# Utopian Thinking Under the Sign of Neoliberalism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Educated Hope

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ABSTRACT   As the vast majority of people become detached from public forums that nourish social critique, agency not only becomes a mockery of itself, it is replaced by market-based choices in which private satisfactions replace social responsibilities and private solutions become a substitute for systemic change. As the worldly space of criticism is undercut by the absence of public pedagogies and spaces that encourage the exchange of information, opinion and criticism, the horizons of an inclusive and substantive democracy disappear against the growing militarization of public space, the attack on the welfare state, the ongoing commercialization of everyday life, and the growing isolation and depoliticization that marks the loss of a politically guaranteed public realm in which autonomy, political participation and engaged citizenship make their appearance. Drawing upon the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, Zygmunt Bauman and others the author addresses the current crisis of meaning, political agency and pedagogy, and the implications it has for developing a cultural politics that links utopian thinking not only to the complex nature of social agency and the importance of democratic public spheres, but also to the fact that active and critical political agents have to be formed, educated and socialized into the world of politics.

> And it is no accident that the renewal of political thought in Western Europe is quickly accompanied by the resurgence of radical 'utopias'. These utopias manifest, first and foremost, awareness of this fundamental fact: institutions are human works. And it is no accident either that, contrary to the poverty in this respect of contemporary 'political philosophy', grand political philosophy from Plato to Rousseau has placed the question of *paideia* at the center of its interests.
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> *Cornelius Castoriadis*[1]

> To speak today of the defense of democracy as if we were defending something which we knew and had possessed for many decades or centuries is self-deception ... we should be nearer the mark, and should

1.   Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Power, Politics, and Autonomy', *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 161–162.

have a more convincing slogan, if we spoke of the need not to defend democracy, but to create it.

*E.H. Carr*[2]

If we are to believe the prophets of neoliberalism, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[3] Within this dystopian universe, the public realm is increasingly reduced to an instrumental space in which individuality reduces self-development to the relentless pursuit of personal interests, and the realm of autonomy is reduced to a domain of activity 'in which ... private goals of diverse kinds may be pursued'.[4] This is evident in ongoing attempts by many liberals and conservatives to turn commercial-free public education over to market forces, dismantle traditional social provisions of the welfare state, turn over all vestiges of the health care system to private interests and mortgage social security to the whims of the stock market. There is a growing sense in the American popular imagination that citizen involvement, social planning and civic engagement are becoming irrelevant in a society where the welfare state is being aggressively dismantled.[5] Those traditional, if not imagined, public spheres in which people could exchange ideas, debate and shape the conditions that structure their everyday lives increasingly appear to have little relevance or political significance in spite of the expressions of public good that followed the tragedy of 11 September 2001. In the midst of growing fears about domestic security, dissent is now labeled as unpatriotic while the appeal to patriotic fervor feeds a commercial frenzy that turns collective grief into profits and reminds us how easy the market converts noble concepts like public service and civic courage into forms of civic vacuity.

While the role of big government and public services made a brief comeback on behalf of the common good, especially in providing crucial services related to public health and safety, President Bush and his supporters remain wedded to the 'same reactionary agenda he pushed before the attack'.[6] Instead of addressing the gaps in both public health needs and the safety net for workers, young people and the poor, the Bush administration pushed through both houses of Congress a stimulus plan based primarily on tax breaks for the wealthy and major corporations, while at the same time 'pressing for an energy plan that features subsidies and tax breaks for energy companies and drilling in the arctic wilderness'.[7] Investing in children, the environment, crucial public services and those most in need, once again, gives way to investing in the rich and repaying corporate

2. E.H. Carr cited in Richard Swift, *The No Nonsense Guide to Democracy* (Oxford: New Internationalist, 2002), p. 138.
3. This quote is actually taken from Fredric Jameson: 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism.' Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. xii.
4. Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 335.
5. Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998).
6. Editorial, 'Bush's Domestic War', *The Nation*, 31 December 2001, p. 3.
7. *Ibid.*

contributors. Such practices suggest that little has changed with respect to economic policy, regardless of all the talk about the past being irrevocably repudiated in light of the events of 11 September. Where is the public outrage over a tax stimulus package that gives the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population 45 per cent of the total tax cut? In this tax scheme, the lowest 60 per cent of the income scale will get an annual tax reduction of US \$256 while the top 1 per cent get US \$54,480. Where is the outrage over the Bush Administration's willingness to repeal the inheritance tax, saving billions of dollars for less than 1 per cent of the population while it simultaneously refuses to enact legislation lessening the financial burden for older Americans on Medicare? Where is the outrage over the Bush administration's ongoing assault on the environment, scornfully evident in the government's refusal to ratify the Kyoto treaty to reduce global warming, the opening up of wildlife areas to big businesses engaged in oil exploration and the refusal to put any restraints on auto companies that continue polluting the air with high levels of auto emissions? Even more serious is the government's refusal to address the shameful plight of 11 million children who live in poverty, the 9.2 million who have no health insurance and the 1.4 million children who are homeless in America.[8]

Emptied of any substantial content, 'democracy' even in its current deracinated state appears imperiled as individuals are unable to translate their privately suffered misery into public concerns and collective action. Zygmunt Bauman goes so far as to observe that the prevailing modes of domination appear to have been altered in that the public no longer dominates the private. He states: 'The opposite is the case: it is the private that colonizes the public space, squeezing out and chasing away everything which cannot be fully, without residue, translated into the vocabulary of private interests and pursuits'.[9] Civic engagement and political agency now appear impotent, and public values are rendered invisible in light of the growing power of multinational corporations to commercialize public space and disconnect power from issues of equity, social justice and civic responsibility.[10] As the vast majority of citizens become detached from public forums that nourish social critique, agency not only becomes a mockery of itself, it is replaced by market-based choices in which private satisfactions replace social responsibilities or, as Ulrich Beck points out, biographic solutions become a substitute for systemic change.[11] As Cornelius Castoriadis argues, under such conditions, it becomes impossible to imagine politics as the autonomy of the collective, 'which can be achieved only through explicit self-institution and self-governance'.[12] In this perspective, contemporary notions of freedom—legitimated as an absence of restraint and a narrow form of self-interest—have nothing

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8.  Jennifer Egan, 'To Be Young and Homeless', *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 March 2002, p. 35.
9.  Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (London: Polity Press, 2001), p. 107.
10. Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Media: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: The New Press, 1999).
11. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1992), p. 137.
12. Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime', *Constellations*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1997), p. 5.

to do with real autonomy and effective freedom in which individuals function as critical thinkers capable of 'putting existing institutions into questions ... [so that] democracy again becomes society's movement of self-institution—that is to say, a new type of regime in the full sense of the term'.[13] As the space of criticism is undercut by the absence of public spheres that encourage the exchange of information, opinion and criticism, the horizons of a substantive democracy in which the promise of autonomous individuals and an autonomous society disappear against the growing isolation and depoliticization that marks the loss of politically guaranteed public realms in which the realized power of people, political participation and engaged citizenship make their appearance. Rapidly disappearing are those public spaces and unmarketed cultural spaces in which people neither confuse the language of brand names with the language of autonomy and social engagement, nor communicate through a commodified discourse incapable of defending vital institutions as a public good. One consequence is that political exhaustion and impoverished intellectual visions are fed by the increasingly popular assumption that there are no alternatives to the present state of affairs.

At the same time, as Manuel Castells observes, economic power is removed from politics to the degree that it has become global and exterritorial; power now flows, largely escaping from and defying the reach of traditional centers of politics that are nation based and local.[14] The space of power appears increasingly beyond the reach of governments and as a result nations and citizens are increasingly removed as political agents with regards to the impact that multinational corporations have on their daily lives. Once again, the result is not only general indifference, but the elimination of those public spaces that reveal the rough edges of social order, disrupt consensus, and point to the need for modes of education that link learning to the conditions necessary for developing democratic forms of political agency and civic struggle.

As the promise of what Takis Fotopoulos calls an 'inclusive democracy'[15]—with its emphasis on the abolishment of iniquitous power relations in all economic, political and social spheres—recedes from public memory, unfettered brutal self-interests combine with retrograde social policies to make security a top domestic priority. One consequence is that all levels of government are being hollowed out as their policing functions increasingly overpower and mediate their diminishing social functions. Reduced to dismantling the gains of the welfare state and constructing policies that now criminalize social problems such as homelessness and prioritize penal methods over social investments, government is now discounted as a means of addressing basic, economic, educational, environmental and social problems. Zero tolerance policies link the public schools to the prison system as both substitute education, amelioration and compassion for mandatory intolerance and a culture of regulation and punishment. One consequence is that the distinction between the prison and the school

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
14. Manual Castells, especially his *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Volume III: *End of Millennium* (Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1998).
15. Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards an Inclusive Democracy* (London: Cassell, 1997).

has become blurred. The police, courts and other disciplinary agencies have increasingly become the main forces used to address social problems and implement public policies that are largely aimed at minorities of race and color. Moreover, the increasing concerns for national security fueled by a hyped-up jingoism have amplified the forces of domestic militarization in the USA and the US public appears increasingly drawn together 'through shared fears rather than shared responsibilities'.[16] Misfortune breeds contempt and poverty is confused with personal neglect. Across the social sphere, neoliberalism's dismissal of public goods coupled with an ecology of fear rewrites the meaning of community through the logic of government threats, anti-terror campaigns waged against minorities, the squelching of dissent, and a highly coordinated government and media blitz in support of an invasion of Iraq.

Labeled by neoliberals and right-wing politicians as the enemy of freedom (except when it aids big business), government is discounted as a guardian of the public interests. The forces of hyper-capitalism have attacked what they call big government when it has provided essential services such as crucial economic and social safety nets for the less fortunate, but they have no qualms about using the government to bail out the airline industry after the economic nosedive that followed the events of 11 September 2001. Nor are there any expressions of outrage from the cheerleaders of neoliberalism when the state engages in promoting various forms of corporate welfare by providing billions of dollars in direct and indirect subsidies to multinational corporations. As a result, government bears no obligation for either the poor and dispossessed or for the collective future of young people. The disappearance of those noncommodified public spaces necessary for reactivating our political sensibilities as critical citizens, engaged public intellectuals and social agents is happening at a time when public goods are disparaged in the name of privatization, and critical public forums cease to resonate as sites of utopian possibility. The growing lack of justice and equity in American society rises proportionately to the lack of political imagination and collective hope.

Politics devoid of a radical vision often degenerate into either cynicism or appropriate a view of power that appears to be equated only with domination. It is therefore crucial that progressives, educators and other activists respond with a renewed effort to merge politics, pedagogy and ethics with a revitalized sense of the importance of providing the conditions for constructing critical forms of individual and social agency rather than believe the fraudulent, self-serving hegemonic assumption that democracy and capitalism are the same, or indeed that politics as a site of contestation, critical exchange and engagement is in a state of terminal arrest. In part, this would demand engaging the alleged argument for the death of politics as not only symptomatic of the crisis of democracy, but also as part of the more specific crisis of vision, education, agency and meaning that disconnects public values and ethics from the very sphere of politics.

Some social theorists such as Tony Bennett, Ian Hunter and Todd Gitlin make the plunge into forms of political cynicism easier by suggesting that any attempt

16. Anatole Anton, 'Public Goods as Commonstock: Notes on the Receding Commons', in Anatole Anton, Milton Fisk and Nancy Holmstrom, eds, *Not for Sale: In Defense of Public Goods* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), pp. 3–4.

to change society through a cultural politics that links the pedagogical and the political will simply augment the power of the dominant social order.[17] Lost from such accounts is the recognition that democracy has to be struggled over, even in the face of a most appalling crisis of political agency. Within this discourse, little attention is paid to the fact that struggles over politics, power and democracy are inextricably linked to creating democratic public spheres where individuals can be educated as political agents equipped with the skills, capacities and knowledge they need not only to actually perform as autonomous social agents, but also to believe that such struggles *are worth taking up*. Neither homogeneous nor nostalgic, *the public sphere* points to a plurality of institutions, sites and spaces; a sphere in which people not only talk, debate and reassess the political, moral and cultural dimensions of publicness but also develop processes of learning *and* persuasion as a way of enacting new social identities and altering 'the very structure of participation and the ... horizon of discussion and debate'.[18]

The struggle over politics, in this instance, is linked to pedagogical interventions aimed at subverting dominant forms of meaning in order to generate both a renewed sense of agency and a critical subversion of dominant power itself. Agency now becomes the site through which, as Judith Butler has pointed out in another context, power is not transcended but reworked, replayed, and restaged in productive ways.[19] Central to my argument is the assumption that politics is not simply about power, but also, as Cornelius Castoriadis points out, 'has to do with political judgements and value choices',[20] indicating that questions of civic education and critical pedagogy (learning how to become a skilled activist) are central to the struggle over political agency and democracy. Civic education and critical pedagogy emphasize critical reflexivity, bridge the gap between learning and everyday life, make visible the connection between power and knowledge, and provide the conditions for extending democratic rights, values and identities while drawing upon the resources of history. However, among many educators and social theorists, there is a widespread refusal to either address education as a crucial means for expanding and enabling political agency, or for recognizing that such education takes place, not only within schools, but across a wide variety of public spheres mediated through the very mechanisms of culture itself, what Raymond Williams once called 'the cultural force of permanent education'.[21]

17. See for example, Tony Bennett, 'Cultural Studies: A Reluctant Discipline', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1998, pp. 528–545; Todd Gitlin, 'The Anti-political Populism of Cultural Studies', in M. Ferguson and P. Golding, eds, *Cultural Studies in Question* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), pp. 25–38; Ian Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

18. John Brenkman, 'Race Publics: Civil Illiberalism, or Race After Reagan', *Transition*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 1995), p. 7.

19. Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, 'Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Signification', *JAC*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2000), p. 741.

20. Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Institutions and Autonomy', in Peter Osborne, ed., *A Critical Sense* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 8.

21. Raymond Williams, *Communication* (Revised Edition) (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 15.

In spite of the urgency of the current historical moment, educators should avoid crude antitheoretical calls to action. More than ever, they need to appropriate scholarly and popular sources and use theory as a critical resource to name particular problems and make connections between the political and the cultural, to break what Bhabha has called 'the continuity and the consensus of common sense'.[22] As a resource, theory becomes important as a way of critically engaging and mapping the crucial relations among language, texts, everyday life and structures of power as part of a broader effort to understand the conditions, contexts and strategies of struggle that will lead to social transformation. I am suggesting that the tools of theory emerge out of the intersection of the past and present, and respond to and are shaped by the conditions at hand. Theory, in this instance, addresses the challenge of connecting the world of the symbolic, discursive, and representational to the social gravity and force of everyday issues rooted in material relations of power.

The overriding political project at issue here suggests that educators and others produce new theoretical tools (a new vocabulary and set of conceptual resources) for linking theory, critique, education and the discourse of possibility to creating the social conditions for the collective production of what Pierre Bourdieu calls realist utopias.[23] In part, such a project points to constructing both a new vocabulary for connecting what we read to how we engage in movements for social change, while recognizing that simply invoking the relationship between theory and practice, critique and social action is not enough. As John Brenkman points out, 'theory becomes closed circuit when it supposes it can understand social problems without contesting their manifestation in public life'.[24] It is also symptomatic of a kind of retreat from the uneven battles over values and beliefs characteristic of some versions of postmodern conceptions of the political. Any attempt to give new life to a substantive democratic politics must, in part, produce alternative narratives to those employed by the producers of official memory, and address what it means to make the pedagogical more political. In part this means engaging the issue of what kind of educational work is necessary within different types of public spaces to enable people to use their full intellectual resources and skills both to provide a profound critique of existing institutions and to enter into the public sphere in order to interrupt the operations of dominant power, and fully address what Bauman calls the 'hard currency of human suffering'.[25]

If emancipatory politics is to be equal to the challenge of neoliberal capitalism, educators need to theorize politics not as a science or set of objective conditions, but as a point of departure in specific and concrete situations. We need to rethink the very meaning of the political so that it can provide a sense of direction but no longer be used to provide complete answers. Instead, we should ask why and how particular social formations have a specific shape,

22. Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, 'Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha's Critical Literacy', *JAC*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1998), p. 11.
23. Pierre Bourdieu, 'For a Scholarship with Commitment', *Profession*, (2000), p. 43.
24. John Brenkman, 'Extreme Criticism', in J. Butler, J. Guillary and K. Thomas, eds, *What's Left of Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 130.
25. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 5.

come into being, and what it might mean to rethink such formations in terms of opening up new sites of struggles and movements. Politics in this sense offers a notion of the social that is open and provisional providing a conception of democracy that is never complete but constantly open to different understandings of the contingency of its decisions, mechanisms of exclusions and operations of power.[26] In the absence of such languages and the social formations and public spheres that make them operative, politics becomes narcissistic and reductionist and caters to the mood of widespread pessimism and the cathartic allure of spectacle or should I say the seductions of being clever. Emptied of its political content, public space increasingly becomes either a site of self-display—a favorite space for the public relations intellectual, speaking ever so softly on National Public Radio, or it functions as a site for the reclaiming of a form of social Darwinism represented most explicitly in reality-based television with its endless instinct for the weaknesses of others and its masochistic affirmation of ruthlessness and steroidal power. Escape, avoidance and narcissism are now coupled with the public display, if not celebration, of those individuals who define agency in terms of their survival skills rather than their commitment to dialogue, critical reflection, solidarity and relations that open up the promise of public engagement with important social issues. Reality TV embraces the arrogance of neoliberal power as it smiles back at us while it simultaneously legitimates downsizing and the ubiquitousness of the political economy of fear.

### Educated hope

Against an increasingly oppressive corporate based globalism, educators and other cultural workers need to resurrect a language of resistance and possibility, a language that embraces a militant utopianism while constantly being attentive to those forces that seek to turn such hope into a new slogan or punish and dismiss those who dare look beyond the horizon of the given. Hope, in this instance, is one of the preconditions for individual and social struggle, the ongoing practice of critical education in a wide variety of sites, and the mark of courage on the part of intellectuals in and out of the academy who use the resources of theory to address pressing social problems. Hope is also a referent for civic courage and its ability to mediate the memory of loss and the experience of injustice as part of a broader attempt to open up new locations of struggle, contest the workings of oppressive power and undermine various forms of domination.

The philosopher, Ernst Bloch, is instructive here. He argues that hope must be concrete, a spark that not only reaches out beyond the surrounding emptiness of privatization, but anticipates a better world in the future, a world that speaks to us by presenting tasks based on the challenges of the present time. For Bloch, utopianism becomes concrete when it links the possibility of the '*not yet*' with forms of political agency animated by a determined effort to engage critically

26. Simon Critchley, 'Ethics, Politics, and Radical Democracy—The History of a Disagreement', *Culture Machine*, available at www.culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/frm_fl.htm.

the past and present in order to address pressing social problems and realizable tasks.[27] Bloch believed that utopianism could not be removed from the world and was not 'something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is *not yet* in the sense of a possibility; that it could be there if we could only do something for it'.[28] As a discourse of critique and social transformation, utopianism in Bloch's view is characterized by a 'militant optimism', one that foregrounds the crucial relationship between critical education and political agency, on the one hand, and the concrete struggles needed, on the other hand, to give substance to the recognition that every present was incomplete. For theorists such as Bloch, utopian thinking was anticipatory not messianic, mobilizing rather than therapeutic. At best, utopian thinking, as Anson Rabinach argues 'points beyond the given while remaining within it'.[29] The longing for a more human society in this instance does not collapse into a retreat from the world but emerges out of critical and practical engagements with present behaviors, institutional formations and everyday practices. Hope in this context does not ignore the worse dimensions of human suffering, exploitation and social relations; on the contrary, it acknowledges the need to sustain the 'capacity to see the worst and offer more than that for our consideration'.[30] The great challenge to militant utopianism, with its hope of keeping critical thought alive, rests in an emerging consensus among a wide range of political factions that neo-liberal democracy is the best we can do. The impoverishment of intellectuals, with their increasing irrelevance, if not growing refusal, to speak of addressing, if not ending, human suffering is now matched by the poverty of a social order that cannot conceive of any alternative to itself.

Feeding into the increasingly dominant view that society cannot be fundamentally improved outside of market forces, neoliberalism strips utopianism of its possibilities for social critique and democratic engagement. By doing so it undermines the need to reclaim utopian thinking as both a discourse of human rights and a moral referent for dismantling and transforming dominant structures of wealth and power.[31] Moreover, an anti-utopianism of both the right and left can be found in those views that reduce utopian thinking to state terrorism and progressive visionaries to unrealistic, if not dangerous, ideologues. The alternative

27. Bloch's great contribution in English on the subject of utopianism can be found in his three volume work, Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vols I–III (trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986[1959]).
28. Ernst Bloch, 'Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopia Longing', in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 3.
29. Anson Rabinach, 'Ernst Bloch's *Heritage of Our Times* and the Theory of Fascism', *New German Critique*, Vol. 11 (Spring 1977), p. 11.
30. Thomas L. Dunn, 'Political Theory for Losers', in Jason A. Frank and John Tambornino, eds, *Vocations of Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 160.
31. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, 'Transcending Pessimism: Rekindling Socialist Imagination', in Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, eds, *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), pp. 1–29; David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

offered here is what Russell Jacoby calls, a 'convenient cynicism',[32] a belief that human suffering, hardship and massive inequalities in all areas of life are simply inherent in human nature and an irreversible part of the social condition. Or in its liberal version, the belief that 'America's best defense against utopian as terrorism is preserving democracy as it currently exist[s] in the world'[33]—a view largely shared by the likes of people such as Lynne Cheney, John Ashcroft and Norman Podhoretz. Within this discourse, hope is foreclosed, politics becomes militarized and resistance is privatized, aestheticized, or degenerates into all forms of hyper-commercialized escapism. Against a militant and radically democratic utopianism, the equation of terrorism and utopianism appears deeply cynical. Neoliberalism not only appears flat, it also offers up an artificially conditioned optimism—operating at full capacity in the pages of *Fast Company*, *Wired Magazine*, *The World Street Journal* and *Forbes* as well as in the relentless entrepreneurial hype of figures such as George Gilder, Tom Peters and the Nike and Microsoft revolutionaries—in which it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine a life beyond the existing parameters of market pleasures, mail-order catalogues, shopping malls and Disneyland.[34] The profound anti-utopianism that is spurred on by neoliberalism and its myth of the citizen as consumer, markets as sovereign entities and its collapse of the distinction between both market liberties and civic liberties, on the one hand and a market economy and a market society, on the other, not only commodifies a critical notion of political agency, it also undermines the importance of multiple democratic public spheres.

Against the dystopian hope of neoliberalism, I want to argue for the necessity of educated hope as a crucial component of a radically charged politics 'grounded in broad-based civic participation and popular decision making'.[35] Educated hope as a form of oppositional utopianism makes visible the necessity for progressives and other critical intellectuals to be attentive to the ways in which institutional and symbolic power are tangled up with everyday experience. Any politics of hope must tap into individual experiences while at the same time linking individual responsibility with a progressive sense of social agency. Politics and pedagogy alike spring 'from real situations and from what we can say and do in these situations'.[36] At its best, hope translates into civic courage as a political and pedagogical practice that begins when one's life can no longer be taken for granted. In doing so, it makes concrete the possibility for transforming hope and politics into an ethical space and public act that confronts the flow of everyday experience and the weight of social suffering with the force of individual and collective resistance and the unending project of democratic social transformation. Emphasizing politics as a pedagogical practice and performative act,

32.  Russell Jacoby, 'A Brave New World', *Harper's Magazine* (December 2000), p. 80.
33.  Norman Podhoretz cited in Ellen Willis, 'Buy American', *Dissent* (Fall, 2000), p. 110.
34.  For a critique of entrepreneurial populism of this diverse group, see Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
35.  Carl Boggs, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), p. 7.
36.  Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 96.

educated hope accentuates that notion that politics is played out not only on the terrain of imagination and desire, but is also grounded in relations of power mediated through the outcome of situated struggles dedicated to creating the conditions and capacities for people to become critically engaged political agents.

Combining the discourse of critique and hope is crucial to affirm that critical activity offers the possibility for social change, one that views democracy as a project and task, as an ideal type that is never finalized and has a powerful adversary in the social realities it is meant to change. Post-colonial theorist, Samir Amin, echoes this call by arguing that educators should consider addressing the project of a more realized democracy as part of an ongoing process of democratization. According to Amin, democratization 'stresses the dynamic aspect of a still-unfinished process' while rejecting notions of democracy that are given a definitive formula.[37] An oppositional cultural politics can take many forms, but given the current assault on democratic public spheres, it seems imperative that progressives revitalise the struggles over social citizenship, particularly those struggles aimed at expanding liberal freedoms, the equality of resources and those forms of collective insurance that provide a safety net for individual incapacities and misfortunes. Simultaneously, any viable cultural politics must address the necessity to develop collective movements that can challenge the subordination of social needs to the dictates of commercialism and capital.

Central to such a politics would be a critical public pedagogy that attempts to make visible alternative models of radical democratic relations in a wide variety of sites. These spaces can make the pedagogical more political by raising fundamental questions such as: what is the relationship between social justice and the distribution of public resources and goods? What are the conditions, knowledge and skills that are a prerequisite for political agency and social change? At the very least, such a project involves understanding and critically engaging dominant public transcripts and values within a broader set of historical and institutional contexts. Unfortunately, many educators have failed to take seriously Antonio Gramsci's insight that '[e]very relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship'—with its implication that education as a cultural pedagogical practice takes place across multiple sites as it signals how, within diverse contexts, education makes us both subjects of and subject to relations of power.[38] In what follows, I want to conclude by commenting on what it would mean to make the pedagogical more political as part of a broader effort to reclaim the radically democratic role of public and higher education, and the implication of addressing educators as critical public intellectuals.

## Public intellectuals and higher education

In opposition to the corporatizing of schooling, educators need to define public and higher education as a resource vital to the promise and realization of demo-

37. Samin Amin, 'Imperialization and Globalization', *Monthly Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (June 2001), p. 12.
38. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Press, 1971), p. 350.

cratic life. Such a task, in part, points to the need for academics, students, parents, social activists, labor organizers and artists to join together and oppose the transformation of higher education into commercial spheres, to resist what Bill Readings has called a consumer-oriented, corporate university more concerned about accounting than accountability.[39] As Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, schools are one of the few public spaces left where students can learn the 'skills for citizen participation and effective political action. And where there are no [such] institutions, there is no "citizenship" either'.[40] Higher education may be one of the few sites left in which students can learn about the limits of commercial values, address what it means to learn the skills of social citizenship, and work to deepen and expand the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life. I think Toni Morrison is right in arguing that '—If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or menage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us'.[41] Defending higher education as a vital public sphere is necessary to develop and nourish the proper mediation between civil society and corporate power, between identities founded on democratic principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive, self-interested individualism that celebrate selfishness, profit making and greed. This view suggests that higher education be defended through intellectual work that self-consciously recalls the tension between the democratic imperatives or possibilities of public institutions and their everyday realization within a society dominated by market principles. Education is not training, and learning at its best is connected to the imperatives of social responsibility while recognizing that political agency does not reduce the citizen to a mere consumer.

I believe that academics and others bear an enormous responsibility in opposing neoliberalism by bringing democratic political culture back to life. Part of this challenge suggests that as educators we begin to reassess what it means to define and change the conditions under which full and part-time educators work in order for them to gain a sense of dignity and power. A radical pedagogy as a form of resistance might, in part, be premised on the assumption that educators vigorously resist any attempt on the part of liberals and conservatives to reduce them to either the role of technicians or multinational operatives. Equally important, such questions need to be addressed as part of a broader concern for renewing the struggle for social justice and democracy. Such a struggle demands, as the writer, Arunhdhati Roy, points out, that as intellectuals we ask ourselves some very 'uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our "democratic institutions", the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community'.[42]

39. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
40. Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 170.
41. Toni Morrison, 'How Can Values Be Taught in the University?', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, (Spring 2001), p. 278.
42. Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001), p. 3.

Edward Said argues that the public intellectual must function within institutions, in part, as an exile, as someone whose 'place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations'.[43] In this perspective, the educator as public intellectual becomes responsible for linking the diverse experiences that produce knowledge, identities and social values in the university to the quality of moral and political life in the wider society; and he or she does so by entering into public conversations unafraid of controversy or of taking a critical stand.

The issue is not whether public or higher education has become contaminated with politics, it is more importantly about recognizing that education is already a space of politics, power and authority. The crucial matter at stake is how to appropriate, invent, direct and control the multiple layers of power and politics that constitute both the institutional formation of education and the pedagogies that are often an outcome of deliberate struggles to put into place particular notions of knowledge, values and identity. As committed educators, we cannot eliminate politics, but we can work against a politics of certainty, a pedagogy of censorship and an institutional formation that closes down rather than opens up democratic relations. This requires that we work diligently to construct a politics without guarantees, one that perpetually questions itself as well as all those forms of knowledge, values and practices that appear beyond the process of interrogation, debate and deliberation. Against a pedagogy and politics of certainty, it is crucial for educators to develop pedagogical practices that problematize considerations of institutional location, mechanisms of transmission and effects.

Public intellectuals need to approach social issues mindful of the multiple connections and issues that tie humanity together; but they need to do so as border intellectuals moving within and across diverse sites of learning as part of an engaged and practical politics that recognizes the importance of 'asking questions, making distinctions, restoring to memory all those things that tend to be overlooked or walked past in the rush to collective judgment and action'.[44] If educators are to function as public intellectuals they need to provide the opportunities for students to learn that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what students say and do counts in their struggle to unlearn privileges, productively reconstruct their relations with others, and transform, when necessary, the world around them. More specifically, such educators need to argue for forms of pedagogy that close the gap between the university and everyday life.

At one level, this suggests pedagogical practices that affirm and critically enrich the meaning, language and knowledge that students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives. Unfortunately, the political, ethical and social significance of the role that popular culture plays as the primary pedagogical medium for young people remains largely unexamined. Educators need to challenge the assumption that popular cultural texts cannot be as profoundly important as traditional sources of learning in teaching about important issues

43. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), p. 11.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

framed through, for example, the social lens of poverty, racial conflict and gender discrimination. This is not a matter of pitting popular culture against traditional curricular sources. More importantly, it is a matter of using both in a mutually informative way, always mindful of how these spheres of knowledge might be used to teach students how to be skilled citizens, whether that means learning how to use the freedom of information act, knowing their constitutional rights, build coalitions, write policy papers, learning the tools of democracy, analysing social problems, or learning how to make a difference in one's life through individual and social engagements.

At the risk of being too bold, I have suggested that educators need to become provocateurs; they need to take a stand while refusing to be involved in either a cynical relativism or doctrinaire politics. Central to intellectual life is the pedagogical and political imperative that academics engage in rigorous social criticism while becoming a stubborn force for challenging false prophets, deflating the claims of triumphalism and critically engaging all those social relations that promote material and symbolic violence. At the same time, such intellectuals must be deeply critical of their own authority and how it structures classroom relations and cultural practices. In this way, the authority they legitimate in the classroom (as well as in other public spheres) would become both an object of self-critique and a critical referent for expressing a more 'fundamental dispute with authority itself'.[45] This does not mean that teachers should abandon authority or simply equate all forms of authority with the practice of domination, as some radical educators have suggested. On the contrary, authority in the sense I am describing it here follows Antonio Gramsci in calling upon educators to assert authority in the service of encouraging students to think beyond the conventions of common sense, to expand the horizons of what they know and to discover their own sense of political agency and what it means to appropriate education as a critical function. Crucial here is the recognition that while the teacher 'is an actor on the social and political stage, the educator's task is to encourage human agency, not mold it in the manner of Pygmalion'.[46] As Edward Said mentions in a different context, 'the role of the intellectual is not to consolidate authority, but to understand, interpret, and question it: this is another version of speaking truth to power'.[47]

There is a lot of talk among social theorists in the USA about the death of politics and the inability of human beings to imagine a more equitable and just world in order to make it better. I would hope that of all groups, educators would be the most vocal and militant in challenging this assumption by reclaiming the university's subversive role by combining critiques of dominant discourses and the institutional formations that support and reproduce them with the goal of limiting

45. R. Radhakrishnan, 'Canonicity and Theory: Toward a Poststructuralist Pedagogy', in Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, eds, *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 112–135.
46. Stanley Aronowitz, 'Introduction', in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), pp. 10–11.
47. Edward Said, *Reflections On Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 503.

human suffering while at the same time attempting to create the concrete economic, political, social and pedagogical conditions necessary for an inclusive and substantive democracy. Critical scholarship is crucial to such a task but it is not enough. Individual and social agency becomes meaningful as part of the willingness to imagine otherwise in order to act otherwise. Knowledge can be used for amplifying human freedom and promoting social justice, and not for simply creating profits or future careers. Intellectuals need to take a position and as Edward Said argues, they have an obligation to 'remind audiences of the moral questions that may be hidden in the clamour and din of … public debates … and deflate the claims of [neoliberal] triumphalism'.[48] Combining theoretical rigor with social relevance may be risky politically and pedagogically, but the promise of a substantive democracy far outweighs the security and benefits that accompany a retreat into academic irrelevance and the safe haven of a no-risk professionalism that requires, as Paul Sabin observes, 'an isolation from society and vows of political chastity'.[49]

I realize this sounds a bit too utopian, but we have few choices if we are going to fight for a future that does not endlessly repeat the present. Unfortunately, it is not a matter of exaggeration to suggest that we live in a culture in which the unhappy consciousness of powerlessness feeds into a collective cynicism that has become a powerful fixture of everyday life, but rather than make despair convincing, I think it is all the more crucial to take seriously Meghan Morris's argument that 'Things are too urgent now to be giving up on our imagination'.[50] Or, more specifically to take up the challenge of Derrida's recent provocation that 'We must do and think the impossible. If only the possible happened, nothing more would happen. If I only I did what I can do, I wouldn't do anything.'[51]

48. *Ibid.*, p. 504.
49. Paul Sabin, 'Academe Subverts Young Scholars' Civic Orientation', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 February 2002, p. B24.
50. Cited in Lawrence Grossberg, 'Why Does Neo-Liberalism Hate Kids? The War on Youth and the Culture of Politics', *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2001), p. 114.
51. Jacques Derrida, 'No One is Innocent: A Discussion with Jacques About Philosophy in the Face of Terror', *The Information Technology, War and Peace Project*, p. 2 available online at: http://www.watsoninstitute.org/infopeace/911/derrida_innocence.html.