

Struggling for the Soul of the Nation

Educational Policy, Democratic Leadership, and Radical Democracy in Neoliberal Times

CARLOS ALBERTO TORRES

UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

Two conditions are crucial in preparing radical democratic leaders for a democratic society. I will argue against instrumental rationality and for radical democratic leaders with a critical perspective in education and schools.

Critical Theory has been first and foremost a critique of instrumental rationality, claiming

that instrumental rationality had penetrated all aspects of quotidian life and that science had become a vehicle of social domination and control that actually denied the critical faculty of reason in deference to the empirically provable fact. In their view, science had fallen prey to the scientific method and analysis had become separated from the questions of ethics and ends, instead focusing solely on description, classification, and means. Positivism thus ushered in a paradigm that always stopped short of critique, and was forever stuck in describing the world as it was seen, heard, and felt. (Torres & Van Heertum, 2009, p. 135)

In other terms, instrumental rationality has been the basic premise of neoliberalism and in much of the work taking place in schools of education in the United States and elsewhere. However, despite its failures—and the recent experience in the U.S. of the No Child Left Behind Act is exemplary of this failure—neoliberalism has made a formidable impact in the constitution of educational research policy, planning, and evaluation agendas worldwide. Neoliberalism built a *new common sense* in education, leaving behind most of the established

paradigms, particularly the social democratic model that animated the educational outcomes of the “New Deal.”

This *new common sense* in education includes a strong drive towards privatization, decentralization, the accountability movement, the testing movement, and an instrumental and economicist model of educational policy and planning based on the OECD new conceptual hegemony—updating and eventually surpassing the hegemony of the ‘banking education’ model of the World Bank. There is no question for some critics that the OECD and World Bank, two worldwide ‘think-tanks’ in education, that they promote an educational model which has an elective affinity with neoliberal top-down globalization models.

With the consolidation of this *new common sense* in the last three decades or so, there is a kind of scientism based on the fetishism of the method predominating in the training of educational leaders in our schools of education and teachers training institutions. The key moral and ethical questions are rarely explored, or when they are addressed, are considered marginal to the pressing needs of solving questions of testing, accountability, training of qualified labor force for the competition in the context of globalization, or privatization of educational institutions to name a few.

An important response to this situation is the critique. We need radical democratic leaders who are critical intellectuals challenging the deleterious effects of neoliberalism, the fetishism of the scientific method, or the dominance of instrumental rationality in our institutions. Make no mistake: This *new common sense* in education undermines the promises and practice of democracy.

We may say, paraphrasing Bertolt Brecht, that critical democratic leaders consider education not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it. Critical democratic leaders assume themselves as critics of the system, not to be a critic who is necessarily intransigent or intolerant by definition, but one who is able to offer to society, like a mirror, the critical aspects that need to be considered and improved in dealing with mechanisms of sociability, production, and political exchanges.

Antonio Gramsci’s insightful suggestions for critical intellectuals are useful here as a parallel to understand the role of critical democratic leaders. First, intellectual work (the basis for democratic leadership) is not only a trade, a set of techniques, or a profession but also the capacity to realize refined analysis that may lead to praxis and social transformation. Second, a critical intellectual is able not only to teach but also to learn from the people. Third, radical democratic leadership should assume that there is never a perfect, definitive, or comprehensive interpretation or understanding nor a conclusive analysis that cannot be challenged or be subject to serious debate and criticism.

As I said elsewhere: “Perhaps the best way to put it is the Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung*: Knowledge creation is always the negation of the previous negation, the criticism of the previous knowledge that in and by itself is a criticism of the previous knowledge” (Torres, 2009, p. 58). The ability to engage in dialogue and deliberation is a rational response of this situation in knowledge and science.

Fourth, in the best of the revolutionary traditions, a democratic leader should be able to criticize but also to celebrate the struggles, particularly of the people that in the trenches built the basic premises, and strive to live the fundamental promises of democracy.

My colleague Mike Rose, with his elegant prose, said it very well:

Somehow we need to craft critiques that begin with an affirmation of what people can do—real, concrete images of intellectual, social, economic possibility. This critique needs to move back and forth from historical, social analysis to detailed, everyday moments of achievement: kids adding numbers, people planting a garden, and so on. So much of the critical literature I read holds up only one standard for social change: major social transformation. There's something arrogant about that, it seems to me, for it discounts the daily good work that thousands of people do to effect micro level change, to incrementally build community. Such change gets dismissed (or patronized) in way too much in the radical literature. There was something very powerful about those teachers I visited—doing the hard, consistent day-to-day work they were doing—and I don't see it represented very often in the critical literature. (Torres, 2009, p. 61)

There is a dialectical relationship struggling for projects of social transformations while at the same time, recognizing and celebrating the life and the struggles everywhere.

Nicola Machiavelli, the founding father of Political Science, said that the ruler should be either loved or feared but never ignored. Radical democratic leaders should be feared by the ruling elites who benefits from the workings of capitalism undermining democracy. Yet they will be loved if they make possible the dreams of children, teachers, and parents for a quality public democratic education.

References

- Torres, C. A., & Van Heertum, R. (2009). Globalization and neoliberalism: The challenges and opportunities of radical pedagogy. In M. Simons, M. Olssen, & M. A. Peters (Eds.), *Re-reading education policies: A handbook studying the policy agenda of the 21st century* (pp. 143–162). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Torres, C. A. (2009). *Globalizations and education. Collected essays on class, race, gender and the state*. New York: Teachers College Press.

About the Author

Carlos Alberto Torres is professor of social sciences and comparative education, division head of SSCE, and director of the Paulo Freire Institute at UCLA. He is also the founding director of the Paulo Freire Institute in São Paulo, Brazil

(1991), Buenos Aires, Argentina (2003), and UCLA (2002). Former director of the Latin American Center at UCLA (1995–2005), past president of the Comparative International Education Society (CIES), and past president of the Research Committee of Sociology of Education, ISA, he is the author or co-author of more than 62 books and 250 research articles and chapters in books. His recent books are *Globalizations and Education. Collected Essays on Class, Race, Gender, and the State* (Introduction by Michael W. Apple, Afterword by Pedro Demo. New York and London: Teachers College Press—Columbia University, 2009); *Education and Neoliberal Globalization* (Introduction by Pedro Noguera. New York and London: Routledge, 2009). With Pedro Noguera he edited *Social Justice for Teachers. Paulo Freire and Education as a Possible Dream* (The Hague and The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2009). He may be reached via e-mail at: catnova@aol.com