Critical Public Pedagogy and the Paidagogos
Exploring the Normative and Political Challenges of Radical Democracy

PATRICK A. ROBERTS AND DAVID J. STEINER

This chapter offers a brief look at the normative and political challenges of defining critical public pedagogy and its primary aim, the achievement of an inclusive, participatory, “radical” democracy (Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 2005). Critical public pedagogy is a complex of both moral and political meanings. Its goals and methods are defined by social values that must be expressed and debated within political frameworks that maximize deliberative participation. As Gutmann (1987) notes, moral ideals are inherently divergent in a democratic society. Hence, there is a need for a political framework that scaffolds self-governance and provides guidance for resolving disagreements over moral values. Yet, these political frameworks themselves must remain open to critique and revision.

In what follows, we attempt to do three things. First, we surface the tensions related to articulating the normative and political boundaries around which critical public pedagogy’s goal of radical democracy is made meaningful. We wish to state here that our goal is not to reject the progressive, political project of critical public pedagogy, but rather to complicate its assumptions about its own purposes. Second, we briefly analyze two examples of public pedagogy that illustrate the normative and political tensions necessarily embedded in democracy. In the first example, we examine the challenge of locating democratic authority in the political ideal of reconciliation through a brief look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. In the second example, we examine the challenges of free speech and deliberation as practiced by two peace education organizations based in the United States and devoted to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Finally, we suggest that the liminal figure of paidagogos, the slave in ancient Greece charged with the supervision of children, offers a productive metaphor for thinking about the critical public pedagogue as a servant-leader who traverses the space between the normative sphere of subjective articulation and the political realm of institutional determinacy.

The Challenge of Radical Democracy

The discourse of public pedagogy is replete with qualification. Clearly, not just any pedagogy will do as a public pedagogy, nor will just any sense of the word public do as a modifier. As Jurgen Habermas (1991) has noted, the word public is burdened with a “syndrome of meanings” (p. 2).
Critical Public Pedagogy and the *Paidagogos* • 21

Accessibility, ownership, functionality, recognition—these are all frames of usage for public which often overlap. *Public domain*, for example, is a legal term referring to intellectual properties that are not owned by any individual or corporation. A public square might be public by virtue of its (theoretical) accessibility to all, all being the public, or by its dependence on public money for construction and upkeep. But who constitutes the public as opposed to a public? Furthermore, any sense of the word public is necessarily defined over and against definitions of private. There is no public without the private citizens who constitute it. Where are the boundaries that separate the public sphere from the private sphere, public space from private space?

Similar questions arise when we talk about the primary goal of critical public pedagogy, which we take to be radical democracy (Giroux, 2003, 2004, 2005). But what makes a democracy radical, and over and against what other conceptions of democracy is radical opposed? Should any political or social arrangements less than radical democracy even qualify as democratic? Is a democracy radical by virtue of the quality of public and civic life it promotes and sustains? Against what standard might such quality be measured? The scope of participation? But what kind of participation, and with what level of deliberative, critical agency?

As a call for “an expanded notion of the public, pedagogy, solidarity, and democratic struggle” (Giroux, 2003, p. 13), critical public pedagogy is broadly circumscribed by its normative goals of social transformation and progressive politics. These goals are opposed to the “corporate public pedagogy” of neoliberalism. Giroux (2004) identifies neoliberalism as the dominant ideological framework at the turn of the 21st century. It is defined by the application of capitalist free market principles to public and political life. Giroux notes that its “modalities” are “privatization, deregulation, and commercialization” (p. xv). Through a corporate public pedagogy, neoliberalism dis-empowers citizens to think of themselves as “autonomous political agents” (p. xv) and equates citizenship with consumerism. The aim of corporate public pedagogy is “free market democracy,” or what McLaren (2005) has called a “hollow democracy” that favors procedural, token participation in civic life over fully inclusive, critical participation (p. 6). It is to free market democracy that radical democracy is opposed.

Predicated as it is on fully inclusive and critically deliberative practices, a radical democracy is necessarily a pluralistic democracy that is characterized by competing agendas and differences of opinion. Indeed, in a radical democracy such differences are encouraged and empowered. A key definitional element of critical public pedagogy is the emphasis on the ethical, moral imperatives surrounding critical social agency. In discussing the work of Stuart Hall, Giroux (2000) notes, “Agency—the linking of capacities to the ability of people to intervene in and change social forms—offers hope and a site for new democratic relations, institutional formations, and identities” (p. 353). Critical public pedagogy broadens the pedagogical field to include the public terrain of culture, and thereby promotes autonomous political agency by expanding possibilities for critique, self-definition, and praxis. Radical democracy maximizes the realization of these possibilities.

Critical social agency pre-supposes political conflict, however, as people are empowered to come together individually and collectively to realize sometimes competing visions for what constitutes a life well lived and the ethical and moral parameters for organizing political, economic, and social relations. Democracy is both a moral and a political ideal. Its principles are based on moral and ethical beliefs, values, and assumptions that are subject to debate and deliberation. As we have noted, the normative ideals that compel individuals to act in the interest of certain aims will often be in conflict with the normative ideals of others. If one of the hallmarks of radical democracy is inclusive participation in the deliberations of what a just society should look like, as well as in the creation of institutions that ensure democratic values are preserved and perpetuated, then critical examination of *all* ethical and moral claims is inherent to the
definition. Thus, it is not simply enough to have normative ideals, but also to make political judgments about how to pursue particular courses of action, and how to arrange institutional and public space for the realization of these norms.

Democracy must be governed by some set of constraints that enable fully inclusive and rational deliberation to take place. Even radical democracy, in which fully autonomous political agents come together in public spaces to debate how to organize and move forward as a democratic society, requires the establishment of “rules of engagement.” In a radical democracy, those rules must be subject to constant critique and revision. For Gutmann (1987), the horizons of these rules of engagement are non-repression and nondiscrimination:

The principles of non-repression and nondiscrimination limit democratic authority in the name of democracy itself. A society is undemocratic—it cannot engage in conscious social reproduction—if it restricts rational deliberation or excludes some educable citizens from an adequate education. (p. 95)

Like Giroux (2000), Gutmann (1987) rejects a majoritarian view of democracy because it is clear that some majority-rule decisions in the present might have the effect of “restricting citizens’ capacity for deliberation in the future” (p. 96). Gutmann also rejects a “directed” view of democracy in which some political body regulates democratic decision-making in the interest of achieving what is right as measured by the “general will” (p. 96). Yet, although Gutmann’s criteria of non-repression and nondiscrimination offer important critical standards for qualifying the boundaries of democratic authority, these standards are themselves normative values subject to critical debate and revision.

In the following two sections, we offer two brief examples that illustrate the difficulty in locating democratic authority in normative ideals. The first example uses South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to illustrate how the political aims of reconciliation existed in tension with the normative value of justice. The second example is focused on the micro-level dynamics of two peace education organizations dedicated to dialoguing about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In this case, we examine the problem of privileging the normative value of free speech and deliberation over the complexities of public identity.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) represents a form of public pedagogy that seeks to reconcile political authority with moral pluralism in the interest of promoting democratic transition and societal reconciliation. Wilson (2001) characterizes the purpose of the TRC as “truth-telling about the apartheid past and the reconciliation of ‘the nation’” (p. xix). Established in 1995 as part of the new South African government’s Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the TRC was comprised of three committees. According to a pamphlet published and distributed by the South African Ministry of Justice (1995), the Committee on Human Rights Violations was charged with investigating and documenting “allegations and complaints of gross human rights violations” between March 1, 1960 and May 9, 1995 (p. 12). The Committee on Amnesty reviewed and heard public testimony on applications for amnesty for “acts associated with political objectives” (p. 14). The Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation of Victims was charged with gathering “evidence relating to the identity, fate and whereabouts of victims and the nature and extent of the harm suffered by them” in the interest of “restor[ing] the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them the opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are victims” (pp. 17–18).
The final report of the TRC, issued in 1998 (Villa-Vicencio & Verwoerd, 2000), stressed the public pedagogical nature of the proceedings. TRC chairman Desmond Tutu noted in the report’s forward that “the commission operated in the full glare of publicity” (South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998, Vol. 1, Chap. 1: item 3). Tutu also noted that more than 20,000 South Africans testified either through public hearings or in written statements (Vol. 1, Chap. 1: item 80). To be granted amnesty, “full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to such acts [of political violence]” had to be given in public testimony to the Committee on Amnesty (South African Ministry of Justice, 1995, p. 14). The Committee in certain cases could make an exception to the public testimony requirement. The names of persons granted amnesty were published in a government newspaper.

From its inception, the TRC had to balance the goal of reconciliation with the right of victims of political violence to seek justice rather than forgiveness (Gutmann & Thompson, 2000). As an institutional mechanism for regulating a democratic process, the TRC faced a difficult tradeoff between the political aim of reconciliation and the moral claim for justice. Gutmann and Thompson note:

The power of the TRC to grant amnesty to political leaders, security officials, and other individuals who confessed to committing political crimes during the apartheid regime was a political compromise between the advocates of total amnesty and the proponents of criminal prosecution. (p. 24)

However, this compromise marginalized legitimate demands for justice on the part of the victims of political crimes. Disagreements concerning “political morality” are part of the terrain of democratic societies. How a democratic society moves beyond those disagreements, however, is a marker of its democratic character. It is here at which Gutmann and Thompson offer their qualification of what deliberative democracy demands. They note, “At the core of deliberative democracy is the idea that citizens and officials must justify any demands for collective action by giving reasons that can be accepted by those who are bound by action” (p. 36). This idea is formalized as an “economy of moral disagreement,” and Gutmann and Thompson offer it as a guiding principle of deliberative democracy. The principle essentially “calls on citizens to justify their political positions by seeking a rationale that minimizes rejection of the positions they oppose” (p. 38). We suggest, however, that within a radical democracy, the principle of the economy of moral disagreement is counterproductive if it is not also accompanied by the critical examination of how identities are formed in relation to the publics of which they are a part. In the next section, we explore this added dimension by examining two peace education organizations, Seeds of Peace and Hands of Peace, which offer a different kind of public pedagogy in which the institutional structures are less clear than they are with the example of the TRC.

Sowing the Seeds of Peace between Palestinians and Israelis

While South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission operated in the context of a unified (legally speaking) constitutional state, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians offers no such legal framework. The TRC was charged with unifying a state already constituted by citizens. The dynamics of the Middle East are clearly different. Unlike in South Africa, where reconciliation was a driving force in the immediate post-apartheid era, Israelis and Palestinians are far from peace and in desperate need of reconciliation. For Israelis, May 1948 represents independence. For Palestinians, it represents al Naqba, the catastrophe.

Seeds of Peace is a peace education organization focused on promoting peaceful coexistence
by bringing young Palestinians and Israelis together for transformative curricular experiences. According to its website, Seeds of Peace is a leading organization in the pedagogical peace initiative. It was founded by journalist John Wallach and has grown from 46 Israeli, Palestinian, and Egyptian teenagers in 1993 to become a leadership network now encompassing nearly 4,000 young people from several major conflict regions including the Middle East. The goal of Seeds of Peace is to empower young people with the leadership skills required to advance reconciliation and coexistence. The Seeds of Peace program “allows participants to develop empathy, respect, and confidence as well as leadership, communication and negotiation skills—all critical components that will facilitate peaceful coexistence for the next generation” (Seeds of Peace, n.d., ¶ 4). In 2001, the United States State Department became a financial backer of the Seeds of Peace program. Seeds of Peace operates a summer camp in Maine where the children of conflicting societies live together, experience coexistence, and dialog with the enemy.

Although Seeds of Peace is the largest model for intergroup, coexistence education, numerous other programs exist. In Chicago, home to over 120,000 Palestinians and 250,000 Jews, there is a privately funded, church-based organization modeled after Seeds of Peace called Hands of Peace. The Hands of Peace website states that its mission is “to foster long term peaceful coexistence among Jewish-Israelis, Arab Israelis, and West Bank Palestinians by bringing young people from the Middle East together with American teens in an interfaith setting” (Hands of Peace, n.d., ¶ 1). Like Seeds of Peace, Hands of Peace promotes this mission through face-to-face encounters. The stated goals of Hands of Peace dialog sessions are to facilitate “honest, powerful connections in ways not possible for them at home, and to open their hearts and minds and challenge them to consider the world in ways they haven’t before” (Hands of Peace, n.d., ¶ 1). The Hands of Peace leadership also wants American teens to expand their knowledge by hearing of the experiences of their Middle Eastern peers. A specific goal of the program is to get participants “to listen and respectfully speak about their experiences and perspectives on the current conflict and the potential for peaceful coexistence in the region” (Hands of Peace, n.d., ¶ 3).

Despite slight organizational differences, Seeds of Peace and Hands of Peace share a core commitment to individual transformation and reciprocity through dialogue and encounter, and it is these commitments that we wish to examine. The emphasis on reciprocity and the power of dialogue and deliberation is theoretically consistent with Gutmann and Thompson’s (2000) principle, but this is only a necessary, not sufficient, normative value. For example, in the case of Hands of Peace, after a summer camp experience in Chicago, participants communicate through a moderated, online discussion group. Discussions take place under simple rules of engagement: no posting pictures, videos, or text that are not your own words, and pay heed to the adult moderators who watch the dialogue take place. The philosophy of the site is that it is better that dialogue continue than communication cease. During the conflict in the Gaza Strip in December and January 2008–2009, this mode of communication became a hotbed of verbal hostility and symbolic violence. The Hands of Peace public pedagogy of coexistence through reciprocity and dialog was lost in a flurry of name-calling, racial and ethnic epithets, and accusations of Nazi-like behavior and suicidal jihad.

In allowing such verbal violence to take place, the Hands of Peace moderators subordinated the democratic values of non-repression and nondiscrimination to the value of free speech. Additionally, without a carefully defined pedagogic focus on the multiple publics—religious, ethnic, regional, peer, socio-economic, etc.—that shape the identities of the participants, the Hands of Peace model of forced coexistence became an unhealthy and counterproductive public pedagogy that failed, in the words of Giroux (2000), “to acknowledge the pedagogical function of culture in constructing identities, mobilizing desires, and shaping moral values” (p. 349).
A pedagogical framework of dialog and free speech that fails to address simultaneously the complexities of multiple personal and public identities stands the risk of becoming repressive and/or discriminatory. According to Sacks (2002), “Peace can be agreed upon around the conference table; but unless it grows in ordinary hearts and minds, it does not last. It may not even begin” (p. 7). Here Sacks’ juxtaposition of the political and normative dimensions of peace building poses a challenge to Seeds of Peace and Hands of Peace, both of which try to facilitate the transformation of individual participants through the development of “empathy, respect, and confidence as well as leadership, communication and negotiation skills” (Seeds of Peace, n. d., ¶ 4) in a framework that reifies identity in a context of multiple and fluid publics. In light of the experiences in the Hands of Peace discussion groups, consideration of identity in critical public pedagogy must become a fundamental component of radical democracy. The work of critical public pedagogy can never be concerned only with qualifying through critique the parameters of democratic authority, whether that authority is located in an institutional body, as with the TRC, or in a democratic ideal, as with Hands of Peace. In the following section, we argue that the figure of paidagogos offers a performative metaphor for conceptualizing the dual focus of critical public pedagogy on democratic critique and public identities.

The Critical Public Pedagogue as Paidagogos

Learning does not wait for teachers; pedagogy, however, always already assumes the intentionality of a pedagogue. The contours of this intentionality lie in the performative nature of pedagogical practice. “Pedagogy,” writes Giroux (2004), “is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations” (p. 61). We think the notion of pedagogy as performative is evocative of the figure of paidagogos, which literally means “boy leader” and is the ancient Greek word from which the word pedagogy is etymologically derived. Our purpose in introducing the figure of paidagogos is to suggest it as a generative heuristic for conceptualizing the performative possibilities of the critical public pedagogue working toward radical democracy.

According to N. R. E. Fisher (1993), the paidagogos was a “domestic slave charged with attending and watching a free child” (p. 120). Elsewhere, Fisher notes that the paidagogos specifically would have supervised male children of wealthy citizens and was tasked with leading the boy from the home to the school and back again (p. 55). Charged with leading the child from the home to the school, the paidagogos operated within the public, cultural space of the agora. He (and the paidagogos would have been a male) served by leading.

Lugones (2006) notes that liminality can be “understood narrowly as a standing outside or away from power narrowly conceived” (p. 75). We suggest that as a slave, the paidagogos was a liminal figure whose identity as servant-leader was formed through an ambiguous relation to power in two ways. First, house slaves in ancient Greece embodied a paradox in that a sense of dependency as well as superiority was fostered in their young charges. “As free children grew up,” writes Fisher (1993), “they would be increasingly aware that they were expected to like, and to obey...people whom they were also expected to despise as wholly inferior and saw treated permanently like children” (p. 73). Second, as a slave, the figure of paidagogos embodied a contradiction in the classical origins of democracy. Dependent as it was on a system of chattel slavery, Athenian democracy was, to say the least, hardly radical. As Habermas (1991) notes, “The political order [of the Greek city-state]...rested on a patrimonial slave economy” (p. 3). Fisher (1993) believes that most Athenian citizens, including “ordinary peasant-citizens,” depended on
agricultural slave labor, and thus, “found it easier to engage in some political activity as a result of their slaves keeping the work going in their absence” (p. 46).1

While Athenian citizens enjoyed the prerogatives of a limited democratic political order dependent upon slave labor, they simultaneously feared the potential for subversive resistance. Slaves were both trusted and distrusted. They often were called upon to help defend the city against hostile, outside forces although they themselves represented an internal threat. Kyriatatas (1994) notes that “slaves were regarded as natural enemies of the political order” (p. 44). Further, “it is hardly likely that [slaves] would have spoken highly of the democracy. Athenians were obviously aware of this reality” (p. 47). Thus, the paidagogos derived his liminality from his position as both enabler and disabler of democratic authority and as the servant-leader who occupied the pedagogical space between the private world of the household and the institutional world of schooling.

Our suggestion that the figure of paidagogos can serve as a generative heuristic for thinking about the performative work of critical public pedagogy recalls Peter McLaren’s (1986) “liminal servant,” the name he uses to describe teachers committed to a “liberatory pedagogy” in schools (p. 112). The liminal servant occupies an ambiguous space both within and without the rituals and meaning systems that structure schooling (p. 112). McLaren writes:

The liminal servant is both a convener of customs and a cultural provocateur.... The liminal servant, as the name suggests, is able to bring dimensions of liminality to the classroom setting where obligations that go with one’s social status and immediate role are held temporarily in abeyance. (p. 133)

We suggest that the paidagogos is to the critical public pedagogue what the liminal servant is to the critical classroom teacher. With all of its attendant cultural practices, the contemporary, postmodern agora, as it were, represents the space of subversive possibility existing beyond the formalized and determinate structures of home and school. This is the space of critical public pedagogy, where almost by definition, the critical public pedagogue both serves and leads as a source of social, cultural, and political critique. Her pedagogical performances “speak truth” (Said, 1996) to the power of free market democracy to structure identity in limited, oppressive ways.

In performing the role of paidagogos, the critical public pedagogue foregrounds two vital responsibilities: (a) To critique through her role as enabler/disabler the political parameters of democratic authority as these are established, of necessity, to maximize participation and inclusion in the public deliberation of normative values; and (b) To promote through her role as servant-leader subjective re-articulation (reflection on one’s identity in relation to “publics”) in the interest of developing critical social agency oriented to the public good. The critical public pedagogue recognizes that critical social agency is developed within those cultural spaces that connect the private sphere of self-understanding to the institutional world of politics.

Conclusion

We have offered in the most preliminary of ways possible avenues of thought on critical public pedagogy that explore some of the tensions embedded in the discourse surrounding it. We have raised questions associated with qualifying the aims of critical public pedagogy, and we have done so by pointing to the struggles associated with reconciling the normative claims of radical democracy with the institutional requirements of its political realization. We used the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and two peace education programs devoted to
the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Seeds of Peace and Hands of Peace, as examples to illuminate some of these tensions. Finally, we suggested that the figure of paidagogos offers a productive metaphor for thinking about the performative work of the critical public pedagogue in pursuing radical democracy. She is the embodied expression of the social, cultural, and political contradictions that compel the work of critical public pedagogy. Her presence keeps the hopes for radical democracy alive, for she occupies the in-between, cultural realms of subversive possibility that connect and complicate the institutional spaces of democratic authority and the subjective, personal spaces of moral choice and commitment.

Notes
1. The same can be said, of course, of democracy in the United States.

References