

Toward a New Sociology of Curriculum

Henry A. Giroux

Some theorists are rejecting the traditional model of curriculum and raising important questions about the relationship between schools and society.

Anthony Giddons, the English sociologist, once remarked that those who are waiting for a Newton of the social sciences "are not only waiting for a train that won't arrive, they're in the wrong station altogether."¹ Giddons' remark could very well have set the stage for one of the most interesting and urgent debates now taking place in the curriculum field in the United States.

At the heart of this debate is the question of whether the curriculum field can continue to pattern itself after the model of the natural sciences. It is not simply that the curriculum field suffers from serious misconceptions regarding its mode of reasoning and methodology. What is at stake is more than a conceptual problem. The real issue centers on whether the field is moribund, both politically and ethically. Put another way, is the curriculum field in a state of arrest, incapable of developing either emancipatory intentions or new curricular possibilities?²

Debate of this sort is not new to the curriculum field. Questions concerning the role that schools and curriculum play in reproducing the values and attitudes necessary for the maintenance of the dominant society have been raised by educators since the turn of the century. What is new is the scope as well as the nature of some of the questions being raised. This should not suggest that a new school or paradigm has appeared in the field. Such an assumption would be both misleading and inaccurate. It would be misleading because those who make up what I will label as the new sociology of curriculum movement represent many critical strands and traditions. It would be inaccurate to call such a movement a paradigm because it would oversimplify its varied members' relatedness and depth of commitment to a new world view, one that speaks to a unifying set of assumptions and

¹ Quentin Skinner. "The Flight from Positivism." *New York Review of Books* 25(10): 26; June 15, 1976.

² Emancipatory intentions in this case can be generally construed as a paradigm that combines theory and practice in the interest of freeing individuals and social groups from the subjective and objective conditions that bind them to the forces of exploitation and oppression. This suggests a critical theory that promotes self-reflection aimed at dismantling forms of false consciousness and ideologically frozen social relations, all of which usually parade under the guise of universalistic laws. Thus, emancipation would render complementary critical thinking and political action. This suggests a learning process in which thought and action would be mediated by specific cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions.

guidelines for the development of curriculum theory and practice. Though such a paradigm doesn't exist at the present time, the foundations for such a paradigm can be recognized in some of the broad concerns and related questions voiced by a number of emerging disparate critical traditions.³

The singular theme that unites all of these critical traditions is their opposition to what might be called the technocratic rationality that guides traditional curriculum theory and design. This form of rationality has dominated the curriculum field since its inception and can be found in varied forms in the work of Tyler, Taba, Saylor and Alexander, Beauchamp, and others. William F. Pinar claims that between 85 and 95 percent of those who work in the curriculum field share a perspective that is either tied or closely related to the dominant technocratic rationality.⁴ Herbert Kliebard has further argued that this form of rationality has evolved in a manner parallel to the scientific management movement of the 1920s, and that early founders of the curriculum movement such as Bobbitt and Charters warmly embraced the principles of scientific management.⁵ The school as factory metaphor has a long and extensive history in the curriculum field. Consequently, modes of reasoning, inquiry, and research characteristic of the field have been modeled on assumptions drawn from a model of science and social relations closely tied to the principles of prediction and control.

The new sociology of curriculum critics see their tasks as more than an attempt to clear up what might be called a conceptual muddle. In the first place, the concepts that underlie the traditional curriculum paradigm serve as guides to action. Secondly, these concepts are inextricably linked to value judgments about standards of morality and questions concerning the nature of freedom and control. More specifically, these assumptions not only represent a set of ideas that educators use to structure their view of curriculum; they also represent a set of material practices embedded in rituals and routines thought of as necessary and natural facts. Thus, they have become forms of sedimented history, common-sense assumptions that have been severed from the historical context from which they developed.⁶

The new sociology of curriculum views the basic assumptions embedded in the traditional curriculum paradigm as the basis for both a critique and a limit situation to be overcome in developing new orientations and ways of talking about curriculum. Hence, it is important that we specify what these assumptions are: (a) Theory in the curriculum field should operate in the interest of lawlike propositions that are empirically testable; (b) The natural sciences provide the "proper" model of explanation for the concepts and

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techniques of curriculum theory, design, and evaluation; (c) Knowledge should be objective and capable of being investigated and described in a neutral fashion; and (d) Statements of value are to be separated from "facts" and "modes of inquiry" that can and ought to be objective.

In the most general sense, the technocratic model of curriculum has been criticized both for its stated claims to the truth and the assumptions implicit in the kinds of questions it ignores. Regarding its stated truth claims, critics argue that the traditional model rests on a number of flawed assumptions about the nature and role of theory, knowledge, and science. Moreover, these assumptions have resulted in truncated forms of inquiry that ignore fundamental questions concerning the larger relationship between ideology and school knowledge as well as meaning and social control.⁷

³ Decent collections of writings on the movement can be found in: William F. Pinar, editor. *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing, 1975; James Macdonald and Esther Zaret, editors. *Schools in Search of Meaning*. Washington, D.C.: ASCD, 1975. The best book on the subject published in this country is: Michael W. Apple. *Ideology and Curriculum*. Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979. The continental influence can be found in: Jerome Karable and A. H. Halsey, editors. *Power and Ideology in Education*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. I also deal with this subject in a forthcoming book, *Radical Theory and Practice in Classroom Pedagogy*.

⁴ William F. Pinar. "Notes on the Curriculum Field 1978." *Educational Researcher* 7(8): 5-11; September 1978.

⁵ Herbert M. Kliebard. "Bureaucracy and Curriculum Theory." In: *Curriculum Theorizing*, op. cit., pp. 51-69.

⁶ Michael F. D. Young, editor. *Knowledge and Control*. London: Collier Macmillan, 1971.

⁷ Michael W. Apple and Nancy King. "What Do Schools Teach?" In: *Humanistic Education*. Richard Weller, editor. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing, 1977. p. 36. See also: Henry A. Giroux and Anthony N. Penna. "Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum." *Theory and Research in Education* 7(1): in press.

Shortcomings of the Dominant Model

The "new" critics claim that theory in the dominant curriculum model is either ignored altogether or is badly instrumentalized. In other words, theory is important to the degree that it can be rigorously formulated and empirically tested. Its ultimate purpose here is a technocratic one: to reveal lawlike propositions about curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation that can be either factually proven or disproven. Theory is thus reduced to an empirical explanatory framework for social engineering. From this critical perspective, theory appears incapable of stepping outside of its empirical strait jacket in order to raise questions about the nature of truth, the difference between appearance and reality, or the distinction between knowledge and mere opinion. Most importantly, theory in the dominant curriculum paradigm appears unable to provide a rational basis for criticizing the "facts" of the given society. Theory in this case not only ignores its ethical function, it is also stripped of its political function.⁸

Knowledge in the dominant curriculum model is treated primarily as a realm of objective "facts." That is, knowledge appears "objective" in that it is external to the individual and is "imposed" on him or her. As something external, knowledge is divorced from human meaning and intersubjective exchange. It no longer is seen as something to be questioned, analyzed, and negotiated. Instead, it becomes something to be managed and mastered. In this case, knowledge is removed from the self-formative process of generating one's own set of meanings, a process that involves an interpretive relationship between knower and known. Once the subjective dimension of knowing is lost, the purpose of knowledge becomes one of accumulation and categorization. Questions such as "Why this knowledge?" are superseded by technical questions such as "What is the best way to learn this given body of knowledge?" Within the context of this definition of knowledge, curriculum models are developed that stress "mission specificity," "time on task variables," and "feedback obtained to make adjustments."⁹ This view of knowledge is usually accompanied by top-to-bottom classroom social relationships conducive to communiques, not communication.¹⁰ Control, not learning, appears to have a high priority in the traditional curriculum model. What is lost here is the notion that knowledge is not simply "about" an external reality, it is more importantly self-knowledge oriented toward critical understanding and emancipation.

A pivotal force in the traditional curriculum model is the claim to objectivity. Objectivity in this case refers to forms of knowledge and methodological

inquiry that are untouched by the "untidy" world of beliefs and values. While the severance of knowledge and research from value claims may appear to be admirable to some, it hides more than it uncovers. Of course, this is not meant to suggest that challenging the value-neutrality claims of mainstream curriculum theorists is tantamount to supporting the use of bias, prejudice, and superstition in pedagogical inquiry.

Instead, the notion that objectivity is based on the use of normative criteria established by communities of scholars and intellectual workers in any given field is espoused. Intellectual inquiry and research free from values and norms are impossible to achieve. To separate values from "facts" or social inquiry from ethical considerations is pointless. As Howard Zinn points out, it is like trying to draw a map that illustrates every detail on a chosen piece of terrain.¹¹ But this is not just a simple matter of intellectual error; it is an ethical failing as well.

The notion that theory, facts, and inquiry can be objectively determined and used falls prey to a set of values that are both conservative and mystifying in their political orientation. As critics such as Paulo Freire have pointed out, schools do not exist in precious isolation from the rest of society. Schools embody collective attitudes that permeate every aspect of their organization.¹² In essence, they are not things,

⁸ This should not suggest that the new sociology of curriculum supports the separation of theory from empirical work or rejects empirical investigations altogether. Such a characterization is crude and vulgar and appears to exist chiefly in the muddled discourse of critics like Daniel and Laurel N. Tanner. See their critique of the Reconceptualist Movement in: "Emancipation from Research: The Reconceptualist Prescription." *Educational Researcher* 8(6): 8-12; 1979. Theory as it is being described in this essay has its center of gravity in its social potential for insight into the nature of truth and the meaning of life. It is linked to specific interests and situates its assumptions and modes of inquiry in *both* understanding and determining ends. What the new sociology of curriculum rejects is empiricism, that is, the use of theory to boost scientific methodology as the ultimate definition of meaning and truth. Empiricism is theory reduced to the instrumentality of finding means for ends that go unquestioned. It stands convicted of ideology in that it is incapable of identifying its own normative foundation or the interests that it serves. See: Jürgen Habermas. *Toward A Rational Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

⁹ Fenwick W. English. "Management Practice as a Key to Curriculum Leadership." *Educational Leadership* 36(6): 408-13; March 1979. An in-depth response to the positivist ideology inherent in English's model can be found in: Henry A. Giroux. *Schooling and the Culture of Positivism*. Boston: Boston University.

¹⁰ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

¹¹ Howard Zinn. *The Politics of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970. pp. 10-11.

¹² Freire, *op. cit.*

but concrete manifestations of specific rules and social relationships. The nature of their organization is value-based. Similarly, curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation always represent patterns of judgments about the nature of knowledge, classroom social relationships, and the distribution of power. To ignore this is to lose sight of the origins and consequences of the belief system that guides one's behavior in the school setting.

Traditional curriculum represents a firm commitment to a view of rationality that is ahistorical, consensus-oriented, and politically conservative. It

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supports a passive view of students and appears incapable of examining the ideological presuppositions that tie it to a narrow operational mode of reasoning. Its view of science ignores the competing elements and frames of reference within the scientific community itself.¹³ Moreover, it ends up substituting a limited form of scientific methodology based on prediction and control for critical scientific inquiry.

Instead of promoting critical reflection and human understanding, the dominant curriculum model emphasizes the logic of probability as the ultimate definition of truth and meaning. Not only do the concepts that characterize this model appear less than critical, they appear as blank checks that support the status quo. One example of this can be found in the powerful influence of learning psychologists in the field of education with their endless studies on "performance and the interchange between students and teachers."¹⁴ Some critics view this as a strong measure of the political conservatism that dominates the curriculum field. The learning psychology perspective fails to examine the way schools legitimize certain forms of knowledge and cultural interests.¹⁵

The Challenge

The new sociology of curriculum has mounted a serious challenge against many of the deeply held be-

liefs and assumptions that characterize traditional curriculum. This challenge is far from uniform and has its roots in continental philosophies as diverse as existentialism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and phenomenology. The new sociology of curriculum speaks a language that might seem strange when compared to the input-output language of the traditional curriculum model. The new language may be difficult, but it is necessary, because it enables its users to develop new kinds of relationships in the curriculum field and to raise different kinds of questions. This is not a moot point. It would be spurious indeed to dismiss these critics for drawing upon what might appear to be alien forms of language and thought, and some of their detractors have done just that. However, the real point of concern should be whether the language and concepts used are raising profoundly important questions and issues about the curriculum field itself. While it is not possible to present the various factions and issues that make up the new sociology of curriculum movement, the nucleus of some of the more general ideas that run through this perspective can be analyzed briefly.

The new sociology of curriculum group strongly argues that schools are part of a wider societal process and that they must be judged within a specific socio-economic framework. In addition, the curriculum itself is viewed as a selection from the larger culture. From this perspective the new critics argue for a thorough re-examination of the relationship between curriculum, schools, and society. This re-examination focuses on two broad interrelationships. On the one hand, the focus is on the relationship between schools and the dominant society. The focus here is primarily political and ideological; its emphasis is on highlighting how schools function to reproduce, in both the hidden and formal curricula, the cultural beliefs and economic relationships that support the larger social order. On the other hand, the focus is on how the very texture of day to day classroom relationships generates different meanings, restraints, cultural values, and social relationships. Underlying both of these concerns is a deep seated interest in the relationship between meaning and social control.

A number of these critics have been particularly concerned about how meaning is constructed and acted upon in schools. They support the view that the social construction of the principles that govern the

¹³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

¹⁴ Thomas Popkewitz. "Educational Research: Values and Visions of Social Order." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 6(4): 19-39; December 1978.

¹⁵ Karabel and Halsey, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-85.

operation of curriculum design, research, and evaluation are often ignored by curriculum specialists and classroom teachers. One consequence has been that many educators often operate out of common-sense assumptions that fail to raise fundamental questions about how teachers perceive their classroom experiences and students. Also ignored are questions about how students perceive and generate meaning in the classroom; similarly, questions concerning how particular classroom materials mediate meanings between teachers and students, schools and the larger society, also go unquestioned. Within this limited view of meaning, prejudices and social myths are relegated to the realm of unquestioned habits of mind and experience.

Given this mode of behavior, there is little room for students to generate their own meanings, to act on their own lived histories, or to develop an attentiveness to critical thought. Learning under such circumstances, it is argued, degenerates into a euphemism for a mode of control that imposes rather than cultivates meaning. This is a crucial point. If teachers do not bracket their own basic assumptions about curriculum and pedagogy, they do more than transmit unquestioned attitudes, norms, and beliefs. They unknowingly may end up endorsing forms of cognitive and dispositional development that strengthen rather than challenge existing forms of institutional oppression. Commonly accepted definitions about work, play, achievement, intelligence, mastery, failure, and learning are socially constructed categories that carry with them the weight of specific interests and norms. To ignore this important notion is to relinquish the possibility for students and teachers alike to shape reality in an image other than the one that is socially prescribed and institutionally legitimated. The failure of curriculum workers to appreciate that there are fundamental interests of knowledge other than prediction, control, and efficiency is not just a matter of misunderstanding, it is a serious ethical and political failing.

Critics such as Michael Apple have gone far beyond stressing the need for a model of curriculum that generates interpretive understanding and purposive learning. These critics have raised the debate over curriculum to a new level of criticism by calling for a view of curriculum that defines it as a study in ideology.¹⁶ In this view, questions concerning the production, distribution, and evaluation of knowledge are directly linked to questions of control and domination in the larger society. This can be more fully understood by examining some of the types of questions that would provide the basis for viewing curriculum from this perspective. These questions would include:

1. What counts as curriculum knowledge?

2. How is such knowledge produced?
3. How is such knowledge transmitted in the classroom?
4. What kinds of classroom social relationships serve to parallel and reproduce the values and norms embodied in the "accepted" social relations of the workplace?
5. Who has access to "legitimate" forms of knowledge?
6. Whose interests does this knowledge serve?
7. How are social and political contradictions and tensions mediated through acceptable forms of classroom knowledge and social relationships?
8. How do prevailing methods of evaluation serve to legitimize existing forms of knowledge?

At the core of these questions is the recognition that power, knowledge, ideology, and schooling are linked in everchanging patterns of complexity. The nexus that gives form to these interrelationships is social and political in nature, and it is both a product and process of history. In more concrete terms, curriculum theorists, teachers, and students alike embody certain beliefs and practices, concepts and norms that strongly influence how they perceive and structure their educational experiences. These beliefs and routines are historical and social in nature; moreover, they may be the object of self-reflection, or they may exist unnoticed by the individual they influence. In the latter case, they serve to dominate rather than serve the individual in question.

This approach calls for forms of curriculum that push beyond appreciating that knowledge is a social construction. Also, it stresses the need for examining the constellation of economic, political, and social interests that different forms of knowledge may reflect. To put it another way, curriculum models must develop forms of understanding that relate explanations of social meanings to wider societal parameters in order to be able to judge their claims to the truth.¹⁷

Significance for the Future

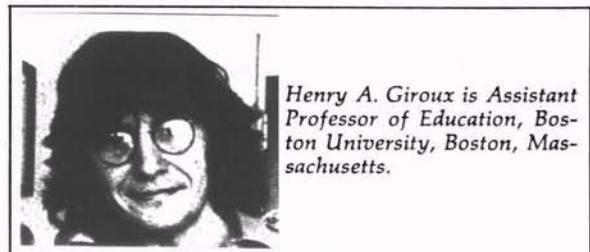
If one purpose of curriculum is to generate possibilities for individual and social emancipation, we will have to develop a new language and new forms of

¹⁶ Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*. Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979; Henry A. Giroux. "Beyond the Limits of Radical Educational Reform: Toward a Critical Theory of Education." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 2(1): in press; Henry A. Giroux. "Paulo Freire's Approach to Radical Educational Reform." *Curriculum Inquiry* 9(4): in press.

¹⁷ Rachel Sharp and Anthony Green. *Education and Social Control: A Study in Progressive Primary Education*. Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.

rationality to accomplish such a task. The predicament of the age is no different from the predicament the curriculum field presently faces. And this predicament is as engaging as it is radical: to build the conditions that allow humanity to search for its self-understanding and meaning. The new sociology of curriculum movement provides us with a number of possibilities for developing more flexible and humanizing forms of curriculum.

We must develop a mode of curriculum that culti-



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vates critical theoretical discourse about the quality and purpose of schooling and human life. We need to develop broader perspectives that enrich rather than dominate the field. Critical curriculum theory must be situational. It must analyze the various dimensions of pedagogy as part of the historical and cultural conjunctures in which they occur. And it must do this with the tools that are fashioned from a variety of disciplines. This does not mean that we have to become political scientists or sociologists in order to study curriculum. That is not the case, and it would be inappropriate to do so. Our center of gravity is curriculum, but we need to enrich our focus by drawing upon the concepts and tools that other disciplines offer us.

The foundation for a new mode of curriculum must be as deeply historical as it is critical. In fact, the critical sensibility must be seen as an extension of historical consciousness. The genesis, development, and unfolding of ideas, social relationship, and modes of inquiry and evaluation must be viewed as part of an ongoing development of complex, historically-bound social conditions and formations.

The new mode of curriculum must be deeply personal. But only in the sense that it recognizes individual uniqueness and needs as part of a specific social reality. We must not confuse self-indulgence with critical pedagogy. Individual and social needs have to be linked and mediated through a critical perspective tied to notions of emancipation. Curriculum models must address themselves to the concrete personal experiences of specific cultural groups and populations. Curriculum educators must be able to recognize the relevance and importance of accepting and using multiple languages and forms of cultural capital (systems of meaning, tastes, ways of viewing

the world, style, and so on). At the same time, educators must acknowledge that the call for cultural pluralism is empty unless it is recognized that the relationship between different cultural groups is mediated through the dominant cultural system. Thus, our task is to unravel these relationships for different cultural groups to emancipate them from the imposed kinds of definitions and emotional pain that minorities of class and color have a history of in this country.

A new mode of curriculum must abandon the ideological pretense of being value-free. To acknowledge that the choices we make concerning all facets of curriculum and pedagogy are value-laden is to liberate ourselves from imposing our own values on others. To admit as such means that we can begin with the notion that reality should never be taken as a given, but instead, has to be questioned and analyzed. In other words, knowledge has to be made problematic and has to be situated in classroom social relationships that allow for debate and communication.

Finally, a new mode of curriculum rationality will have to subordinate technical interests to ethical considerations. The question of means must be subordinated to questions that speak to the ethical consequences of our pursuits. Although these suggestions represent a broad theoretical sweep, they do provide a starting point for developing new modes of curriculum inquiry. Also, the somewhat disparate traditions of the new sociology of curriculum have helped to translate some of the larger abstract issues surrounding the purpose and meaning of schooling into concrete curriculum problems and avenues for further study and research.

I began this essay by pointing out that the traditional model of curriculum was moribund, both politically and ethically. I want to go back to that statement and clarify it, lest it be confused with a form of unwarranted optimism. The dominant technocratic curriculum paradigm may be aging, but it is far from a historical relic, condemned to the dustbin it so richly deserves. The struggle to replace it with principles and assumptions consistent with the vision of the new sociology of curriculum movement will be difficult indeed. But one thing is certain. The struggle for a new mode of curriculum rationality cannot be approached as a technical task only. It must be seen as a social struggle deeply committed to what Herbert Marcuse has aptly termed ". . . the emancipation of sensibility, reason, and imagination in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity."¹⁸ The new sociology of curriculum has helped to make this struggle just a bit easier. The rest is up to us. *EZ*

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse. *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978. p. 9.

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