

# Critical Theory, Critical Ethnography, Critical Conditions: Considerations of Postcritical Ethnography

Bill J. Johnston  
North Carolina State University

*Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first as tragedy, the second as farce. . . .*

*Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.*

—Karl Marx (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart)

## PROLEGOMENON: CRITICAL CONDITIONS

During the past few years there have emerged a plethora of studies in which is borrowed the rhetoric, if not always the conceptual understandings, of postpositivism, poststructuralism and postmodernism in framing the object of study. In

part, this may represent little more than academic faddishness. But I think that something more is at work. During the 19th century, an industrial revolution occurred, which historians have portrayed as being of general social significance. In the United States, this revolution spanned a period of about 80 years, and represented a shift in labor force participation from agriculture to industry of about 20% (Brown, 1976). During the late 20th century there occurred a shift from goods to service production. This shift represented more than 30% change in relative labor force participation and was accomplished in only about 25 years. The *deindustrial revolution* occurred in about one third the time and directly affected many more people than the industrial revolution. It is reasonable to presume that the de-industrial revolution will transform basic social institutions, social relationships, and ideological sensibilities in ways as unexpected and significant as the original industrial revolution (Johnston, 1993; Kellner, 1989). At the very least, we are living in an age of anxiety and structural uncertainty. More likely, we are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy (Habermas, 1975) in which both the institutional forms and ways of interpreting institutional relationships are being called into question. The institution of schooling, as in earlier periods, is one of the most visible social institutions being called on to respond to economic restructuring. Educators are forced to abandon the logic of social reproduction and engage in social reconstruction, but under conditions in which the desirability of competing images of the future is hotly contested. In shaping the future of schooling, educators and social theorists must account for general conditions of postindustrial capitalism and the transformation of the capitalist state now under pressure to respond to (a) fragmenting cultural politics (Apple, 1996; Giroux, 1988, 1992), (b) increasing marginalization as transnational corporations become more powerful, and (c) an ever increasing fiscal (O'Conner, 1973) and legitimacy crisis.

Reflecting on the history of social thought, one finds a process in which the negative philosophers of the Enlightenment did serve, through critique, to free society from the ideological strictures of the ancient regime; but this negative philosophy was considered unsuitable soil on which the seeds of social reconstruction could flourish (Beaud, 1983; Hilton, 1976). Instead, the perceived need was to develop a positive philosophy, guided by instrumental/technical reason, grounded in an epistemology of intersubjectively validated, objective knowledge that could motivate, guide, and sustain efforts to build a new social order. What a remarkable accomplishment this turned out to be. Feudalism, which had reigned for several hundred years, was, in a very brief period of time, overcome by mercantilism. Mercantilism, which had such a short reign that it is seldom mentioned in popular history texts, was replaced by capitalism, which is itself divided into periods: competitive capitalism sustained by classic liberalism, which evolved into advanced capitalism seeking legitimation through modernist sensibilities, which further evolved into corporate-monopoly capitalism grounded in raw economic power, political mystification, and ideological cynicism. And where are we now?

A recent report, "The Rise of Global Corporate Power" released by the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies (1996), revealed that 200 multinational corporations now control 25% of the world's economic activity. If one subtracts the gross domestic product of the nine largest economies (the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Canada, and China) the combined gross domestic product of the remaining 182 countries is \$6.9 trillion, compared to \$7.1 trillion in combined sales of the 200 largest corporations. It is now the case that of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are corporations and 49 are countries. It is estimated that only about 20% of the population benefits from such global concentration and centralization of economic (and one would presume political) power. Although it may not be fashionable to recognize, Marx was correct in predicting the concentration and centralization of economic power into fewer and larger units; I wonder if scholars such as Domhoff (1967) and Dye (1976) find wry satisfaction in observing the emergence of a global ruling class from the corporate boardrooms. Are we witnessing the relative decline of the nation state and the ascendancy of the corporation; are we, following Hegel, witnessing the recurrence of history in which the transnational corporation emerges, like the feudal estates of an earlier period, as the central motive force of political, economic, military, and indeed, general social activity?

If we are merely uncertain regarding what the institutional life-world is coming to, I would say that we are positively befuddled at the cultural and ideological level. But rising as Minerva from the ashes of contemporary positivism, scientism, and modernism, we find postmodernism offering to guide us. What a strange notion is postmodernism, associated first with movements in art and architecture, characterized by pastiche and collage. Then adopted within movements of literary criticism as a method of deconstructing text, and by so doing serving the important function of decentering interpretive authority from authorial intention and text structure to the subjectivity of the reader. More recently still, within the framework of social analysis, postmodernism has served two contradictory functions.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, it has abandoned the core principles of modernism by rejection of grand narrative, questioning the epistemological primacy of positivism and scientism and challenging the motive force of instrumental reason. This avant-garde and deconstructive strand of the postmodern appears to stand as the functional equivalent to the negative philosophy of an earlier period. More important for the purpose of this chapter, however, is a second, more pragmatic, politically engaged and social reconstructivist strand. Motivated no less than its deconstructive cousin in wishing to overcome through critical analysis the constraints inherent in ideologically dominant forms of modernism, but equally motivated by desire to achieve concrete social conditions of liberty, equality, and fraternity, reconstructive postmodernism

<sup>1</sup>Among the texts that attempts to explain postmodern I find the following useful: Best and Kellner (1991), Rosenau (1992), Conner (1989), and Usher and Edwards (1994).

attempts through political struggle to influence concrete social practices. Abandoning all claims to ideological purity, reconstructivist postmodernism steps with trepidation and optimism from the relative safety of critique into the ongoing stream of engaged social/political action. The history to be made may not be entirely to our liking, but it will be made.

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I attempt to explore the possibilities, characteristics and contribution of a postcritical ethnography (PCE) of education. My general thesis is that the *possibility* of a PCE is socially and historically contingent; representing the confluence of several previous intellectual movements (cf. critical theory, critical ethnography, and to lesser extent, postmodernism) and responds to particular, historically contingent conditions that I am inclined to characterize as representing institutional and ideological crisis of postindustrial capitalism. The *characteristics* of a PCE are in part determined by the selective incorporation of concepts and intellectual traditions from which it emerges and the needs to which it responds; among the most important inherited characteristics are (a) the search for new forms of rationality, (b) motivation by the desire to achieve more democratic and emancipatory forms of social life, and (c) renewed interest in the relationship between mass media and mass culture as an important influence on the development of social identity and action. The *contribution* of PCE is located in its potential to (a) better represent the lived experience of individuals and groups that constitute the object of its investigation, (b) mobilize and sustain collective social action in pursuit of more sound, just, and equitable social conditions, and (c) conceptually link the micro- and macrostructural within the same analysis.

I attempt to develop this thesis by first tracing the genealogy of PCE through critical theory, critical ethnography, and postmodernism. I then briefly identify some limitations of these previous forms. Finally, I offer suggestions for the development of PCE. To anticipate the argument developed here I make the following observations:

- Critical theory has made an invaluable contribution in the area of theoretical development and critique, especially regarding rejection of economic, or other reductionist theoretical approaches. It has tended, however, to be underdeveloped in the area of strategic social action with the consequence that it is typically ignored or perceived as irrelevant by practitioners within the context of curricular and organizational change and development of schooling.
- If you will pardon the Hegelian impulse, the Spirit of the Age really is postmodernist. There exist side by side, groups eager to express

profound skepticism and mistrust of core institutions and traditional beliefs, and groups chanting adamantly for a return to premodern subservience to authoritative faith, family, and fidelity. We are beyond belief in the mythology of past social consensus but should take seriously the possibility of social balkanization and degeneration. If schooling is to contribute to the "collective" good, we must first figure out who is the collective and how we may overcome the differences of the categorical *other* in order to facilitate ethical, collective, strategic social action. It is clear that the corporate chiefs have their ideological ducks in a row; what of the opposition?

- I think of critical ethnography primarily as a methodology in the service of an ideology; I find both the ideology and the methodology appealing. Nevertheless, I don't think critical ethnography has been significantly more effective than critical theory in improving concrete social conditions. I see in the emergence of PCE, however, an opportunity to redirect social inquiry in more productive directions.
- PCE must be socially engaged to be relevant, but should avoid the teleological presumptions of critical theory. To be socially engaged requires a willingness to get one's hands dirty in the making of history under conditions not of our choosing, but as directly encountered. This leads me to advocate willingness to investigate, propose and defend strategic action. I am reminded here of the antismoking advertisement, "Don't tell me I should quit smoking. Show me how." In similar fashion, "Don't tell me I should be empowered. Show me how."
- Narrative analysis offers a strategy to convey complex understandings in a manner that is socially accessible and consistent with principles of substantive rationality. PCE is well positioned to develop this methodology. Pushing the boundaries of narrative analysis, in ways similar to Weber's use of *verstehen* in writing the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, appears to me to offer a strategy for connecting interest in micro- and macrostructural concerns within a seamless web of understanding. Therefore, I advocate use of narrative analysis as a core methodology of PCE.

### GENEALOGY OF PCE

This section is intended as an overview of primary themes and trajectories that have contributed to the emergence of PCE. Others, for example, Morrow and Torres (1995), Simon and Dipbo (1986), and Kincheloe and McLaren (1994), provide a much more thorough and scholarly treatment of many of these topics. My purpose here is limited to selectively *identifying* themes that directly con-

tribute to the development and providing a gloss of the intellectual context within which to locate discussion of defining characteristics of PCE. Figure 3.1 outlines the trajectory of influences as I describe them.

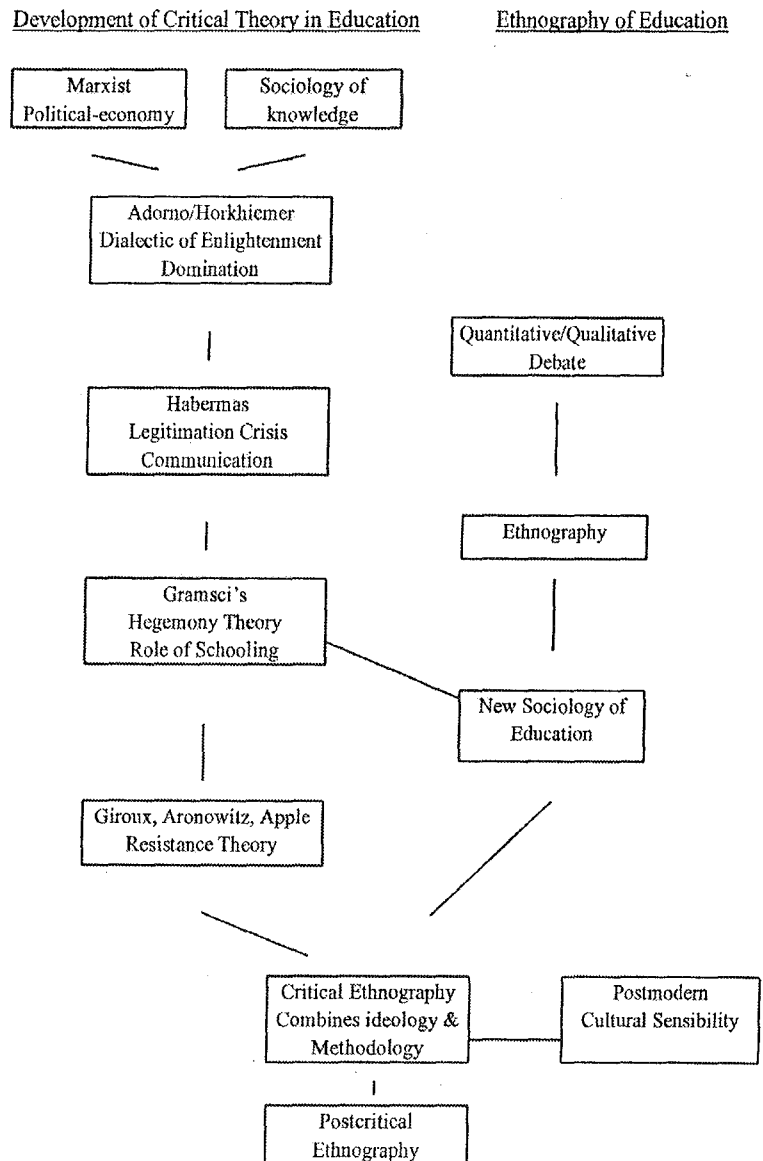


Figure 3.1. Influences on Postcritical Ethnography



## CRITICAL THEORY

I consider the origins of critical theory to be located in the attempt to combine interest in examination of structural influences of the political economy as inspired by Marxist theory with examination of the ideological dimension as represented by the sociology of knowledge of Mannheim (Geuss, 1981). Two features of this move are significant. First, it shifted analytic attention from economic reductionist arguments and legitimated the examination of the independent influence of such social factors as race, gender, religion, and ideology. Second, it represents an early, albeit largely unsuccessful, attempt to connect examination of structure and agency. In the hands of Adorno and Horkheimer, these dual influences led to examination of the "dialectic of the enlightenment" in which a particular form of reason, instrumental-technical rationality, which had served the positive function of (a) relocating the basis of authority from aristocratic families and the institutions of the feudal period to the rational individual and (b) providing the frames of reference and sensibilities for the emergence of modern society (much as Weber has described in *Economy and Society* and *The Protestant Ethic*) now turned on itself through processes of institutionalization and reification to become the primary form of domination (Held, 1980). This move served to stimulate a sustained critique of instrumental rationality that has not abated. Adorno and Horkheimer continued to develop this theme in the guise of a theory of (ideologically legitimated structural) domination and studies of the authoritarian personality. This same basic theme was also carried forward by Eric Fromm from a psychoanalytic perspective and more importantly by Marcuse (1966) within the arena of popular culture.

Habermas continued the critique of instrumental reason in his debate with Gadamer while remaining a staunch defender of the *potentiality* of reason (more broadly considered), and later of modernism, to contribute to the attainment of emancipatory social interests. Whereas Gadamer wished to disconnect empathetic understanding and the search for first principles from the "seamless ontology of historical interpretation" (a move with which Habermas was originally in partial agreement), Habermas would eventually advocate a more transcendental position (Ingram, 1987). One means through which Habermas (1971) sought to connect reason, agency, and structure was through the theory of interests. Three types of interests were identified: empirical analytic (oriented toward technical control); historical-hermeneutic (oriented toward interpretation and understanding); and critical-emancipatory (oriented toward overcoming domination and achieving social transformation). The consequence of this effort was to locate human understanding in its various forms within structural conditions, and to provide a rationale for human agency at odds with extant conditions. It challenged deterministic explanations of the influence of structure on consciousness without dismissing the fundamental value of historical forms of reason. Although Habermas did not develop in a direct and formal manner the

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notion of *substantive rationality*<sup>2</sup> rising to challenge the hegemony of instrumental rationality, the focus on human interests did provide a means to bring into the discussion the influence of social values and the centrality of individual voluntarism and choice of action.

In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas (1975) adopted a more Durkheimian turn than had previous members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. The institutionalized and systemic nature of the social life-world was afforded a more prominent place in his thinking. Crisis tendencies of the economy, polity (rationality crisis), social systems (legitimation crisis), and tradition (motivation crisis) were discussed, it seems to me, more within the (implicit) context of system maintenance needs and interests and less from the perspective of critical-emancipatory interests. The issue here, is not so much that Habermas had made a theoretical turn, but that through privileging institutional levels of analysis, the individual was becoming lost. Moreover, in the search for institutional level ideological and cultural oppositions to dominant forms of empirical-analytic control interests, which gave rise to integrated social systems of domination, Habermas (1979) posited principals of *universalistic* morality and utilitarianism, *formalistic* ethics, and ultimately the theory of *universal pragmatics* and the *ideal speech community*. Although Habermas considered himself contributing to the potentiality of attaining conditions in which critical-emancipatory interests could emerge, many critical theorists found the theory of the ideal speech community to be little more than wishful thinking and were disturbed by the universalistic, formalistic, (implicitly) teleological, and transcendent aspects of his approach. Critical theorists continued, however, to find utility in the Frankfurt tradition's critique of instrumental rationality, and Habermas' discussion of social interests and the theory of legitimation crisis.

Just as Habermas was beginning to fall from grace, there was rediscovery of the work of Gramsci, especially among such influential scholars of schooling as Giroux (1983) and Apple and Weis (1979, 1983). Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Gramsci's Hegelian Marxism, although differing in emphasis, clearly bear a close family resemblance. Gramsci's contribution is primarily found in the theory of hegemony (domination). In his view, the dominant class exercised control in one of two general forms: politically based force and ideologically based consent. Similar in some regards to Althusser's treatment of schooling as an ideological state apparatus, Gramsci saw in education and schooling the primary means through which the dominant class was able to reproduce ideological legitimation and consent for the established social order, regardless of the degree to which that order may be counter to the authentic interests of the masses. The importance of Gramsci's view was to privilege "ideology critique" as a key weapon in the struggle for emancipation. As aptly summarized by Morrow and

<sup>2</sup>The notion of substantive rationality was named but not directly developed by Weber; substantive rationality was, however, implicit in his studies of religion. Later theories would incorporate the idea of value rationality to represent similar ideas.



Torres (1995) "Rather than simply a 'war of movement,' a revolutionary transition required a 'war of [ideological] position'" (p. 251) and quoted by Gramsci, "Every revolution has been preceded by an *intense labor of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas* among masses of men who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition" (Gramsci, cited in Morrow & Torres, 1995, p. 12, italics added).

As inherited and further developed by contemporary scholars of education within the critical tradition, a number of central themes may be identified:

1. The continued interest in critique of the hegemony of instrumental reason.
2. Adoption of ideology critique as a central methodology.
3. Continued specification of the variety of human interests while attributing theoretical prominence to human agency.
4. Much greater emphasis on the role of language in perpetuating systems of domination and conversely in offering the possibility of transformation.
5. Perhaps most significant, the development of poststructural theories of educational reproduction and resistance.

This most recent turn in the development of critical theory was made possible, in part, by parallel developments in ethnographic research, to which we now turn. A central limitation of the critical theory tradition, however, was the tendency to remain at the level of critique without adequately developing strategies for concrete cultural-political action. This tendency has been extensively described by Wexler (1987), among others, and is a theme to which I return.

### Critical Ethnography

During the first half of the 20th century, the social sciences were struggling to gain academic respectability (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Karabel & Halsey, 1977). The road to glory was thought to require adoption of the methodologies that had contributed to the rise of the natural sciences—positivism, scientism, and statistical analysis. Not until the 1960s and 1970s was there a serious general challenge to the hegemonic logic of these methodologies. Ethnomethodology made the first halting steps, but even Garfinkel felt compelled to legitimate his efforts through attempts to quantify scuffed tiles and the space between bodies. Ethnography that was at first considered little more than an annoyance to serious scholars, and was only made palatable, and thereby tolerated, by locating it within "anthropological methods" still presumed to be grounded in the structuralism of Malinowski and Levi-Straus. But like a rogue seed planted in the perfumed garden of truth, ethnography inevitably grew to challenge nomothetic

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and axiomatic theories of social being; it regaled in difference, the nonparametric, heteroscedasticity, and theoretical overdetermination. Abandoning the search for universal truth, probability, and control, the ethnographer was at first content merely with disentangling the multiple influences of regulative, constitutive, and intersubjective interpretation on the production of social action; such contentedness, however, would not last.

It is said in the Bible that "Ye shall know the truth and it shall set you free," but as Aldous Huxley observed, there are also times in which "Ye shall know the truth, and it will make you mad." Having once studied social groups, the ethnographer was positioned to make judgments (albeit conditioned by various received interpretations of governing institutional/regulative rules) of the utility relationship, the correspondence between particular observed actions and beliefs and the likelihood that those actions would contribute to attainment of outcomes desired by the focal group. For example, the relationship between some group's depreciation of academic achievement, on the one hand, contrasted with their desire to attain the symbols of social and economic status. In such cases, the ethnographer might conclude that given the prevailing institutional and interpretive order, the observed beliefs and actions of the focal group were dysfunctional or at least structurally disconnected. At other times, however, the ethnographer might find in favor of the focal group; that the prevailing institutional order imposed unjust and unwarranted constraints on the focal group (e.g., the discovery of institutionalized structures of inequality and prejudice). In this case, the ethnographer might be moved by a sense of moral outrage, and being so moved, shift the focus of their work from an exposition of the "anthropological" curiosities of the other, toward explanation and critique of the social order. And when such shift occurs, what then shall we say is the object and the objective of our investigation? And when through our study we discover groups struggling against the injustices of the regulative and constitutive social order, what then are the limits of our responsibility to assist in such struggle?

Throughout most of the history of public schooling, academic research interests were oriented primarily toward expansion and legitimation efforts. Influenced first by functionalist theories, then in response to rising costs during the 1950s relying on theories of human capital development, and later still during the 1960s and 1970s on efforts to calculate the economic returns of various investments in education as well as to explain differences in academic achievement, none of these approaches needed ethnography as a methodological form (Karabel & Halsey, 1977). Beginning with the correspondence theory of Bowles and Gintis (1976), and developed through the critique of reproduction theory by Carnoy and Levin (1985), however, schooling came to be understood not as an ideologically benign agency of socialization and enculturation into the American way of life, nor as simply an instrument for upward social mobility, but rather as the central tool of class domination. While serving to add a critical dimension to studies of schooling, these early structuralist expositions of reproduction were unable to explain the concrete mechanisms through which regula-

tive institutional structures penetrate the consciousness of social groups. To provide this information, ethnography was essential, and in meeting this need the New Sociology of Education was born.

Critical theory and the New Sociology of Education were natural allies. There existed reciprocity of concern with issues of intersubjectivity and the necessity of interpretation, the privileging of language analysis, and the centrality of critique as both a method of analysis and as a viable form of political action. Through this collaboration was developed more grounded theories of social reproduction as well as of resistance (e.g., Everhart, 1983; McLaren, 1980; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977). The significance of the New Sociology of Education should not be underestimated; the American Educational Studies Association has incorporated the pursuit of normative, interpretive and critical analysis into its statement of curricular purpose, NCATE has adopted this language into its accreditation standards, only the most traditional preservice programs fail to include reference to reproduction and resistance theory. And yet it seems to me that the insights of critical theory have very little impact on the structure and content of the majority of public classrooms that I have observed. The reasons for this appear to be twofold. First, precisely as the insights of critical ethnography were gaining credibility (and perhaps in reaction to this rising influence) the capitalist state launched a massive effort to reassert ideological hegemony through (a) attack on the public schools as having failed to properly serve its social maintenance function (e.g., *The Nation at Risk*) and (b) portraying educators as resistant to change thereby requiring that school reform efforts be centrally directed by state political bodies. By and large, public school educators were not sufficiently vested in critical consciousness nor versed in strategies of mobilizing collective political struggle to effectively resist the power of the state to intensify its control. Second, many university-based researchers, while lamenting the injustice of public attack on the nations schools, did not apparently feel compelled to suggest concrete strategies for mobilizing and sustaining collective resistance. In the confluence of these tendencies, the battle was lost.

## Postmodernism

Concurrent with the development of critical ethnography were the beginnings of development of postmodernist social analysis. Whereas critical ethnography tended to borrow from critical theory the emphasis on analysis and critique of the political-economic infrastructure, postmodernism developed themes of the centrality of language and critique of instrumental rationality, while substituting for the universalistic, formalistic, and transcendent nature of understanding a view of social life as fragmented, particularistic, and episodic. In essence, postmodernism introduced a profound skepticism regarding "grand narrative" and "totalizing rhetoric," the effect of which was to challenge the legitimacy of tra-

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ditional macrostructural theories of society. This is an important "negative" function, in that it helps clear away the ideological constraints of the past, but it is only a first step for social reconstruction. Moreover, it creates something of a dilemma, for without some superordinate, institutional level theory of school-society relationships within which to locate critical studies of schooling, there is the danger that critical study may degenerate into a fragmented collection of what C. Wright Mills described as "abstracted empiricism," and what may be better described in the context of critical ethnographic study as "isolated interpretivism."

Now to be sure, postmodernist critique did serve the valuable function of allowing researchers to abandon, hopefully once and for all, reductionist economic or racial or gendered accounts of social determination and/or influence (McCarthy & Apple, 1988). It also highlighted the need for scholars to pause and reflect on the ideological nature of their work (McCarthy, 1993). It may even serve to challenge the privileged position to which the critic qua researcher had risen (although it is doubtful that we are willing to relinquish what little status we still retain). Yet I remain convinced that the institutions that support transnational capitalism, the capitalist state, and the privilege of the ruling class will be able to withstand the blistering rhetoric of postmodernists simply declaring that the prevailing basis of authority and privilege is a chimera. Perhaps I am merely anachronistic, but I remained convinced that at least for the near future something very similar to old fashioned strategic political opposition will be needed to stimulate fundamental transformation of the social formation toward conditions of greater equity and democratic participation.

The relevance of postmodernism for this discussion appears to me to be located in sensitizing us to two features. One is grounded in my belief as a sociologist that we remain rational and social animals. The dominant forms of rationality may shift, but we do not thereby escape the search for meaning. Likewise, although the prevailing forms of association may change, we still seek social affiliation. Postmodernism challenges us to examine social practices of emerging tribalism, and multiple and shifting affiliations in a variety of discourse communities. I am coming to the opinion that discourse communities, rather than class, race, and gender are becoming the central categories of social accounting. If that is true, at least in part, then ethnographers are justified in undertaking renewed interest in the constitutive functions of language. Second, it appears to me that the postmodern decentering of authority challenges the privileged status of the rational individual, rational organizations and institutions as well as religion, and the family. We are seeing the emergence of a self-referential and self-generated individualism, inscribed by multiple discourse communities. The primary frame of reference to making normative judgments is coming to be subjective experience. Any movement toward collective political action must take into consideration these social conditions.

## WHAT NOW IS TO BE DONE?

I am not alone in believing that critical studies generally, and critical ethnography in particular, needs to adopt a more politically engaged research agenda (Whitty, 1985). Critique of a particular course of action, within the context of an already existing structure of possible actions, may have had a transformative *potential* in the past (e.g., critique of particular distribution policies within the context of U.S. capitalist economic relationships); such critique is certainly consistent with a traditional democratic and emancipatory research project. But add to this mix a postmodern dismissal of belief in the legitimacy of, and overarching logic of structural analysis, capitalism and modern institutional society, and something more than critique is necessary; one must adopt strategies of *affirmative, reconstructive collective social action*. To develop such strategies two problems must be overcome.

First, we live in a society struggling to reinvent itself. The old modernist order really has been discredited, and we may never again praise it with a pure heart. The society really is postmodernist; many people really do manifest attitudes of cynicism, fragmentation, anxiety, and uncertainty. At the same time it appears that we really cannot build a new social order dedicated to principles of justice and equity without at least some unity of purpose and collective action in pursuit of a common vision. I would immodestly propose then that a central problematic, and defining characteristic, of postcritical ethnography would be to (a) investigate the opportunities and barriers to development of affirmative, critical, postmodern social consciousness; (b) explicate socially contingent, alternative strategies of mobilizing and sustaining affirmative, reconstructive collective social action oriented toward achievement of common purposes; and (c) ensure that postcritical ethnographers be willing to exercise leadership in pursuit of that endeavor. We need to posit an alternative vision of possibility of the social formation and then work to animate that vision.

Second, in responding to the challenge posed by postmodern cultural sensibilities, ethnographers must adopt forms of communication that better resonant with those who are the object of study and with those who are the consumers of ethnographic accounts. In meeting this challenge, I suggest adoption of narrative analysis. My objective here is very modest and is meant only to be suggestive.

Bruner (1985) made a distinction between paradigmatic and narrative forms of cognitive functioning. Lyotard (1984) made a similar distinction between scientific and narrative knowledge. The essential point that is being made is between knowledge that derives from the analysis of discrete data points, accumulated and unified through inductive reasoning for the purpose of generating axiomatic theory to guide prediction and control and knowledge that derives from story. As described by Polkinghorne (1995), "A story is a special type of discourse production. In a story, events and actions are drawn together

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into an organized whole by means of a plot. A plot is a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed" (p. 7). Polkinghorne also made a distinction between the analysis of narrative in which a particular story is the object of analysis, and narrative analysis in which a new, "emplotted" narrative is produced. "The outcome of a narrative analysis is a story—for example, an historical account, a case study, a life story, or a storied episode of a person's life. In this type of analysis, the researcher's task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15).

Everyone likes a good story, which is perhaps one reason why teachers are so often drawn to ethnographic forms of research. But there may be something more involved. When you listen to teachers and school administrators talk, two features are common. One is that they tend to attribute what they have learned to personal experience, not their preservice training, not the workshops they have attended for continuing certification; primacy of place is granted to personal experience. Second, when educators speak of professional issues in the presence of their peers they almost inevitably begin ritualistically: "I have been (or have only been) a teacher (or administrator) for X years, and I have discovered. . . ." The subtext is that (a) the speaker has earned the right to speak through experience, (b) the comments to follow are grounded in experience, (c) that others have the obligation to honor the fact of the experience even though they may have different experiences or conclusions, and (d) the moral of the *narrative analysis* to be shared will be embedded within the plot and context of the story. The point I make here is that narrative analysis resonates with the epistemic structure of schooling in ways that no other form of knowledge production offers. If we are to speak meaningfully to educators, we must do so through the use of narrative; no other form has similar power to inform and motivate.

Additionally, recall the second quote from Polkinghorne, the "task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data," and consider where these data elements come from in the stories of educators. It is often the case that they were neither originally presented nor perceived in a unified chronology. They were selected and constructed through a dialectic process of perception-reflection-construction; this such student, that such class, this teachable moment, that instructional failure. It is enough to make a positivist blanch: the ecological fallacy committed with impunity, the unreliability of selective memory, the lack of concern with objectivity. Yet the stories are so often similar, both for what is included and for what is left unspeaken. What is included are people and activities, represented to reveal both a moral order and a struggle to achieve collective or individual purpose; what is so often left out is the invisible structure of metacognitive interpretive schema and the constitutive and regulative rules of the institutional life-world. Teachers' stories reveal a human struggle located organizationally, but not institutionally. The result is a narrative that often celebrates and reinforces the "heroic" struggle of autonomous individuals, while diminishing the likelihood

that these individuals will become a unified political force. Seldom do the narratives of educators recount a collective endeavor. In this regard, traditional narrative may actually serve as a counter transformative force.

The *researcher's task* is to reconfigure narratives in such a way that the hidden structures and processes are revealed; so that all of the relevant data elements are incorporated, unified, and attain meaning. And having brought to the narrative a more inclusive set of concerns and understandings, the research narrative must also point toward future action. Narrative, grounded as it is in *past* experience, is inherently conservative. If narrative is to contribute to a postcritical ethnographic project, then there must be an attempt to articulate a future of possibility different from the past and strategies for attaining that future consistent with the values and ethics of participants. Such narrative analysis may not attain paradigmatic objectivity, but may attain something of greater social worth: fidelity with the lived experience of schooling (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995), intersubjective validation of the narrative itself, and the possibility and desirability of participating in a collective "narrative."

In articulating a narrative of a collective experience, it is necessary to incorporate "data events" from a variety of levels (e.g., institutional, group, and personal) and emplot these elements within the context of the story. Emplotting institutional level structure and process is perhaps the most difficult because of the ambiguous character of institutions. Institutions are analytically and phenomenally independent of individuals, but they do not have an existence apart from the consciousness, habits and routines of individuals. Institutions exist because individuals qua social actors have internalized, objectified/reified, and externalized predictable, taken-for-granted ways of being in the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). And inherent in institutionalization is the logic of categorization of "This such" and "That" as instances of some class of phenomena. Narrative, by contrast emphasizes the distinctiveness and particularity of events. How then to *instantiate* the categorical in such a way that it both resonates with the lived experiences of individuals and demystifies reified institutional imperatives?

One strategy may be to borrow from Weber's notion of *verstehen*. If you have read Weber's letters, you may recall his describing *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* as the first attempt to employ the method of "empathic understanding" (*verstehen*), "creative imagination" and "critical judgments of plausibility" at the macrostructural level. In collecting data, he visited several capitalist societies, he interviewed scores of people, and began to articulate the variety of interpretive frameworks that people used to make sense of the rapidly changing social conditions of the late 19th century. Weber did not presume the existence of a categorical, universal and essentialist institutional structure of capitalism resonating ideologically with the Protestant ethic. Rather he "discovered" that such a connection appeared to exist, if we may borrow a term from Durkhiem, at the level of the collective unconscious. To engage in postcritical narrative analysis is to reveal the influence of internalized institutional motives of individuals and to connect these motive influences with the

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more apparent causes and explanations of social action. Such a strategy may not overcome the "otherness" of institutional forces, but it may make it more accessible to social intervention.

### CLOSING

By way of closing the following are the essential points.

- We live under conditions of postindustrial capitalism. We don't know exactly what this will come to mean, but may predict that the basic structures of domination and subordination that characterized earlier capitalist phases will persist. I am inclined to believe that one of the most significant changes will be in the analytic categories by which we divide a population. Class and to lesser extent race and gender may decline in relative significance, whereas focus on various discourse communities will be ascendant.
- Critique of modernism and especially instrumental reason will serve to catapult ethnography to a place of prominence in social science research and will alter the prevailing forms of ethnographic study. Narrative analysis did not and could not emerge as a legitimate system of general social inquiry under modernist epistemic dominance. Narrative that links personal experience with structural conditions in the service of generating intersubjective understanding and collective action will likely become the prevailing method in a post-critical ethnography.
- Because of the intensity of need under conditions of postindustrial capitalism, there is greater need for social science research to contribute to the project of daring to build a new social order. In this, researchers should address the questions of What? So What? Now What? and How? In the past we have addressed the first two questions, we must do better in the future.

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