Constructions of Innocence in Times of War:
Breaking into the Hegemony of Peace

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> …all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers... Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.[1]

> …Until the philosophy which hold one race
> Superior and another inferior
> Is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned
> Everywhere is war, me say war…[2]

The phrase "in times of war" suggests that we also have times of peace. For this to be true, we would have to define war in extremely narrow terms such as "armed militaristic conflict between or among nation states." From this definition we could say that peace is a time void of armed militaristic conflict between or among nation states. But war and peace are much more complex social and political phenomena than simply armed militaristic conflict between and among nation states or the lack thereof; their complexity lies in the fact that victors of "war" inevitably determine the substance of "peace." As such the absence of armed conflict does not necessarily mean that the war is over. It simply means that one faction has the power to control their "enemy" to the extent that the enemy no longer has the resources or the will to

fight back on a scale recognized by the victors as war. We might call this state of war the "hegemony of peace," because it signals the domination of power in the service of social and political order. The hegemony of peace makes invisible asymmetrical relations of power and thus narrates a story of social order, the ruling formation being the benefactor of "social integration."[3] When violence does erupt during these periods of apparent calm, it is usually repressed in the name of order or isolated in areas and among people who are repeatedly victimized by the hegemony of peace.

Another way to come at this problem is to disentangle the notion of order from the notion of peace. The outward appearance of both might be quite similar. However, underlying order, especially order dictated from above or through force and/or persuasion (i.e., propaganda, schooling, media, etc.) is often a quiet war of resistance. Peace, by contrast, signals in the best sense, a degree of order that has been shaped through agonistic or respectful struggle. In this context, times of peace are animated by a substantive degree of mutual respect among competing parties. Agonistic peace, from this perspective, is animated by unarmed, demilitarized conflict and struggle among and between competing parties who recognize the right of each and all to fight for their just interests in equitable terms. Given that the capitalistic nation state is the dominating international force of geo-political hegemony, it is unlikely that we will see, anytime soon, a time of agonistic peace.[4] We will most certainly experience a tightening of the social order in the name of peace—hegemonic peace—as more communities throughout the globe (formal nation states like Venezuela, Cuba, and China and informal collectives like Hamas) contest the West's, and specifically the U.S.'s, hegemony of peace.

This is not to say, however, that war, in either sense, is a new referent in the classroom. Throughout modern history, wars have conditioned our knowledge in significant and complex ways. From the genocide of the Native Americans in the U.S. to the ongoing war in Iraq, wars' brutalities ripple across our national (un)conscious via the narratives we tell through film, television and documentary as well as through more formal educational material such as textbooks, curriculum, language policies, and pedagogy.[5] In what follows, I will refer to both the hegemony of peace, as well as armed militaristic struggles, like we have in Iraq, to critically reflect upon and pedagogically examine the concept of "innocence" as it was taken up in one of my most recent graduate seminars. I will begin, however, by discussing what I see are some of the unique challenges and questions for critical teaching during these times of war.

Critical Pedagogy and the Struggle against Polemics: Keeping the Political Pedagogical in Times of War

That until there are no longer first class
And second class citizens of any nation
Until the colour of a man's skin

Is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes
Me say war

That until the basic human rights are equally
Guaranteed to all, without regard to race
Dis a war[6]

Like many of my colleagues, I continually struggle to enact a "complex" critical pedagogy that helps to provoke my students to "brush history against the grain" by specifically examining operations of force for how they normalize the transmission of violence, oppression, inequity, and the reproduction of dominant political classes.[7] In times of war, these provocations take on an urgency just as they risk becoming polemical. It seems that the more entrenched U.S. culture becomes in the ideology of war and domination the more forceful and adamant the resistance must be. This, however, presents a difficult challenge to critical teachers who strive to be transformative intellectuals.[8] How might we create an activist space within an increasingly neoconservative environment that remains, at the same time, committed to the goals of critical consciousness and social change through pedagogical channels? How might we go about creating a *pedagogical* space, as opposed to simply a political one? Granted, we know as critical educators that it is impossible to separate the political and pedagogical (just as it is impossible to separate the personal and political) yet this does not mean that the latter cannot (does not) become overwhelmed by the former. To maintain a strong sense of the pedagogical means to emphasize the complex process of teaching and learning, without sacrificing the ethical demands of working in the service of socially just and democratic ideals. It means that as critical teachers we "own" our own fallibility while simultaneously fighting for what we think is right.

In this time of militaristic war, are we able, given the impulse to ramp up resistance in the face of a ramped up ideology of war and domination, to maintain an environment in which thinking critically—thinking with complexity—about ideologies is a possibility? How can we teach critically in a time of war without becoming polemicists, as the context created by war encourages? Are we prepared, as Nicholas Burbules suggests, to encourage our students to ask, "What kind of education am I getting?" and "In what or whose interest does it serve?"[9] As critical educators we often encourage these questions to be directed at those in positions of institutional power, i.e., people other than ourselves. But what if we encouraged the questions to be asked of all teachers, programs, and curriculum? What would the educational sphere look like if the authority to educate was always already met with an intellectual challenge to that authority? Is this challenge a privilege of "peace" or, more likely, a necessity of war? It is equally important, of course, for teachers to ask before/during their tenure, "What kind of education *do I think* I am providing to *which* students and why?" The challenges and tensions arise when there is an ideological disconnect between the teacher's intent and the students' expectation. I would argue that in

times of war it is even more important for students and teachers to ask these questions and enact these challenges across the ideological continuum, because there is more at stake in *not* asking them.

But it seems that there is more at issue here than being able to defend one's pedagogy in political terms and politics in pedagogical terms. There is an issue of epistemological relevance that under girds the questions above and speaks not to the issue of who is politically/pedagogically right or pedagogically/politically wrong per se, but rather brings attention to the means by which people decide notions of right and wrong. What knowledges, in times of war, do critical teachers have an ethical responsibility to introduce to their students and why? Should critical teachers privilege some knowledges over others in the service of their own political perspectives even in the face of their own fallibility? Do critical teachers have an ethical responsibility to introduce dominant perspectives of knowledge and power into their classrooms or is it enough to assume that dominant power and knowledge already dominates the thinking of students and therefore needs only to be confronted, disrupted, analyzed, and revised? How might critical U.S. educators respond to an increasingly vocal nationalistic, homophobic, fundamentalist, and racist student presence in the suburban public classroom? Should there be room for all discourses in a public classroom or are there justifiable exclusions?

In what follows, I will try to answer many of these questions, using my own teaching experiences as a jumping off point. I teach a range of courses in different departments throughout the university. From general education courses in cultural studies and honors courses in social analysis to doctoral seminars in pedagogy and masters level courses in critical thinking and literacy, I am involved with students in all academic disciplines and from all levels of knowledge and skill. In all of my courses, war and/or the hegemony of peace have become, either explicitly or implicitly, the contexts from which I teach. This means, as you will see, that war is omni-present in my classes; it is the ultimate expression of human degradation and provides the backdrop against which our ideas about education, identity, history, innocence, and power come into high relief. As Theordor Adorno has observed, in the exaggerations there are truths. And war is the ultimate exaggeration of domination and aggression.

Whether a teacher teaches about the social consequences of war, media representations of war, literacy education, or educational foundations, the specters of war are present in the knowledges and histories that we "choose" to explore and (re)construct. War is a grand narrative in the most vulgar sense; it is perverse in how quickly it can reduce some of the most complex philosophical issues, like the morality of killing, to one dimensional grunts of aye or nay. In 2005, war marches into the classroom sporting pierced eye-brows and lips, upturned Izod collars, baggy-baggy pants, Fubu, low-low rise jeans, cell phones, and shades of shadowy lip liner. War also marches into the classroom in the teacher's syllabi, assessments, briefcases, laptops, and lectures. As Benjamin understood better than most, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And

just as such a document is not free of barbarism, *barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another* (my emphasis)."[10] In other words, just as Gramsci theorized a pedagogic dimension to hegemony, there is also a pedagogical process at work in the transmission of wartime ideology. This pedagogy, as Benjamin's words imply, is another form of barbarism.

Innocence in Times of War: Who are We Protecting and at What Cost?

> That until that day
> The dream of lasting peace, world citizenship
> Rule of international morality
> Will remain but a fleeting illusion
> To be persued, but never attained
> Now everywhere is war, war[11]

The dialogue I am attempting to have with my graduate students in my Critical Thinking and Literacy class is about childhood innocence. We have been reading Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalites*.[12] In a previous class I asked my students, almost all of whom are public school teachers, white, and women, whether they thought it would be appropriate to discuss the genocide of Native Americans during the Thanksgiving holiday season with elementary school aged children. Some said, flatly, "No." Their reasoning was that it was a family holiday *now*, and that historical accuracy had little or nothing to do with the meaning of the holiday in the 21st century. What would be the point, was their point. It was a time for families to get together and eat turkey and cranberry sauce, reminisce about old times, and catch up with relatives. It did not matter that the dominant historical narrative was manufactured, which they acknowledged it was. The point was that the meaning of the holiday had moved, in their estimation, so far from being a historical referent that it would unnecessarily expose children to past horrors that were better left unspoken.

I find this response interesting because it does acknowledge, on some level, the historical and contextual in terms of meaning making. Meanings do change over time and are part of a cultural circuit where representations correlate to the processes of consumption and distribution.[13] I asked the students who supported this point of view to think about how they came to these conclusions. For the most part they were unfamiliar with any theoretical knowledge that might under gird their critique. As such, they were also unaware of the limitations of their critique in regards to issues of power. For the most part, they appealed to their own commonsense, which, in turn, came out of their own experiences, imagined or real. For example, many had children of their own and/or had fond memories of Thanksgiving in which no one spoke about Native Americans or the colonists. The holiday, in their immediate experiences, had an affective pull which correlated with a particular idea of a complex and contradictory tradition.

I asked them if they thought Native Americans felt the same way about Thanksgiving as they did. Probably not, they said. But, for them, I had again missed the point. It did not matter that the holiday meant something different to Native Americans. If that was the case, which they acknowledged it probably was, then they could observe the holiday anyway they wanted. But why, they suggested, should that affect *their* understanding of *their* family tradition? Lastly, I asked them if they thought there was a relationship between their understanding of Thanksgiving and the invalidation and de-legitimation of Native American history. Do the privileges of power, I asked, getting perturbed by what I felt was an increasingly insulated and provincial perspective, allow them to rewrite the meaning of Thanksgiving so that genocide can become a symbol of family, home and comfort? Difficult question? Combative question? Polemical? When does dialogue devolve into argument, teaching/learning into political grappling? When war is at issue, when history is at stake, when our memories of the past directly affect our understanding of the present and future, it is hard not to draw a line in the sand…

In response to this perspective on Thanksgiving, other students voiced concern that historical accuracy should not be sacrificed at the alter of tradition, but were equally concerned for their students' sense of safety and security. It was suggested that young people might have nightmares if they were to learn, in too graphic detail, the story of colonization from the Native American perspective. Maybe, they continued, a softer version of history could be told that wouldn't sacrifice historical accuracy too much. In this rewriting, the natives and colonists would be enemies, but the violence and brutality that the Native Americans suffered would be edited out of the story.

Through open ended questions I tried to get this group to, again, understand how they had come to this conclusion. Again, they appealed to what they considered to be commonsense notions of childhood innocence and the benefit of protection and security, as they had come to understand these things. They were unaware that their notion of innocence excluded children who would be made secure by acknowledging the continued degradation of Native American's in the U.S. What kind of insecurity and violence do we do to children whose lives have been perverted by violence and degradation when we rewrite their history in an effort to protect them and others from historical reality? How is rewriting historical memory not only a privilege of the victors of war, but a further act of aggression through symbolically violent means? Moreover, how does the whitewashing of history assure that the "barbarism of civilization" will be repeated and, more often than not, exacted on similar, if not the same victims?

Nevertheless, innocence, for my students, was a static concept. For example, all children are born innocent and then, god-forbid, something terrible happens, and they are no longer innocent. As such, the innocent must be protected from the tainted and/or the guilty. There is no sense in this discourse of the historical connectedness of those that are considered innocent and those that are not. Perversions of power are faceless and timeless from this perspective. The innocence of their white, middle

class children and students had to be protected from the effects of the savage inequalities that ravaged the urban landscape not ten miles from their homes. Their commonsense did not connect their privilege to the war-like conditions that Kozol portrays. It failed to acknowledge that inequity is a double edge sword, where some benefit handsomely from savage inequality and then rationalize the protection of that privilege by appealing to an ahistorical notion of innocence. If innocence is such a concern, then is it not reasonable to ask, as I did, why "a black infant in New Jersey is more than three times as likely to die before his or her first birthday as a white infant?"[14] Certainly, this degree of savagery suggests another kind of war, one that has been going on in the U.S. since its occupation.

I moved the conversation from the invasion of North America to the war on Iraq. I asked my students if they taught their students about the war. Some told me that they were censored by their principals. Others said they did not know enough to discuss the event. Most felt that it was inappropriate material for young children. They believed that war, after all, was not for children, although more than half supported the initial invasion. In other words, war was not for *their* children, although it was obviously alright for Iraqi children.

Although Iraqi civilian death tolls are hard to calculate with any accuracy, it has been estimated that 100,000 thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed since the U.S. occupation began.[15] Without knowing exactly how many of the dead were children, we know that more than quite a few were. Moreover, we know that Iraq has a large *living* population of children who continue to experience war and its brutalities everyday.

I asked my students in light of this whether or not Iraqi children are also too innocent to learn about the occupation and destruction of their country. I ask if they think that German children and Israeli children are too young to learn about the Holocaust. I ask them if young African American and white children should not be taught about the brutalities that whites exacted on their families and histories. I ask if the children in Kozol's account are too young to discuss in class the degradation of their neighborhoods that they discuss openly and honestly with Kozol while walking around their neighborhood. Who are we protecting when we make a claim to protect innocence, I ask? Was "our" innocence being protected when the Bush administration censored the coffins coming back from Iraq, or corporate U.S. news outlets edited out the savagery of war? When do appeals to innocence and its protection become complicit in the construction and perpetuation of violence from which we need to be protected? There is an irrational rationality at work in the idea that innocence must be protected from the perversions of war, while war is the means by which we protect innocence.

I feel an urgency to the lesson. Some are apathetic; others are ambiguous, while a few are downright angry. Am I leaving enough space for thinking? For reflection? Am I considering my own fallibility as I ask these questions? Am I leaving room for dissention? Am I invalidating their experiences? Am I asking them to be rigorous in examining how they have come to have the beliefs they do? Or has this discussion

pedagogically devolved, the pedagogical overwhelmed by the urgencies of war and the hegemony of peace? Is it true that there is no teaching if there is no learning?[16] How might we assess our teaching and our students' learning when we know the effects of critical teaching might not immediately reveal themselves?

The harder I push for them to "rub history against the grain," to examine the process by which their commonsense is manufactured, the more entrenched they seem to become in their own commonsense. Interestingly, it is now *their* innocence that they feel is being encroached upon by my questions…their security and safety. I do have one "older" African American woman in the class who supports the nature and direction of the questioning, adding her own comments and questions throughout the discussion. She tells the class that these questions give her a sense of safety and security, because she feels a sense of validation—even if she doesn't agree with everything I have been saying…

Conclusion

> And until the ignoble and unhappy regimes
> that hold our brothers in Angola, in Mozambique,
> South Africa sub-human bondage
> Have been toppled, utterly destroyed
> Well, everywhere is war, me say war
>
> War in the east, war in the west
> War up north, war down south
> War, war, rumours of war[17]

War often creates a heightened state of emergency for many people, creating a sense of insecurity and chaos, but "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency…"[18] Bringing about a state of emergency in a time of war suggests the need to question the idea that war is a natural dimension of progress or political evolution, as we have been told repeatedly by the architects of the Iraqi war. Walter Benjamin writes, "The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the [twenty-first] century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."[19] As critical educators, we cannot *not* take a position on these issues, but unavoidably risk, as we do, alienating those students who have a strong affective investment in the dominant national pro-war discourse. The upside to taking this risk is having the knowledge that we not only acted ethically, but that we are part of a larger collective of teachers and other political workers determined to plant seeds of critical consciousness and/or till the soil in which seeds from previous plantings are trying to grow.

My own experiences suggest that the seeds of critical knowledge may be planted

generations before the soil is ever tilled. As such, archeological and genealogical excavation is called for in the development of critical consciousness. They might be laid deep within the rich soil of consciousness during a shift in location, geographic disruption representing a time when we are made aware not only of "difference," but of our own "otherness" as well. In this context, we must become cartographers, mapping our travels so that we know where we have been, where we are, and where we would like to go. As good cartographers, we must leave our shores, or else risk mapping ourselves at the center of the world. Seeds may also be planted without notice, by a teacher for example who praises a student for creating a metaphor that runs against the grain of the dominant discourse. We must be prepared to respond to that which we cannot know, but which we know can arise when we least expect. We must be willing to act without guarantees, knowing that we might be wrong, but secure in the knowledge that we can change the course of our actions when we are.

But just because seeds are planted does not mean that they will grow. The fertility of our social minds and bodies depends heavily, if not almost entirely, upon the environment we create. Is it rich in resources? Does it offer positive and supportive attention? Does it value creativity, imagination, individual expression, cooperation? Does it support the development of democratic agency, which is the ability a person has to control their own life through democratic struggle and resistance? Does it name oppression/oppressors and create the means by which we, as a community, can struggle against it/them? Does it support a sense of social fairness, providing the most and best for those that have the least and worst? Does it allow for the formal desegregation of our schools, which are still segregated not only by race, but by class as well? Once desegregated, have we created an environment in our schools that creates understanding between people with different experiences without legitimating the status quo? Does it nurture the kind of courage it takes to fight for what is right and against what it wrong? Are we prepared to create this kind of environment in times of war?

Notes

[1] Walter Benjamin. (1969). *Illuminations*. Germany: Schoken.

[2] Bob Marley lyrics, "War."

[3] Aronowitz. (2003). *How Class Works.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 57.

[4] For a complex discussion of the role of the state in post-Marxist times see Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis (Eds.). *State Theory Reconsidered*: *Paradigm Lost*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

[5] See Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud. (1991). *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. Also See Henry A. Giroux, "Doing Cultural Studies: Youth and the Challenge of Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review* Vol. 6, 3, (Fall 1999): 278-208.

[6] Bob Marley lyrics, "War."

[7] Joe Kincheloe (2004). *A Critical Pedagogy Primer*. New York: Peter Lang Press.

[8] Henry A. Giroux. (1988). *Teaches as Intellectuals*. New York: Bergin and Garvey; See also Edward Said. (1996). *Representations of Intellectuals.* New York: Vintage Reprint Edition.

[9] Nicholas Burbules. (2004). "Ways of Thinking about Educational Quality." *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 33, (6), pp. 4-10.

[10] Walter Benjamin. (1969). *Illuminations*. Germany: Schoken.

[11] Bob Marley lyrics, "War."

[12] Jonathan Kozol. (1992). *Savage Inequalities*. New York: Harper.

[13] Stuart Hall. *Representations*. (1997). London, UK: Open University Press.

[14] New Jersey Sustainable State Institute: http://www.njssi.net/gi/equity/ind9.php

[15] Go to: Les Roberts, Riyadh Lafta, Richard Garfield, Jamal Khudhairi, Gilbert "Burnham Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey" at http://globalresearch.ca/articles/LAN410A.html retrieved on April 27, 2005.

[16] Victoria Purcell Gates (1995). *Other People's Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[17] Bob Marley lyrics, "War."

[18] Walter Benjamin. (1969). *Illuminations*. Germany: Schoken.

[19] Ibid.

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