REVIEW ESSAY

THEY'RE RAD! THEY'RE BAD! RADICAL THEORIES OF EDUCATION: AND THEY WARRANT FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Liston, Daniel P. (1990). *Capitalist schools: Explanation and ethics in radical studies of schooling.* New York: Routledge, 216 pp., $16.50 (softcover).

Liston, Daniel P. & Zeichner, Kenneth M. (1991). *Teacher education and the social conditions of schooling.* New York: Routledge, 320 pp., $19.95 (softcover).

With the new sociologies of education and the publication of *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), the educational research community has witnessed a proliferation of Marxist analyses of education. For Daniel Liston (1990), this proliferation has been fraught with difficulties ranging from a lack of philosophical acceptance by the wider academic community to conceptual deficiencies and a lack of ethical circumspection (pp. 7, 15). Undeterred, he argues for the potential insights these radical frameworks offer calling for a methodological reexamination to enhance the project's explanatory power. Of particular concern are the many theoretical claims which Liston asserts are founded upon flawed logic and compounded by a lack of empirical support. The latter, he argues, contributes to a priori theory building and he situates responsibility for the deficiencies in the researchers themselves.

> Minimally, a rational appraisal would expect the explanations to be coherent and warranted by evidence, the evaluations to be clearly stated and substantiated, and the prescriptions to be morally

> defensible. Too many Marxist writers have not seriously acknowledged these standards. (p. 14)

Liston finds there is an additional price to pay for failing to adhere to these standards. The result often translates into research marked by theoretical preoccupation, misconstrued moral superiority, and undiscerning of its ethical implications (p. 17). He opines that, "the tradition can do better" (p. 8).

Concerns about a priori reasoning and empirical rigor in Marxism are not unique (e.g., Hammersley, 1984; Hargreaves, 1982, 1985; Hickox, 1982). Conversely, there are others within the paradigm who would claim that empirical verification is inimical to critical theory, political pragmatism or use of the dialectical. In defending his call for evidential warrant, Liston sets out to debunk such a claim asserting that irrespective of one's theoretical framework, employment of the empirical is necessary as a "control over the arbitrariness of belief" (Scheffler in Liston, p. 36).

Liston reserves his major criticism, though, for what he sees as the tradition's tendency toward functional analyses which Marxist educational sociologists themselves critique as "positivistic, deterministic and mechanistic" (p. 42). Yet, Liston argues it is still uncritically employed by many of those same researchers, contending that they are guilty of faulty logic whereby "the analyst identifies an effect ... of a particular practice and assumes the practice is required" (p. 45). To support his claim, Liston examines the work of several radical researchers (i.e., Apple, 1982; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Giroux, 1981). It is outside the scope of this review to pursue that examination. Suffice it to say that Liston finds they all employ a functional logic that leads to a description of the relationship between capitalism and schooling being elevated to one of explanation. He sees such facile functional explanations, a priori reasoning, and eschewal of evidential assessments as producing not only a theoretical and conceptual fortress (p. 68), but also a diminution of Marxism's potential as "a provocative, powerful and valuable framework for analyzing schools" (p. 12). For Liston, salvation lies within analytical Marxism.

The analytical variant evolved from a concern over Marxism's ability to "withstand the criticisms that have led most mainstream social scientists to reject it" (Gordon, 1990, p. 1). Through the aid of economics and analytic philosophy, researchers believe that a reconstructed Marxism can be both analytically rigorous and satisfy the criteria of a scientific discipline as both "[are] characterized by high standards of precision and technical elaboration" (p. 23). For example, Cohen (1978) examined whether capitalism was, as Marx contended, exploitative and whether the Marxian view of history held. In so doing, he advanced a contentious defence of "the validity of a type of functional explanation" (Gordon, p. 26) which Liston draws upon as a means of overcoming facile functional explanations. Interestingly, many of Cohen's analytic *confreres* do not subscribe to his reworked logic, and with Liston's additional surgery the patient may not fare much better. But of greater import is Liston's conclusion that such explanations are "defensible but limited" (p. 101). One cannot help but question a long and seemingly convoluted journey through the maze of functional logic only to find that even the "tour director" has doubts about the excursion's destination.

What, then, is required for the concerns about a priori reasoning, facile functional explanation, and lack of empirical warrant to be rectified? Liston suggests that "if Marxist analysts wish to pursue functional explanations, it seems clear they should 1) reduce their reliance on functionalist assumptions, 2) formulate researchable functional propositions, and 3) assess the empirical basis for their properly formulated functional claims" (p. 73). Clearly, this has scientific overtones, a focus Liston advocated initially, but nevertheless, an approach whose very essence is at the core of much methodological debate within Marxism. Thus, Liston's critique appears tied to a particular conceptual and methodological constitution of adequate research. Yet one cannot help but recall his earlier noting of an Elliot Eisner argument — "since there are multiple ways of looking at the world, calls for simple tests of validation misconstrue the entire research endeavor" (Liston, p. 19).

In the final chapters the ethical values imbedded in Marxist educational research are examined. The claim is put that the majority seem founded

upon a standard of social justice. Liston counters that Marx did not employ such an ethical standard in his critique of capitalism, but rather a conception of human freedom (p. 126). And so, in order to pursue greater human freedom, "for students to become self-determining, the realities of capitalism must be unveiled" (p. 154). Thus, focus is centered upon the interpretation of reality. A supplementary concern relates to possible restrictions on those interpretations — "does a Marxist educational agenda support a distinctly Marxist understanding of capitalism or a pluralist offering of social explanatory frameworks?" (p. 163).

A particular strength of *Capitalist Schools* rests with its succinct and systematic overview of many of the assumptions, issues, and debates that inhabit the Marxist educational project. In addressing them Liston has not only illuminated the multiplicity of concerns that researchers are grappling with, but through his call for further critical inspection he has also been disapproving of the tacit nature of many of their understandings. Articulate and cogent in his arguments, Liston demonstrates the unswerving force of his commitment to Marxism's potential. However, the question still remains as to whether his reasoned argumentation is sufficiently convincing for others to migrate to his vision. Telling them *they got it all wrong* makes the task considerably more challenging.

Teacher Education and the Social Conditions of Schooling is a logical extension for Liston. The text represents his and Zeichner's views on the role of teacher educators and teacher education. The authors commence by expressing concern for the lack of philosophical grounding and moral deliberation by many/most preservice teachers in the United States — they are perceived as unable to articulate sound pedagogic (philosophical, nontechnical) rationales and justifications for their educational activities thereby remaining vulnerable to the technical imperatives currently dominating the practice, often at the expense of moral and ethical, if not social and political, implications. This technical focus finds preservice teachers dwelling disproportionately on issues of curricular content, time and classroom management, grouping practices, questioning techniques, and so forth (p. 20) — what Giroux (1992) calls "fetishized methodology" (p. 155). More than the acquisition of mere technique, teacher education, they

argue, is the vehicle through which aspirants build their outlook on life which they, in turn, bring to their communities through the employment of those technical skills. Quoting the progressivist Kilpatrick (1933) the authors agree that "more than anything else ... does education mean the building of the life outlook, for when put to work, the life outlook includes and orders everything else .... Techniques and procedures become then subordinate" (in Liston & Zeichner, p. 28). Thus Liston and Zeichner envision education, including teacher education, as the means whereby individuals are afforded the opportunity to gain skills not only to manage their lives, but also to come to a fuller comprehension of those larger societal forces, often driven by scientific and technological progress, that impact upon their daily lives and work. It is such an orientation to education that the authors believe will offer teachers an opportunity to have their profession contribute to social reconstruction.

Another related issue for Liston and Zeichner rests with the apparent coopting of critical reflection thus effecting a situation where "the reflective stance ... has become so widely employed by so many distinct practitioners and theoreticians that the term now lacks ... a very conscious social and political orientation" (p. 38). The consequences are seen as devaluing the practice's potential contribution. The result "seems to be that as long as teachers reflect on their actions, everything is alright" (p. 38).

Further to this, Liston and Zeichner claim that teachers' understandings of their role and much of the basis for the deliberation of their practice is drawn from their larger professional community's views. But, the authors contend that while such a community exists, it lacks a sufficiently united and coherent articulation of that role and its concomitant practices to adequately ground teachers' understandings. Rather, they call for the situating of educators' practices within a discourse of the reform traditions of American education. Three traditions are delineated: conservative, progressive, and radical. It is sufficient to note that the authors claim a need for preservice exposure to all three to enhance understanding of the various aims, procedures, and practices. And anticipating an argument for a universal justification for educative practice that transcends tradition boundaries, Liston and Zeichner argue that while such criteria exist (e.g.,

honesty), to assume that all educational aims and objectives could appeal to such universality fails to afford due consideration to those traditions' "very real and distinct educational aims and objectives" (p. 51). Furthermore, such universal claims fail the test of substantiation while disregarding practitioners and scholars' moral and practical diversities (p. 52). Faced with impending relativism, they offer up a conceptual yardstick. Drawing upon Gutmann (1987), Liston and Zeichner argue for democratic education where such "(1) must develop a deliberative, democratic character in students; (2) cannot repress rational deliberation and (3) cannot discriminate against any group of children" (Liston & Zeichner, p. 54). In explicating nonrepression, they envisage limitations on education's involvement in restricting "competing conceptualizations of the good life and the good society" (p. 55).

Such a limitation has obvious implications for the conservative tradition whose primary objective is viewed as cultural transmission. One wonders where the incentive is for teachers grounded in that tradition to subscribe to the authors' view of democratic education, when it appears to undermine their aims and objectives, essentially pillorying their tradition. There appears to be no place for curbing competing visions, even when they might be perceived as culturally undermining (e.g., one need only look to recent World Health Organization meetings on population and to Muslim nations' reaction to birth control and gay rights issues. For different reasons, Canadian nationalists and the arts community generally have expressed concern about US influence on Canadian culture, particularly through visual media. The larger cultural Goliath is seen as unduly impacting upon the definition of *the good life* through the sheer size and (corporate) power of its cultural export). First nations, minorities who have emigrated to the West, or countries that have imported Western capitalism can also attest to the gradual demise of their traditional values and cultural knowledge. One assumes, however, that the cultivation of a democratic and deliberative character in students is intended as a safeguard. Nonetheless, one can envisage conflicts between those who perceive any curbs on conceptualizations of the good life as a governor on action designed to eliminate repression in its various forms and those who see unlimited definitions as potentially undermining social cohesion and

their cultural evolution by playing into capitalism's hand with a marketplace of competing viewpoints vulnerable to corporate image-makers and the media (e.g., in 1992, during the Canadian constitutional referendum, where major social, cultural, and economic changes were proffered, corporate Canada's involvement in not only defining *our good life*, but also surreptitiously encouraging public consent was significant). And so while Liston and Zeichner's stance seems utterly rational and defensible, open to debate is the sophistication of *most* students' critical abilities and whether society can ultimately withstand such unrestrained ac(ex)cess.

Of further importance to preservice teachers' self-examination of "implicit and unarticulated assumptions, beliefs, and values" (p. 61) is that much of what they already believe has been derived from their larger educational and social communities including the educational traditions adopted by *their* past teachers. But for Liston and Zeichner, such examination is not to be conducted merely at the micro level. In order to "min[e] the ways in which larger societal structures and institutional conditions create obstacles and opportunities for teachers and teacher educators" (p. 118), a macro perspective is also necessary. They advocate improving research by situating teaching within these two seemingly oppositional approaches to inquiry. And for those who argue the importance of independent, authoritative knowledge the authors claim that educational research is incapable of such knowledge creation for two reasons: (a) adequate means of dealing with its inherently normative nature have not been found, and (b) such research frequently generates additional problems.

For those who question the value and potential of educational research, Liston and Zeichner counter with three areas where it can contribute, particularly as it relates to the social conditions of schooling: (a) partisan research, (b) journalistic reportings (descriptive information), and (c) elaborate conceptual frameworks that illuminate the unacknowledged (concepts to help alter perceptions). Drawing upon Lindblom and Cohen (1979), partisan research is situated within a particular group, not necessarily attending to broader community interests. For Liston and Zeichner, such an approach would anticipate analysts clearly articulating

the normative bases of their research thereby affording others an opportunity for their critical examination. By adopting such an approach, it is argued that investigators are perceived not as authoritative knowledge givers, but as those who provide alternative perspectives.

In arguing for an understanding of the social conditions of schooling, Liston and Zeichner also claim that racial discrimination, gender repression and the poor working conditions of teachers transcend reform tradition boundaries becoming obstacles to any teacher's commitment to democratic education (p. 94). In brief, they call for:

(1) an increased articulation of the working conditions of teachers;

(2) a greater appreciation for the cultural mosaic as well as the discrimination many minorities encounter during their educational experience; and

(3) a greater understanding of the administrative dominance by males of a historically female practice and the concomitant tendency toward devaluing education in part because of "an assumed opposition between the so-called caring and nurturant dispositions of the feminine character ideal and the intellectual rigor and reasoning of the masculine character ideal" (p. 115).

Finally, the authors conclude by noting the lack of teacher education programs with a distinctively radical orientation. Such programs as do exist appear to have benefitted from superior organization, articulation, and implementation of course content combined with a practical translation through fieldwork. Many would argue that these are the criteria for judging *any* program's worth. One is left with the impression that only by so doing/being, will more programs of this sort not only germinate, but have a chance at flourishing.

Teacher Education and the Social Conditions of Schooling highlights problems within teacher education programs that I suspect are not endemic to the United States. As societies convulse under the strain of economic

restructuring, and social injustices and inequities increasingly demand amelioration, the time for a (extended) debate on conceptualizations of the good life seems particularly appropriate. *Active* participation by teachers in such discussions certainly would be encouraged by Liston and Zeichner. There are more than enough others willing to do so if educationists decline (e.g., politicians, business, religious groups). However, assuming the adoption of a radical orientation by most preservice/teachers derived from rational debate, no matter how compelling, demands a leap of faith especially in a nation where the label *liberal* often finds people scurrying for cover. Nonetheless, *Teacher Education and the Social Conditions of Schooling* offers a comprehensive and thought provoking discussion that addresses many of the issues and concerns that education faculties should grapple with. That many do not reflects the uphill struggle that lies before the authors. Liston and Zeichner put forth a strong argument of the need for all educators to develop their pedagogical and social philosophies within a critical inspection of their own beliefs, assumptions, and values so as to ground their educative practice. However, one wonders whether the force of that argument might not be undermined by critics employing one of its own conditions claiming that it suffers the postmodern symptom of *partisan research.*

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