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## **Critical Study of the Concept of Public Identity as Manifested in Postmodernist Versions of Critical Pedagogy**

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*Key Words: Critical pedagogy, Multi cultural Education, Postmodern Education, Pedagogy of Identity.*

*The article seeks to highlight the fundamental weaknesses of the postmodern concept of Public identity as it appears in critical pedagogy. Although these versions of critical pedagogy present their goals in the positive terms of achieving freedom and liberation from oppression, they tend to disregard the complex dialectical nature of identity and its positive aspects. I claim that such concepts fail to grasp the concrete nature of identity by not acknowledging the immanent tensions between the individual and the collective and between liberation and empowerment. I argue that these postmodern stances lead to suppression of identity and the reduction of humanity. Through its critical examination, this article hopes to re-establish the dialectical nature of concrete identity and its importance for critical pedagogy.*

### **Introduction**

Almost forty years after the publication of Paulo Freire's most widely known book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the question of the identity of "the oppressed" arguably remains one of the most significant and problematic issues in the field of critical pedagogy. From an existential perspective, the public identity specifies the image of the oppressed, its genuine needs and characteristics. From an ideological perspective, the identity of the oppressed marks the target audience of the relevant ideology: Such a determination is essential to the definition of pedagogy and to a focusing of its objectives.

Critical pedagogy is indeed oriented towards bettering the condition of the oppressed public and arousing their consciousness; however, in fact, it is not always clear who falls in its framework, what the nature of their identity is, and how it was formed. A critical examination of the issue of public identity turns out, therefore, to be essential to updating and adapting pedagogy to educational praxis.

It is important to stress that the problem of the public identity is not merely theoretical; it entails, as I will try to show below, significant practical implications for critical educators. When I began my career as a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade educator at one of Jerusalem's toughest inner-city public schools, for example, I had a hard time assessing in a coherent way the shared attributes of the population with whom I was working: poor and undereducated residents of a disadvantaged neighborhood, including Mizrachi, Ethiopian and Russian Jews. My search for a concept of public identity more complex and dynamic than that suggested by Marxist pedagogies (i.e., those of Freire, 1996; McLaren, 1988; Bowles and Gintis, 1976) led me to examine postmodernist versions of critical pedagogy (i.e., those of Gur-Ze'ev, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Pappé, 1999; Ellsworth, 1989; Orner, 1992). These formulations, whose epistemological reasoning I discuss below, challenge the validity of reductive and deterministic modernist categories of the public

identity, and propose instead a more dynamic and versatile system of categories that allows for the updating and adaptation of pedagogy to a diversity of group identities. At the same time, it seemed to me that postmodernist pedagogies more sharply and successfully appraise the components of my students' oppression - the boundaries and limitations of their collective identity. However, my initial enthusiasm with the intellectual and theoretical power of postmodernist pedagogies started to wane as I began to examine and apply their emancipatory meditations upon the rocky terrain of educational reality.

In the present article, I investigate the immanent limitations of the concept of the public identity in rigid postmodernist versions of critical pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> To this end, I present the unique stance of critical theory regarding the identity of "the oppressed," and analyze its philosophical and pedagogical implications. My main assertion is that postmodernist critical theory's radical pursuit of the unshackling of identity from all limitations and definitions is based on an incoherent concept of identity, which cannot encompass identity's complex and contradictory nature. Beyond its theoretically problematic character, such a concept of identity has grave pedagogical and political ramifications for the oppressed. An analysis of the epistemological and pedagogical limitations of the postmodernist concept of the *public identity*, can shed a new and challenging light on the dialectical nature of identity and its formational role in the construction of any empowering pedagogy.

### **On the Political Foundation of the Concept of Identity**

The unique view of the public identity inherent to the critical paradigm can be identified in the basic train of thought that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels lay out in the initial pages of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). As is well known, Marx argued that history should be viewed from the standpoint of the exploited public rather than that of the powerful, since only in the hands of the oppressed masses, whose voices were silenced throughout history, lies the key to the establishment of a true perception of reality. The positioning of the epistemological standpoint of the oppressed as a basis for the act of liberation has been critical for two main reasons: firstly, because it stresses the formative status of identity in the process of liberation; and secondly, because it exposes its political, formational and dialectical nature.

Thus, in contrast to the tendency of liberal and progressive pedagogies to overlook the issue of public identity, critical theory focuses on the political and existential complexity of the collective identity. According to this logic, the concrete identity of the public is embodied in the complex dialectical tension between personal and group identity.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the positive concept of identity held by liberal theory, which views identity as a given, independent, and harmonious entity, radical critical theory emphasizes that the public identity must be understood as complex, political and dialectical in relation to other identities, which limit it, on the one hand, and constitute it, on the other hand.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, identity is shaped as a border concept, which vacillates dynamically and dialectically between its internal, positive limit (what it is, namely, its identity or similarity) and its external, negative limit (what it is not, namely, its difference, or otherness).<sup>4</sup>

Pursuantly, public identity assumes its coherent content as a border identity realized *vis-à-vis* other individual and collective identities and other conditions, cultural and economical, that delimit and determine its actual boundaries. In this manner, the negational and restrictive

character of positive identity is highlighted by the very fact that every identity is necessarily the restriction of another identity in the vast range of possible identities, only that in a dialectical shift, this negation itself embodies the essentialness of collective identity: a concrete identity shaped, internally and externally, as a vital and dialectical border concept.

The dialectical character of identity finds expression in the space known as “the politics of identity, which, Gelsner (2005) writes, “is a concept according to which the function of politics and culture is to represent the identity of sectors – Mizrachim, women, homosexuals, etc., who were rejected or excluded in the past from politics or culture by the majority” (p. 50). In this sense, the preoccupation with identity and its formation is one of the most important emancipatory and existential dimensions of critical pedagogy, which is a struggle over the limit, form and freedom of the oppressed collective’s identity. In the framework of this space, critical pedagogy struggles to minimize the potential for the oppression and normalization of institutional systems, while making an increasingly sharp demand for recognition of groups and identities and their right to be heard. This move places the question of *otherness* and the legitimacy of difference at the forefront of radical-critical discourse.

The political logic of identity reached its pinnacle within the domain of the postmodernist paradigm. This radical theory opposed, in principle, the modernist attempt to construct a collective and public identity on the basis of general and shared elements, such as class, race, and gender. These positive and non-complex elements were viewed as an unreliable product of a pretentiously ideological, essentialist, and, thus, limiting and oppressive, reduction. By contrast, the postmodernist paradigm sees identity as being formed on the basis of the emancipatory principle of creation, negation and individuality. In this framework, collective identity categories are shaped as dynamic and variable categories that are operative within a particular historical and social context.<sup>5</sup>

The negative attitude of the postmodernist paradigm and its deconstruction of the positive dimensions of identity were not technical but rather a matter of principle. In the spirit of poststructuralist insights, which disavowed any show or pretense of generality or objectivity, the paradigm’s post-critical aim was directed at a fundamental undermining of the supposedly general, consistent, and coherent status of the critical subject himself. The ideal of the liberty of identity was realized then in the image of the individual and amorphous entity that can “move madly from identity to identity, from knowledge to knowledge, from memory to memory, or from one collective to another, and to wander freely within and between different cultural spaces” (Gur Ze’ev, 1999a, p. 27). These ‘emancipatory’ traits redefined the character of critical pedagogy, which began to formulate its concepts and objectives in purely negative terms. The crowning of the subject as a *space of struggle* embodied the ideal of the liberation of critical theory in its entire splendor. Identity was formulated as an amorphous and contingent entity, free of external definition or restriction, which is shaped in the course of response and persistent movement, *vis-à-vis* the multiplicity of discourses held in reality. Such a critical stance, the postmodernists claimed, turns out to be a powerful liberational device by means of which one can offset the tendency of identity to be fixated as an object and accept change and movement as constructive, immanent, and unthreatening elements.<sup>6</sup>

The advantages of the postmodernist definition of the public identity are manifested in its ideological flexibility, in its ability to adapt itself to individual identity, and in its sharp awareness of the oppressive potential in the very pretension to define identity. The problematic

side of the postmodernist concept of identity and its grave implications for critical pedagogy will be discussed below.

### **The Postmodern Ideal of *Hybridic and Contingent Identity*.**

Postmodernist critical theory rejected, as aforesaid, the modernist pretention of constructing collective identity on the basis of general and shared components. These were seen by post modernists as evidence of the operation of restrictive power suppressing identity. In this spirit, Gur Ze'ev (1999b) asserted that all modernist versions of critical pedagogy are violent and based on weak and inadequate definitions of the collective. The tendency of postmodernist criticism to regard all definitions in a negative light was translated into a fundamental and scathing rejection of all positive pedagogical manifestations objectively viewed as oppressive indoctrination, or part of a "normalization" project, in Gur Ze'ev's (1996, p. 11) language.<sup>7</sup>

From this radical standpoint, the existence of positive identity of any type indicates above all the exclusion of the identity of the other from discursive space. In this way, any attempt at a positive formation of public identity is viewed as evidence of the existence of an oppressive and exclusionary power whose operation must be stopped at any cost if we desire to retain a modicum of freedom. A quintessential example of this can be found in postmodernist pedagogy's attitude towards the identity category of (Israeli) nationalism. "From the beginning," writes Gur Ze'ev (1999a),

the success of the Zionist project was conditioned in its ability to overcome the multiplicity of histories and identities of Jewish communities and individuals. Zionist education mobilized a coherent and exclusive master-narrative that would erase or devour indigenous Jewish histories, which were non-productive in terms of Zionist objectives, or would destroy those threatening or denying it. (p. 74)

From a similar standpoint, Pappé (1999) ties the existence of 'multicultural' education in Israel to public criticism of Zionist nationalism and the alternative establishment of an open and borderless 'critical' identity. "Multicultural education in Israel," Pappé writes accordingly,

is education that recognizes the demands of anyone who sees himself as being negatively affected by the Zionist entity in the past and present (including Palestinian neighbors, evacuees, and displaced persons). Such education recognizes these groups' challenge to Israeli collective identity, which was engineered or adopted by the Zionist elite in the country, and upon which the scale of educational values in the State of Israel is based. (p. 236).

Ostensibly, the postmodernist concept of public identity evidences a perfectly reflexive and liberational consciousness, but this negative theoretical approach actually fails the test of concreteness. In its faithfulness to the negational principle of criticism, and in its radical insistence upon identifying the collective purely on the basis of its restrictive and separative boundaries, it conceives identity in a non-dialectical, one-dimensional, and inadequate way, which fails to capture the positive and collective dimensions of identity. This weakness turns out to be critical since the positive dimension of identity includes important existential senses of identification, affiliation, mutual responsibility, home and security. These positive dimensions indeed limit by their very nature the theoretical infiniteness of the subject, but, in a dialectical

shift, they lend identity existential meaning, which is indispensable to any concrete emancipation project.<sup>8</sup> As Lamm claims (2000), the existence of the personal sphere heavily depends on the presence of a positive collective identity from which it can develop. Sensory concepts (the beautiful, the delicious, the pleasant) and moral concepts (the just, the good, the worthy) are all shaped in the realm of collective culture. The psychological power of collective culture lies in the fact that it becomes like second nature for the individual, on par with his inborn abilities. Accordingly, culture is powerfully assimilated into the mind and identity of the individual, a process that is not easily undone. Particularist, historical, collective culture emerges, therefore, as a source of positive power and as a basic yardstick for identity. Against this background, the power embodied in the feelings of injustice and indignation that accompany any offense against the individual's culture also becomes clear.

In this manner, the close dialectical relation between elements such as similarity and difference, individuality and collectivity, liberation and empowerment, which are at play in the process of public identity construction, is reemphasized. By this dialectical logic, without there first having developed a strong sense of positive identity, affiliation and self-worth, there can be no significant movement towards inclusion of the other and the different.<sup>9</sup> This insight has clear implications for critical pedagogy: Callan (1997) indicates, for instance, that education in the positive identity framework of patriotism is essential to the shaping of concrete liberal values, and in any case, to the establishment of a strong, autonomous subjectivity possessing a sense of self-worth. From a similar standpoint, White (2001) states that fostering through education a positive national identity while not disallowing the possibility of criticism serves as a significant and even necessary element in the formation of a coherent and concrete identity. It is important to point out that positive components of public identity can and even must be negated in turn, but there is no concrete identity whose construction does not entail a double negation (an affirmation of identity), and freedom of identity cannot be based merely on the sanctification of the theoretical and negational process.

During my pedagogical work as a high school teacher, I have often been confronted with my underprivileged students' tendency to express racist opinions and statements during class. Any attempt on my part to exclude and condemn such beliefs was treated with angry and insulted reactions from their part, no matter how elaborated my explanations were. Through my personal relationship and dialog with them, I realized that the more insecure my students were in their Israeli identity (being new immigrants and coming from a low social background), the more they had the tendency to express hateful opinions against those they considered as outsiders. It was then that I understood that in order to empower my students to renounce their hateful and narrow-minded dogmas, one must work first to empower their sense of cultural self-worth and belonging to the Israeli collective. Only then will they be able to open their hearts and minds to humanistic and democratic beliefs and methods of thinking.

### **Who Can Afford to Renounce Positive Identity?**

The emphasis on the existential and political dimensions of public identity raises two disturbing questions: firstly, who can afford to renounce the advantages embodied in collective identity? and secondly, what is the pedagogical and political price entailed in such renouncement?

When we take into account the dialectical nature of identity, it turns out that when postmodern critical theory chooses to define the project of the emancipation of the subject in terms of negation and deconstruction, it reduces not only the potential for restriction latent in the positive identity of the collective, but also, and dialectically, the potential for the emancipatory power embodied in it: In this sense, post-critical theory appears to be a double-edged sword in the hands of minority groups fighting for their rights in society. This is because it denies the formational importance of common and collective identity as a base that unifies, mobilizes and gives meaning to political and transformative struggles. An emancipatory theory based on radical deconstruction of identity turns out to be, to a great extent, disempowering and problematic.<sup>10</sup>

Pursuantly, the question arises, of course, as to who can afford to treat the issue of identity, in all of its existential and political meanings, as if it were an article of clothing that can be changed and used for one's amusement? Postmodernist critical theory sees in the play (movement and intersection) of identities and narratives a vision of the subject's emancipation. However, a sober look exposes the cynical and contemptuous side of the ideal of amorphousness and free movement. In my view, such post-critical philosophy is interested in the collective only theoretically, while in fact it has no genuine interest in the condition of the populace and the likelihood of its empowerment in reality. In this way, post-critical theorists can allow themselves to dismiss in the stroke of a pen the formative implications of national identity and call for the establishment of education that is anti-nationalist, diasporic, emancipatory, and free of truth claims, and which is oriented to a multi-narrative, multi-interpretative view of reality.<sup>11</sup> Only that their ostensibly pure intellectual stance is formulated from a safe and already strong existential and material confidence, after they have already reaped all of the possible spiritual and material dividends from positive identity.

The liberty and empowerment of my students from the neighborhood, in contrast, do not involve their ability to deny or free themselves from the collective national identity, but rather demand an ability to acquire and master it, to enter it, and to enjoy the fruits that it offers to those who take part in it. One must always remember that only members of the powerful class have the privilege to declare themselves as having no identity, since they define their identity as a universal one, while simultaneously denying the underprivileged right to their own distinct identity. As bell hooks (1990, p. 28) points out, "it's easy to give up identity, when you got one."

Beyond the political unfairness, postmodernist theory's cynicism is a recipe for a blatantly impractical pedagogy. A pedagogue who wishes to pursue the empowerment and emancipation of his students' public identity in praxis must respect the existential and formative power of positive identity in order to change it; he therefore cannot assume that the project of empowerment will be easy and carried as a harmonious, smooth and flowing theoretical movement between identity and difference. The liberation of identity, on the one hand, involves a willingness to learn and to deal with the variety of political, social, behavioral and emotional manifestations of identity in praxis. In this framework, the process of the emancipation of identity is taken as a pedagogical and existential project of the first degree – a project that can only be conceived as a difficult and exhausting physiological task aimed at real and fateful change in a person's life.<sup>12</sup> Pedagogy that aims to generate an empowering transformation in public identity must prepare itself for intensive and comprehensive pedagogical work. It must acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of its students' personalities, cultures and communities. It must win their trust and prove its right, commitment, and goodwill over time.

And finally, it must be able to present a serious, professional, pedagogical blueprint for meeting the enormous challenge that lies before it.

Accordingly, liberation movements must be empowered to no less a degree than the forces of oppression that they seek to eradicate. "The power that it [critical pedagogy] seeks to impart," stresses Gover (1999), "is precisely the power needed by individuals to deviate from and turn their backs on their ethnic, traditional or community roots, which unfortunately often justify patriarchy, oligarchy, pagan religions or fatalism, nationalist, racist or tribal ethos, and intolerance" (pp. 136-137). Gover's modernist position is indeed potentially restrictive, yet it better grasps, in my opinion, the dialectical, concrete and respectful conceptualization of identity.

### **The Political and Pedagogical Price of an Epistemological Dilemma**

The epistemological position of postmodernist criticism rejects the notion of reality as an objective yardstick for assessing identity, and maintains the fact that public identity's contents and values are determined always in the political domain. Following this logic, postmodernist criticism focuses its investigation on acts of representation and the manner in which they are shaped and fixed in consciousness. Exploration of modes of representation of minority identities and groups enriches the critical discourse and contributes to an improvement in the treatment of minorities in society and culture, such as perfection of speech and phraseology and awareness of the power of the act of representation in culture and the media. However, the focus of criticism on the field of representation raises a number of political and pedagogical problems.

The first problem is manifested in the tendency of critical theory to neglect the material dimensions that constitute differences in collective identities. By this logic, the fundamental rejection of objectivity leads to the assumption that the emancipation project's principal mission is the struggle over the conditions in which the oppressed identity is represented in consciousness (i.e., in the domain of subjectivity). This implies that the very identification of otherness and acceptance of difference in consciousness is sufficient for liberation. Indeed there is no denying the importance of the issue of representation in the whole struggle over the formation of public identity, yet its exclusive and non-dialectical emphasis turns out to be a regressive move, since it detaches representation from the reality that is responsible for it. In this way, it becomes clear that epistemological progress may actually operate against the potential for collective emancipation because it severs the dialectical link between reality and its representation. This trend has threatened to empty the discourse on public identity of concrete political meaning and turn it into, what Gates (1992, p. 19) calls, "a marionette theater of the political." Gates emphasizes that, "it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves of the distance from the classroom to the streets," and warn us that "it sometimes seems that blacks are doing better in the college curriculum than they are in the streets".

Another problem stemming from the radical inclination of postmodernist epistemology is manifested, in an apparently paradoxical way, in a languishing ability to identify clearly and distinctly the oppressed group. Guided by postmodern ideas, I can still remember how perplexed I was in front of my high school students' complexity and fluidity of identities in praxis: different economic priorities which blurred the material concept of poverty; individual and social alienation; teenagers with gender issues; ethnic diversity: African, Asian, Russian Jews each with their own special characters and culture differences (or was it cultural poverty celebrated as false authenticity?) – With so much diversity, where does one begin?

This epistemological weakness is the result of postmodernist pedagogy's inability to establish a positive identity of the oppressed. According to this critique, the celebration of difference and otherness obscures the possibility of establishing a positive and normative yardstick for appraising the public identity of the oppressed. In the absence of a positive correlation between the representation of identity and forms of its realization in praxis, the transformative power of critical pedagogy is weakened, since when the oppressed group is not identifiable, it is impossible to work toward its emancipation.

The clearest and most problematic manifestation of this trend lies in the neglect of the speculum of class, which is perceived, in light of the ideal of deconstruction, as anachronistic and simplistic. According to Ortner (1992), class exists in America but is hidden and cannot be talked about directly; instead, as Ortner argues, it is spoken through other languages of social differences such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Lacking a class category, pedagogy is dragged into countless analyses of identities and sub-identities of gender, ethnicity and sexuality, which are supposed to offer a more polemical explanation for the increasingly ambiguous logic of oppression in reality. "To be other in this sense", writes Rorty (1997, p. 80), "you must bear an ineradicable stigma, one which makes you [a] victim of socially accepted sadism rather than merely of economic selfishness." The inattentiveness to economic and class elements is, in Rorty's view, the dark side of the theoretical preoccupation with the question of otherness and difference, since in its framework, the capacity to engage in liberating actions on both fronts (epistemological and historical) is neutralized. From a quintessentially materialist position, McLaren (1998) translates the discussed assumptions into an explicit indictment, since the polemical preoccupation with the problem of identity's representation is no more than a neo-liberal, ideological diversion, which is meant to obscure the class identity and class oppression of the collective. In condemnation of post-modernist individualism, which deconstructs collective identity into a plethora of identities and sub-identities, and ultimately amounts to no more than epistemological and moral materialism, Freire and Macedo (1995) assert simply and decisively: "I do not think it is difficult to identify the thirty-three million people in my country who are in constant danger of dying of hunger as belonging to the oppressed group"(p. 389).

### **"I Am Strong Because I Am Weak" – On the Problematic Nature of Victim Identity**

Another problem that stems from the deconstructive tendency of postmodernist criticism has to do with the formation of victim identity. As we have seen, critical pedagogy assumes that the content of the public identity is determined in its being delimited and restricted by other identities in a given discursive space. This orientation, which stresses the power relations involved in the shaping of the public identity, has led critical theory to base collective identity on its negative boundaries, that is, on the dimensions of difference and otherness embodied in it.<sup>13</sup>

The postmodernist concept of identity ostensibly reflects an acute and reflexive political consciousness, but this consciousness, which is based solely on recognition of the negative limits of identity, turns out to be primarily non-concrete. As a result of this negative perspective, the discursive space in which identities are formed is conceived as a vast oppressive space where there is no room for positive self-determination, and where identities take on their value, as well as their right to exist, purely on the basis of their oppression. The logic of such a one-dimensional political space deviates, of course, from the logic of praxis, in which the public

identity is constructed dialectically as a border concept between similarity and difference and between affirmation and negation. This non-concrete orientation, in which oppression is transformed into a positive aspect of identity, is realized as victim identity – a non-concrete identity whose positive content is endowed purely on the basis of its limitation. The non-dialectical logic of victim identity turns out to be problematic in two respects: political and pedagogical.

From a political perspective, the non-concrete logic of victimhood is problematic because it blurs the nature of power relations in praxis. According to this line of reasoning, the concept of victimhood dulls one's sensitivity to real victims in the world. When victimhood is itself turned into an immanent and essential component of identity, the concept of oppression is emptied out of concrete content and is rendered pure abstraction, since, by this logic, we are all victims. In the framework of such abstraction, the concrete boundaries of oppression are blurred, and the ability to deal with its manifestations in praxis is lost. Such a theoretical position has grave political and moral ramifications, since as soon as its advantages are internalized, the position of the victim becomes a comfort zone from which one can commit additional injustices. Such a reactionary and oversimplified stance can deteriorate into total conceptual confusion in which the word *racist* can signify an *anti-racist* and in which chauvinism can be conceived as an empowering property. Such a situation paves the way for the emergence of politically absurd defense responses in the framework of which, for instance, associations of the White, middle-class man are established, where the male members see themselves as oppressed due to the political gains of minority groups in society, on a feminist, racist, cultural or other basis.<sup>14</sup> In such a political and cultural space, in which the victimized identity of a group becomes a main focus of power, there is no possibility of concrete reflection, guilt or responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

From a pedagogical perspective, the problematic nature of the concept of victimhood is embodied in the fact that it exchanges the ideal of positive empowerment and growth for an ideal of weakness and desistance. Consequently, people's claim for power and recognition is derived from the weakness of their identity and its limitation in praxis, namely from the fact that they are recognized as oppressed. This problematic position turns liberational discourse into the rhetoric of piteousness, which is meant, paradoxically, to empower identity. This movement is fundamentally anti-pedagogical, since victimhood and the weakness it entails are transformed into a source of positive power. It almost goes without saying that such an ideal of non-concrete identity is damaging to the project of emancipating and empowering oppressed groups, since when lack becomes a foundation of identity, and the main source of that identity's power, the project of positive empowerment actually becomes an obstacle (!). In such an anti-pedagogical constellation, positive and empowering values, such as responsibility, self-respect, pride, capability and independence, become weights around the necks of oppressed collectives. Under such conditions, one can assume, the oppressed collective will, paradoxically, do everything in its ability to guard its inferior position in order to preserve the advantages that such a position affords it. This position is clearly anti-pedagogical since it negates the positive basis of empowerment that the process of emancipation imminently entails.

### ***The Personal is Political* – Empowering Ideal or Recipe for the Dilution of Identity?**

One of the most well-known ideas held by post-modernist critical theory is embodied in the slogan, *the personal is political*. This radical proposition asserts that all spaces, as personal as they may be, are always subject to power relations, and accordingly carry strong political

implications. This critical stance revitalized the concept of emancipated identity because it called for the deconstruction and polemicization of natural and taken-for-granted categories of identity, and for the assimilation of more specific and complex categories of identity. *Prima facie*, this move was indicative of a welcomed strengthening of political awareness, and of the penetration of radical critical theory into areas beyond the narrow sphere of philosophical discourse.

However, from a pedagogical point of view, the ideal of public identity's deconstruction is revealed to be problematic, since it turns its exposure of the personal, through its attack on and negation of public and collective spaces, into a paragon to be celebrated in itself, regardless of its actual emancipatory potential. This radical and non-dialectical orientation dilutes the concrete meaning of liberational identity in two aspects.

The first aspect is embodied in the practical inadequacy of the postmodernist concept of the public identity. When emancipatory discourse focuses on the philosophical-epistemological limits of identity, the realization of the ideal of freedom in praxis itself is neglected.<sup>16</sup> The separation of the theoretical from the practical degrades the quality of pedagogy since, once again, it rests on an ideal of non-concrete identity disconnected from reality. In this manner, postmodern thinkers are led to wander in borderless visions regarding the ontological nature and epistemological scope of potential freedom without having to account for the possibility of applying identity within real educational contexts. In the absence of feedback, such an unbounded movement contributes to a process of theoretical radicalization, which leads, for its part, to an exacerbation of its detachment from praxis. Such separation between theory and praxis allows postmodern theory to commit itself to clever theoretical negation without ever needing to get their hands dirty dealing with actual pedagogical issues in reality, such as educational politics, public school struggles, and teachers every day dilemmas. A concrete consideration of the potential for identity's emancipation, on the other hand, must take into account the possibility of identity's realization in praxis, as well as the recurrent theoretical implications of such. In the absence of a dialectical relation between theory and practice, the identity emancipation project becomes merely a theoretical abstraction, which is irrelevant to the work of critical pedagogues.

The second aspect of the diluted postmodernist concept of identity is the detachment of the personal sphere from the public sphere. As aforementioned, the construction of identity, and by the same token its potential emancipation, is formed through an immanent tension between its diametrically opposed foundations: individual and collective, subjective and objective, personal and public. When collective space is trampled under the emancipatory wheels of negation, the dialectical tension to which coherent identity owes its existence is also overrun. In such a non-dialectical constellation, in which the public sphere is sacrificed upon the altar of the individual and the personal, the complexity of the concept of identity is watered down, as is its emancipatory orientation.

Such dilution has not only epistemological implications, but also important political and pedagogical ones. By this logic, the radical pursuit of the personal is liable to turn out to be a means of severing, isolating, and alienating the individual from his community in praxis. In the final account, this emancipatory space, in which the flag of the individual freedom of the subject is raised, may be the most comfortable position from which to normalize the oppressed collective.<sup>17</sup> The ever-mounting discourse on identity politics and its emancipatory conceptualization of the personal, is seen by McLaren (1998), accordingly, as a tool in the hands

of the capitalist system, which serves to divide and sow conflict between and among groups, and hence to minimize the likelihood of the establishment of a coalition against the capitalist order, which, in his view, is responsible for the condition of the oppressed. A similar approach is represented by Sahay (1998) who argues that identity politics is ultimately meant to divide and polarize oppressed minorities by way of “epistemological segregation.”

The dialectical character of the emancipation project highlights again and again the fact that the struggle for the emancipation of the individual always occurs in the public domain. The meaning of the slogan, *the personal is political*, is that any one of our simple, everyday activities – every longing, every relationship, and every thought – is always already inscribed within a public and collective situation, and hence is charged with moral and political significance. The personal is not innately political, but rather becomes so by virtue of people organizing for collective critical action based on solidarity. In this spirit, Freire (1996, p. 164) emphasizes the importance of the ideal of “unity in diversity.” He argues that, notwithstanding the general differences between forms of oppression and collective identities, we must pursue some form of unity that expresses partnership and which lends meaning to the act of liberation. The struggle for concrete liberation, Freire stresses, can only be waged on the basis of cooperation, or solidarity, in praxis. The radical and dialectical logic of solidarity is what reconciles in effect the multiplicity of tensions between identity and difference, the personal and the public, the theoretical and the practical, and is what ultimately allows for the concrete empowerment of identity.

### **Some Concluding Thoughts**

It emerges from the discussion up to this point that the main problem with the postmodernist concept of public identity is its non-concrete nature and its propensity to detach itself from the complexity of identity in praxis. By this logic, the epistemological orientation of postmodernist critical theory frustrates the possibility of establishing a positive correlation between contradictory elements of identity. In its radical pursuit of a conceptualization of identity in terms of negation and deconstruction, postmodernist critical theory preferences the personal over the public, the individual over the collective, difference over similarity, and emancipation over empowerment. This radical position is indeed highly political and reflective, but it is non-dialectical, and hence, conceives identity and its potential emancipation in an oversimplified way.

In the domain of pedagogical praxis, this conceptual oversimplification, which severs theory from educational realities, has a number of disturbing manifestations. Firstly, it neglects to inquire into the material origins of oppression, and undermines the potential for solidarity and unity among oppressed groups. Secondly, it holds a cynical and patronizing attitude towards the existential dimension of positive identity, and fosters a sense of victimhood and piteousness, which subverts the ideal of pedagogical empowerment. Thirdly, it obscures the visibility of oppression, and floods pedagogical-emancipatory discourse with a barrage of epistemological interpretations. And in the final account, it actually neglects the fate of the oppressed in the name of their emancipation in theory.

In my view, a deep examination of the dialectical nature of public identity shows how complex and fragile is the process that critical theory must undertake in attempting to reconcile the conflicting aspects of identity; how volatile, on the one hand, and how inspiring, on the other hand, is the unlikely convergence between the individual and collective, diversity and identity, difference and equality, objective and subjective, emancipation and empowerment. For my part, I believe that such a fascinating and paradoxical process is achievable, both in theory and practice, only within the domain of a collective, day-to-day pedagogical struggle, and that only out of this struggle can there develop mutual commitment and responsibility among teachers, parents and students. In the field of pedagogical praxis, the contradictory aspects of identity are woven and rewoven together each day through reciprocal and necessarily irrational acts of love, dialogue, compassion and mutual respect. In this manner, educational praxis reasserts the concrete possibility of emancipatory public identity and the political and pedagogical justification of the emancipation project. The theoretical and practical development of this position, which I term *the pedagogy of praxis*, ought to be undertaken in future research.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I make a clear distinction between *moderate* and *rigid* versions of the postmodern concept of the collective. Moderate versions of critical theory indeed favor the emancipator value of the postmodern ideal of deconstruction and negation, and yet, in their commitment to positive transformation, they nevertheless preserve something of a concept of identity which is grounded in actual reality. This epistemological pretension, which is criticized for being paradoxical (see Aviram & Dotan 2009), assumes the possibility of the complex formation of a positive, consistent and coherent concept of identity. The rigid approach, on the other hand, remains thoroughly faithful to the negational and deconstructive foundations of critical theory. Accordingly, it demands a sweeping abolition of all manifestations of the positive concept of identity, which is perceived, in itself, as a quintessential expression of exclusion, oppression and restriction. This insistence is embodied ultimately in a rejection of the ontological status of identity and in an attempt to construct it as a fluid and transient space.

<sup>2</sup>“In the free person,” as Sigad writes, “there is the same dialectical opposition, which is simultaneously both an individual personality and a part of the whole of human society, with one element necessarily dependent on the other,” (Sigad, 1975, p. 10).

<sup>3</sup> Homi Bhabha contended that the very attempt to positively formulate the question of identity necessarily leads to being swallowed by an external and internal framework. This is because one can discuss the issue of identity’s limit without the need for other identities through which and on the basis of which individual identity is defined. (Bhabha, 1990, p. 188).

<sup>4</sup> “Identity”, emphasize Wardekker & Miedema (1997), “is not a given, but an activity, the result of which is always only a local stability. This activity is not one of balancing between the expectations of others and those of the individual himself. Rather, the balancing act is between different expectations which have each been partly internalized. Within every person there are different voices, which can be and usually are, contradictory” (p. 57).

<sup>5</sup> According to this approach, desires, associations, and new forms of resistance are shaped in a variety of popular culture modes. Accordingly, music culture, dress style, forms of resistance, thought, and expression are no longer subject to general categories such as place, class or race. See on this matter: Giroux 1994, p. 303.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Orner, 1992, p. 74; also the ideal of *diasporism* in Gur Ze’ev (2004).

<sup>7</sup> “Normalizing education,” writes Gur Ze’ev (1999b), “manufactures the subject as *something* and prevents him from being *someone*. Normalized people are always suspended between ‘them,’ the ‘others,’ and ‘we,’ or the ‘self.’ Denied them is the possibility of struggling for the realization of the infiniteness intrinsic to them in their affinity with the otherness of the ‘other’” (p. 11).

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche (1965), the great prophet of the individualist orientation and the critique of generality, emphasized that identity-based social relationships are inevitable. Human beings, Nietzsche exhorts, are not isolated beings, but rather “stand in countless human relations by their birth, position, education and country, their own circumstances and the importunity of others” (p. 33). Every act of liberation is “(f)or one's self only, in the first instance: and finally, through one's self, for all” (p. 35).

<sup>9</sup> Rorty (1997) open his book by stating that: “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement” (p. 1).

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<sup>10</sup> “Consider the irony,” writes Henry Louis Gates (1990), “precisely when we (and other Third World peoples) obtain the complex wherewithal to define our black subjectivity in the republic of Western letters, our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain’t no such thing as a subject, so why should we be bothered with that? In this way, those of us in feminist criticism or African-American criticism who are engaged in the necessary work of canon deformation and reformation confront the skepticism even of those who are allies on other fronts, over this matter of the death of the subject and our own discursive subjectivity” (p.36).

<sup>11</sup> The view according to which “the recognition by the teacher and his students that the nationalist versions of reality, Palestinian and Zionist, are only one possibility among many existing ones, in the past and in the present, options that do not result from historical ‘material,’ but rather from the current standpoints of the researcher” (Pappe 1999, p. 236).

<sup>12</sup> The act of liberation of the self, Nietzsche (1990) stressed, is not an easy movement between spaces of cultural, art and identity, but rather an agonizing and heroic act.

<sup>13</sup> In accordance with this radical logic, Allen (2004) claims, for example, that critical pedagogy customarily thinks in terms of the oppressed, but is not heedful of the fact that in the identity game, all of us also (and primarily, in fact) belong to the oppressed group: “The trick, then, is to dig into the specificities of a particular oppressor–oppressed relationship. For instance, even though elite white capitalists oppress white middle-class men, like myself, we are nevertheless the oppressors of white middle-class women and white working-class people. Moreover, all of us white folks are the oppressors of people of color of all economic classes since race operates as a caste system in the US” (p. 123).

<sup>14</sup> An example of a website that provides a compilation of articles condemning what it terms “feminist militarism” can be found <http://www.menweb.org/gendjust.htm> (Gender Justice).

<sup>15</sup> Sykes (1992) terms the culture that emerges from this non-concrete position “therapeutic culture” (p. 23).

<sup>16</sup> The neglect of the practical dimension is fundamental to critical theory since it severs the dialectical link between the act of speculation and transformation. This claim echoes Marx’s thesis (1888) according to which: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Marx, “Thesis 11 on Feuerbach”.

<sup>17</sup> From the standpoint of dialectical criticism, Horkheimer (1992) warns of the tendency, liberational in theory but oppressive in practice, to detach the individual from the collective framework in the name of his emancipation: “The more it is necessary to preserve, develop and civilize the emancipated individual, as an antithesis to the nation, to the collective in general, against the zeitgeist,” wrote Horkheimer, “the more the meaning of the individual’s existence in itself, the meaning of the aspiration to satisfy his material needs and his ambition to power, is diminished. In taking care of himself and himself alone, he is no more than part of the mob and conformity; integration then is the most appropriate mode of behavior” (p 40).