Reconciling Hope and Critique in Teacher Education

An Analysis of Structural Perpetuation and Transformation in Schools and Society

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Abstract

Why have our seemingly intractable social and environmental challenges remained so difficult to identify and address? Is it still possible to confront institutionalized systems of oppression, domination, and exploitation with genuine hope rather than crippling despair? In this paper, I examine why structural problems persist, and I suggest, perhaps paradoxically, that serious critique and authentic hope are actually interdependent. Indeed, I propose that genuine hope cannot be realized *except* through social critique, and that social critique is useless *unless* it results in some degree of movement or change, which is essential to hope. However, at least three things are necessary to realize this improbable relationship. First, we must identify the major factors involved, including not only the better-known (material and ideal) conditions associated with the genesis of the problems, but also lesser-known "perpetuating" factors responsible for their reproduction. Second, beyond merely identifying these factors, they also need to be addressed, through critical and imaginative praxis—through action and reflection oriented toward the realization of better (more just,

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equitable, and sustainable) possibilities and relationships. Finally, we must continue to work on ourselves as important components of the society and world we wish to transform.

Introduction

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as "wild." Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and "savage" people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it "wild" for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the "Wild West" began.

—*Chief Luther Standing Bear* of the Oglala Sioux
(McLuhan, 1971, p. 45)

(We) need to develop a discourse that unites the language of critique with the language of possibility…(We) must speak out against economic, political, and social injustices [to help our students] become citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical.

—*Henry A. Giroux* (1985, p. 379)

For decades, I have taught elementary and secondary certification and graduate courses in colleges of education at public research universities. Last year, as usual, I started my classes with hard-hitting social critique. The broad aim of Global Education, a graduate social studies course, was for my mostly white, mostly middle-class students: (1) to gain a more critical understanding of the world—past and present—from the perspectives of others who have been, and in many cases continue to be, marginalized, minoritized, exploited, and erased; and (2) to consider the implications of these understandings for their own current and future teaching across grade levels and academic areas. Since I wanted to promote critical and reflective awareness of the world as it has been experienced by marginalized others, we addressed problematic structural conditions such as colonization and neocolonialism (Kincaid, 1988; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Simpson, 2004), economic exploitation and subjugation (Freire, 1970/1990; Klein, 2007, 2020; Pilger, 2002); white supremacy and racism (Baldwin, 1963; hooks, 1984/2000; McIntosh, 1989); patriarchy, paternalism, and other problematic sex and gender power relations (Butler, 1997; hooks, 1984/2000; Lorde, 1984/2007); environmental exploitation (Bookchin, 1990; Devall & Sessions, 1985; Gore, 2006; Hardin,

1968; Ho, 2022; Merchant, 1994; Naess, 1973), and various forms of social, cultural, and geopolitical othering (Ellsworth, 1992; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988).

To accomplish these goals, I utilized films, primary resources, testimonials and other first-person accounts, academic and non-academic literature, simulation and role-playing experiences, writing activities, and small group and whole class discussions. The first day of class included a vivid simulation experience designed to promote critical ecological consciousness.[1] The activity was also intended to serve as a tangible reference for subsequent discussions of problematic conditions and relationships introduced through materials such as Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, Baldwin's (1963/1988) *A Talk to Teachers*, Gore's (2006) *An Inconvenient Truth*, Kincaid's (1988) *A Small Place*, McIntosh's (1989) *White Privilege*, Pilger's (2002) *The New Rulers of the World*, and Quinn's (1996) *The Story of B*.

Chinua Achebe's classic (1958) *Things Fall Apart: The Story of a Strong Man* was read and discussed soon after the first-week's simulation experience. This powerful novel, set in colonial Nigeria, illustrates the processes, consequences, and consciousness of colonization. Achebe notes that the colonizers brought both a religion and a government. They also brought an economy, including a market for palm oil, bicycles, and tools, and a foreign concept of "wealth" (Quinn, 1997), as well as a new form of education—a missionary school set up away from the village. In Nigeria, as elsewhere, these forces worked together, and things fell apart.

Beyond the processes and consequences of colonization, we also examined the consciousness of the colonizer, revealed in two well-known historical paintings. The first was Hans Holbein's (1533) *The Ambassadors* (see Figure 1), followed by John Gast's (1872) *American Progress* (see Figure 2). In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972) notes that the painting of *The Ambassadors* is filled with rich, sumptuous, tactile objects consistent with emerging market attitudes of property and change. Like other works extolling these virtues (such as Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*), *The Ambassadors* depicts the colonial attitude, the general proprietary stance of colonial Europe toward the rest of the world. Accustomed to being in control, "the two men are confident and formal" (p. 94). The ambassadors belonged "to a class who were convinced that the world was there to furnish their residence in it" (p. 96).

Berger (1972) observes that the ambassadors' gaze and stance communicate a curious lack of recognition, of disinterested contemplation. They can see us, and we can see them, but we are not *part* of their

Figure 1
The Ambassadors. (1533). Hans Holbein.

world, and they are not part of ours. Although we can see and appreciate them in all their particularity,

> it is impossible to imagine them considering us in a similar way…. The gaze of the ambassadors is both aloof and wary. They expect no reciprocity. They wish the image of their presence to impress others with their vigilance and their distance. (pp. 97, 98)

Greater than human images had long been depicted in the form of royalty, but this was different. Unlike emperors and kings, the ambassadors are not presented as *im*personal and aloof but as *personal* and aloof. "What is new and disconcerting here is the *individualized presence* which needs to suggest *distance*" (p. 97). Individuality usually implies access and equality. After all, we are all human. Yet, Holbein's ambassadors are *both* individual *and* superior.

Berger (1972) also draws our attention to the objects on the shelves between the ambassadors, including scientific instruments for navigation during a "time when the ocean trade routes were being opened up for the slave trade and for the traffic which was to siphon the riches from other continents into Europe" (p. 95). Explorers (like Magellan, in 1519) were promised large percentages "of the profits they made, and the right to run the government of any land they conquered" (p. 95). Notably,

> The globe on the bottom shelf is a new one [on which Holbein has added] the name of the estate in France which belonged to the ambassador on the left. Beside the globe are a book of arithmetic, a hymn book, and a lute. To colonize a land, it was necessary to convert its people to Christianity and accounting, and thus to prove to them that European civilization was the most advanced in the world. (p. 95)[2]

The second painting we examined, completed on a different continent nearly 350 years later, was *American Progress* (1872) by John Gast, a Prussian-born artist who lived in Brooklyn, New York (see Figure 2). Commissioned, reproduced, and widely disseminated by George Crofutt, of American Western Travel Guides, *American Progress* eventually be-

Figure 2

American Progress. (1872). John Gast.

came an archetype of American Western art. Like Holbein's *Ambassadors*, *American Progress* illuminates the consciousness of colonization:

> *American Progress* is an allegory of Manifest Destiny and American westward expansion…. The woman in the center is Columbia, the personification of the United States, and on her head is what Crofutt calls "The Star of the Empire." Columbia moves from the light-skied east to the dark and treacherous West, leading white settlers who follow her…. Progress lays a telegraph wire with one hand and carries a schoolbook in the other. Additionally, seen on the right, are white farmers that have already settled in the Midwest. As Lady Columbia moves westward, Indigenous people and a herd of buffalo are seen fleeing her and the settlers…. Columbia is ushering an era of modernization, development, and advancement to the West, which in the painting is portrayed as a dark and savage place, especially when compared to the eastern side of the painting. But, with the ushering in of these developments, the Indigenous people living in the West and their way of life is cast out. (*American Progress*, 2022)

Each Wednesday night I found myself asking my students to grapple with momentous social, environmental, and educational challenges while simultaneously navigating the stresses of school and life during the second year of the Covid pandemic. One evening, as I moved from group to group, dropping in on discussions of Al Gore's (2006) *An Inconvenient Truth* (illustrating the human causes and devastating effects of global climate change) and an equally disconcerting excerpt on culture collapse from Daniel Quinn's (1996) *The Story of B*, I could tell something was wrong. The students made strong efforts to participate; however, their expressions of despair would have been impossible to miss. As one student stated, "Two-thirds of the time Gore said we have left is already gone, and things are even worse now than when the film was made."

Revisiting the Call for a Language of Critique and a Language of Possibility

My students' reactions took me back to a question I have visited frequently of late. Is it even possible to simultaneously experience serious social critique and legitimate hope? Is it possible to live and teach in ways that both interrogate our most troubling structural issues and foster authentic feelings of hope and possibility rather than crippling despair? If this is possible, what does it look like? If it is not possible, how can we justify continuing to act as if it is?

During the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the United States experienced intense scrutiny of its social institutions as well as its foreign policies (Baldwin, 1963; 1963/1988; Chomsky, 1969). This scrutiny

was strongly rebuked, particularly among those who were well-served and well-positioned within the current systems of power and privilege (Baldwin vs. Buckley, 1965; Buckley & Bozell, 1954). Fatigue mounted as activists and educators encountered increased resistance to their efforts to identify and transform structural inequities. Educational scholars like Paulo Freire (1970/1990), Maxine Greene (1988, 1993), and Henry Giroux (1985) began to advocate for a discourse that united a language of critique with a language of possibility. Part of this argument was that, in addition to directing our critique outward, we must also work on ourselves, identifying and addressing the ways in which our own perspectives, practices, and identities may, although perhaps unconsciously, help perpetuate the very conditions we seek to transform (Baldwin, 1963/1988; Freire, 1970/1990; Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1988; McIntosh, 1989).

Like many others, I took the call seriously. I sought to unite critique and possibility within my teaching and to synthesize these ideas with my prior understandings. Piaget (1972) had long since established that cognitive dissonance, or disequilibrium, is necessary for learning to occur. Yet, excessive disequilibrium can be counterproductive. As Dewey (1938/1965) noted, anything that disrupts continuity of learning is "mis-educative." Dewey (1933, 1938/1965) had also argued that reflection is the highest form of thought. Social learning theorists had demonstrated the importance of social interaction for meaningful growth (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991), and foundational work in cultural studies, gender studies, and critical multicultural education had demonstrated the need to consider diverse social and cultural perspectives and to reclaim the right to shape one's own identity (Anzaldua, 1987/1999; Baldwin, 1963; Butler, 1997). Collectively, these ideas emphasized the need for diverse communities of learners, for both social critique and critical reflection, and for the inclusion of dissonance and safety for self-development and social transformation to occur.

Within these parameters, I have sought to engage my students (and myself) in authentic, hard-hitting social critique while fostering genuine feelings of hope and possibility. Yet with each passing year, I, too, have become increasingly discouraged. It is difficult not to conclude that we are fighting a losing battle. While engaging in the seemingly glacial process of nurturing critical consciousness, student-by-student, our institutionalized crises intensify. Justifiable anger and frustration continue to mount among those most immediately and persistently affected by exploitive social conditions as they wait for the rest of society to "get it."

Thus, while I have persisted in promoting hard-hitting social critique, my capacity to support genuine hope has weakened. When class discussions turn to questions of hope, I have become less certain about what to say. When I calculate the incremental pace of human development against the intensification of our systemic conditions, my expressions of hope and possibility feel forced and anemic. When I do weigh in, I often feel as if I am trying to convince others of something I no longer believe. Class conversations still include assurances that every action matters and that we must remember the ripple effect. Margaret Mead's famous quote "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" resurfaces, and the nineteen-seventies slogan "Think globally, act locally" is recited. A few participants invariably proclaim that their lives will be complete if they can reach a single child, and the roles of religion and faith are sometimes invoked. Yet, I cannot help but worry that whatever is done now will be "too little, too late."

I am not fundamentally opposed to any of these efforts to derive hope. I recognize that every action can matter, the ripple effect is real, every person is important, and religious institutions respond to genuine needs for moral guidance, personal comfort, and a sense of hope. However, as a teacher educator working in social studies, environmental education, and the arts, my primary unit of analysis has always been life and society itself. My greatest concern is for the health and survival of humans, societies, and the community of life. I care about the literal, physical health of the world, the wellbeing of humanity, and the continuation of human and nonhuman life on the planet. Is it still possible to believe we can change our course? Can legitimate hope be experienced on these terms, without relying on spiritual or psychological interventions developed more for moral guidance, self-improvement, and personal salvation than for societal wellbeing or the health and survival of the community of life? Can hope and critique be reconciled? If so, what would it look like, beginning with my course in Global Education?

This questioning took me back to the literature, to my personal experiences as a teacher and learner, and to the experiences and perspectives of my students. Collectively, these sources suggest it is still possible to learn and teach in ways that promote both serious critique and authentic hope. However, for this to happen, at least three things need to occur. First, the relevant factors must be identified. Beyond the original (material and ideal) factors associated with the genesis of a given structural problem, there are additional "perpetuating factors" that must also be considered. Second, having identified the relevant factors, they must be addressed through critical, imaginative, and reflective praxis – thought-

in-action directed toward the realization of more just, equitable, and sustainable relationships. Finally, we must continue to work on ourselves, to develop a better understanding of our own identities and connections as part of the society and world we wish to transform.

Identifying the Relevant Factors and Their Functions

Structural systems of domination and exploitation consist of both the original factors involved in their genesis and additional factors that perpetuate (and, in so doing, often intensify and accelerate) those original conditions. One reason our systemic challenges are so persistent is that there is a tendency to focus more attention on the better-known originating conditions than on the lesser-known factors that reproduce, or perpetuate, them. For example, it is well understood that economic inequality involves discrepancies in material wealth based on assumptions of merit and entitlement, that patriarchy is based on assumptions of gender superiority and inferiority, that racism consists of prejudice and discrimination based on assumptions of racial superiority and inferiority, and that global climate change involves human degradation of the environment. Unfortunately, the reproduction of these problems is often explained with sweeping, fatalistic generalizations such as the assertion that humans are *innately* greedy, power-hungry, and self-centered. Again, the originating factors are perceived as evident, and their persistence is attributed to presumed universal human faults and frailties.

If the analysis ends here, we are left with the impossible proposition that the only way to address our systemic challenges is to change humanity itself. Fortunately, there are alternative explanations that do not indict all of humanity. These explanations synthesize the originating factors and their means of perpetuation (Ho, 2022; Houser, 2023; Quinn, 1992, 1996; Simpson, 2004, 2017). The major perpetuating factors (and their functions), include: (1) social mechanisms of persuasion and control; (2) deeply ingrained perceptual orientations and epistemologies, or modes of thought (as well as the language systems, cultural narratives, and social institutions that arise from and reproduce these perceptions and epistemologies); and (3) the normalizing, reifying, obscuring, and erasing effects of history and time (Houser, 2023).

Social Mechanisms of Persuasion and Control

Social mechanisms of persuasion and control are the most basic factors contributing to the reproduction of systems of domination and exploitation. Physical force, military might, division and conquest, so-

cial opprobrium, anti-dialogue, cultural invasion, disciplinary activity, and ideological hegemony are among the numerous means of persuasion and control that have emerged throughout history. A major function of these mechanisms has been to suppress opposition to oppressive conditions long enough for those conditions to take hold.

Beyond the use of brute physical force, one of the longest existing means of social control is division and conquest (Freire, 1970/1990). While this is sometimes achieved directly, by pitting one person or faction against another, it also occurs indirectly, by generating suspicion and distrust, thereby weakening the larger community. Anti-dialogue is another age-old means of exerting control. Anti-dialogue may appear to be authentic because verbal interaction occurs; however, it is not true dialogue because the discourse is grounded in asymmetrical power relationships (Freire, 1970/1990). Anti-dialogue often works in subtle ways, as when the voices of some are unconsciously afforded greater credence than those of others based on differential status within or between communities. So long as these imbalances remain unaddressed, true dialogue cannot occur (Freire, 1970/1990).

Yet another mechanism of social control, ideological hegemony, takes strategic advantage of the unconscious operation of commonsense. Antonio Gramsci (1982) characterizes hegemony as an act of coercion rather than physical force. Historically associated with military alliances, Gramsci applies the concept to ideological relationships within modern social and political contexts. He describes hegemony as a process of manipulation in which subordinate members of a coalition are persuaded to agree to the wishes of the dominant group based on the tenuous assumption that this will also advance their own interests. While subordinate members may achieve short-term gains, their consent unconsciously reinforces the dominant group's aims which ultimately undermine their own best interests (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006).

A final example of social control involves disciplinary activity. In his fascinating study of the birth of the prison, Foucault (1977) describes the 18th century development of a new "science of discipline" evolving in prisons, hospitals, factories, military establishments, and schools. The basic practices of this new science of discipline included: *spatialization* (based on the idea that everyone needs to be in place, and that our physical location indicates our identity and worth); *microscopic control of activity* (via time schedules and checklists); *repetitive exercises* (that generate automatic responses to external stimuli); *hierarchical observation* (comprised of chains of authority and training under close surveillance); and *normalizing judgment* (involving the internalization of external standards to achieve a sense of "normalcy").

Dependent on surveillance, top-down management, and self-incrimination, the purpose of this "science" was to engineer the individual. "Discipline," in this sense, was not externally imposed punishment. Rather, it was a form of *self*-discipline. Instead of simply punishing undesirable behavior, as law-based systems had previously done, disciplinary activity also rewarded desired behavior, and rather than defining transgression as *bad* or *evil*, as dominant religious institutions had done, it was now defined as *abnormal*. The objective was to create desire among those who deviated from the norm to wish to be "normal." Thus, the science of discipline worked from the inside out, first creating a desire for "normality," then consolidating the ranks of the "normal" against all "others."

A primary function of social mechanisms of persuasion and control is that they perpetuate systems of domination and exploitation by enforcing adherence to intolerable conditions long enough for those conditions to take hold—to become normalized among the oppressed (Achebe, 1958; Anzaldua, 1999; Baldwin, 1963/1988; Kincaid, 1988; Pilger, 2002; Stannard, 1992; Zinn, 1995). Although few such mechanisms are unique to any particular situation, all have helped maintain oppressive relationships long enough for those relationships to become habitual, to take root in everyday life.

Mechanisms of persuasion and control are also prevalent in schools. For example, in a statewide study of teachers' efforts to navigate the reform-accountability culture, the participants cited numerous cases of anti-dialogue as their administrators replaced coveted team-planning meetings with curriculum alignment and data-entry training sessions designed to accommodate the demands of NCLB (Houser et al, 2017). We also observed that Teacher-Leader Evaluations led many teachers to utilize external criteria to negatively judge their *own* merits.

Instances of surveillance were also reported. For example, a second-year high school teacher who rarely left her class unattended was compelled one day to violate her policy, hurrying down the hallway to use the restroom. Upon her return, she found an assistant principal sitting at her desk, thumbing through her lesson plans, ostensibly "preparing for an observation." The teacher was left with the disconcerting question of how her administrator knew she was not in the classroom. She acknowledged that his visit may have been a coincidence; however, by this point it no longer mattered whether her suspicions were justified. Since surveillance traffics in fear and uncertainty (Foucault, 1977), all that mattered was that she *suspected* surveillance and feared the possible ramifications. Once such levels of fear and uncertainty are internalized, external tools are no longer needed to maintain the order of things (Foucault, 1966/1970, 1977).

Perceptual and Epistemological Factors

A second set of perpetuating factors consists of dominant Western perceptions and epistemologies that have evolved over vast periods of time (Bookchin, 1990; Capra & Luisi, 2014; Devall & Sessions, 1985; Houser, 2009/2014; Lyotard, 1984; Merchant, 1994; Naess, 1973; Quinn, 1992, 1996). Living-systems theorist Fritjof Capra (1996) argues that there are profound inconsistencies between modern *perceptions* of the world and the *nature* of the world. He insists that "most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world" (p. 4). Capra (1996) explains that "In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries….the notion of an organic, living, and spiritual universe was replaced by that of the world as a machine, and the world machine became the dominant metaphor of the modern era" (p. 19). Capra is highly critical of prevalent absolutist, dualistic, reductionistic, and hierarchical assumptions and modes of analysis within our modern mechanistic worldview.

For Capra, our prevailing view of the world represents a "crisis of perception" (p. 4). Mechanistic perceptions of reality have emphasized separation and hierarchy at the expense of connectedness and community while providing an epistemological framework for domination and control (Capra, 1996; Capra & Luisi, 2014; Ho, 2022; Palmer, 1998/2007; Simpson, 2017). Capra insists that the natural world, including humans, can more accurately be understood as a vast organic web of systems based on horizontal rather than hierarchical interconnections and interdependencies. As modern, mechanistic perceptions have reshaped our social institutions and language systems they, too, have contributed to the perpetuation of our problematic structural conditions.

Thus, just as social mechanisms of persuasion and control have impacted schools and society, so have dominant perceptions and epistemologies that have arisen over the centuries. Social, linguistic, and educational systems have been shaped by modernist assumptions grounded in hierarchical relationships and binary oppositions. In schools, these influences are reflected in dichotomies such as "high-achieving/low-achieving," "expert/novice," "teacher/student," and "passing/failing" while students continue to be sorted by age, ability, and economics and processed through siloed courses and assembly-line regimens (Anyon, 1980; Willis, 1977).

If the primary role of social mechanisms of persuasion and control has been to suppress resistance long enough for oppressive conditions to take hold, a major function of dominant Western perceptions and

epistemologies (along with their social institutions and language systems) has been to further embed those conditions in the consciousness of people and society. Dominant perceptions and epistemologies reinforce our daily habits, practices, and relationships through our narratives, metaphors, and explaining stories, and even the structure of our language. Today, perceptual, epistemological, and linguistic concerns are at the heart of the postmodern critique of modernist grand theorizing (Lyotard, 1984), post-structural critiques of the binary relations inherent in Western social structures and language systems (Derrida, 1997), feminist critiques of the paternalism embedded in social norms and gender constructions (Butler, 1997), and postcolonial critiques of the discourse inherent in classic colonial and neocolonial relationships (Kincaid, 1988; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988).

The Obscuring Effects of Time and "History"

Finally, in addition to social mechanisms of persuasion and control, and beyond dominant Western perceptions and epistemologies, a third set of perpetuating factors consists of the normalizing, reifying, and erasing effects of time and history. These factors provide further insight as to how it is possible for institutionalized systems to be so problematic yet so difficult to comprehend and address.

One way traditional communities and cultures have been altered is through reification, a normalizing process by which humanly constructed ideas come to be seen as if they were objectively real. In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) state reification "implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world" (p. 89). Within a few generations, new constructions, perceived as if objectively real, can transform entire communities. As reified ideas gain the status of *commonsense*, perceived as "what everyone knows" (Haney-Lopez, 2003), they are no longer seen as worthy of consideration.

In time, reification can contribute to social, cultural, and historical amnesia, wherein entire communities forget their histories and identities (Lukacs, 1968/1994; Quinn, 1992, 1996). Novelist Daniel Quinn (1992, 1996) examines cultural and historical amnesia from a fascinating angle. Quinn explores the processes by which ancient agriculturists, once a tiny fraction of the human community, gradually expanded and imposed their ways of life on others. Initial attempts to accommodate a growing population—the inevitable consequence of an expanding food supply—led to increasingly aggressive efforts to acquire additional land and resources. In turn, these resources support-

ed the growing population. The inexorable need for further resources eventually led to the development of totalitarian agricultural practices (Diamond, 1987, 2012; Quinn, 1996). Like other totalitarian entities, this growing "culture" utilized specialized mechanisms based on its unique perceptions to eliminate its competition, including annihilation of competing perspectives and lifestyles. What began as a novel way of life evolved into a dominant worldview based on principles of acquisition, expansion, consumption, and control.

After thousands of years of expansion, this acquisitive worldview has finally prevailed on every continent—north, south, east, and west. While other cultural distinctions may persist, few remaining members of the human community have been able to resist adopting the premises (and reaping the material rewards) of totalitarian agriculture (Diamond, 1987, 2012; Quinn, 1992, 1996). With time and repetition, a perceptual orientation anathema to human sustainability has become not merely the prevalent way of life, but the *only* way of life acceptable to its followers. Totalitarian agriculture continues to expand, passing unconsciously from generation to generation through processes of habit, cultural transmission and invasion, and historical amnesia. The supreme irony, for Quinn, is that the destruction of alternative perspectives and traditions has left us with the belief that there is only "one right way to live"—and such uniformity is the single greatest threat to the community of life (1992, p. 167).

Countless cultural identities have been "forgotten" throughout history, contributing to the cumulative loss of memory that vastly diverse human communities (Indigenous and otherwise) have functioned "successfully" in the world without eradicating their neighbors or destroying the environment upon which all depend. These innumerable forgotten successes suggest the need not merely to tolerate sociocultural diversity but to acknowledge its absolute necessity. When even the memory that diverse human communities have thrived on the planet is erased, we are left with the bleak proposition that the only viable option is the dominant image we currently see.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) addresses issues of power, memory, history, and culture in her discussion of the danger of a single story. Adichie insists that it is essential to consider who tells the stories of others and when those stories begin:

> It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power…. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the *definitive* [emphasis added] story of that person. The Palestinian poet

Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, 'secondly.' Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story. (9:30-10:43)

Here again there are implications for education, which privileges history as a primary source of information. Adhering to the Western supposition that "history" consists primarily of *written* records of the past, events occurring prior to the advent of writing have typically been relegated to the status of "prehistory," effectively erasing the experiences of countless people and communities who have lived on the planet.[3] When world history classes begin with the Bronze Age rather than the Stone Age, three and a half million years of human existence are dismissed. Similarly, when the story of American civilization begins with the arrival of European explorers, colonizers, clergy, and educators instead of the countless diverse and successful Native cultures that existed on the continents for tens of thousands of years, "you have an entirely different story" (Adichie, 2009). Thus, beyond identifying mechanisms of persuasion and control that have maintained oppressive relationships long enough for them to take hold, and beyond contemplating new perceptions and epistemologies that have further embedded those conditions in the consciousness of society, we must also consider the normalizing, reifying, and erasing functions of time and history.

Addressing the Relevant Factors through Thought-in-Action

In addition to *identifying* the relevant factors associated with our structural problems, they must also be *addressed*. Authentic hope requires more than just analysis. It also requires evidence of movement toward the realization of improved conditions and relationships. According to Freire (1970/1990), such movement requires praxis, the synthesis of critical, imaginative, and reflective thought-in-action oriented toward humanizing and emancipatory structural transformation. Within this process, movement is vital to the experience of hope.

John Dewey (1933, 1938) was the among the first to write about reflective thinking in education, which he distinguished as being consequential rather than sequential. Instead of materializing independently, one after another, Dewey argued that new thoughts extend from previous thoughts, forming a sort of chain (or cognitive structure, in

Piagetian terms). Reflective thinking, which he considered the highest form of thought, involves "active, persistent, careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1933, p. 9). Dewey noted that reflective thinking consists of "a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates" as well as "an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle, and dispose of the perplexity" (p. 12).

Despite its value, Dewey acknowledged that reflective thinking can be "disagreeable" to those who "cultivate an over-positive and dogmatic habit of mind, or feel perhaps that a condition of doubt will be regarded as evidence of mental inferiority" (p. 16). Coping with this "disagreeability" remains a significant challenge of education and society. In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Maxine Greene (1988), a proponent of reflective thought, argues that U.S. citizens have come to view "freedom" in negative terms, as "freedom from" (social and civic responsibility; commitment to community; reflective thinking). Within the U. S., she insists, freedom has increasingly come to be viewed as an entitlement or original endowment rather than as an achievement. Noting the roots of negative freedom in early notions of capitalism (based on freedom from government constraint) and libertarian thought (being left to one's own devices), Greene argues that negative freedom, coupled with attitudes of passive consumerism, has virtually eliminated public talk of community well-being and societal improvement.

Greene (1988) suggests that freedom within diverse and democratic societies must be conceptualized in positive terms—as "freedom to" (work for the good of society; shape one's own identity; engage in reflective thinking). Positive freedom involves imagining that which *can* be done (despite the obstacles), envisioning how to proceed, and working to enact those visions. Consciousness and imagination are essential—consciousness of the normative and imagination of the possible (Greene, 1988, 1993). Such freedom is a conscious existential achievement rather than a passive (material or political) entitlement or endowment, and it must be continually achieved anew. Positive freedom is realized in lived social situations "by people in search of themselves" (p. xi). The quest is both personal and public, and multiple perspectives are needed.

Greene (1988) recognizes that existing conditions can be perceived fatalistically, as taken-for-granted realities that cannot be changed. They can be seen as simply "the way things are," as hopelessly "there" (p. 5). "As has been said, a rock is an obstacle only to the one who wants to climb the hill. Not caring, the traveler merely takes another path"

(p. 5). The rock needs "to be viewed as a personal challenge, as an obstacle; but it becomes such only to those risking free choice" (p. 6), only to those who recognize the possibility and necessity of climbing the hill. Without risking free existential choice, we cannot perceive even the *possibility* that things could be otherwise. However, existential risk involves action. As Foucault writes: "Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects upon it as a problem" (1984, p. 388).

Freire (1970/1990) insisted that praxis is central to the struggle for structural change. Within this relationship, initial thinking is part of the action, and subsequent operations are part of the thought. The dynamic relationship between thinking and acting is essential to the realization of hope, which depends on evidence of movement toward better alternatives. The pivotal moment is the act itself—the difference between stasis and movement. For better or worse, every act, no matter how slight, has *some* effect. This basic recognition is central to resisting paralyzing all-or-nothing assumptions that suggest we must either (immediately and singlehandedly) accomplish everything, or we may as well do nothing at all.

Working on Ourselves

Finally, in addition to identifying the major factors contributing to our structural systems of oppression, and beyond addressing these factors through critical, imaginative, and reflective praxis, we must also continue to work on ourselves as members of the society and world we seek to change. Self-development is essential to the reconciliation of hope and critique for at least two reasons. First, in the most fundamental sense, we are part of the world, and the world is part of us (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Ho, 2022; Quinn, 1992, 1996). This is a central premise of ecological philosophy (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Merchant, 1994; Naess, 1973), and it has been addressed in fields as diverse as pragmatic philosophy (Mead, 1934), Indigenous studies (Nxumalo et al. 2022; Simpson 2004, 2017;), and the environmental sciences (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Capra & Luisi, 2014).[4] Since this is the case, to change oneself truly *is* to change the world. Our actions, for better or worse, no matter how great or small, literally cannot help but impact our communities and environments.

The second reason self-development is essential to the reconciliation of hope and critique is simply that it is *possible*. Self-development is something over which it is possible to exercise a degree of personal agency. Few of us directly impact entire communities, states, or na-

tions, but virtually all of us can change ourselves, and no act is entirely without consequence. Since conscious growth is a decidedly personal process, and since it is something we can *do*, it is a tangible example of how deliberate action can affect change. As such, self-work represents a viable source of hope.

Returning to my course in Global Education and, more broadly, my work in teacher education, I have long assumed that only *after* a problem has been thoroughly diagnosed can solutions be effectively sought. As a result, considerable time has been spent every semester identifying and analyzing the nature and causes of our structural challenges. The problem with this approach—analogous to insisting on covering the entire historical past prior to addressing current concerns—is that since structural conditions can never be fully understood (there are, after all, countless intersecting factors, and social and environmental conditions continue to evolve), there will never be a "right" time to begin working on solutions. Since this is the case, and since we literally can no longer wait, I think we must begin searching for alternatives much earlier in the process, while continuing to adjust as new information is acquired.

A number of years ago, I began to relinquish some of my classroom control. Previously, discussions of course materials focused primarily on my own priorities rather than my students' interests and concerns. Additionally, while I have long required my students to write personal philosophies of education, I tacitly communicated that these should align (or at least not overtly conflict) with my own beliefs. Gradually, with class discussions and assignments such as the personal philosophies, I began to open greater space and to encourage my students to develop, explain, support, and advocate their own views, regardless of whether they aligned with mine. These changes have paid off in terms of increased student interest, engagement, and investment.

Within this context, when my Global Education students recently expressed deep distress, it was clear that something needed to be done. I continue to believe it is important for teachers to understand existing structural inequities and to acknowledge our own (often unintentional) complicity in supporting the factors that perpetuate these conditions. However, the overwhelming despair communicated by students I knew to be deeply critical, caring, and reflective demanded that I reconsider how to proceed.

Reflecting on prior semesters, I recalled occasions in which the despair I felt when considering the enormity of our systemic conditions gradually gave way to feelings of hope and possibility while observing my students' energy and optimism as they analyzed their challenges,

envisioned alternatives, and reported on the consequences of their efforts. I could sense their enthusiasm based on *their* students' reactions, and it was gratifying to know that some of these ideas originated in our classes together. Yet, this often resulted in an internal conflict that went something like this:

> This is wonderful, of course. It is good for my students and for their students! It is also evidence of tangible, albeit incremental, change. This is exactly what we need. Yet… It isn't enough. More is needed. Much more. Not only that, but there is a risk that such accomplishments could be misperceived as solutions instead of merely modest steps on the way to the greater structural change that is ultimately needed.

This was a real quandary. I well understood the magnitude of our structural problems; yet I also realized that global changes are the result of multiple local actions, and that local action is unlikely to occur without the possibility of hope. What I did not sufficiently understand was the extent to which I, too, had internalized a number of factors that helped perpetuate the very conditions I sought to transform. For example, I tacitly adhered to the absolutist and binary assumption that we must either transform everything or we may as well do nothing. This paralyzing and fatalistic belief is exactly the kind of thinking that prevents us from taking the steps that can lead to structural change. Other internalized perpetuating factors included rigid hierarchical thinking, particularly as applied to my expert-novice assumptions involving the relationships between myself and my students, and linear and absolutist thinking, such as my insistence that only *after* a problem is thoroughly diagnosed can it be effectively addressed.[5]

Ensnared in absolutist, binary, hierarchical, and linear thinking, it was exceedingly difficult for me to entertain epistemological alternatives. I was familiar with the scholarly analyses (e.g., the post-structural critique of binary logic; the postmodern critique of universal theorizing); however, I had not sufficiently applied these critiques to my *own* thinking. As a result, despite my rhetoric, it was nearly impossible for me to think globally while acting locally, to consider the future while acting in the present, or to really *believe* that simply because I cannot do everything does not mean that I may as well do nothing. Paralyzed by fears of inevitability based on unexamined perceptions and assumptions, I was unable to live in the present, to celebrate local successes while imagining and enacting further possibilities.

In classes like Global Education, too much emphasis has been placed on the critique, and too little on the search for better alternatives. Dichotomizing hope and critique, I failed to recognize that they

coexist. Of course, we must continue to acknowledge the brutal and dehumanizing realities of colonization, past and present; however, we must also learn who the people *were* who were depicted in Achebe's Nigerian villages and Gast's promotional depiction of Indigenous people as fleeing from "Progress." Not just the names of their communities or "curious" aspects of their cultures, but who they were (and are) as people. What were their thoughts, experiences, perspectives, and concerns? How did (and do) they continue to live *in* the world without destroying the world? Greater efforts are needed to learn *with* and *from* rather than simply *about* those who have been (and continue to be) marginalized, minoritized, colonized, and erased (Ho, 2022; Nxumalo et al. 2022; Simpson, 2004, 2017). And greater attention must be focused on who tells the story and where it begins (Adichie, 2009).

All three aspects are necessary. We must develop critical understanding of the factors associated with the origins of our institutionalized systems of oppression as well as the factors that have perpetuated those systems. Without a basic recognition of the existence, nature, and persistence of our structural problems, there can be little awareness of the need for change. Yet, as important as it is to understand the relevant factors, understanding alone is not enough. In addition to understanding, we must also *address* the challenges through critical, imaginative, and reflective thought-in-action. Finally, even deep understanding and a willingness to act will not be sufficient to reconcile serious critique and authentic hope unless we also continue to work on ourselves. Self-work is essential so that we do not contradict ourselves, opposing problematic conditions associated with specific structural problems (such as racism, paternalism, heteronormativity, or anthropocentrism) while unconsciously reinforcing the perpetuating factors (e.g., absolutist, binary, linear, or hierarchical thinking) that reproduce those very conditions. The greatest potential we possess to experience the tangible movement required for authentic hope resides in the work we do on ourselves, along with the understanding that to transform oneself truly is to transform the world.

Notes

[1] Critical ecological consciousness is a synthesis of critical social consciousness and an epistemological orientation toward biocentric rather than anthropocentric ways of thinking and being (Houser, 2023).

[2] The elongated skull in the foreground is a memento mori, commonly included in paintings of the period.

[3] For similar reasons, cultures with oral traditions have often been excluded from the historical record.

[4] Elsewhere, I have provided detailed analyses of the foundations of this relationship and the implications for education (e.g., Houser, 2006, 2009/2014, 2023).

[5] Palmer (1998/2007) reminds us that tools such as binary logic have their place when they serve us well. He suggests that the problem is not their *existence* so much as it is their unexamined *prevalence*.

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