh). Considering that Critical Pedagogy was borne out of Brazilian radical educator Paulo Freire'work and that Freire had addressed in depth the colonizer/colonized tension, the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, the colonized mentality of oppression and the notion of cultural invasion drawing on Franz Fanon and Albert Memmi, we would expect to see a strong disciplinary tradition in this direction. Unfortunately, Critical pedagogy remains rooted in the western paradigm.

A decolonial project in the context of Critical Pedagogy would presuppose a different kind of historical thinking. A different kind of historical thinking means to critically reflect on our relationship with dominant narratives, in this case Western narratives, and to understand decoloniality as an ongoing pedagogical project. This is not a proposal to dispose of Western knowledge altogether; it, rather, means to revisit our exclusive relationship with the West (with privileged versions of the West, more accurately) at the expense of other knowledge production and producers. The West, while not "a homogeneous construction is held together by the narratives and rhetoric of modernity, including the variation of postmodern narratives and the logic of coloniality." Consequently, argues Mignolo (2017), "the westernization of the world touched upon many different histories and memories. Each local history and memory was disturbed by the intervention and domination of Western civilization, with the collaboration of elites in each local history". Colonial constructions of history are stubborn and enduring, despite the growing body of literature on decoloniality (MIGNOLO, 2017; MIGNOLO; WALSH, 2018). The decolonial project is not exclusively a scholarly endeavor; it includes decolonial thinking and doing. Decolonization is a pedagogical project of unlearning narratives, ways of thinking and doing, deeply steeped in oppressive systems of knowledge and identity production. The first step in this decolonial project would be to decolonize the self: for scholars and educators who have been socialized, educated, and conditioned in particular ways of learning, knowing, teaching, and talking about knowledge and disciplinary ways of inquiry, unlearning is a long and painful process; it is about un-educating ourselves from the "colonial shackles of knowledge production" (YAKO, 2021, p. 8). With un-learning, comes re-learning, that is, rescuing, articulating, and enriching a vision of knowledge that does not limit itself in the confines of the West. A vision of knowledge embodied in different groups of human beings in the World "to rebuild all that has been damaged by the colonial wounds and the disciplinary institutions we dealt with throughout our lives" (YAKO, 2021, p. 9).

Another important process in the project of decoloniality is that of constant humanization to counter dehumanization. Colonization dehumanizes people, it devalues their mind, psyche, and body. This process works on two levels: for scholars/educators who are colonized subjects it means reclaiming their value and authority in making meaningful contributions. As Yako (2021) notes, "coloniality puts colonized people in such a position that they must validate everything they do through the criteria and measurements of the apparatus put in place by Europe and North America" (para. 10). It is then, vital that colonial subjects/scholars reclaim their value and reconnect "with that deeply buried voice of knowledge inside of us that has been silenced by the wreckage of wars, sanctions, racism, violence, sexism, and other forms of divisions, classifications manufactured and imposed by coloniality" (para. 10). Second, it is important that as scholars and educators we hold and preserve the core of what makes us human refraining from reproducing dehumanizing ideologies and practices in our lives and in our work; and that we constantly engage in the delinking and relinking process suggested by Mignolo.

Finally, and in connection with the previous discussion on decoloniality, discourses as constitutive of knowledge need to be decolonized, we must "examine why we say the things we say and how we get to internalize and express the things that shape our lives. In fact, language is truly the only home that remains even in exile when all else is lost" (YAKO, 2021, p. 20). In summary, Critical Pedagogy scholarship must engage with the core matter of thinking historically and put historical knowledge at the core of our pedagogical and theoretical practices as part of a liberatory project. Often the very analyses in Critical Pedagogy literature are, themselves, superficial and dehistoricized and mostly serve as a vehicle for disposable progressive politics. An important attempt has been made by De Lissovoy (2007, 2008) who distinguishes history (as a linear dominant narrative) from historicity (that redefines history as a site of possibility). Drawing on Paulo Freire's work, De Lissovoy structures historicity as part of the fulfillment of the historical vocation of humanization by the oppressed where "history is a human learning and a human teaching toward liberation" (DE LISSOVOY, 2018, p. 12).

Felipe Ziotti Narita: One of the main concerns of far-right ideologies is to change historical consciousness. The revisionist effort of many conservative movements aims to frame history in Manichean terms (for example, the evil of communism) or use conspiracy theories (Marxist indoctrination, etc.) to support their "alternative facts". Those narratives always existed beneath the surface of stability of liberal democracies, but now they became mainstream. How has that happened?

Panayota Gounari: In my work, exploring Trumpist discourse, I found a lot of evidence that speaks to this polarization. I remember in some exchange on far-right friendly messaging application Telegram, a Trump supporter emphatically claimed that "The left are the true fascists"! In constructing the 'left' as the enemy, the argument is flipped. In this way, far-right extremists can claim that what is wrong with our society is the political correctness and lack of tolerance of the Left towards those they disagree with. Arguments and characterizations historically reserved for far-right extremists and Nazis are now reframed, recontextualized and directed against the Left. This device further fits in the distorted idea of the 'two extremes' that are equally responsible for atrocities and violence. The two poles in this ideological construction are the extreme Left and the extreme Right and they are compared on equal terms: if one extreme can be bad (Right) the other should also be bad (Left). This is an argument straight out of historical revisionism that emerged in Europe to absolve Nazis of their crimes by equating fascism with anti-fascist communism in the theory of the extremes. I have similarly found that far-right and neo-Nazi users project themselves as victims of left intolerance and hypocrisy. What is also interesting is the attempt to uncover the so-called hypocrisy of 'cultural Marxists', the left and liberals, by claiming that their anti-fascist politics are just a façade imposed by political correctness and that they would be the first ones to join the fascist bandwagon if there were a regime change. Rejection of political correctness in language is a characteristic of far-right populist discourse.

What's more important is that this discourse and practice has been building a new U.S. historical revisionism. In European political discourse, we are used to this polarization: if fascism is bad, then communism is also bad because they are the two sides of the same coin. But we need to explore how this commonsensical and distorted equation came about. This is part of a very dangerous narrative of historical revisionism. In European historiography, revisionism emerged as an attempt to revisit and rehabilitate fascism and to equate it with communism, by looking at both as popular revolutions of the two extremes This version of historical revisionism has further built tolerance to fascism, downplaying its atrocities after World War II, thus shifting people's perceptions and feelings about them. Far-right populist leaders in Europe capitalized on this shift, self-labeling as holocaust deniers and Nazi worshippers. This type of historical revisionism has not only contributed to exonerating fascism, but it has also shifted the focus of its agenda in the post war period. For instance, in the classical fascist agenda, an authoritarian state was necessary (even in the context of a bourgeois democracy) in order to 'resolve' issues such as the fear of social decadence and degeneration, the defense of national and cultural identity, the threat of 'contaminating' national identity by the massive influx of foreigners, religious hate,

and homophobia. Contemporary far-right populist rhetoric puts at its core hostility towards immigrants, border protection from intruders, and the deportation of immigrants back to their countries of origin since they do not qualify as asylum seekers. This type of anti-immigrant rhetoric lies at the core of far-right populist parties and is part of the reason for their ever-increasing popularity.

Much in the way that European historical revisionism attempted to absolve fascism of its crimes, the new American historical revisionism is attempting to absolve (white) America from enslavement, white supremacy, and violent racism. Look for example at anti-Critical Race Theory state legislation across the country. The relationship between race, racism, and power that Critical Race Theory scholars have been uncovering and analyzing, seems to pose a threat to this ultra-conservative, dominant narrative behind all the anti-CRT bills. Critical Race Theory has put race at the core of its analyses, presenting the history of white supremacy and revealing the systemic, legal, and other mechanisms that have maintained and continue to maintain racial division and discrimination. For instance, through CRT, students might be able to grasp the context behind the nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was kneeling on George Floyd's neck resulting to his death.

However, moving away from purely discursive arguments, I think that the dire financial conditions, austerity, and unemployment of the vast majority of people around the world and the fact that they have been ignored by mainstream politics has made the far-right discourse and politics more appealing and a "common-sense" solution to the world's problems. But how can one knowingly embrace this kind of violent extremism (fascism in this case) without any ideological legitimation/excuse? If the far right, is after all a comfortable, friendly place to be, then who is the enemy?

Jeremiah Morelock: What part does historical time play in your vision for critical pedagogy?

Panayota Gounari: In my work I am borrowing Walter Benjamin's notion of "emergency time." Benjamin challenged positivistic notions about history and the thesis that the past is a predictable continuum towards progress into the present. He cautioned on the danger of the return of fascism in the human life scene claiming that the 'emergency situation' in which we live is the rule." However, dominant positivistic perspectives on history posit that evolution brings progress and that fascism was purely an accident of history. Benjamin disagrees with this notion and, instead, posits that fascism is always *a violent expression of the permanent state of emergency*. So, I am thinking of a pedagogy that builds on this "emergency time" as a permanent state of alertness, a pedagogy that is

unsettling, that prevents us from resting easy, from becoming complacent. As I said earlier, after the end of World War II, the Nazi atrocities, violence, and the sentiments of aversion these provoked in the mainstream collective imaginary, seemed to have created a 'never again' narrative that suggested that the progress human societies have been making, coupled with the knowledge of atrocities, would relegate fascism in the trashcan of history. Well, obviously, this famous trashcan was, after all, for recyclables. Clearly, neither progress and human development nor 'knowledge' of the atrocities prevented the reinvention of far-right extremist and neo-Nazi movements and the symbolic and material violence they have generated anew.

And yet, the rise of authoritarianism, far-right politics and the emboldened revival of neo-Nazi ideologies, are still perceived as accidents of history, as stains in the human progress and they illustrate Benjamin's thesis that 'progress' is not a linear path towards the improvement of human societies but, rather, the platform for the emergence of human atrocities. If progress is supposedly where humans are unequivocally headed to, how can we explain the dark historical landscape of far-right populism since the 80's that culminated in the last five years of Trumpism as a far-right authoritarian movement? Or the recent election of far-right leader Giorgia Meloni in Italy? History is a permanent state of emergency, and such movements are not exceptions; they are embedded in history's violent fabric. And we need to be talking about this violent fabric, as opposed to pretending it does not exist as anti-CRT legislation is trying to do.

The notion of historicity is central to my work and my vision for critical pedagogy. I believe realizing ourselves as historical beings is central in understanding the ways we are situated in the world, the development of our consciousness and the ways we can intervene in the world. This historicity is antithetical to capitalism's here-and-now, in-the-moment approach to historical conditions. When I think of the rise and persistence of far-right authoritarian movements and governments across the world, I think our inability to think historically, to see ourselves as a whole is part of why people see themselves aligned with these kinds of politics and practices. Capitalism brings a fragmentation to our human existence and brings a rupture with our present and past, casting light to an unattainable but shiny future. A critical pedagogy that matters is one that can help people see their wholeness as historical, social, emotional human beings, their situatedness in the world and with the world, as Freire would say. Any pedagogy must necessarily be historical! To think critically means to think historically. But history is the present. So, to think historically means to think about the present in ways that are emancipatory, agential, and liberating. Thinking historically does not simply mean to 'know' history. Or to read the past through the lens of the present and the present through the lens of the past. It means to realize the continuities and ruptures of history, the interconnectedness and difference. It also signifies the

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ability to realize ourselves as historical beings with a developing critical consciousness. History in the sense of historiography should not be an exercise in narrative but rather bear use to the 'here and now': "we need history for life and action", claims Nietzsche (LÖWY, 2016, p. 110). History is not a prison of the past through which we can look at the present only through bars; it is not a mechanism that confines our thinking, but it can surely function this way. Marcuse (1964, p. 103) is illuminating once more here when he notes that the recognition and relation to the past as present "counteracts the functionalization of thought by and in the established reality. It militates against the dosing of the universe of discourse and behavior; it renders possible the development of concepts which de-stabilize and transcend the dosed universe by comprehending it as historical universe". As academics and educators, we are constantly called to confront and address crises coming in waves. From the neoliberal assault against our societies and the public good, to authoritarianism and the far-right populist insurgence our societies are becoming laboratories for the fierce implementation of capitalism, that has generated more repression, human immiseration, dehumanization and authoritarianism. Our pedagogies must be tuned into these large structural issues and solidly ground to a historical understanding of the world we live in.

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