

Henry Giroux

*Border Pedagogy as Postmodern Resistance* (1991)

(excerpt)

*In the following selection, Henry A. Giroux provides a context in which postmodern thought can have an impact on education. Although he speaks specifically to the issue of racism, his comments also can be extended to additional forms of "Otherness," including gender and class identities. Notice his emphasis on how the totalizing nature of Eurocentric discourses freezes out other discourses and how inclusion of the voices of Others can enrich not only the lives of students but the lives of teachers and the larger society, as well.*

Within the current historical conjuncture, the political and cultural boundaries that have long constituted the meaning of race and culture are beginning to shift. . . . First, the population of America's subordinate groups are [*sic*] changing the landscapes of our urban centers. . . . Second, while people of color are redrawing the cultural demographic boundaries of the urban centers, the boundaries of power appear to be solidifying in favor of rich, white, middle and upper classes. . . .

The dominant discourses of modernity have rarely been able to address race and ethnicity as an ethical, political, and cultural marker in order to understand or self-consciously examine the notions of justice inscribed in the modernist belief in change and the progressive unfolding of history. In fact, race and ethnicity have been generally reduced to a discourse of the Other, a discourse that regardless of its emancipator or reactionary intent, often essentialized and reproduced the distance between the centers and margins of power. Within the discourse of modernity, the Other not only sometimes ceases to be a historical agent, but is often defined within totalizing and universalistic theories that create a transcendental rational white, male, Eurocentric subject that both occupies the centers of power while simultaneously appearing to exist outside time and space. Read against this Eurocentric transcendental subject, the Other is shown to lack any redeeming community traditions, collective voice, or historical weight—and is reduced to the imagery of the colonizer. . . .

If the construction of anti-racist pedagogy is to escape from a notion of difference that is silent about other social antagonisms and forms of struggle, it must be developed as part of a wider public disclosure that is simultaneously about the discourse of an engaged plurality and the formation of critical

citizenship. This must be a discourse that breathes life into the notion of democracy by stressing a notion of lived community that is not at odds with the principals of justice, liberty, and equality. Such a discourse must be informed by a postmodern concern with establishing the material and ideological conditions that allow multiple, specific, and heterogeneous ways of life to come into play as part of a border pedagogy of postmodern resistance. This points to the need for educators to prepare students for a type of citizenship that does not separate abstract rights from the realm of the everyday, and does not define community as the legitimate and unifying practice of a one-dimensional historical and cultural narrative. Postmodernism radicalizes the emancipator possibilities of teaching and learning as a part of a wider struggle for democratic public life and critical citizenship. It does this by refusing forms of knowledge and pedagogy wrapped in the legitimizing discourse of the sacred and the priestly; its rejecting universal reason as a foundation for human affairs; claiming that all narratives are partial; and performing a critical reading on all scientific, cultural, and social texts as historical and political constructions.

In this view, the broader parameters of an anti-racist pedagogy are informed by a political project that links the creation of critical citizens to the development of a radical democracy; that is, a political project that ties education to the broader struggle for a public life in which dialogue, vision, and compassion remain critically attentive to the rights and conditions that organize public space as a democratic social reform rather than a regime of terror and oppression. It is important to emphasize that difference and pluralism in this view do not mean reducing democracy to the equivalency of diverse interests; on the contrary, what is being argued for is a language in which different voices and traditions exist and flourish to the degree that they listen to the voices of others, engage in an ongoing attempt to eliminate forms of subjective and objective suffering, and maintain those conditions in which the act of communicating and living extends rather than restricts the creation of democratic public spheres. This is as much a political as it is a pedagogical project, one that demands that anti-racist pedagogical practices be developed within a discourse that combines a democratic public philosophy with a postmodern theory of resistance.

What is being called for here is a notion of border pedagogy that provides educators with the opportunity to rethink the relationship between the centers and the margins of power. That is, such a pedagogy must address the issue of racism as one that calls into question not only forms of subordination that create inequities among different groups as they live out their lives but, as I have mentioned previously, also challenges those institutional and ideological boundaries that have historically masked their own relations of power behind complex forms of distinction and privilege. What does this suggest for the way

we develop the basic elements of an anti-racist pedagogy? First, the notion of border pedagogy offers students the opportunity to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages. This means providing the learning opportunities for students to become media literate in a world of changing representations. It means offering students the knowledge and social relations that enable them to read critically not only how cultural texts are regulated by various discursive codes, but also how such texts express and represent different ideological interests. In this case, border pedagogy establishes conditions of learning that define literacy inside the categories of power and authority. This suggests developing pedagogical practices that address texts as social and historical constructions; it also suggests developing pedagogical practices that allow students to analyze texts in terms of their presences and absences; and most important, such practices should provide students with the opportunity to read texts dialogically through a configuration of many voices, some of which offer up resistance, some of which provide support.

Border pedagogy also stresses the necessity for providing students with the opportunity to engage critically the strengths and limitations of the cultural and social codes that define their own histories and narratives. Partiality becomes, in this case, the basis for recognizing the limits built into all disclosures. At issue here is not merely the need for students to develop a healthy skepticism towards all discourses of authority, but also to recognize how authority and power can be transformed in the interest of creating a democratic society.

Within this disclosure, students engage knowledge as a border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power. These are not only physical borders, they are cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized within maps of rules and regulations that serve to either limit or enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms. In this case, students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten as the codes and regulations which organize them become destabilized and reshaped. Border pedagogy decenters as it remaps. The terrain of learning becomes inextricably linked to the shifting parameters of place, identity, history, and power. By reconstructing the traditional radical emphasis of mapping domination to the politically strategic issue of engaging the ways in which knowledge can be remapped, reterritorialized, and decentered, in the wider interests of rewriting the borders and coordinates of an oppositional cultural politics, educators can redefine the teacher-student relationship in ways that allow students to draw upon their own personal experiences as real knowledge.

At one level this means giving students the opportunity to speak, to locate themselves in history, and to become subjects in the construction of their identities and the wider society. It also means defining voice not merely as an opportunity to speak, but to engage critically with the ideology and substance of speech, writing, and other forms of cultural production. In this case, "coming to voice" for students from both dominant and subordinate cultures means engaging in rigorous discussions of various cultural texts, drawing upon one's personal experience, and confronting the process through which ethnicity and power can be rethought as a political narrative that challenges racism as part of [a] broader struggle to democratize social, political, and economic life. In part, this means looking at the various ways in which race implicates relations of domination, resistance, suffering, and power within various social practices and how these are taken up in multiple ways by students who occupy different ethnic, social, and gender locations. In this way, race is never discussed outside broader articulations, nor is it merely about people of color.

Second, a border pedagogy of postmodern resistance needs to do more than educate students to perform ideological surgery on master-narratives based on white, patriarchal, and class-specific interests. If the master-narratives of domination are to be effectively deterritorialized, it is important for educators to understand how such narratives are taken up as part of an investment of feeling, pleasure, and desire. There is a need to rethink the syntax of learning and behavior outside the geography of rationality and reason. For example, this means that racism cannot be dealt with in a purely limited, analytical way. An anti-racist pedagogy must engage how and why students make particular ideological and affective investments and occupy particular subject positions in regard to issues concerning race and racism. This means attempting to understand the historical context and substance of the social and cultural forms that produce in diverse and multiple ways the often contradictory subject positions that gave students a sense of meaning, purpose, and delight. As Stuart Hall argues, this means uncovering both for ourselves as teachers as well as for the students we are teaching "the deep structural factors which have a tendency persistently not only to generate racial practices and structures but to reproduce them through time and which therefore account for their extraordinarily immovable character." In addition to engaging racism, within a politics of representation, ideology, and pleasure, it is also important to stress that any serious analyses of racism also has to be historical and structural. It has to chart how racist practices develop, where they come from, how they are sustained, how they affect dominant and subordinate groups, and how they can be challenged. This is not a discourse about personal preferences or dominant tastes but discourse about economics, culture, politics, and power.

Third, a border pedagogy offers the opportunity for students to air their feelings about race from the perspective of the subject positions they experience as constitutive of their own identities. Ideology in this sense is treated not merely as an abstraction but as part of the student's lives experience. This does not mean that teachers reduce their role to that of an intellectual voyeur or collapse his or her authority into a shabby form of relativism. Nor does it suggest that students merely express or assess their own experiences. Rather, it points to a particular form of teacher authority grounded in a respect for a radically decentered notion of democratic public life. This is a view of authority that rejects the notion that all forms of authority that are rooted in democratic interests and emancipator social relations, forms of authority that, in this case, begins [*sic*] from a standpoint from which to develop an educational project that reflects politics as aesthetics, that retains instead the significance of the knowledge/power relationship as a discourse of criticism and politics necessary for the achievement of equality, freedom, and struggle. This is not a form of authority based on an appeal to universal truths, it is a form of authority that recognizes its own partiality while simultaneously asserting a standpoint from which to engage the discourses and practices of democracy, freedom, and domination. Put another way, this is a notion of authority rooted in a political project that ties education to the broader struggle for public life in which dialogue, vision, and compassion remain critically attentive to the liberating and dominating relations that organize various aspects of everyday life.

This suggests that teachers use their authority to establish classroom conditions in which different views about race can be aired but not treated as simply an expression of individual views or feelings. . . . An anti-racist pedagogy must demonstrate that the views we hold about race have different historical relations of power, and that they always embody interests that shape social practices in particular ways. In other words, an anti-racist pedagogy cannot treat ideologies as simply individual expressions of feeling, but as historical, cultural, and social practices that serve to either undermine or reconstruct democratic public life. These views must be engaged without silencing students, but they must also be interrogated next to a public philosophy that names racism for what it is and calls racist ideologies and practices into account on political and ethical terms.

Fourth, educators need to understand how the experience of marginality at the level of everyday life lends itself to forms of oppositional and transformative consciousness. For those designated as Others need to both reclaim and remake their histories, voices and visions as part of a wider struggle to change those material and social relations that deny radical pluralism as the basis of democratic political community. It is only through such an understanding that

teachers can develop a border pedagogy which opens up the possibility for students to reclaim their voices as part of a process of empowerment and not merely what some have called an initiation into the culture of power. It is not enough for students to learn how the dominant culture works to exercise power, they must also understand how to resist power which is oppressive, which names them in a way that undermines their ability to govern rather than serve, and prevents them from struggling against forms of power that subjugate and exploit. . . . This is not to suggest that the authority of white dominant culture is all of one piece, nor is this meant to imply that it should not be the object of study. What is at stake here is forging a notion of power that does not collapse into a form of domination, but is critical and emancipatory, that allows students to both locate themselves in history and to critically, not slavishly, appropriate the cultural and political codes of their own and other traditions. Moreover, students who have to disavow their own racial heritage in order to succeed are . . . being positioned to accept subject positions that are the source of power for a white, dominant culture. The ability of white, male Eurocentric culture to normalize and universalize its own interests works so well . . . as a site of dominant narratives, [that it prevents] . . . black students from speaking through their own memories, histories, and experiences. . . . [We must illuminate] more clearly how power works in this society within the schools to secure and conceal various forms of racism and subjugation. Power is multifaceted and we need a better understanding of how it works not simply as a force for oppression but also a basis for resistance and self and social empowerment. Educators need to fashion a critical postmodern notion of authority, one that decenters essentialist claims of power while at the same time fighting for relations of authority and power that allow many voices to speak so as to initiate students into a culture that multiplies rather than restricts democratic practices and social relations as part of a wider struggle for democratic public life.

Fifth, educators need to analyze racism not only as a structural and ideological force, but also in the diverse and historically specific ways in which it emerges. This is particularly true of the most recent and newest expressions of racism developing in the United States and abroad among youth in popular culture, and in its resurgence in the highest reaches of the American government. This also suggests that any notion of an anti-racist pedagogy must arise out of specific settings and contexts. Such a pedagogy must allow its own character to be defined, in part, by the historically specific and contextual boundaries in which it emerges. At the same time, such a pedagogy must disavow all claims to scientific method or for that matter to any objective or transhistorical claims. As a political practice, an anti-racist pedagogy has to be constructed not on the basis of

essentialist or universal claims but on the concreteness of its specific encounters, struggles, and engagements. . . .

Sixth, an anti-racist border pedagogy must re-define how the circuits of power move in a dialectical fashion among various sites of cultural production. We need a clearer understanding of how the circuits of power move in a dialectical fashion among various sites of cultural production. We need a clearer understanding of how ideologies and other social practices which bear down on classroom relations emerge from and articulate with other spheres of social life. As educators, we need a clearer understanding of how the grounds for the production and organization of knowledge is [*sic*] related to forms of authority situated in political economy, the state, and other material practices. We also need to understand how circuits of power produce forms of textual authority that offer readers particular views of the world. In addition, educators need to explore how the reading of texts [*is*] linked to the forms of knowledge and social relations that students bring to the classroom. In other words, we need to understand in terms of function and substance those social and cultural forms outside the classroom that produce the multiple and often contradictory subject positions that students learn and express in their interaction with the dominant cultural capital of American schools.

Finally, central to the notion of border pedagogy are a number of important pedagogical issues regarding the role that teachers might take up in making a commitment to fighting racism in their classrooms, schools, communities, and the wider society. The concept of border pedagogy also helps to locate teachers within social, political, and cultural boundaries that define and mediate in complex ways how they function as intellectuals who exercise particular forms of moral and social regulation. Border pedagogy calls attention to both the ideological and the partial as central elements in the construction of teacher discourse and practice. In part, this suggests that to the degree that teachers make the construction of their own voices, histories, and ideologies problematic they become more attentive to Otherness as a deeply political and pedagogical issue. In other words, by deconstructing the underlying principles which inform their own lives and pedagogy, educators can begin to recognize the limits underlying the partiality of their own views. Such a recognition offers the promise of allowing teachers to restructure their pedagogical relations in order to engage in open and critical dialogue questions regarding the knowledge taught, how it relates to students' lives, how students can engage with such knowledge, and how such practices actually relate to empowering both teachers and students. Within dominant models of pedagogy, teachers are often silenced through a refusal or inability to make problematic with students the values that inform how they teach and engage the multifaceted relationship between

knowledge and power. Without the benefit of dialogue, and understanding of the partiality of their own beliefs, they are cut off from any understanding of the effects their pedagogies have on students. In effect, their infatuation with certainty and control serves to limit the possibilities inherent in their own voices and visions. In this case, dominant pedagogy serves not only to disempower students, but teachers as well. In short, teachers need to take up a pedagogy that provides a more dialectical understanding of their own politics and values; they need to break down pedagogical boundaries that silence them in the name of methodological rigor or pedagogical absolutes; more important, they need to develop a power-sensitive discourse that allows them to open up their interactions with the discourses of various Others so that their classrooms can engage rather than block out the multiple positions and experiences that allow teachers and students to speak in and with many complex and different voices.

**Source:**

Reprinted by permission from *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries* by Henry A. Giroux (Ed.), the State University of New York Press © 1991, State University of New York. pp. 358-363. All rights reserved.