

## Critical Pedagogy and Liberal Education: Reconciling Tradition, Critique, and Democracy

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As we live in the tradition, whether we know it or not, so we are all liberal artists, whether we know it or not. As we should understand the tradition as well as we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.... The democratic ideal is equal opportunity for full human development, and, since the liberal arts are the basic means of such development, devotion to democracy naturally results in the devotion to them.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, [the academic approach to reading] ignores the life experience, the history, and the language practice of students. On the other, it overemphasizes the mastery and understanding of classical literature.... Thus literacy in this sense is stripped of its political dimensions; it functions, in fact to reproduce dominant values and meaning.... [Critical pedagogy] provides students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy.<sup>2</sup>

This essay begins with the intuition that underlying the seemingly contradictory projects of liberal education and critical pedagogy there is nevertheless a common educational and social concern. Liberal education, in all of its variations, seems to practice deference to tradition and a detachment from everyday life that leads to its association with intellectual and political conservatism. Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, in its attention to social justice, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and the social and political context of learning, often involves a critique of the tradition and the consideration of new social arrangements. While the tension between these projects is substantial, I argue that there is an underlying mutual dependence that can be used to make the case for their compatibility. All approaches to education must struggle with the extent to which they prioritize simply transmitting a tradition versus developing or transforming it.<sup>3</sup> While critical pedagogy and liberal learning take explicit positions on opposite sides of this issue, they both depend on sustaining a balance between transmission and transformation. I will argue first that while the historical, text-based approach of liberal education articulated in the twentieth century United States can appear elitist and merely deferential toward tradition, it nevertheless requires a critical interpretation of tradition in light of democratic political ideals. I then argue that critical pedagogy is not limited to explicitly political critique and must implicitly draw on cultural tradition, in ways analogous to liberal education. I suggest that critical pedagogy and liberal learning are not only compatible, but also mutually dependent, and that together they offer an alternative to education defined by preparation for occupational roles or cultural transmission.

I do not have the space to do justice to the rich history of both of these educational traditions, so I will confine this discussion to some of the central presuppositions of each with reference to some of their most well-known advocates. I will begin with liberal education in an effort to show that its common identification as apolitical and narrowly academic is misleading. Liberal education exists in

particularly diverse forms today, most commonly in institutions of higher education that identify themselves as liberal arts colleges. Ironically, the term “liberal” in the university usually refers to the fact that students must fulfill some general requirements in different disciplines, providing a general education distinct from technical education. As John Dewey points out, the idea of liberal education is founded on its distinction from professional and industrial education, which “goes back to the time of the Greeks, and was formulated expressly on the basis of a division of classes into those who had to labor for a living and those who were relieved from this necessity.”<sup>4</sup> This basic distinction frames the development of the academic disciplines that we now identify as the liberal arts, and explains why liberal education is associated with social elitism and a detachment from the social concerns of working people.

Even the advocates of liberal education in the twentieth century United States, like Robert Hutchins, a pioneer of the “Great Books” tradition at the University of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, acknowledge its origins in a sharp class distinction. However, Hutchins argues that, in a democratic society, liberal education can be provided to all: “if leisure and political power require this education, everybody in America now requires it, and everybody where democracy and industrialization penetrate will ultimately require it” (*GC*, 18). He argues that if the liberal arts were the best way of preparing the elite to use their power and their freedom wisely, then it should offer all people this same guidance as they gain access to political and economic liberty: the best education for the best, should be the best education for all.

Hutchins provides a brief sketch of what this education of “the best” looks like in his introduction to a collection of “great books” that drew from the Chicago curriculum. Here he argues that the Western tradition is characterized by a commitment to on-going inquiry and conversation and that it is unique in this commitment. He goes on to claim that the conversation and inquiry surround certain basic questions or problems in human experience, for example, what is the best form of government, the nature of the soul, or the nature of beauty. Liberal education offers its students participation in this conversation through the careful interpretation of classic texts, which represent some of the best answers to or statements of these questions (*GC*, 3). Hutchins claims that active participation in answering these questions leads to a general standard of human excellence, which supports excellence in more specialized fields (*GC*, 3). Apart from emphasizing the importance of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking, Hutchins is vague about the specific methods that liberal education employs. However, it is clear that Hutchins characterizes liberal learning as more than merely the content of the “great books.”

There are many problematic aspects of Hutchins’s account, not the least of which is his inattention to the pluralistic and multicultural dimensions of American society and to the less flattering aspects of the “Western tradition.” He should acknowledge that inquiry (however this might be defined) is only one strand of the Western intellectual tradition, alongside less romantic tendencies, such as procedural rationality and technological development. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that “on-going inquiry” is unique to the West (whatever “the West” might mean). Nevertheless, Hutchins’s account of liberal education can be disassociated from his ethnocentric claims of uniqueness without losing its focus on the study of

broad questions about human life through historically significant texts.

Another problem with Hutchins's argument is that the economic and political *possibility* of extending liberal education to a wider portion of the population does not necessarily mean that this education is in the interest of (let alone "the best" for) the average citizen in a democracy. I will respond to this concern, building on Hutchins's account, by arguing that there are three ways in which liberal learning may be understood as relevant to and in the interest of most students.

First, the process of interpreting historical texts in the context of discussion and examination by students must be distinguished from merely transmitting the content of these texts. While liberal learning assumes some kernel of value in all of the "great books" insofar as they represent positions on universal themes, the process of interpreting them is not simply an exercise in deference to them. The model of understanding in liberal education centers on interpreting texts from the past, but interpretation here does not mean merely re-stating or reproducing the tradition. By casting his argument for the liberal arts in the language of "inquiry" and "conversation" Hutchins is trying to point out the way that the texts represent historical answers to these questions that inform but do not define the response to these questions in the present. Reading Machiavelli's, *The Prince*, in the context of liberal education is certainly not about transmitting his political ideas to the present, but understanding them as a powerful historical response to how the state should be ordered so that it can be viewed critically. In honoring tradition through attention to certain classic texts, Hutchins is not then advocating a pedantic worship of these texts or a particular ideology.<sup>5</sup> Hutchins assumes that students will play an active and critical role in making sense of these texts in the context of their own experience. Their participation in this conversation that spans historical epics is meant to make them more active participants in the present.

The inquiring conversation of liberal learning clearly distinguishes it from more didactic approaches to teaching traditional knowledge, such as E.D. Hirsch's account of "cultural literacy."<sup>6</sup> Because liberal learning and cultural literacy are both conservative in their regard for tradition and because their advocates both disregard cultural diversity there is a tendency to conflate them. However, conversation among people from diverse viewpoints is a defining characteristic of liberal learning and this distinguishes it from the transmission of factual knowledge that characterizes "cultural literacy."<sup>7</sup>

Second, the interpretive emphasis of liberal learning is also related to political activity insofar as it is explicitly linked with democratic ideals. Hutchins not only claims that liberal education is "largely responsible for the emergence of democracy as an ideal," an undoubtedly controversial thesis, but also suggests in the quote at the beginning of the essay, that liberal education is a basic means for fulfilling democratic ideals (*GC*, 5). Earl Shorris, a former student of Hutchins, attempts to elaborate and support this claim in his recent efforts in organizing and teaching a five course curriculum in the humanities offered to low income, pre-college students in New York City.<sup>8</sup> In his introductory remarks to students of the Clemente Course in New York, Shorris sketches a connection between the humanities and democracy:

I think the humanities are one of the ways to become political, and I don't mean political in the sense of voting in an election, but political in the broad sense: The way Pericles, a man who lived in ancient Athens, used the word "politics" to mean activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city/state in which he lived.<sup>9</sup>

Shorris argues that the humanities course provides students with a kind of reflection that cultivates a new sense of agency, by freeing them from the "surround of force," the various forms of economic, social, and psychological pressure acting on them.<sup>10</sup> While this is a difficult claim to empirically verify, Shorris succeeds in articulating through concrete examples the kinds of political empowerment that liberal education is *intended* to provide, even when the texts are not explicitly about politics. As the liberal arts have been practiced in the twentieth century United States, they have been framed by democratic ideals for social life, that shape the interpretation of the tradition and the pedagogical context in which the interpretation takes place. While the texts and methods of liberal learning may not be explicitly "political," the liberal arts are cultivating dispositions and skills that are meant to equip students for politics in the broad sense of participation in social life.

Finally, the social context in which Hutchins articulated his version of the liberal arts, most clearly reveals the way in which liberal education is engaged in social and political problems of the present. Hutchins is, in part, responding to schools' increasing orientation to the needs and practices of the industrial economy in the first half of the twentieth century. As public schooling expanded during this period, it employed ideas about efficiency and specialization from the industrial workplace. Efficiency, of course, also meant that the students received different sorts of education depending on their expected occupation.<sup>11</sup> Hutchins thought that extending liberal education to all classes would not only preserve an equally high standard of education for all, but also "humanize work" by allowing working people to "understand their relations to others co-operating in a given process, the relation of that process to other processes, the pattern of them all as constituting the economy of the nation, and the bearing of the economy on the social, moral and political life of the nation and the world" (*GC*, 15). Though he was sympathetic with John Dewey's broad approach to teaching through occupations, Hutchins thought that Dewey was unable to articulate specifically enough how "the broader moral, social, scientific and intellectual contexts of occupations" would be taught without reference to classic texts (*GC*, 12).<sup>12</sup> He worried that, despite Dewey's intentions to the contrary, "education *through* occupations will in practice turn out to be a program of education *for* occupations" (*GC*, 12). While Hutchins agrees with Dewey that education should provide people with an understanding of their work in a broader social and cultural context, he thinks this will more likely be accomplished through the examination of broad historical questions outside the scope of any particular occupation. He calls for liberal education as a way of providing a broader social perspective on work life in the present.

By drawing out the ways that liberal education interprets the past in light of the present through democratic ideals and a concern for "humanizing" work, I hope to have begun to show its compatibility with some of the political ideals of critical pedagogy. However, this still does not address the tension if we interpret critical

pedagogy to be exclusively grounded in students' experience and in political critique. To respond to this tension I will briefly sketch the theory of knowledge presumed by critical pedagogy in order to expose its implicit reliance on the interpretation of tradition and culture beyond the political situation of the student.

Critical pedagogy begins with Marx's presupposition that a group's social interests determine their ideas and beliefs: "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."<sup>13</sup> This sociological approach to knowledge, developed by social scientists and theorists after Marx, assumes that more complete accounts of social experience can be achieved by relating ideas to their social interests and contexts.<sup>14</sup> Paulo Freire, in Brazil, provided a way of translating this theory of knowledge into an approach to education. He developed a pedagogy based on the assumption that oppressive social relations can only be challenged by education that begins with the students' own social reality rather than traditional knowledge, which serves those who have been privileged by the tradition. Political liberation for disadvantaged people requires their active participation in creating and reproducing knowledge and therefore requires an educational method that allows all students to actively critique and revise traditional knowledge based on their own social and economic situation. Education that is liberating thus requires a method that emphasizes mutual discussion and investigation of issues and themes related to the students' daily life. Most critical pedagogues implicitly assume that themes relevant to students' lives will relate, directly or indirectly, to a universal concern with liberation and empowerment.<sup>15</sup>

However, in presupposing a sociologically informed account of knowledge, critical pedagogy must understand human experience as conditioned by its cultural and historical context. Those practicing critical pedagogy are concerned that the "values and meanings" of dominant groups, who control cultural capital, have a more visible place in the canon.<sup>16</sup> They want to avoid simply transmitting an intellectual tradition that does not reflect the interests of a majority of today's students. However, if students' experiences are defined by oppression, basing education on the student's experiences alone, will not transform the inequity either. Critical pedagogy must, to some extent, create an educational context that draws students out of their everyday lives to take new perspectives on social relationships. Most often, it hopes to achieve this through a method of critical and reflective dialogue that links students' experience with broader social and political problems. As Freire points out, genuine dialogue allows the teacher to introduce themes and structure to the discussion along with the students.<sup>17</sup> This process can be understood as interpretive in the broad sense that liberal learning is: the students' lives need to be related to, translated into the language of these more universal themes, and *vice versa*. While simply providing a well-structured discussion may provide a break from the everyday routine and conventions that define the students' experience, engaging with unfamiliar texts that speak to universal themes can provide a more radically unconventional perspective to the student. Whether or not the critical pedagogy classroom employs central texts from the tradition, it is nevertheless engaged in an interpretive task, like that of liberal learning, as students encounter

unfamiliar concepts and questions that relate to a broader social reality than their own immediate life experience.

Critical pedagogy has a more explicit concern with social injustice and democratic ideals than liberal education. However, the political commitment of critical education does not determine its scope to the degree that some of its theoretical articulations can imply. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was developed in response to a particular social movement in a particular country. Some versions of critical pedagogy can imply that it must concern such specific political objectives: whether it is advocacy for a particular political party or an understanding of the inequities resulting from global capitalism.<sup>18</sup> However, a more charitable interpretation of critical pedagogy, as it is elaborated by Freire, as well as other critical theorists of education like Henry Giroux, Michael Apple and Peter McLaren, suggests that its political aim is quite broad, including reflective participation in social life and culture more generally. Critical pedagogy has acknowledged its concern with culture in a broad sense through increased attention to popular culture.<sup>19</sup> Building on the argument above, I would argue that historical sources could serve the critical pedagogue's aim of making students critical consumers and creators of culture, without dismissing the students' experiences. There is no incompatibility between critical pedagogy and broadly humanistic subject matter like literature, art, and science, even "classic" texts in these domains of culture, if they are studied in a context that allows for students' critical participation.

I hope to have shown that the emphasis on critique in critical pedagogy implicitly draws on the interpretation of the cultural tradition and domains of that tradition that are not explicitly political. Furthermore, I hope to have shown that the emphasis of cultural tradition and universal questions in contemporary liberal education also requires critical interpretation in the present and a commitment to democratic social ideals. It is only the simplistic, theoretical articulations of liberal education and critical pedagogy in which they seem fundamentally incompatible. With the possible exception of Shorris's project, the assumption of this antagonism has left most advocates of the liberal arts, ignorant of critical pedagogy and in a defensive posture toward what they see as "progressive" or "politically correct" educational reform.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, critical theorists of education tend to identify liberal education with reflexive deference to tradition that does not do justice to the intent or the effect of liberal learning, even if this identification is supported by the rhetoric of some of its advocates. The interdependence of interpretation and critique as central dimensions of education reveals the shared aims and practices of liberal education and critical pedagogy. The central point of this essay is that these educational projects are not only compatible, but mutually dependent and that this dependence should motivate collaboration in curriculum and pedagogy in ways that are yet to be explored.

So far I have tried to link critical pedagogy and liberal learning by looking more closely at what is presupposed in the practice of each in order to soften some of their most pronounced differences. However, their compatibility and dependence is further revealed by more explicit common ground that they share in opposition to

other common (and indeed dominant) approaches to education and schooling, namely training for occupational competence or expertise and cultural transmission.<sup>21</sup> Preparing people for work in an ever-developing economy is and should be one of the central motivations for schooling in the U.S, and it is similarly important to introduce young people into a common cultural and moral tradition.<sup>22</sup> While most people would agree that education is about something more than social reproduction or job training, there are few developed accounts of alternatives or complements to these prevailing approaches. Liberal education and critical pedagogy, if they are no longer understood to be at cross purposes, can cooperate to provide a rich alternative to the occupational and transmissive purposes of schools.

The cooperation of liberal education and critical pedagogy suggest two central principles for schooling. First and most obviously, they provide related versions of what genuinely democratic education might mean. The one goal that Americans agree on for education apart from preparation for work life is some notion of democratic citizenship. While Dewey showed how this political ideal might be translated into concrete educational practices a century ago, there are few versions of democratic education beyond the content of a basic civics course. Critical pedagogy and liberal education provide elaborated visions of education, in a Deweyian vein, as preparing students for active participation in all domains of social life by beginning with the classroom. They both portray democratic education in terms of question-posing that is not merely instrumental; question posing that is not only about the best means of accomplishing some goal, but about the goals themselves. Liberal education and critical pedagogy both reject democratic education that is merely preparation for a narrowly defined, procedural account of citizenship. They foster broad intellectual development that is meant to provide the foundation, in knowledge and dispositions, for critical social participation in a range of social contexts, including one's work life.

A second and more controversial principle implied in different ways by critical pedagogy and liberal education is the importance of distinguishing the process of learning from the everyday course of experience or mere preparation for future experience. This principle follows from the preceding point that genuinely democratic education encourages broad question posing about both the means and the ends of social life. In liberal education the disjunction of learning from everyday experience is clearest in its reliance on historically removed texts that are probably unfamiliar to the students. Again, Hutchins hopes that these texts engage questions that are relevant to students' experience in a broad sense, but the process of carefully reading and discussing them is nevertheless dramatically separate from other forms of work, recreation, and training in daily life. It is the escape from "the surround of force," which has traditionally been a privilege of the elite that is the educational essence of liberal learning. While critical pedagogues might begin with subject matter that is more immediately relevant to students, they hope to raise questions that require unconventional, broad and critical thinking that allows students to imagine alternative social arrangements. Freire describes the oppressed as dehumanized in part because they live "'submerged' in a world to which they can give no meaning,

lacking a 'tomorrow' and a 'today' because they exist in an overwhelming present."<sup>23</sup> He connects a sense of agency with a realization of one's historical nature, which requires a perspective outside the present. Critical pedagogy and liberal learning thus share an effort to make students into historical actors by allowing them to step outside prevailing conventions and routines of experience.

Critical pedagogy and liberal learning are not the only approaches to education that emphasize the need to interrupt the normal exigencies of action and preparation for action. Consider, for example Maxine Greene's work on the imagination and the potential for the arts in breaking through the "crust of convention."<sup>24</sup> However, the insight from liberal learning that the value of education is not always measured in terms of immediate relevance is uncommon enough today that it can seem counterintuitive in both traditional and progressive educational camps. Indeed, some aspects of critical pedagogy provide a strong version of the claim that education should be immediately relevant to the students' current social circumstances. I have tried to highlight an alternative goal of critical pedagogy, namely, to enable the student to take a critical position on society, which requires the suspension of some existing beliefs and assumptions. The point of connection between relevance and the escape from the "surround of force" is, of course, that moments of crisis, misunderstanding and change in everyday experience motivate reflection, critique, and reorientation. The need to step back from experience in order to reconsider it, is part of our experience; it is practical. Students must practice reflection on the context of the broader experience with the aid of central thinkers, past and present, just as they practice other skills for citizenship and productive employment. Of course, the defenders of the liberal arts bear some responsibility for the failure to communicate the importance of historically informed reflection to the personal and social lives of students.

I have argued that the interpretative, historical focus of liberal education and the critical, politically informed dimensions of critical pedagogy are mutually dependent and, together, provide an alternative to education concerned simply with social transmission and/or preparation for a future occupation. While most reflective educators and theorists are painfully aware that education needs to be about more than these narrow goals, I am arguing that there is no need to choose between the these two rich alternatives that have often appeared to be in tension. Critical pedagogy's commitment to liberation and to question posing that begins with students' experience is compatible with liberal education's question posing through influential historical texts. The ideals and resources of the liberal arts need not exclude a political commitment to social justice, nor should the political orientation of critical pedagogy exclude broader domains of culture and human experience that the liberal arts address. Good critical pedagogy should be a form of liberal learning, and good liberal education should be critical pedagogy. The commonality of these projects is highlighted in a shared commitment to forms of social life and education that are not simply defined by the instrumental transmission of ideas or preparation for work. They both aspire to provide educational contexts that interrupt participation in existing social conventions and task-oriented work, however briefly, in order to cultivate reflection about aspects of our lives that are taken for granted. While the



opportunities for such reflection may seem like a luxury, they serve an essential role in fostering social and cultural development that is informed by democratic ideals.

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1. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education* (Chicago,: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952). This book will be cited as *GC* in the text for all subsequent references.
  2. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word, and the World* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1987), 146, 151.
  3. See Philip Jackson, "The Mimetic and the Transformative: Alternative Outlooks on Teaching" in *The Reflective Practice of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986). Jackson develops this difference in terms of the teacher-student relationship, whereas I am concerned more with the broader social function of education here. Of course, the two discussions are interrelated.
  4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 251.
  5. Mortimer Adler also makes this point in one of his defenses of the liberal arts: Mortimer Adler, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, ed. Geraldine Van Doren (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 322-323.
  6. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).
  7. See Michael Oakeshott's account of conversation, "[I]t is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices: in it different universes of Discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated into one another." Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962).
  8. Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).
  9. *Ibid.*, 127.
  10. *Ibid.*, 47. Interestingly, Shorris quotes Freire on this point.
  11. See Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 1987) and David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).
  12. See John Dewey, *The School and Society and the Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915/1990).
  13. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology, Part One*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International, 1989), 47.
  14. See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1936/1985).
  15. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1970), 93.
  16. Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 146.
  17. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 114.
  18. See Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 83; See Colin Lankshear with James Paul Gee, Michele Knobel and Chris Searle, *Changing Literacies* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1997), 58.
  19. Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, eds., *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1993); Peter McLaren et al., *Rethinking Media Literacy: A Critical Pedagogy of Representation* (Peter Lang Publishing 1995); Henry A. Giroux, *Impure Acts: The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2000).
  20. See, for example, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
  21. Although these purposes are not necessarily dominant in educational theory or in the motivations of teachers, I do not believe this is a controversial claim when examining national and state policy on education, for example, "A Nation at Risk" (see below) or the New York State Standards; see <<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/pub.html>>

22. Among other places to turn for support of this claim, one obvious choice is the 1983 federal report "A Nation at Risk": The National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" (1983) <<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/>> (15 October 2001).
23. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 87.
24. See Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* ( San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).