

## **CURRICULUM, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE DIALECTICS OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH WAYNE AU**

**WAYNE AU** received a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin and is currently a dean and professor at the University of Washington Bothell. He has published extensively on critical education theory, educational equity, curriculum theory and educational policy. His works include *Unequal by Design* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, 2023), *Critical Curriculum Studies* (Routledge, 2012) and *A Marxist Education* (Haymarket, 2018). The interview was organized and conducted by Felipe Ziotti Narita.

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*Felipe Ziotti Narita: In a recent paper, you argue that high-stakes standardized tests measure what Marx referred to as socially necessary labor time, instead of focusing merely on learning and teaching abilities. This view is interesting and provocative, because it tends to invert the mainstream argument of school systems based on the need of standardized tests to measure the efficacy of didactic skills. Could you talk about this topic?*

**Wayne Au:** For decades, especially here in the United States, we've had study after study showing that high-stakes, standardized test scores correlate most strongly with family income and education levels of parents. This fact is telling because, ultimately, standardized test scores can only give us correlations, right? We test students on a sample set of knowledge, and we say that their performance on this sample correlates with their knowledge of the full class or subject. So, in the end, all these tests give us is correlations. So, what does it mean that the strongest correlations for test scores are linked to income and familial education levels?

It all raises the question: What are these tests really measuring? This has been bugging me since my earliest work on high-stakes, standardized testing, but I hadn't found a way to think it through that satisfied me. It wasn't until I was reading Lyko Day's book, *Alien Capital: Asian American Racialization and the Logics of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), that I saw a way into answering this question. In this book, in an entirely different context, Day was

revisiting Marx's concept of socially necessary labor time. Of course, I had read Marx's discussion of this concept before, but this time it struck me that it was useful in the context of understanding what our standardized tests actually measure – particularly because naming economic status and parental education never felt clear or exact enough.

In Volume I of *Capital*, Marx has a brilliant discussion about the value of commodities as “definite masses of congealed labor time.” This was illuminating for me because it is obvious that our standardized tests turn students (and teachers) into commodities, particularly within the context of neoliberal, quasi-market, education policies. In this sense, we can begin to understand test-commodified-students as embodiments of congealed labor time. That is to say, there is an amount of labor manifest in the social, familial, institutional, and community resources that have gone into the upbringing, life experiences, and education of the student. This all then connects to what Marx refers to as “socially necessary labor time,” where “magnitude of value” of a commodity ends up equaling the “amount of labor socially necessary for its production.”

Given what we know about the correlations of test scores with family income and family education, following Marx, I would argue that standardized tests are generally measuring the amount of social resources accrued in individual students. Students with access to fewer resources throughout their lives end up have less congealed social labor “within” them, than those affluent students who have more congealed social labor “within” them. I liked this explanation because to me it pinpoints the social nature of production and how that manifests generally within individuals in extremely inequitable ways, all through high-stakes, standardized testing.

*Felipe Ziotti Narita: Many researchers – including Michael Apple, José Gimeno Sacristán and your own works – point out that school curriculum is a field of struggle that embodies ideological strategies, social relations, etc. When selecting what should or should not be taught, curriculum also hierarchizes and values knowledge. Could you talk about the politics of knowledge assumed in the curricula?*

**Wayne Au:** Part of the “trick” of curriculum is that, when it is presented to students, it is presented as “done” – fully cooked, so to speak. This gives curriculum a kind of totality that can make it seem either all-knowing or, at least, normal, not-named as different, literally hegemonic. Students typically don't see or consider all of the kinds of selective processes that have gone into the curriculum they experience: teachers make choices about what to teach, departments may decide what to teach, the state makes choices about what knowledge is important via standards and tests, textbook choose what knowledge

should be included or not included, the teacher's educational training was also similarly selective, and on and on.

And so, what curriculum we get in schools and classrooms end up being a complex mix of all these factors. And even more so, all of these outcomes are the results of political struggles over the politics of knowledge! Textbook publishers are bound by market conditions, and they don't want to offend the rich and powerful, nor do they want to offend the masses of conservative, white Americans who have been riding an authoritarian populist wave and fighting culture wars. This alone means that textbook publishers will shy away from including anything having to do with more radical forms of justice. We also see similar fights with local school boards who govern district policies and state legislatures in conservative states, where right now bans are being passed restricting the teaching of anything that affirms diversity, racial justice, and the LGBTQ community.

Again, students in classrooms don't necessarily know these political struggles going on behind the scenes, and so they end up experiencing a racist, homophobic curriculum as an unspoken norm – even if that racism and homophobia is defined by the omission of certain voices in the curriculum.

However, all of that said, because curriculum is always a site of struggle, there are spaces, pockets of flexibility, that do exist and that do allow teachers to take up a counter-hegemonic curriculum. And so there are localized efforts, particularly in more progressive cities, where teachers can and do advance a curriculum based on social justice.

*Felipe Ziotti Narita: You have written extensively on the relationship between curriculum and social justice. How can school curriculum commit progressive agendas and the emancipation of students and communities?*

**Wayne Au:** As I mentioned in the previous question, a lot of this depends on local context and conditions. For instance, being in a more progressive community with more progressive parents, makes a big difference for teachers because those parents can defend teachers who are teaching towards liberation. The same could be said for having a more progressive principal or school administrator. Different kinds of institutional support – from community or from an administrator – create more room for progressive teachers to implement a more justice-based curriculum. So, for teachers, it is just really important to know your context really well before engaging in a more liberatory curriculum. This is something I talk with my students in teacher education about all of the time.

That said, we also just can't leave it up to random circumstance to determine whether or not we can engage in doing more liberatory education. So, the other thing I always talk with educators and parents about is the need to organize for

justice in schools as well. The lone radical teacher is easy to punish, but a group of teachers organized together is much, much more dangerous for school authorities or conservatives to punish. Even better is when it is a group of progressive teachers organized alongside progressive parents and community members! School administrators and school districts are often fearful of upsetting the community, and a united front around doing justice work in education can help fend off attacks and create the room for liberatory curriculum.

However, I know this sounds equal parts daunting and overly simplistic. It's like saying, "I want to be a liberatory teacher, so I'm just going to organize a bunch of people to do this work. Easy, right?" When people ask me about how to organize around progressive education, my answer is pretty simple: You just have to call a meeting. See who is out there. Build relationships and feel good in your comradeship. And then you call another meeting. And another. Pretty soon you'll look around and see that you are building something. Or, better yet, ask around and see if there are any local groups of progressive educators in your area – it could be geographically or maybe in your union. Indeed, that is a whole other way to start feeling more empowered to do justice education, through union work. There are several teachers' unions here in the U.S. that have left-wing caucuses, and these caucuses have been able to advance justice efforts for their memberships.

Finally, I'd also add that perhaps the first step for doing more liberatory educational work for teachers is to find resources that you can use in your classroom. For instance, I've worked with the publisher, Rethinking Schools, for decades. This is a teacher-focused, practitioner-based, non-profit magazine, website, and book publisher that has consistently published lesson plans and analysis that helps teachers envision what it means to take social and environmental justice seriously in their classroom work. I think that for all of us, one of the biggest battles is surviving our feelings of isolation, and even reading the words of other teachers writing about their liberatory practices helps us feel less isolated and more like we can do this work ourselves.

*Felipe Ziotti Narita: In light of the sociocultural pressures and crises, especially since the 2010s, ultranationalist movements and the far-right have gained momentum. You argue that multicultural education is important, but it is not enough. Why? Do the promises and the horizons for multicultural education, which was largely constructed in the high era of globalization in the 1990s, seem to stumble when up against this political moment?*

**Wayne Au:** I want to be careful as I answer this question. Right now, the ultranationalist, white supremacist movements in the U.S. are very strong, and they have led successful campaigns attacking teachers and schools, getting almost

any content related to diversity inclusion, and justice banned. In this context, even the multicultural education of the 1990s looks radically progressive! So, given that we are in the middle of this struggle over the politics of knowledge, I want to make sure everyone understands that my critique was not an attack on multicultural education, per se. Rather, it should be understood as a principled Left critique of multicultural education for not being radical enough. I wrote that article in the middle of the Trump Presidency, when so many of us were experiencing heightened fears of both state and right-wing vigilante violence against immigrants, non-whites, Muslims, and members of the LGBTQ community. For me, the point I was arguing is that, in the face of such attacks (some physical, some verbal, and many political), we needed to do so much more to fight back within the confines of multicultural education. Yes, multicultural education is good, but it isn't enough for when we need to really organize and really resist the rise of the right wing, white nationalism. We need to build solidarities, build united fronts, and really let folks know that fascism will not be tolerated here – and fostering this kind of critical consciousness can require a more revolutionary kind of curriculum than multicultural education can offer.

Of course, lurking within my critique here is the reality that there are all kinds of multicultural education – from super safe forms that don't fundamentally name power and challenge systems of oppress (think the most surface forms that simply focus on multicultural heroes and holidays or foods and festivals), to more radically transgressive ones that are framed as “transformative multicultural education.” But, ultimately, I find the whole frame limiting because it is so easily co-opted for such a wide range of uses, including forms of what Jodi Melamed called “neoliberal multiculturalism” that use the progressive intent of multiculturalism to advance global capitalism.

*Felipe Ziotti Narita: Critical pedagogy plays an important role in the analysis and denunciation of how social asymmetries, grounded in the unequal distribution of power, goods, etc., affect education. Is there room for critical pedagogy and counter-hegemonic activities in the American school system?*

**Wayne Au:** As I talked about a little earlier in this interview, yes, there is room for critical pedagogy and counter-hegemonic activities in the American school system. That said, it is also clear that the agenda of the rightist attacks on public education here are very much aimed at limiting the space that teachers here have for implementing more critical, counter-hegemonic pedagogies and curriculum. It is also very much based on local contexts. Some states, like the U.S. states of Florida, Texas, or Wisconsin, have passed laws essentially making it illegal for teachers to teach critically about racism – or if not outright “illegal,” still making it an offense that could get you fired. The struggle over the teaching of Palestine



has become part of this as well, where teachers who vocally support a cease fire and who are critical of the Israeli government can easily (and outlandishly) be labeled as antisemitic and disciplined.

But not all contexts are like this, and in more centrist communities, teachers have more leeway to explicitly teach for social and environmental justice. Plus, there are some movements for teaching racial justice that have taken hold at the level of individual states. For instance, after a protracted community struggle, the U.S. state of California passed a law requiring Ethnic Studies as a high school graduation requirement. Now, even though the California standards and model Ethnic Studies curriculum are imperfect (themselves the result of the struggle over the politics of Ethnic Studies knowledge), this was a major victory in terms of advancing more socially just, critical curriculum knowledge. Further, there are local networks – like here in Seattle, in the San Francisco Bay Area, in Los Angeles, in Chicago, among others – of teachers organizing for educational justice and sharing workshops on counterhegemonic curriculum. Groups like Rethinking Schools and the Zinn Education Project are also important examples of teaching for social justice, and they have led campaigns like “Teach the Truth” which support teachers around the United States with workshops and teaching materials. Of course, this could all change given the rise in neo-fascism in the United States, but for now we still have spaces to do good and important work.

*Felipe Ziotti Narita: Your theoretical works have been concerned with Paulo Freire, who is a keystone for Latin American popular education. You argue that Freire’s critical pedagogy, from his conception of consciousness and political praxis to his dialectical epistemology, is grounded, above all, in Marxism. Could you talk about the relevance of Freirean critical pedagogy for contemporary society?*

**Wayne Au:** To me, Freirean critical pedagogy is always relevant because it has always been concerned with the development of deeper forms of consciousness about the world. Even from the perspective of learning theory, Freire provided us with better understandings of what it meant to learn something and then put that learning in to practice. So, even though Freire’s original work was very context dependent on his work with peasants in Brazil, it also has very practical applications that transcend its original Brazilian context. That said, I also think that Freirean critical pedagogy also continues to be important today because of its politics. Freire so clearly saw how language, literacy, and critical thinking were important for social movements, and I think the kinds of critical education we’re seeing today – from Black Lives Matter at School, to the rise in k-12 Ethnic Studies, to educational projects like Rethinking Schools and the Zinn Education Project – are all indebted to Freirean pedagogy in some ways. Anywhere we are seeking to educate for justice, Freire is with us.

*Felipe Zioti Narita: In Latin America, popular education consists of many molecular groups – at last since the 1960s – that challenge the strong asymmetries of capitalism. These social movements state that emancipation is always a political practice against the effects of class cleavages and ethnic bias on the cultural reproduction of society. In this sense, popular education involves both a critique of dominant ideologies and a practical effort to attain cultural hegemony. How do you assess the role of this kind of social movement for progressive social change?*

**Wayne Au:** First, let me say that I appreciate the depth of this question! I think most use Gramsci's notion of hegemony to indicate control by the ruling class. Few recognize that Gramsci's discussion of hegemony what one part critique of bourgeoisie hegemony and another part an argument for the need of proletarian hegemony. Your question points to this and makes me appreciate that the goal is for the oppressed to gain power, for the forces of justice to attain cultural hegemony, as you say. But the work you describe is the hardest of work, I think. We rightly get so caught up in the immediate struggles we're facing – the current crisis, the issue in front of our face – that we often get stuck in critique and dismantling the "bad" without also attending to the creation and birthing of the "good." It truly is dialectical, and we have to be able to do both, often at the same time. That can be exceedingly difficult to achieve.

Now the real question is, can we win power through cultural struggle? As my dear friend and mentor, Michael Apple, would be quick (and correct) to point out that the Right has done an excellent job at engaging in culture wars in ways that help them recruit large numbers of people to their cause based on appealing to a kind of cultural commonsense. And certainly, culture – especially popular culture – has become a real battlefield for these political struggles around race, gender, class, and sexuality. Indeed, the Right has gotten really skilled at using culture to whip up its base, while also using it to bring political forces in line.

To some degree, we can and certainly do use popular education as a tool – sometimes even a bulwark – in these political struggles. Popular education can be central to building movements. But to be clear, I don't see it as a chicken or the egg, which comes first kind of thing. Like right now, taking the current university student movement to protest the Israeli war on Palestine as an example, I think just the raw carnage and slaughter of Palestinians drove many students to protest through encampments. Then, through social media, both the footage of the indiscriminate killings of Palestinians and the word of the protests drove even more students to ask questions and to build their own encampments. Along the way there is constant struggle over knowledge, history, and politics, and a lot of popular education helping students sharpen their understanding and strengthening their resolve. So, to me, there should be no surprise, for instance, that the student organizers at the University of Washington (my university) have

asked that we do not refer to their protest site as an “encampment,” and have instead requested that we refer to their protest area as the “Popular University for Gaza.” This points to the power of popular education in social movements! However, all of that said, the Right is objectively more powerful than us. They simply have more resources – foundations, billionaires, multimedia corporations – at their disposal to push their own Rightist cultural hegemony. And so, even as I recognize the importance of popular education in cultural struggle, I also have to recognize that we are materially outmatched. Now, please don’t read this as cynicism! Those of us fighting for justice can still win (indeed, I think the future of humanity and planet earth depends on it), but we also need to fully reconcile with the terrain of struggle we’re facing if we’re going to be successful.

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