

From Critical Feminist Theory to Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy

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Abstract

Since 1996, Stuart Hall has written that no intellectual who truly wants to fulfill this role and no university that wants to face the 21st century with pride in its adequacy can afford to ignore the racial and ethnic problems that plague our world (Hall, 1996: p. 343). Indeed, we may claim that gender issues are just as critical to the adequacy of educational institutions and educators. The present work is based on the recognition of the difficulties that educators face in translating social justice-based policy into an emancipatory pedagogy in the classroom when the gender perspective is absent. Indeed, many of the difficulties that educators face today are due to the absence of a critical feminist reading of the world, a point that has been recently highlighted in the relevant literature (Gale de Saxe, 2016). In this work, I propose a Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy based on the discussions about critical revolutionary pedagogy and resistance practices thus offering educators the opportunity to reflect on how education is a form of cultural politics and how practices such as participation in reflective and critical discussions as well as reflection can offer new ways of challenging the “traditional” nature of school education as well as different sources of empowerment.

Keywords

Gender, Critical Feminism, Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy, Critical Theory, Critical Education

1. Introduction: Theoretical Approaches to Gender Relations

After approximately 200 years of women’s struggles for equality, it is now widely accepted that the political and social movement known as feminism is multifaceted and diverse, both in its historical manifestations and in its political and

ideological content (Cameron, 2019). There are versions that are not only different from each other but also potentially completely incompatible. However, if we want to look at the basic theoretical approaches to the issue of gender relations, we will outline three currents: liberal feminism, radical/postmodern feminism, and Marxist/socialist feminism, with the criterion being the emphasis on the element that is considered crucial for gender inequality.

Liberal feminism focuses on the inequality of rights between men and women. It believes and argues that gender equality can be achieved through the provision of equal opportunities for men and women.

Based on this assumption, liberal feminism points out that the basic rights to life, e.g. freedom and property (according to this line of thought), have not been granted equally to men and women. Contemporary liberal feminism argues that women should be more active in the political arena, and have the same access to economic opportunities and education as men. Additionally, it supports the elimination of unequal access to power between men and women.

Liberal feminist theorists argue that the subordination of women takes many forms, such as income inequality between men and women, human rights violations against women in particular, domestic violence, rape, etc. The solution to establishing justice between men and women, according to this current, can be achieved by removing the legal barriers that prevent women from having equal rights with men.

Radical/postmodern feminism is a diverse and complex current of thought that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. It is characterized by its critique of the traditional family, its focus on the experiences of women of color and other marginalized groups, and its rejection of the idea that there is a single, universal definition of womanhood.

Radical/postmodern feminists argue that gender is a social construct, not a biological fact. They believe that the gender binary (male/female) is a form of oppression that limits women's potential. They also argue that the traditional family is a patriarchal institution that perpetuates gender inequality.

Radical/postmodern feminists have made significant contributions to our understanding of gender and sexuality. They have challenged traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, and they have helped to raise awareness of the ways in which gender inequality is embedded in social institutions.

Socialist feminism is based on the theories of classical Marxism on the class organization of society considering gender differences as a factor that perpetuates social inequality.

In this work, Critical feminist theory is situated in the broader context of Marxist feminism examining the material manifestations of gender identities and gender power in political, cultural, and social life having its roots in Critical Theory and in the Marxism of Antonio Gramsci.

The term hegemony, introduced by Gramsci, is crucial here. In the Gramscian sense, hegemony is used to describe a society in which, despite inequalities, there is a high degree of consensus. So that the exploited social groups and classes

support and align themselves with the values, goals, cultural and political characteristics that bind them to the dominant forms of ideology and power (Storey, 2015).

At this point, I will discuss the critical issue of the relation between gender and class. The starting point of my analysis is that there is an overlap between personal life and social structures, and therefore gender should be approached as an aspect of the subject's identity connected with social institutions and practices.

To avoid the reductionism of the dual systems approach, according to which the complex dynamic of the relationship between gender and class is reduced in the question "what comes first, gender or class?", I will adopt the unifying approach of social reproduction theory (SRT) (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019).

SRT insists that we should try to think through the complex web of relations in a capitalist society, i.e. relations of exploitation, domination, and oppression, avoiding unhelpful simplifications, however reassuring they may be.

Thus, the emphasis is placed on a unifying logic, referring at the same time to exploitation and oppression, i.e. the "spheres" of production and reproduction are unified (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, & Fraser, 2019).

It is precisely this approach of social reproduction theory that provides an opportunity to supplement the Marxist categories of "reproduction", "labor", "value", "economy", "working class", etc. with contemporary meanings, as Marx envisioned with his critique of historicism. This does not mean in any way that his categories are outdated. On the contrary, although these categories were developed in the 19th century, they need to be historicized, analyzed thoroughly, and placed in a contemporary political-historical context.

It goes without saying that the unifying approach of social reproduction theory provides a useful model for understanding gender relations by emphasizing the importance of criticizing the economic processes that shape social reality.

Standing against the oppression of women and their bodies is exactly what the labor movement should aim for. In a system of transitional demands, it is necessary to include the issue of the oppression of women and their bodies. It is one of the challenges facing the united front policy between the feminist and the labor movements and this should be seriously considered by social activists.

2. Recontextualizing Critical Feminist Theory

The work by Gale de Saxe (2016) provides a comprehensive and vivid account of Critical Feminist Theory and its relationship with Critical Education. The book serves its purpose and all aspects of the theory as well as its multifaceted character along with the various perspectives working within it are presented in a non-partisan way.

Despite the merits of such an approach, in this paper, Critical Feminist Theory is defined as a current of thought within the feminist movement that

emphasizes the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, concepts that are understood as interconnected hegemonic structures.

From a political point of view, critical feminism aims at the emancipation of women, liberating them from oppressive relationships, acting as a force of resistance against the development of capitalism and multinational corporations.

Critical feminists focus on issues of power and seek to explain the origins and consequences of gender relations. They study the ways in which gender ideology is produced, reproduced, and transformed through the everyday lives and experiences of men and women.

Although critical feminist theory is still in development, it is characterized by the acceptance of theory and lived experience interacting in dialectical ways as a challenge for a better life here and now.

Accordingly, critical feminist theory continuously explores an interconnected, multi-parametric system that constitutes the reality of social relations and, through it, aims at the liberation, emancipation, and empowerment of the oppressed (Dadds, 2011).

In short, the main point of the political agenda of Critical Feminist Theory includes the dialogical engagement with marginalized social groups with the aim of their inclusion. This key point constitutes a fundamental feminist contribution to critical social theory and academic research (Dadds, 2011: pp. 177-178).

Critical feminist theory is not reductionist. By examining its various component currents and the politics they express, we can understand how critical feminism contributes to the effort to address oppression in various forms. Critical feminism recognizes the relationship between race, class, and gender in the formation of a hegemonic discourse.

It is important to note that Critical Feminist Theory does not function as a manual; it does not offer specific ways in which it can achieve its goals. On the contrary, it calls for a re-examination of existing notions of knowledge, domination, and ways of empowering the weak.

In addition, critical feminism recognizes the relationship between race, class, and gender in the formation of a dominant discourse in education, so it is important to also recognize its contribution to the discussion of an education of resistance and empowerment of the oppressed (Bhandar, 2000: p. 109).

It is our main argument in this work that for critical feminism to be established in education, it is important to engage with critical pedagogy so as to be inspired and envision how to essentially empower its goals. Thus, for educators to challenge the politics of race, class, and gender within classrooms and lecture halls, it is necessary to draw on both the critical pedagogy of Freire's tradition (Freire, 1974) and the critical feminist perspective. It is therefore appropriate, in this effort, to recognize the contribution of research on feminist issues to the empowerment of diverse subjects (Cannella & Mañuelito, 2008) and to transformative logic. This, of course, includes challenging patriarchy as a characteristic of critical education, one of the most important issues that educators must face in their search for emancipatory pedagogies.

3. The Combined and Uneven Development of Critical Pedagogy

Critical Pedagogy is defined as a school of educational thought and practice that aims to transform existing structures towards societies of equality, social justice, environmental sustainability, and collectivity.

The birth of critical pedagogy in the early 1980s is linked to the rise of social movements in the previous decades and to the attempt to address the rising wave of neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

Critical pedagogues tried to build an alternative to neoliberalism, which they called the language of critique and possibility. This project, despite the pedagogical richness of its analyses in the first decade, lacked a specific articulation with a broader political strategy.

It is beyond doubt, that critical pedagogues made important contributions to the discussion for a radical transformation in education, but they were not able to connect them with a strategy for a general socio-political transformation.

On the other hand, critical pedagogy is linked to the pedagogical views of Freire, Gramsci and American progressive education, in order to develop a pedagogy that would be based on the concepts of reproduction, production and reconstruction.

For the main representatives of critical pedagogy, radical theories about schooling had to shift their focus from the question of how society is reproduced based on the interests of capital and its institutions to the question of how excluded majorities can develop institutions, values and practices that serve their own interests in the direction of a radical transformation of education and society (Mayo, 2010).

From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, Giroux, Aronowitz and McLaren, attempted to integrate this project into a synthesis of elements of postmodern theories with a modernist plan for democratic social reconstruction linking Critical Pedagogy with Cultural Studies. This direction of theoretical research was initially criticized by Apple, not because he disagreed with the adoption of postmodern theories but because he believed that it was moving away from the questions concerning school education and proposed a program of study of the neoliberal-neoconservative restructuring in education (Gounari & Grollios, 2010).

In the 2000s, Giroux abandoned the incorporation of critical pedagogy into postmodernism with a plan for a democratic social reconstruction, without stopping to emphasize the importance of linking critical pedagogy with Cultural Studies. He turned his attention to the assessment and critique of the new conditions that have taken shape in American society, advocating an advanced version of liberal democratic reform (Gounari & Grollios, 2010).

At the same time, McLaren moved away from Giroux and Aronowitz's and attempted to formulate a new critical pedagogy based on the Marxist roots of critical pedagogy of the 1980s thus introducing the project for a critical revolutionary pedagogy.

McLaren's starting point is a strong criticism of economic globalization, and

especially its consequences: global capitalism, postmodernity, cultural hybridism and “new imperialism”. This critique is based on Marxist theory, and as an alternative form of education he proposes what he calls “Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy”.

In their celebrated work, McLaren and Farahmandpur emphasize that globalization is a misleading and euphemistic term that masks its “ugly” face: imperialism and especially cultural imperialism, the project of Western societies for unilateral supremacy and global domination, the exploitation of labor, state-sponsored terrorism, the militarization of space, the homogenization of the media, and finally a capitalism that turns the natural environment into a chain of shopping malls (Planet Mall), for short-term profits at the expense of ecological health and human dignity. Therefore, in the authors’ view, globalization “cannibalizes life as a whole” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005: p. 15).

According to McLaren and Farahmandpur, postmodern theories by implicitly adopting a market economy, by focusing on a culturalist discourse, by celebrating the death of universalism in favor of “hyper-globalism”, by refusing to accept that “we are in a post-colonial phase”, ultimately falling victim to the politics of identity, which characterizes a “crude form of culturalism” and collapsing into a form of liberalism (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005: p. 18, 25).

In particular, they put forward the thesis that in any form of education “Marxist analysis should serve as an axiomatic tool for questioning the current social relations associated with the globalization of capital and the neoliberal educational policies that follow as a result” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005: p. 22). They admit, however, that “Marxist theory is a social system of analysis that concerns human subjects and runs through the minutiae of everyday life, so it must be constantly re-examined” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005: p. 22).

As a Pedagogy that resists this “new imperialism”, McLaren and Farahmandpur put forward a “Freirean”, “socialist” Pedagogy of “the working class”, which they also refer to as “revolutionary act of active citizenship” or “critical revolutionary pedagogy”. We need “Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy”, they say, because what we now call “Critical Pedagogy” ought to do more than just continually tear up what the commodity logic of capital daily exalts. It ought to build a new vision of society, liberated from the law of capital’s value.

A Critical Pedagogy, in order to promote a revolutionary praxis, must be able to support the cultural struggle of workers and coordinate such struggles as part of a broader cross-border activism of social movements, which in turn aims to organize and support the working classes and marginalized cultural workers and laborers in their efforts to wage new international anti-capitalist struggles in the march towards socialism (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005: p. 150). McLaren and Farahmandpur sum up these pedagogical positions with the observation that “we need nothing less than a social revolution” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005: p. 152).

Throughout this course, the elimination of gender inequalities in education and in society has been one of the fundamental goals of Critical Revolutionary

Pedagogy.

It is a fact that gender inequalities, as they appear in the field of education, are an issue that has been of concern not only for the feminist movement but also to the Marxist critical pedagogues associated with Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy.

It is under these circumstances that I strongly believe that Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy should be enriched with the ideas and research work of Critical Feminist Theory.

4. Introducing Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy

The introduction of a Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy as a creative conjunction between Critical Feminism and Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy is proposed in order to challenge the culture of “banking education”, which requires educators to compromise with common sense and with patriarchal assumptions and readings of the world.

I give below a brief account of the component characteristics of Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy:

1) Dialoguing Space

One of the most important characteristics of the conceptualization of a critical feminist Revolutionary pedagogy is the continuous interaction with theoretical currents such as critical Revolutionary pedagogy and critical race theory, and their consequent resistance practices.

A number of more recent theoretical developments should also be added here, such as those referring to Critical Indigenous Pedagogy (Denzin et al., 2008), to indigenous/local knowledge (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008), to decolonizing pedagogy (Grande, 2009), to pedagogy of resistance (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005), etc.

It is important for such discussions to be a space for re-examining hegemonic notions of oppression, resistance, knowledge, and power and what this can mean in the context of teaching and learning in the 21st century (Gale de Saxe, 2016).

In addition, it is important to engage in discussions that ask both educators and learners to continue to think about how they perceive (to re-examine) the purposes of school.

This may not guarantee a tangible transformation of the asymmetrical relationships within the educational community, but what it will do is to trigger “dialogue”. This space for dialogue can become the starting point for redesigning teacher education. By examining the redefinition of the elements of teacher education through a critical feminist lens, prospective teachers and their trainers can collaborate to challenge the status quo of education, the hegemonic discourse, while establishing their own roles in the future of democratic education, engaging critically with challenging dominant ideological “reforms” and in building serious alternatives to them (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000).

2) Resistance Practices

What critical feminist revolutionary pedagogy highlights is resistance practices that aim to challenge the status quo of education: challenging the normality

and the prevailing system of knowledge, challenging the hegemonic understanding of inequality and examining the different methods and forms of resistance as a way of understanding the roles of the teacher and the student.

Critical points here are the issues of reflection on knowledge within the framework of the dominant educational model and the transformation of critical knowledge into emancipatory action (Skordoulis, 2016).

Educators need to embrace resistance practices in ways that approach critical education and a way of thinking that challenges the hegemonic culture (including the patriarchal one) and the nature of the curriculum.

To understand more fully the practices of resistance, it is important to start with Freire (1974) and his contributions, focusing on those that promote human values, which broaden the teacher's critical and emotional ability to introduce effective teaching relationships with students and the emphasis on the concept of "hope" in his work for an education of freedom and solidarity (Freire, 2000; Darder, 2020).

In essence, the practice of resistance could be defined inclusively as the effort to broaden the boundaries of critical educational principles in order to adopt a new social and institutional framework with the application of emancipatory theories that will address the hegemonic rhetorics that render educators, students, parents, and communities without expression and without social action (Darder & Miron, 2006: p. 11).

3) Critical knowledge production

Sandra Harding (2004b) argued that it is more than necessary to take the time to look at critical feminist thought and practice, the relationship with the dominant patriarchal discourse and the hegemonic ways of organizing and producing knowledge.

The discussion about knowledge and learning requires an examination of the educator's participation in issues of inequality and injustice both in the school and in the social formation, which requires political thought, collective action, and commitment (Kalesaki & Katsiampoura, 2022).

Particular importance in the field of knowledge production should be given to the creation of space for students that will not be based on the androcentric foundations of traditional teaching but where the views of all social groups, not just the powerful, will be presented and heard (Kincheloe, 2008).

5. Implications for Teacher Education

It has been recognized that the unfamiliarity with the feminist perspective and the lack of recognition of its necessity for the construction of democratic teaching and learning practices has the consequence that even among male educators who are considered politically progressive, conservative values, behaviors, and practices are reproduced that perpetuate, among other structural inequalities, the patriarchal ideology of mainstream education.

Little attention has been paid to this condition, which is critical in the context

of teacher education, as both men and women participate in the educational system. Harding, for example, argues that it is a given in contemporary feminist thought that men can make significant contributions as well as be subjects of feminist thought, emphasizing the importance of solidarity, not unity, between groups with different but partially overlapping interests (Harding, 2004a: p. 195). Such a frame of reference coincides with the current of the reconstruction of whiteness, which offers a unique perspective to discuss the position and role of men in feminism and education.

Just as the current of the reconstruction of whiteness (Leonardo, 2009) argues that recognizing one's position and privileges can give one the opportunity to speak out against oppression and inequality, in the same way men, too, can work with solidarity and refuse to accept the privileges of the male subject. Therefore, as Harding (2004a) argues, we need to take some time to rethink the role of men and feminism and to see critical feminist thought and practice as creating spaces for men to critique patriarchal politics and thought, their relationship to the dominant patriarchal discourse, and the hegemonic ways of organizing the production of knowledge.

It is expected that Critical feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy will provide a framework for transforming teacher education by fostering resistance to the traditional, often unequal, status quo in education. This approach builds upon critical feminism and critical revolutionary pedagogy but goes further by empowering individuals and promoting transformative change.

It emphasizes two crucial aspects:

1) Reflection on knowledge: Examining and questioning existing knowledge bases to uncover potential bias and promote understanding of diverse perspectives.

2) Transforming critical knowledge into action: Translating theoretical understanding into practical steps that promote liberation and challenge inequalities.

This approach requires educators to critically examine their own role in potentially perpetuating existing power structures and inequalities within the education system.

To address this challenge, critical feminist teacher education promotes continuous reflection and dialogue. By encouraging both educators and learners to question the established purposes and practices of education, this approach creates a space for dialogue and potential positive change.

6. Conclusion

This work introduces a teaching and research program named "Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy," which bridges critical feminist theory and critical revolutionary pedagogy.

Critical Feminist Revolutionary Pedagogy can offer educators the opportunity to reflect on how education is a form of cultural politics and how practices such

as participation in reflective and critical discussions can offer new ways of challenging the “traditional” nature of school education.

Integrating resistance practices into teacher training is crucial. By aligning with critical revolutionary pedagogy and challenging dominant cultures, teacher training programs can empower future educators to become agents of transformation in the educational landscape.

Within a critical feminist framework, prospective teachers and their trainers can co-create learning experiences that challenge the status quo, deconstruct existing dominant narratives, and define their roles in building a more democratic and equitable education system. This includes critically engaging with educational “reforms” while actively seeking out alternative approaches that promote social justice and social transformation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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