Part V

Neoliberalism, Fear, and the Control State
Cæsura || iRaq || forkscrew

10,000 Iraqis killed. 773 US soldiers dead.

iRaq, image by forkscrew
iRaq Poster Series Artist Statement

The iRaq poster is about freedom: a freedom more real, active, dialogic, and comprehensive than the freedom currently being sold in the iPod campaign.

The iRaq poster is, even more so, a sign of a freedom far more genuine than the freedom the American military is supposedly granting to the Iraqi people through what is perhaps the most misguided and ungratified military invasion in recent history.

It’s about questioning everything. It’s about retaking the field of political discourse, six square feet at a time. It’s about refusing to let the sluts in the military-industrial complex and the sluts in the halls of advertising power set the terms of debate for a world full of people whose opinions are more diverse, and more revolutionarily diverse, than any political slogan or cookie-cutter image can express.

It’s about two-feet by three-feet of freedom. Download it. Propagate it. Get involved. And then do something else all your own. We don’t give a fuck.
Neoliberalism as Public Pedagogy

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Our age is the time of “individual utopias,” of utopias privatized, and so it comes naturally (as well as being a fashionable thing to do) to deride and ridicule such projects which imply a revision of the options which are collectively put at the disposal of individuals.

The ascendancy of neoliberal corporate culture into every aspect of American life both consolidates economic power in the hands of the few and aggressively attempts to break the power of unions, decouple income from productivity, subordinate the needs of society to the market, and deem public services and goods an unconscionable luxury. But it does more. It thrives on a culture of cynicism, insecurity, and despair. Conscripts in a relentless campaign for personal responsibility, Americans are now convinced that they have little to hope for—and gain from—the government, nonprofit public spheres, democratic associations, public and higher education, and other nongovernmental social forces. With few exceptions, the project of democratizing public goods has fallen into disrepute in the popular imagination as the logic of the market undermines the most basic social solidarities. The consequences include not only a weakened social state but a growing sense of insecurity, cynicism, and political retreat on the part of the general public. The incessant calls for self-reliance that now dominate public discourse betray a hollowed-out and refigured state that neither provides adequate safety nets for its populace, especially those who are young, poor, or marginalized, nor gives any indication that it will serve the interests of its citizens in spite of constitutional guarantees. As Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis argue, “The nation-state lives chiefly as a representative power [though it] also has some purchase on maintaining a degree of ideological hegemony over...‘the multitude.’” In short, private interests trump social needs, and economic growth becomes more important than social justice. The capitulation of labor unions and traditional working-class parties to neoliberal policies is matched by the ongoing dismantling of the welfare state. Within neoliberalism’s market-driven discourse, corporate power marks the space of a new kind of public pedagogy, one in which the production, dissemination, and circulation of ideas emerges from the educational force of the larger culture. Public pedagogy in this sense refers to a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain. The culture of corporate public pedagogy largely cancels out or devalues gender, class-specific, and racial injustices of the existing social order within narrow economic relations. Corporate public pedagogy has become an all-encompassing cultural horizon for producing market identities, values, and practices.
Under neoliberalism, dominant public pedagogy with its narrow and imposed schemes of classification and limited modes of identification uses the educational force of the culture to negate the basic conditions for critical agency. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, political action is only “possible because agents, who are part of the social world, have knowledge of this world and because one can act on the social world by acting on their knowledge of this world.”

Politics often begins when it becomes possible to make power visible, to challenge the ideological circuitry of hegemonic knowledge, and to recognize that “political subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world.” But another element of politics focuses on where politics happens, how proliferating sites of pedagogy bring into being new forms of resistance, raise new questions, and necessitate alternative visions regarding autonomy and the possibility of democracy itself.

What is crucial to recognize in the work of theorists such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu, Noam Chomsky, Robert McChesney, and others is that neoliberalism is more than an economic theory: It also constitutes the conditions for a radically refi gured cultural politics. That is, it provides, to use Raymond Williams’ term, a new mode of “permanent education” in which dominant sites of pedagogy engage in diverse forms of pedagogical address to put into play a limited range of identities, ideologies, and subject positions that both reinforce neoliberal social relations and undermine the possibility for democratic politics. The economist William Greider goes so far as to argue that the diverse advocates of neoliberalism currently in control of the American government want to “roll back the twentieth century literally” by establishing the priority of private institutions and market identities, values, and relationships as the organizing principles of public life. This is a discourse that wants to squeeze out ambiguity from public space, to dismantle the social provisions and guarantees provided by the welfare state, and to eliminate democratic politics by making the notion of the social impossible to imagine beyond the isolated consumer and the logic of the market.

The ideological essence of this new public pedagogy is well expressed by Grover Norquist, the president of the Americans for Tax Reform and arguably Washington’s leading right-wing strategist, who has been quoted as saying, “My goal is to cut government in half in twenty-fi ve years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.”

These new sites of public pedagogy that have become the organizing force of neoliberal ideology are not restricted to schools, blackboards, and test taking. Nor do they incorporate the limited forms of address found in schools. Such sites operate within a wide variety of social institutions and formats including sports and entertainment media, cable television networks, churches, and channels of elite and popular culture such as advertising. Profound transformations have taken place in the public sphere, producing new sites of pedagogy marked by a distinctive confluence of new digital and media technologies, growing concentrations of corporate power, and unparalleled meaning-producing capacities. Unlike traditional forms of pedagogy, modes of pedagogical address are now mediated through unprecedented electronic technologies that include high-speed computers, new types of digitized film, and the Internet. The result is a public pedagogy that plays a decisive role in producing a diverse cultural sphere that gives new meaning to education as a political force. What is surprising about the cultural politics of neoliberalism is that cultural studies theorists have either ignored or largely underestimated the symbolic and pedagogical dimensions of the struggle that neoliberal corporate power has put into place for the last thirty years, particularly under the ruthless administration of George W. Bush.
Making the Pedagogical More Political

The need for permanent education, in our changing society, will be met in one way or another. It is now on the whole being met, though with many valuable exceptions and efforts against the tide, by an integration of this teaching with the priorities and interests of a capitalist society, and of a capitalist society, moreover, which necessarily retains as its central principle the idea of a few governing, communicating with and teaching the many.9

At this point in American history, neoliberal capitalism is not simply too overpowering; on the contrary, “democracy is too weak.”10 Hence the increasing influence of money over politics, the increasing domination of public concerns by corporate interests, and the growing tyranny of unchecked corporate power and avarice. Culture combines with politics to turn struggles over power into entertainment, as occurred in California when Governor Davis was recalled and Arnold Schwarzenegger emerged as the new occupant in the governor’s office. But more importantly, under neoliberalism, pedagogy has become thoroughly politicized in reactionary terms as it constructs knowledge, values, and identities through a dominant media that has become a handmaiden of corporate power. For instance, soon after the invasion of Iraq, the New York Times released a survey indicating that 42 percent of the American public believed that Saddam Hussein was directly responsible for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. CBS, too, released a news poll indicating that 55 percent of the public believed that Saddam Hussein directly supported the terrorist organization al Qaeda. A majority of Americans also believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, was about to build a nuclear bomb, and would unleash it eventually on an unsuspecting American public. None of these claims had any basis in fact, since no evidence existed even to remotely confirm their validity. Of course, the aforementioned opinions held by a substantial number of Americans did not simply fall from the sky; they were ardently legitimated by former President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Colin Powell, and Condoleeza Rice, while daily reproduced uncritically in all of the dominant media. These misrepresentations and strategic distortions circulated in the dominant press either with uncritical, jingoistic enthusiasm, as in the case of the Fox News Channel, or through the dominant media’s refusal to challenge such claims—both positions, of course, in opposition to foreign news sources, such as the BBC, that repeatedly challenged such assertions. Such deceptions are never innocent and in this case appear to have been shamelessly used by the Bush administration to muster support for the Iraq invasion and for an ideologically driven agenda “that overwhelmingly favors the president’s wealthy supporters and is driving the federal government toward a long-term fiscal catastrophe.”11

While not downplaying the seriousness of government deception, I believe there is another issue underlying these events in which the most important casualty is not simply the integrity of the Bush administration but democracy itself. One of the central legacies of modern democracy—with its roots in the Enlightenment classical liberal tradition, and most evident in the twentieth century in works as diverse as those of W. E. B. DuBois, Raymond Williams, Cornelius Castoriadis, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire, among others—is the important recognition that a substantive democracy cannot exist without educated citizens. For some more conservative thinkers, the fear of democracy itself translated into an attack on a truly public and accessible education for all citizens. For others such as the progressive Walter Lippman, who wrote extensively on democracy in the 1920s, it meant creating two modes of education: one for the elite who would rule the country and be the true participants in the democratic process, and the other for the masses whose education would train them to be spectators rather than
participants in shaping democratic public life. Du Bois recognized that such a bifurcation of educational opportunity was increasingly becoming a matter of common sense, but he rejected it outright. Similarly in opposition to the enemies of democracy and the elitists, radical social critics such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Paulo Freire, and Stuart Hall believed that education for a democratic citizenry was an essential condition of equality and social justice and had to be provided through public, higher, popular, and adult education.

While Castoriadis and others were right about linking education and democracy, they had no way, in their time, of recognizing that the larger culture would extend, if not supersede, institutionalized education as the most important educational force in the developed societies. In fact, education and pedagogy have been synonymous with schooling in the public mind. Challenging such a recognition does not invalidate the importance of formal education to democracy, but it does require a critical understanding of how the work of education takes place in a range of other spheres such as advertising, television, film, the Internet, video games, and the popular press. Rather than invalidate the importance of schooling, it extends the sites of pedagogy and in doing so broadens and deepens the meaning of cultural pedagogy. The concept of public pedagogy also underscores the central importance of formal spheres of learning that unlike their popular counterparts—driven largely by commercial interests that more often miseducate the public—must provide citizens with the critical capacities, modes of literacies, knowledge, and skills that enable them both to read the world critically and to participate in shaping and governing it. Pedagogy at the popular level must now be a central concern of formal schooling itself. My point is not that public and higher education are free from corporate influence and dominant ideologies but, rather, that such models of education, at best, provide the spaces and conditions for prioritizing civic values over commercial interests (i.e., they self-consciously educate future citizens capable of participating in and reproducing a democratic society). In spite of its present embattled status and contradictory roles, institutional schooling remains uniquely placed to prepare students to both understand and influence the larger educational forces that shape their lives. Such institutions, by virtue of their privileged position and dedication to freedom and democracy, also have an obligation to draw upon those traditions and resources capable of providing a critical and humanistic education to all students in order to prepare them for a world in which information and power have taken on new and influential dimensions. One entry into this challenge is to address the contributions to such issues that cultural studies and critical pedagogy have made in the last few decades, particularly with respect to how the relationship between culture and power constitutes a new site of both politics and pedagogy.

**Cultural Studies and the Question of Pedagogy**

City walls, books, spectacles, events educate—yet now they mostly miseducate their residents. Compare the lessons, taken by the citizens of Athens (women and slaves included), during the performances of Greek tragedies with the kind of knowledge which is today consumed by the spectator of *Dynasty* or *Perdue de vue*.13

My own interest in cultural studies emerges out of an ongoing project to theorize the regulatory and emancipatory relationship among culture, power, and politics as expressed through the dynamics of what can be called public pedagogy. This project concerns, in part, the diverse ways in which culture functions as a contested sphere in the production, distribution, and regulation of power and how and where it operates both symbolically and institutionally as an educational, political, and economic force. Drawing upon a long tradition in cultural studies work, culture is viewed as constitutive and political, not only reflecting larger forces, but also constructing them;
in short, culture not only mediates history, it shapes it. In this formulation, power is a central element of culture just as culture is a crucial element of power. As Bauman observes, “Culture is a permanent revolution of sorts. To say ‘culture’ is to make another attempt to account for the fact that the human world (the world moulded by the humans and the world which moulds humans) is perpetually, unavoidably—and unremediably noch nicht geworden (not-yet-accomplished), as Ernst Bloch beautifully put it.”

I am suggesting that culture is a crucial terrain for theorizing and realizing the political as an articulation and intervention into the social, a space in which politics is pluralized, recognized as contingent, and open to many formations. But culture is also a crucial sphere for articulating the dialectical and mutually constitutive dynamics between the global political circuits that now frame material relations of power and a cultural politics in which matters of representation and meaning shape and offer concrete examples of how politics is expressed, lived, and experienced through the modalities of daily existence. Culture, in this instance, is the ground of both contestation and accommodations, and it is increasingly characterized by the rise of mega-corporations and new technologies that are transforming radically the traditional spheres of economy, industry, society, and everyday life. I am referring not only to the development of new information technologies but also to the enormous concentration of ownership and power among a limited number of corporations that now control diverse media technologies and markets. Culture plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, images, and desiring maps that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think about themselves and their relationship to others. From this perspective, culture is the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns. It is also the sphere in which the translating and pedagogical possibilities of culture are under assault, particularly as the forces of neoliberalism dissolve public issues into utterly privatized and individualistic concerns.

Against the neoliberal attack on all things social, culture must be defended as the site where exchange and dialogue become crucial affirmations of a democratically configured space of the social in which the political is actually taken up and lived out through a variety of intimate relations and social formations. Far from being exclusively about matters of representation and texts, culture becomes a site, event, and performance in which identities and modes of agency are configured through the mutually determined forces of thought and action, body and mind, and time and space. Culture is the public space where common matters, shared solidarities, and public engagements provide the fundamental elements of democracy. Culture is also the pedagogical and political ground on which communities of struggle and a global public sphere can be imagined as a condition of democratic possibilities. Culture offers a common space in which to address the radical demands of a pedagogy that allows critical discourse to confront the inequities of power and promote the possibilities of shared dialogue and democratic transformation. Culture affirms the social as a fundamentally political space just as free market ideologies attempt within the current historical moment to deny its relevance and its centrality as a political necessity. And culture’s urgency, as Nick Couldry observes, resides in its possibilities for linking politics to matters of individual and social agency as they are lived out in particular democratic spheres, institutional forms, and communities in process. He writes:

For what is urgent now is not defending the full range of cultural production and consumption from elitist judgement but defending the possibility of any shared site for an emergent democratic politics. The contemporary mission of cultural studies, if it has one, lies not with the study of “culture” (already a cliché of management and marketing manuals), but with the fate of a “common culture,” and its contemporary deformations.
Central to any feasible notion of cultural studies is the primacy of culture and power, organized through an understanding of how the political becomes pedagogical, particularly in terms of how private issues are connected to larger social conditions and collective forces—that is, how the very processes of learning constitute the political mechanisms through which identities are shaped, desires mobilized, and experiences take on form and meaning within those collective conditions and larger forces that constitute the realm of the social. In this context, pedagogy is no longer restricted to what goes on in schools, but becomes a defining principle of a wide-ranging set of cultural apparatuses engaged in what Raymond Williams has called “permanent education.” Williams rightfully believed that education in the broadest sense plays a central role in any viable form of cultural politics. He writes:

What [permanent education] valuably stresses is the educational force of our whole social and cultural experience. It is therefore concerned, not only with continuing education, of a formal or informal kind, but with what the whole environment, its institutions and relationships, actively and profoundly teaches…. [Permanent education also refers to] the field in which our ideas of the world, of ourselves and of our possibilities, are most widely and often most powerfully formed and disseminated. To work for the recovery of control in this field is then, under any pressures, a priority.20

Williams argued that any workable notion of critical politics would have to pay closer “attention to the complex ways in which individuals are formed by the institutions to which they belong, and in which, by reaction, the institutions took on the color of individuals thus formed.”21 Williams also foregrounded the crucial political question of how agency unfolds within a variety of cultural spaces structured by unequal relations of power.22 He was particularly concerned about the connections between pedagogy and political agency, especially in light of the emergence of a range of new technologies that greatly proliferated the amount of information available to people while at the same time constricting the substance and ways in which such meanings entered the public domain. The realm of culture for Williams took on a new role in the latter part of the twentieth century, inasmuch as the actuality of economic power and its attendant networks of pedagogical control now exercised more influence than ever before in shaping how identities were produced and desires mobilized, as well as how everyday life acquired the force of common sense.23 Williams clearly understood that making the political more pedagogical meant recognizing that where and how the psyche locates itself in public discourse, visions, and passions provides the groundwork for agents to enunciate, act, and reflect on themselves and their relations to others and the wider social order.

Unfortunately, Williams’ emphasis on making the pedagogical more political has not occupied a central place in the work of most cultural studies theorists. Pedagogy in most cultural studies accounts is either limited to the realm of schooling, dismissed as a discipline with very little academic cultural capital, or rendered reactionary through the claim that it simply accommodates the paralyzing grip of governmental institutions that normalize all pedagogical practices. Within this discourse, pedagogy largely functions to both normalize relations of power and overemphasize agency at the expense of institutional pressures, embracing what Tony Bennett calls “all agency and no structure.”24 Such criticism, however, does little to explore or highlight the complicated, contradictory, and determining ways in which the institutional pressures of schools and other pedagogical sites along with the social capacities of educators are mediated within unequal relations of power. Instead, Bennett simply reverses the formula and buttresses his own notion of governmentality as a theory of structures without agents. Of course, this position also ignores the role of various sites of pedagogy and the operational work they perform in
producing knowledge, values, identities, and subject positions. But more importantly, it reflects the more general refusal on the part of many cultural studies theorists to take up the relationship between pedagogy and agency, on the one hand, and the relationship among the crises of culture, education, and democracy, on the other. Given such a myopic vision, left-leaning intellectuals who are dismissive of formal education sites have no doubt made it easier for the more corporate and entrepreneurial interests to dominate colleges and universities.

Unfortunately, many cultural studies theorists failed to take seriously Antonio Gramsci’s insight that “every 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. I want to build on Gramsci’s insight by exploring in greater detail the connection among democracy, political agency, and pedagogy described in the work of the late French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis has made seminal, and often overlooked, contributions to the role of pedagogy and its centrality to a substantive democracy. I focus on this radical tradition in order to reclaim a legacy of critical thinking that refuses to decouple education from democracy, politics from pedagogy, and understanding from public intervention. This tradition of critical thought signals for educators and cultural studies advocates the importance of investing in the political as part of a broader effort to revitalize notions of democratic citizenship, social justice, and the public good. But it also signals the importance of cultural politics as a pedagogical force for understanding how people buy into neoliberal ideology, how certain forms of agency are both suppressed and produced, how neoliberals work pedagogically to convince the public that consumer rights are more important than the rights people have as citizens and workers, and how pedagogy as a force for democratic change enables understanding, action, and resistance.

Education and Radical Democracy

Let us suppose that a democracy, as complete, perfect, etc., as one might wish, might fall upon us from the heavens: this sort of democracy will not be able to endure for more than a few years if it does not engender individuals that correspond to it, ones that, first and foremost, are capable of making it function and reproducing it. There can be no democratic society without democratic paideia.

Castoriadis was deeply concerned about what it meant to think about politics and agency in light of the new conditions of capitalism that threatened to undermine the promise of democracy at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, he argued, like Raymond Williams, that education, in the broadest sense, is a principal feature of politics because it provides the capacities, knowledge, skills, and social relations through which individuals recognize themselves as social and political agents. Linking such a broad-based definition of education to issues of power and agency also raises a fundamental question that goes to the heart of any substantive notion of democracy: How do issues of history, language, culture, and identity work to articulate and legitimate particular exclusions? If culture in this sense becomes the constituting terrain for producing identities and constituting social subjects, education becomes the strategic and positional mechanism through which such subjects are addressed, positioned within social spaces, located within particular histories and experiences, and always arbitrarily displaced and decentered as part of a pedagogical process that is increasingly multiple, fractured, and never homogenous.

Over the last thirty years, Castoriadis has provided an enormous theoretical service in analyzing the space of education as a constitutive site for democratic struggle. He pursues the primacy
of education as a political force by focusing on democracy both as the realized power of the people and as a mode of autonomy. In the first instance, he insists that “democracy means power of the people … a regime aspiring to social and personal” freedom.27 Democracy in this view suggests more than a simple negative notion of freedom in which the individual is defended against power. On the contrary, Castoriadis argues that any viable notion of democracy must reject this passive attitude toward freedom with its view of power as a necessary evil. In its place, he calls for a productive notion of power, one that is central to embracing a notion of political agency and freedom that affirms the equal opportunity of all to exercise political power in order to participate in shaping the most important decisions affecting their lives.28 He ardently rejects the increasing “abandonment of the public sphere to specialists, to professional politicians,”29 just as he rejects any conception of democracy that does not create the means for “unlimited interrogation in all domains” that close off in “advance not only every political question as well as every philosophical one, but equally every ethical or aesthetic question.”30 Castoriadis refuses a notion of democracy restricted to the formalistic processes of voting while at the same time arguing that the notion of participatory democracy cannot remain narrowly confined to the political sphere.

Democracy, for Castoriadis, must also concern itself with the issue of cultural politics. He rightly argues that progressives are required to address the ways in which every society creates what he calls its “social imaginary significations,” which provide the structures of representation that offer individuals selected modes of identification, provide the standards for both the ends of action and the criteria for what is considered acceptable or unacceptable behavior, and establish the affective measures for mobilizing desire and human action.31 The fate of democracy for Castoriadis is inextricably linked to the profound crisis of contemporary knowledge, characterized by increasing commodification, fragmentation, privatization, and a turn toward racial and patriotic conceits. As knowledge becomes abstracted from the demands of civic culture and is reduced to questions of style, ritual, and image, it undermines the political, ethical, and governing conditions for individuals and social groups to either participate in politics or construct those viable public spheres necessary for debate, collective action, and solving urgent social problems. As Castoriadis suggests, the crisis of contemporary knowledge provides one of the central challenges to any viable notion of politics. He writes:

Also in question is the relation of…knowledge to the society that produces it, nourishes it, is nourished by it, and risks dying of it, as well as the issues concerning for whom and for what this knowledge exists. Already at present these problems demand a radical transformation of society, and of the human being, at the same time that they contain its premises. If this monstrous tree of knowledge that modern humanity is cultivating more and more feverishly every day is not to collapse under its own weight and crush its gardener as it falls, the necessary transformations of man and society must go infinitely further than the wildest utopias have ever dared to imagine.32

Castoriadis is particularly concerned about how progressives might address the crisis of democracy in light of how social and political agents are being produced through dominant public pedagogies in a society driven by the glut of specialized knowledge, consumerism, and a privatized notion of citizenship that no longer supports noncommercial values and increasingly dismisses as a constraint any view of society that emphasizes public goods and social responsibility. What is crucial to acknowledge in Castoriadis’ view of democracy is that the crisis of democracy cannot be separated from the dual crisis of representation and political agency. In a social order in which the production of knowledge, meaning, and debate is highly restricted, not only are the conditions for producing critical social agents limited, but also lost is the democratic imperative...
of affirming the primacy of ethics as a way of recognizing a social order’s obligation to future generations. Ethics in this sense recognizes that the extension of power assumes a comparable extension in the field of ethical responsibility, a willingness to acknowledge that ethics means being able to answer in the present for actions that will be borne by generations in the future. 33

Central to Castoriadis’ work is the crucial acknowledgement that society creates itself through a multiplicity of organized pedagogical forms that provide the “instituting social imaginary” or field of cultural and ideological representations through which social practices and institutional forms are endowed with meaning, generating certain ways of seeing the self and its possibilities in the world. Not only is the social individual constituted, in part, by internalizing such meanings, but he or she acts upon such meanings in order to also participate in and, where possible, to change society. According to Castoriadis, politics within this framework becomes the “collective activity whose object” is to put into question the explicit institutions of society while simultaneously creating the conditions for individual and social autonomy. 34 Castoriadis’ unique contribution to democratic political theory lies in his keen understanding that autonomy is inextricably linked to forms of civic education that provide the conditions for bringing to light how explicit and implicit power can be used to open up or close down those public spaces that are essential for individuals to meet, address public interests, engage pressing social issues, and participate collectively in shaping public policy. In this view, civic education brings to light “society’s instituting power by rendering it explicit…[I]t reabsorbs the political into politics as the lucid and deliberate activity whose object is the explicit [production] of society.” 35 According to Castoriadis, political agency involves learning how to deliberate, make judgments, and exercise choices, particularly as the latter are brought to bear as critical activities that offer the possibility of change. Civic education as it is experienced and produced throughout a vast array of institutions provides individuals with the opportunity to see themselves as more than they simply are within the existing configurations of power of any given society. Every society has an obligation to provide citizens with the capacities, knowledge, and skills necessary for them to be, as Aristotle claimed, “capable of governing and being governed.” 36 A democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, and independent, qualities that are indispensable for making vital judgments and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reform, and governmental policy. Hence, civic education becomes the cornerstone of democracy in that the very foundation of self-government is based on people not just having the “typical right to participate; they should also be educated [in the fullest possible way] in order to be able to participate.” 37

From a Pedagogy of Understanding to a Pedagogy of Intervention

It is not the knowledge of good and evil that we are missing; it is the skill and zeal to act on that knowledge which is conspicuously absent in this world of ours, in which dependencies, political responsibility and cultural values part ways and no longer hold each other in check. 38

Williams and Castoriadis were clear that pedagogy and the active process of learning were central to any viable notion of citizenship and inclusive democracy. Pedagogy looms large for both of these theorists not as a technique or a priori set of methods but as a political and moral practice. As a political practice, pedagogy illuminates the relationships among power, knowledge, and ideology, while self-consciously, if not self-critically, recognizing the role it plays as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within particular sets of social relations. As a moral practice, pedagogy recognizes that what cultural workers, artists,
activists, media workers, and others teach cannot be abstracted from what it means to invest in public life, presuppose some notion of the future, or locate oneself in a public discourse.

The moral implications of pedagogy also suggest that our responsibility as public intellectuals cannot be separated from the consequences of the knowledge we produce, the social relations we legitimate, and the ideologies and identities we offer up to students. Refusing to decouple politics from pedagogy means, in part, that teaching in classrooms or in any other public sphere should not only simply honor the experiences students bring to such sites, including the classroom, but also connect their experiences to specific problems that emanate from the material contexts of their everyday life. Pedagogy in this sense becomes performative in that it is not merely about deconstructing texts but about situating politics itself within a broader set of relations that addresses what it might mean to create modes of individual and social agency that enable rather than shut down democratic values, practices, and social relations. Such a project not only recognizes the political nature of pedagogy but also situates it within a call for intellectuals to assume responsibility for their actions—to link their teaching to those moral principles that allow them to do something about human suffering, as Susan Sontag has suggested.39 Part of this task necessitates that cultural studies theorists and educators anchor their own work, however diverse, in a radical project that seriously engages the promise of an unrealized democracy against its really existing and radically incomplete forms. Of crucial importance to such a project is rejecting the assumption that theory can understand social problems without contesting their appearance in public life. Yet, any viable cultural politics needs a socially committed notion of injustice if we are to take seriously what it means to fight for the idea of the good society. I think Zygmunt Bauman is right in arguing that “[i]f there is no room for the idea of wrong society, there is hardly much chance for the idea of good society to be born, let alone make waves.”40

Cultural studies theorists need to be more forcefully committed to linking their overall politics to modes of critique and collective action that address the presupposition that democratic societies are never too just or just enough, and such a recognition means that a society must constantly nurture the possibilities for self-critique, collective agency, and forms of citizenship in which people play a fundamental role in critically discussing, administrating, and shaping the material relations of power and ideological forces that bear down on their everyday lives. At stake here is the task, as Jacques Derrida insisted, of viewing the project of democracy as a promise, a possibility rooted in an ongoing struggle for economic, culture, and social justice.41 Democracy in this instance is not a sutured or formalistic regime; it is the site of struggle itself. The struggle over creating an inclusive and just democracy can take many forms, offers no political guarantees, and provides an important normative dimension to politics as an ongoing process of democratization that never ends. Such a project is based on the realization that a democracy that is open to exchange, question, and self-criticism never reaches the limits of justice. As Bauman observes:

Democracy is not an institution, but essentially an anti-institutional force, a ‘rupture’ in the otherwise relentless trend of the powers-that-be to arrest change, to silence and to eliminate from the political process all those who have not been ‘born’ into power…. Democracy expresses itself in a continuous and relentless critique of institutions; democracy is an anarchic, disruptive element inside the political system; essentially, a force for dissent and change. One can best recognize a democratic society by its constant complaints that it is not democratic enough.42

By linking education to the project of an unrealized democracy, cultural studies theorists who work in higher education can move beyond those approaches to pedagogy that reduce it to a
methodology like “teaching of the conflicts” or relatedly opening up a culture of questioning. In the most immediate sense, these positions fail to make clear the larger political, normative, and ideological considerations that inform such views of education, teaching, and visions of the future, assuming that education is predicated upon a particular view of the future that students should inhabit. Furthermore, both positions collapse the purpose and meaning of higher education, the role of educators as engaged scholars, and the possibility of pedagogy itself into a rather short-sighted and sometimes insular notion of method, specifically one that emphasizes argumentation and dialogue. There is a disquieting refusal in such discourses to raise broader questions about the social, economic, and political forces shaping the very terrain of higher education—particularly unbridled market forces, or racist and sexist forces that unequally value diverse groups of students within relations of academic power—or about what it might mean to engage pedagogy as a basis not merely for understanding but also for participating in the larger world. There is also a general misunderstanding of how teacher authority can be used to create the conditions for an education in democracy without necessarily falling into the trap of simply indoctrinating students. For instance, liberal educator Gerald Graff believes that any notion of critical pedagogy that is self-conscious about its politics and engages students in ways that offer them the possibility for becoming critical—or what Lani Guinier calls the need to educate students “to participate in civic life, and to encourage graduates to give back to the community, which, through taxes, made their education possible”—either leaves students out of the conversation or presupposes too much and simply represents a form of pedagogical tyranny. While Graff is a strong advocate of creating educational practices that open up the possibility of questioning among students, he refuses to connect pedagogical conditions that challenge how they think at the moment to the next step of prompting them to think about changing the world around them so as to expand and deepen its democratic possibilities. George Lipsitz criticizes academics such as Graff who believe that connecting academic work to social change is at best a burden and at worst a collapse into a crude form of propagandizing, suggesting that they are subconsciously educated to accept cynicism about the ability of ordinary people to change the conditions under which they live. Teaching students how to argue, draw on their own experiences, or engage in rigorous dialogue says nothing about why they should engage in these actions in the first place. The issue of how the culture of argumentation and questioning relates to giving students the tools they need to fight oppressive forms of power, make the world a more meaningful and just place, and develop a sense of social responsibility is missing in work like Graff’s because this is part of the discourse of political education, which Graff simply equates to indoctrination or speaking to the converted. Here propaganda and critical pedagogy collapse into each other. Propaganda is generally used to misrepresent knowledge, promote biased knowledge, or produce a view of politics that appears beyond question and critical engagement. While no pedagogical intervention should fall to the level of propaganda, a pedagogy that attempts to empower critical citizens can’t and shouldn’t avoid politics. Pedagogy must address the relationship between politics and agency, knowledge and power, subject positions and values, and learning and social change while always being open to debate, resistance, and a culture of questioning. Liberal educators committed to simply raising questions have no language for linking learning to forms of public scholarship that would enable students to consider the important relationship between democratic public life and education, politics and learning. Disabled by the depoliticizing, if not slavish, allegiance to a teaching methodology, they have little idea of how to encourage students pedagogically to enter the sphere of the political, enabling them to think about how they might participate in a democracy by taking what they learn “into new locations—a third-grade classroom, a public library, a legislator’s office, a park”—or, for that matter, taking on collaborative projects that address the myriad problems citizens face in a diminishing democracy.
In spite of the professional pretense to neutrality, academics need to do more pedagogically than simply teach students how to be adept at forms of argumentation. Students need to argue and question, but they need much more from their educational experience. The pedagogy of argumentation in and of itself guarantees nothing, but it is an essential step toward opening up the space of resistance against authority, teaching students to think critically about the world around them, and recognizing interpretation and dialogue as conditions for social intervention and transformation in the service of an unrealized democratic order. As Amy Gutmann brilliantly argues, education is always political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency, to the ability to struggle with ongoing relations of power, and is a precondition for creating informed and critical citizens. Educators, she believes, need to link education to democracy and recognize pedagogy as an ethical and political practice tied to modes of authority in which the “democratic state recognizes the value of political education in predisposing [students] to accept those ways of life that are consistent with sharing the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society.”48 This notion of education is tied not to the alleged neutrality of teaching methods but to a vision of pedagogy that is directive and interventionist on the side of reproducing a democratic society. Democratic societies need educated citizens who are steeped in more than just the skills of argumentation. And it is precisely this democratic project that affirms the critical function of education and refuses to narrow its goals and aspirations to methodological considerations. This is what makes critical pedagogy different from training. Indeed, it is precisely the failure to connect learning to its democratic functions and goals that provides rationales for pedagogical approaches that strip the meaning of what it means to be educated from its critical and democratic possibilities.

Raymond Williams and Castoriadis recognize that the crisis of democracy is not only about the crisis of culture but also about the crisis of pedagogy and education. Cultural studies theorists would do well to take account of the profound transformations occurring in the public sphere and reclaim pedagogy as a central category of cultural politics. The time has come for such theorists to distinguish professional caution from political cowardice and recognize that their obligations extend beyond deconstructing texts or promoting a culture of questioning. These are important pedagogical interventions, but they do not go far enough. We need to link knowing with action, and learning with social engagement, and this requires addressing the responsibilities that come with teaching students and others to fight for an inclusive and radical democracy by recognizing that education in the broadest sense is not just about understanding, however critical, but also about providing the conditions for assuming the responsibilities we have as citizens to expose human misery and to eliminate the conditions that produce it. I think Bauman is quite right in suggesting that as engaged cultural workers, we need to take up our work as part of a broader democratic project in which the good society is a society which thinks it is not just enough, which questions the sufficiency of any achieved level of justice and considers justice always to be a step or more ahead. Above all, it is a society which reacts angrily to any case of injustice and promptly sets about correcting it.49

Matters of responsibility, social action, and political intervention develop not simply out of social critique but also out of forms of self-critique. The relationship between knowledge and power, on the one hand, and scholarship and politics, on the other, should always be self-reflexive about what its effects are, how it relates to the larger world, whether or not it is open to new understandings, and what it might mean pedagogically to take seriously matters of individual and social responsibility. In short, this project points to the need for educators to articulate
cultural studies, not only as a resource for theoretical competency and critical understanding, but also as a pedagogical practice that addresses the possibility of interpretation as intervention in the world. Cultural studies practitioners have performed an important theoretical task in emphasizing how meaning and value are constituted in language, representations, and social relations. They have been purposely attentive to a careful and thorough reading of a diverse number of cultural texts. They have rightly addressed in great detail and complexity how power makes demands on knowledge within various cultures of circulation and transformation and how knowledge functions as a form of power. But such a critical understanding, reading, and engagement with meaning is not enough. Politics demands more than understanding; it demands that understanding be coupled with a responsibility to others. This is central to the most basic requirement of taking seriously our role as moral and political agents who can both read the world and transform it.

Neoliberalism not only places capital and market relations in a no-man’s-land beyond the reach of compassion, ethics, and decency; it also undermines those basic elements of the social contract and the political and pedagogical relations it presupposes in which self-reliance, confidence in others, and a trust in the longevity of democratic institutions provide the basis for modes of individual autonomy, social agency, and critical citizenship. One of the most serious challenges faced by cultural studies, then, is the need to develop a new language and the necessary theoretical tools for contesting a variety of forms of domination put into play by neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. Part of this challenge demands recognizing that the struggles over cultural politics cannot be divorced from the contestations and conflicts put into play through the forces of dominant economic and cultural institutions and their respective modes of education. In short, cultural studies advocates must address the challenge of how to problematize and pluralize the political; engage new sites of pedagogy as crucial, strategic public spheres; and situate cultural studies within an ongoing project that recognizes that the crisis of democracy is about the interrelated crises of politics, culture, education, and public pedagogy.

Notes
4. Ibid., p. 128.
7. One interesting analysis on the contingent nature of democracy and public space can be found in Rosalyn Deutsche, Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).


23. Williams, Marxism and Literature.


36. Castoriadis, “Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime,” p. 15. It is crucial here to note that Castoriadis develops his notions of both democracy and the primacy of education in political life directly from his study of ancient Greek democracy.


43. Gerald Graff appears to have made a career out of this issue by either misrepresenting the work of Paulo Freire and others, citing theoretical work by critical educators that is outdated and could be corrected by reading anything they might have written in the last five years, creating caricatures of their work, or holding up extreme and ludicrous examples as characteristic of what is done by people in critical pedagogy (or, more generally, by anyone who links pedagogy and politics). For more recent representations of this position, see Gerald Graff, “Teaching Politically Without Political Correctness,” Radical Teacher 58 (Fall 2000), pp. 26–30; and Gerald Graff, Clueless in Academe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).


