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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Dr. Edward Janak for his encouragement.

| BOOK REVIEW |

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

by Isaac Gottesman (2016)
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According to Stephen Bronner, “ideas build upon ideas, thinkers upon thinkers, books upon books... tradition defines the terms, or mediates the contexts in which the conversation between thinkers occur” (Bronner, 1999, p.11). Isaac Gottesman, Assistant Professor of Education at Iowa State University, embraced Bronner’s notion and masterfully penned, *The Critical Turn in Education: From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race* to “illuminate the historical context” (p. 4) in which critical educational theory evolved: ideas, thinkers, and books building upon one another over time. His overarching goal is to “enrich dialogue in the critical educational community...by offering historically informed criticism” (p. 3). Fortunately, while some of the scholarly traditions may seem hard to grasp, Gottesman expertly conveys even the most complex theories in an accessible fashion.

Because Paulo Freire is often considered the originator of critical scholarship in education (a notion that, ultimately, Gottesman disputes), Gottesman launches *Critical Turn* by examining both Freire’s reception by American education scholars and his contribution to education, in Chapter 1 “Revolutionary Movements.” Often, scholars point to Freire’s widely taught *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) as the impetus of critical scholarship; however, Gottesman posits that for at least 15 years following the publication of *Pedagogy*, scholars did not look to it for “primary theoretical guidance” (p. 24). Although Freire articulates “how and why schooling and education should be harnessed to push against an... unjust social order” (p. 26), Freire doesn’t necessarily encourage critiquing education.

Chapter 2, “Political Economy and the Academic Left” and Chapter 3 “Ideology and Hegemony” highlight the influence of Bowles and Gintis’s book *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) and Michael Apple’s *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979), respectively. Through thoughtful analyses of each book and its authors intellectual influences, Gottesman artfully catalogs emerging Marxist theories in education and how they “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). Central to these chapters is Gottesman’s intellectual history of academics and philosophers, which achieves two purposes: It helps reveal how Bowles, Gintis, and Apple formed their views on Marxism, and it provides readers with a deeper and nuanced understanding of Marxist criticism.

As in Chapter 1, Gottesman disrupts common narratives regarding Freire’s contributions to critical education scholarship in Chapter 4, “Critical Pedagogy.” Here, he evaluates Henry Giroux’s extensive work during the 1970s and 1980s as Giroux developed his concept of critical pedagogy (which is commonly believed to be initiated Freire). According to Gottesman, because Giroux endeavored to “theorize the relationship

between schools and society and the possibilities of schools as sites of radical democratic social reform..." (p. 75), he is its actual architect. Additionally, because Giroux theorized critical pedagogy, it is a post-Marxist concept.

The final two chapters focus on the emergence of "Situated Knowledge and Feminist Standpoint Epistemology," and "Critical Theories of Race" in the 1990s. Chapter 5 considers the role that feminist thought played in developing critical education scholarship through a nuanced analysis of Elizabeth Ellsworth's, Kathleen Weiler's, and Patti Lather's critiques of Giroux's critical pedagogy from the perspective of postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist. Ellsworth, in particular, argued that critical pedagogy is inherently flawed and cannot succeed because it theorizes teachers as radical, emancipatory leaders without "theoriz[ing] a self-reflective teacher as intellectual, one that unpacks his or her own assumptions and recognizes their own subjectivity" (p. 101). In other words, critical pedagogy did not consider the impact of a teacher's social position on the teaching and learning process. Similarly, Chapter 6 shows how critical race theories developed over time. With roots in the multiculturalism of the 1970s, these theories embraced a line of thinking analogous to Ellsworth's. Specifically, Gottesman demonstrates that critical race theories (CRT) came to the fore when "race became a central focus of scholarship" (p. 117) in the mid 1990's; previous critical theories did not consider how the social construction of race was entrenched in every aspect of education and impacted teaching and learning.

In addition to defining critical race theory, Chapter 6 provides "a narrative arc...into the core debates and conversation flows that remain central to critical race scholars" (p.117). By outlining key debates, Gottesman showcases differences of thought between two pairings of CRT scholars: Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso, and Gloria Ladson Billings and William Tate. Recognizing where their philosophies converge and diverge is critical not only because it helps clarify how CRT emerged as a theory, but it also helps reveal potential impacts for assessment and social justice advocacy within the field of education. For both groups, the question was no longer *if* race affects education, but instead *how* race affects education. Nevertheless, without one unified theory, Gottesman believes that CRT will not have the full impact possible.

Gottesman concludes *Critical Turn* by encouraging scholars to be vigilant and engage in four practices: read broadly, read closely, publish broadly, and focus on teaching and learning. By implementing these practices in his book, Gottesman's forges a relationship between the history of critical educational theory and society's reliance on education as the key to social justice. Bearing this in mind, *Critical Turn's* contribution to education is readily apparent: it elucidates various significant "turns" in critical education theory, while challenging each of us to consider how these shifts continue to inform contemporary educational scholarship. And, perhaps more importantly, it entreats us to make our own contributions:

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 the analytical and conceptual care that we hope a more just society might offer. (p. 146)

If there is one weakness in this text, it is that Gottesman doesn't seem to embrace Ellsworth's or CRT's call for self-reflection. Nowhere in the text does he reveal how his social position might influence the narrative. Nevertheless, *Critical Turn*, is a truly unique historical account and a call for social justice. Barring Tyack's *One Best System* (1974), which demonstrated how urban schools developed and how they can be mechanisms for social justice, I have never encountered a historiography that also served as a call to action. For that reason, along with those stated above, *Critical Turn* is essential reading for scholars interested in critical educational theory.

References

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Author

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