The Destructive Path of Neoliberalism: An International Examination of Education
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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Scope
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
THE DESTRUCTIVE PATH OF NEOLIBERALISM:
AN INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATION OF EDUCATION

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Urban educators carry out their work in schools at a time in world history that is
difficult to ignore, let alone imagine. Capitalism, functioning as if it has an in-built
drive to spawn a cruel progeny of ill-tempered bankers and corporate accountants,
has become more and more organically integrated into a world system and
increasingly predatory, as the unfolding global recession and sub-prime crisis
continues to reveal. But the problem is not so much dissolute CEOs who abominate
the masses or the empire of greed in which they live. The problem is the capitalist
system itself in which those who have to sell their labor-power are part of one
class—the class that produces the surplus-value capitalism needs to sustain itself.
Those who purchase human labor and take the profit away from labor are part of
the other class—the ruling class or capitalist class. Gold and Feldman write:

Global capitalism operates across continents and has created an international
division of labor. Yet despite its highly socialized character, the system is
founded on private ownership of the means of production and the alienation
of the workforce from the fruits of their labor. Capitalism produces commodities
for profit for markets instead of need, and so compels consumers to buy what
they do not necessarily need or want, or cannot in reality afford, through
extensive credit and debt arrangements. Capitalism talks about peace yet
maintains a military-industrial complex complete with vast armies directed at
developing countries and domestic populations alike. Capitalism is in sum an
alienating, irrational system that poses a danger to the future of humanity.
(2007, p. 68)

The state of the world looks irrepresibly bleak. In so-called Western ‘democracies’,
the corporate media continue to function in the interests of the transnational
capitalist class. The war in Iraq has not ceased to bring its wretched havoc into
the pock-marked streets of the Middle East. The influence of US Christian
conservatives can been seen in the growing media attention paid to huckster
politicians like Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee. A feckless cabal of Christian-
right ‘profamily’ activists increasingly continue to stoke nativist sentiments and
pander to fears about Latino immigration at home, and Muslim immigration in
places like Europe, which they claim is facing a ‘demographic winter’ unless the
white population produce enough babies to achieve “replacement-level fertility”
(Joyce, 2008). George W. Bush’s presidential term is drawing to an ignoble close,
like a gangrene-ridden wound in the soul of the country being stapled shut by a
back-alley physician, but he continues to apprise himself of what little time he has
left to wreak as much havoc as he can. Currently, “our head torturer is a missionary to the Middle East and begging weaker nations to assist him in his desire to massacre the children of Iran as he has massacred the children of Iraq. Jesus has words for President Bush when he said: “Alas for you hypocrites, you travel over land and sea to make a single proselyte, and when you have him, you make him twice as fit for hell as you are, Matt. 23, 13” (Office of the Americas, 2008, p. 2). And as for the academy in these dark times, postmodern theory and anti-referential writing remain in vogue as the most fashionable form of apostasy undertaken by leftwing social critics and social justice educators.

That the media have conspired to disguise the number of Iraqi civilians exterminated by US bombs, missiles, and machine-gun fire (the real weapons of mass destruction) is but one sign that the country has moved deeper into a moral abyss. When the respected British medical journal, Lancet, published a major statistical study (October, 2006) by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health on how many Iraqis had been killed as a result of the U.S. invasion and occupation, the US media either buried the story, criticized the study on methodological grounds, or published the results with a disclaimer. The Johns Hopkins study estimated that 655,000 Iraqis had been killed as of July 2006, at least 30 percent violently and at least 30 percent directly by coalition forces (McElwee, 2008). The organization, Just Foreign Policy, published their extrapolation of the Johns Hopkins estimate of violent deaths on September 18, 2007 and put the current number at 1.1 million. In September 2007 a respected British polling firm, Opinion Research Business (ORB), released an independent poll finding that 1.2 million Iraqis had been killed violently since the U.S. invasion, an estimate that coincided closely with that of Just Foreign Policy. Associated Press’s senior deputy international editor, Steven Komarow, complained about the lack of information about the methodology of the poll, and also asserted that the Johns Hopkins study used “a technique that was not scientifically accepted” (cited in McElwee, 2008). Yet polls by the same firm that carry a message more favorable to U.S. foreign policy are regularly reported. While the Johns Hopkins studies “employ the method accepted around the world to measure birth and death rates in the wake of natural and man-made disasters” (McElwee, 2008), the media regularly cites “similar studies whose results do not reflect badly on US military policy” (McElwee, 2008). More recently, a January 4 (2008) article by the US-based National Journal’s Neil Munro and Carl Cannon attacked the 2004 and 2006 Lancet studies, claiming that Professor John Tirman, Executive Director and Principal Research Scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for International Studies (MIT) commissioned the second Lancet survey with $46,000 from George Soros’s Open Society Institute and additional support from other funders. The mere fact that Soros was a billionaire who used his money to try to defeat Bush in 2004 discredited the research in the eyes of Munro and Cannon—and a host of other media pundits. The Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the Sunday Times, the Spectator, joined National Journal in attacking the Lancet study. This is the imperialist media at its best.

Today we are facing the prospect of a new U.S. administration continuing a hostile policy of blockade, aggression and counter-revolution against Cuba.
Immediately following Fidel Castro’s announcement that after more than 50 years as Cuba’s president, he is stepping down, statements by Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain reaffirmed that relations will be normalized and the blockade lifted only if the sovereign government of Cuba is overthrown. In other words, only when socialism is replaced with capitalism. Obama praised pro-U.S. counterrevolutionaries as heroes and maintained that Fidel’s announcement marked “the end of a dark era in Cuba’s history.” Given the fact that the US has bombed more countries than any other country in history, and has carried out numerous financial, political and military interventions in countries hostile to US economic and geostrategic interests (under the smokescreen of fighting communism, terrorism or ridding the world of weapons of mass destruction), not to mention its self-proclaimed unilateral right to dictate how sovereign nations should run their political and economic affairs, is this so surprising? Especially when you consider the dozens of governments (including numerous democratically elected governments) directly or covertly removed by the United States over the last 6 decades. When the United Nations or international legal institutions approve of these actions, the US will claim its moral authority, but when these institutions do not support US actions, or upholds resolutions against US actions (which is rarely the case), then the US will assume an above-the-law status, claiming it has the right to act in its own interests regardless of international support. The kind of democracy and freedom that US ruling-class politicians and other political apologists for US imperialism would like to bring to Cuba or governments that pursue economic nationalism or socialism is the kind that would clear the way for a corporate takeover of the economy. As Gloria La Riva (2008) notes,

What they mean is the kind of “democracy” that the U.S. government has imposed on Iraq, which so far has killed more than two million Iraqis and destroyed the country. It is freedom for the corporations, banks and militarists to exploit and to rule….For the Democrats and Republicans, acting on behalf of the corporations, banks and militarists, the only Cuban “democracy” they will accept is the kind that returns the island to capitalism, as a neocolony of the United States. But in a country that is struggling to overcome centuries of underdevelopment and colonialism, it is socialism that has provided the basic rights for free quality healthcare and education, and housing for all. Here is the United States, the richest country in all of history, such rights are only a dream.

Critics of Cuba want to bring U.S.-style elections to Cuba. Again, Gloria La Riva (2008) writes:

How can candidates who together will spend more than $1 billion in the presidential race demand “free” elections in Cuba? In Cuba, on all levels—municipal, provincial and national—the elections are truly free, and campaign spending by candidates is prohibited. While members of the U.S. Congress give themselves large salaries and huge payoffs from lobbyists, elected officials in Cuba maintain their regular jobs, and serve without additional compensation for their responsibilities as legislators.
While US pundits continue to decry the leadership of Fidel Castro, it remains the case that “Fidel Castro is admired and loved in Cuba and the world over. His legendary courage and profound belief—from the earliest days—in the heroism and capacity of the Cuban people to make history, is what now enables him to retire from his official posts with confidence” (La Riva, 2008). What is clear is that in our schools today, the history of US imperialism is effectively absent. Perhaps we should take a lesson from General Smedly Butler, twice decorated with the Medal of Honor, who was ordered to intervene in Mexico in 1914 and who also led interventions into Cuba and Haiti. He said:

I spent thirty-three years and four months in active service in the country’s most agile military force, the Marines. I served in all ranks from second Lieutenant to Major General. And during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.

I suspected I was just part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it. Like all members of the military profession I never had an original thought until I left the service. My mental faculties remained in suspended animation while I obeyed the orders of the higher-ups. This is typical with everyone in the military service.

Thus I helped make Mexico, and especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in. I helped in the raping of half-a-dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers and Co. in 1909–1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras “right” for American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested.

During those years, I had, as the boys in the back room would say, a swell racket. I was rewarded with honors, medals, and promotion. Looking back on it, I feel that I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate a racket in three city districts. The Marines operated on three continents.

In our current world-historical state of affairs, human lives are increasingly shaped by the needs of global corporations. At the level of the academy, resistance to neoliberalism and the invasion of capitalist commodification into everyday life has taken many shapes and forms but in the main it has remained mostly at the level of a politics of representation. And in this politically amorphous arena, the cultural turn towards ‘sign value’ has been the hallmark of a postmodern theory of identity. The trend with avant-garde theories in today’s seminar rooms is to detach the social relations of production and class struggle from cultural representations over which meanings supposedly now float indeterminately like the strange “attractors” of chaos theory. Historical materiality disappears into the vortex of the ‘non-
According to Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2008), as culture moved from the mid-1940s and the Bretton Woods agreement to the world stage of NAFTA, WTO, and neoliberal globalization, it began to face deeper and deeper class antagonisms. This occurred as corporate requirements came to determine more and more the policies and practices of national governments and international agencies, and as capitalist globalization saw increased trade and corporate deregulation; unrestricted movement of capital; international, unregulated financial markets; privatization of public services; new forms of ownership such as intellectual property rights; commodification of new areas such as human DNA, integration of national economies into a global system; increased corporate concentration through global firms; incorporation of new geographic areas into global production; erosion of traditional powers and polities of nation states; and global cultural homogenization (Gold and Feldman, 2007). In the realm of leftist theory, culture was no longer thought to be superstructural to capital’s base (that ‘militant’ Marxist theory was now critiqued as gravely outmoded and ‘instrumentalist’) and the academy began to witness a burgeoning interest among scholars in post-instrumental culture, cultural materialism, cultural economy and the political economy of the sign (Ebert and Zavarzadeh, 2008). Today, cultural theory reigns supreme. Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2008, p. 61) maintain that today,

[c]ulture is no longer an explanatory concept but a figure that intervenes in itself and rids itself of commitment—of cultural politics. Its politics becomes politics in “the last instance” which, like Althusser’s moment of economic determination, will never arrive….The unburdening of culture from culture is intensified in the linguistic turn within the cultural turn by theorizing culture as a form of “writing”—culture as spacing, difference, and singularity. In the cultural turn, culture….is a textuality of the negative, a site of meaningfulness without meaning and thoughtful unthoughtfulness.

Ebert and Zavarzadeh argue that it would be naïve to assume there is no connection between the growing opacity of capital’s system of exchange, the expansion of imperialism in the era of neoliberal globalization, and the politics of representation that is now regnant in the humanities and the arts. Take the case of abstract expressionism in painting. Not only did Nelson Rockefeller describe abstract expressionism as “free enterprise painting” (cited in Ebert and Zavarzadeh, 2008, p. 59) but the CIA used it as part of its Cold War tactics against socialism and its cultural expressions. And the same support was given to cultural criticism and anti-referential writing. The era of high modernism (that emphasized the indeterminacy of the signifier, ‘textuality without an outside’, ‘materiality without matter’) saw an increase in anti-representational writings and the anti-realist view of representation (Ebert and Zavarzadeh, 2008). Ebert and Zavarzadeh write:

MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art)—the main site for the popular dissemination of postwar abstract expressionism—was a close collaborator with the CIA in advancing the cause of indeterminacy of the sign…on behalf
of capitalism and in fighting against socialism. State support of self-mimesis, art about its own nomadic signs—through the CIA and its various cultural institutions on behalf of capitalism—goes beyond support for a particular school or textual art. It is support for apolitical theories of art and apolitical intellectuals who disseminate them. The cultural turn is, above all, about an interpretive strategy that represents the world as a textuality without text—activities without referents (meanings)—and objects without objectivity. The anti-mimetic text is a response to a need: capital after the Bretton Woods agreement, which founded the financial ground for globalization, needed more agile, effective, and aggressive discursive practices to normalize its social contradictions on a global level. Anti-mimetic art “blanks” out these contradictions in an orgy of the singularity of signs, whose abundance of color/meanings exceeds all representations and becomes a performativity of the “impossible,” which reflexively becomes the only possible subject of discourse. It dismantles the “old” reference theories by marking them as residues of a metaphysics of presence. (2008, pp. 59–60)

It is indeed telling that today’s poststructuralist/postmodernist theories emphasizing anti-referential theories and language as anti-referential difference, so often decry Marxist analysis as overstretching and ‘totalizing’. According to our postmodernist visionaries, urban education linked to the dynamics of social class and the capitalist division of labor is no longer producing students, but rather students are now producing themselves as ‘consumers’ of education. Resistance has also become a form of consumption as students are engaged in forging their multiple and overlapping identities through the politics of cultural consumption at the shopping mall. Lost in this analysis is the concept of subjectivity being circumscribed or manufactured by social relations of capitalist production. According to Ebert and Zavarzadeh,

Consumptionist ontology is constructed to legitimate an objective class interest. This valorizing of consumption over production in such idealist theories leads to an interiorist and spiritualist view of reality—one that depicts the world itself as an effect of the consciousness and desires of the consumer. Consuming subjects are lead to believe that they not only (re-)create themselves and change their personal realities by acquiring ever new identities through shopping, but that they can also change the world through the intense experience of consumption that make them obtain some commodities and disregard others. These consumption theories of identity and similar post stories are constitutive of the contemporary cultural turn which has been a particularly effective ally of capital. (2008, pp. 174–175)

In the labor sector, neoliberal globalization has brought about a transformation in work conditions and new ways of rationalizing labor that focus on a distinction between time owned by the workers and their employer’s time, a shift that is collapsing private life into work life (Couldry, 2008) and naturalizing this collapse as a “common sense” shift expected of the new ‘post-Fordist’ workforce. What has occurred in general has been a significant stress on biographical solutions and the
formation and adaptation of subjectivities to extant structural contradictions and the individualization of negative externalities that requires the valorization of individual competence and self-transformation at the workplace (Couldry, 2008). The first transformation in work conditions brought about by neoliberal globalization is “the extension of working hours into a permanent availability-for-work under the guise of ‘flexibility’” (2008, p. 4). The second transformation is “increased employer flexibility to terminate work opportunities with minimal regard for the consequences to the employee.” Two contradictions emerge from this—the “‘timelessness’ (availability without restriction) required of employees” and “the ‘timeliness’ required by [employees’] intimate human relationships” (2008, p. 4). Describing the supermarket chain Asada (now owned by Wal-Mart), Couldry reports on the permanent monitoring of staff who were exhorted to exhibit “miles of smiles” (that had to be a “real smile”) and to live the Asada family values. Work-based surveillance “is used to monitor every aspect of performance, including the length of the toilet breaks” (2008, p. 6). Value is placed on “assurance that the performance’s features will be reproduced beyond the (necessarily limited) moment of active surveillance; hence the value of ‘authenticity’ or deep acting, based on internalization of the performance norms of the job as ‘natural’” (2008, p. 7). These are values normally associated with the private time of the employees.

In describing the “emotional labor” required of service sector employees, Couldry cites the chair of the UK Call Center Managers Association who notes: “service sector employers are increasingly demanding that their employees deep act, work on and change their feelings to match the display required by the labor process” (2008, p. 6). We see the second transformation of work conditions in such instances as the “conflict between the growing individualization of the consequences of increased availability-for-work (as individuals adapt their wider life to constantly changing work flows) and the social costs of that process (for family life, education of children, violence)” (2008, pp. 4–5). Resulting in this case is what Couldry (2008) calls the divorce between the economic system and the social whole and the devaluation of collective politics and collective resistance. What we are faced with in this reorganization of labor-time are the brute lineaments circumscribing the production of new forms of neoliberal subjectivity among workers. Popular culture provides a dominant philosophy that provides workers with “consciousness-skills” that positions them to accept their workplace fate. As Ebert and Zavarzadeh note:

For the labor force to do its “job” it not only has to be highly proficient technically but also have a particular set of “consciousness skills,” which teach workers how to interpret the world in such a way as to legitimate capitalism. Legitimization is always indirectly through “personal” beliefs that are constructed so as to seem to have come from “within” (for example, belief in hard work, private property, a power hierarchy, love, common sense, the importance of family, and reverence for the military). These consciousness skills are taught with varying degrees of subtlety in the schools, media, church, the family, and other channels of ideology. They are
grounded in the dominant philosophy which is itself an expression of the 
social relations of production. The ultimate ideological goal of these 
consciousness skills is to position workers—through the innumerable cultural 
intermediaries of films, novels, music, and sports—in such a relation to the 
social world that they accept the exchange of their wages for their labor-
power as an equal and fair exchange and, in effect, consent to their own 
exploitation, seeing it as a “natural” part of the exchange. (2007, p. 154)

What is needed in today’s world is a very different set of consciousness skills than 
taught by the pedagogical processes of popular culture. Those skills offered by our 
postmodern apostates do little to provide these skills. Students and teachers armed 
with postmodern flexible identities that can ‘decenter’ normative values carried by 
mainstream discourses are certainly not going to gain much ground against the 
great juggernaut of capital. Wearing your hat backwards or text messaging 
profanities about the floor supervisor are not sufficient. Ebert and Zavarzadeh 
proclaim” “What people need is not more cultural identities but equal economic 
access” (2008, p. 95). What we need are teachers who understand how value is 
produced by labor within capitalist societies, and who can work actively to bring 
about the demise of capital. Teachers and students reflexively armed with critical 
pedagogy must not only resist this form of ideological warfare but must work 
towards a vision of new social, material, and economic conditions out of which can 
be built new forms of humanist and humanizing subjectivity. And this means 
struggling for a post-capitalist alternative to capital’s value form, in other words, 
for a socialist alternative.

Porfilio and Malott’s An International Examination of Urban Education is a 
collection of powerful essays that can provide teachers, students, scholars and 
activists with real critical fodder for resistance. Students who populate our urban 
schools share different prisms of reality, they hold different ideals, have different 
ideas about the lives they would like to lead, engage in different strategies of 
change, follow different paths and dream different dreams. Some choose to focus 
on themselves in isolation from the lives of others and concentrate on acquiring 
the luxuriant promises of capital. Others are able to remove the veil from the 
advertisements and corporate messages that fleck their urban lifeworlds and the 
manifold aspects of their lives and possess the strength to resist the seductive 
lure of exploiting others for personal gain. They learn to effect change by effecting 
change, they learn to struggle by struggling, they learn to become revolutionaries 
by making the revolution. Those who choose to make a difference not just for 
themselves but for humanity as a whole are keeping social reality from becoming 
calcified and static because in choosing to fight to attain their dreams and ideals 
they are building political awareness and discipline. They are acquiring critical 
consciousness skills. Porfilio and Malott’s contributors recognize this and share a 
profound respect for all of these change agents and potential change agents—these 
cultural workers that populate our schools and cultural spaces throughout society 
and around the globe.

Students and teachers from urban centers worldwide are looking with fertile 
eyes at renewing social life, looking to de-commodify spaces of social life where
advertising and private wealth have wormed into the very fabric of the ordinary and everyday, and protesting those social relations that prohibit free dialogue and proscribe dissent. They are the new warriors of hope, making a difference, often under the sign of hip-hop, sometimes in the picket lines, and very often marching in the streets in protest with various social movements in the interests of a more humanized and humanizing world. These are the students and teachers that are living critical pedagogy in the streets.

An International Examination of Urban Education, edited by Bad Porfilio and Curry Malott, is not only the sharpest expression of the debate so far around the politics of urban schooling, it is the most substantive and far-reaching.

REFERENCES