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## Critical Pedagogy and Social Critique as an Action Paradigm

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### Abstract

*This paper argues for a fundamental (re-)politicization of pedagogy and Social Work as an essential action paradigm in response to escalating social inequality, systemic injustice, and neoliberal pressures across Europe and beyond. It departs from the premise that the current depoliticization of education—characterized by a focus on efficiency and marketization—treats pedagogical practice as a neutral, apolitical sphere, which serves to obscure existing power dynamics and maintain the status quo. To counter this, the analysis synthesizes the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière with the traditions of Critical Pedagogy, specifically drawing upon the works of Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and Henry Giroux.*

*Furthermore, the contribution incorporates Paulo Freire's rejection of pedagogical neutrality, framing neoliberal education as a form of "domestication" and "cultural invasion". By identifying the culture of silence" inherent in marginalized groups, the text positions Critical Pedagogy as a resistant politics designed to foster emancipatory subjectification. Ultimately, the paper establishes that a political positioning of pedagogical discourse is not a self-serving academic exercise but a professional responsibility. It serves as a catalyst for critical reflection and social change, ensuring that the voices of the uncounted are acknowledged and that the emancipatory mandate of Social Work and education is fulfilled in a democratic society.*

**Keywords:** Social Inequality, Politics, Critical Pedagogy, Social Critique, Action Paradigm, Social Work, (Re-) politicization

### Introduction

The investigation into the nature of (state) politics and the function of pedagogy, professional pedagogical practice, and Social Work as a science of action (*Handlungswissenschaft*) (Staub-Bernasconi, 2017; Anhorn et al., 2018) requires continuous clarification and reflection. This necessity arises not exclusively, but particularly, in

light of current political developments—specifically the escalating conditions of social inequality, injustice, right-wing pressure, and racism across Europe and globally. These disciplines are inherently concerned with individuals affected by intersectional discrimination and systemic inequities. Consequently, defining

both the essence of politics and the "political" dimension of pedagogy is indispensable. Social Work, which cannot achieve adequate practice without fundamental pedagogical concepts, is perpetually challenged to fulfill its political mandate.

Therefore, the political positioning of pedagogy and Social Work is not a mere self-serving exercise to validate scientific and practice-oriented actions. Rather, it represents a political responsibility toward marginalized groups—including minorities, the socio-economically disadvantaged, women, youth, children, and refugees—who face daily discrimination and experience systemic injustices within their lifeworlds (*Lebenswelten*). This responsibility necessitates—despite increasingly difficult structural conditions—an essential return to the political roots of pedagogy and Social Work. Such a shift is required to resist the tendencies toward depoliticization that emerge from liberal-political influences within educational science and pedagogy (Bellmann, 2015, p. 46ff.).

The central objective of this contribution is to outline the necessity of a (re-)politicization of pedagogy and to position this concept as a primary paradigm for action. In this context, the theoretical frameworks and understandings of "the political" within pedagogy are viewed as catalysts for practice. This supports the thesis that theoretical and conceptual reflections do not merely serve the purpose of pure knowledge acquisition; rather, they flow—directly or indirectly—into the communications and actions of social actors, as well as into the relational dynamics between practitioners and their addressees.

Drawing upon the aforementioned tendencies toward the depoliticization of education, this analysis first seeks to clarify the conceptual understanding of "politics." Building on this foundation, the nexus between politics and critical pedagogy will be examined. Subsequently, the relevance of critical political pedagogy for (socio-)pedagogical practice will be addressed. It should be noted that a political understanding of pedagogy and Social Work—alongside politically inspired action concepts (including critical, human rights-oriented, anti-racist, and gender-sensitive pedagogies)—already exists and actively counters the unjust treatment of socially disadvantaged groups. However, these approaches are currently neither comprehensive in scope nor sufficiently visible in the public sphere. Therefore, the political positioning of pedagogical scientific discourse must be established as a reflexive activity. This activity serves as a catalyst for the critical-constructive reflection of practice and the politicization of pedagogy, thereby functioning as a counter-measure to depoliticization.

### **Depoliticization and the Orientation Toward Efficiency in Education**

As numerous critical studies illustrate, politics and "the political" have increasingly been marginalized within pedagogical contexts. From a pedagogical and educational science perspective, the necessity of engaging with political questions arises from an understanding of neoliberal societal conceptions and conditions, which permeate all dimensions of pedagogical relations. Within the sphere of education, there is a growing emphasis on marketization and efficiency. A defining characteristic of the neoliberal policy framework—which serves as the premise for this contribution—is the discursive construction of a disconnect between politics and pedagogy, asserting that they constitute separate spheres. As Zeuner, Kessl, and Schmidt emphasize, this results in pedagogical practices being perceived as apolitical and merely "pedagogically

guided." Such a view is unacceptable, particularly regarding the mediation of educational content and professional practice within pedagogical fields (Zeuner, Kessl & Schmidt, 2015, p. 5).

According to the editors of the DGfE bulletin, the "influence of politics on educational science" poses a challenge to both pedagogy and practice. Furthermore, it necessitates that the "scientific study of processes of upbringing, socialization, and education" (Zeuner, Kessl & Schmidt, 2015, p. 5) engages with the political dimension of its own activities. This involves addressing the "political gaps" inherent in educational theories and confronting the political implications of scientific inquiry itself.

"Fundamental questions regarding the definition of the relationship between educational science and politics, or rather between the pedagogical and the political, have recently coalesced within the context of debates over the disciplinary orientation of educational science—specifically, whether it should function as a factual science (*Tatsachenwissenschaft*) or as an approach rooted in social-theoretical reflection. The relationship between educational science and politics, long characterized as alienated, is currently undergoing a startling and rapid rapprochement. This shift is occurring under the umbrella of a specific form of empirical research, driven by the contexts of evidence-based practice and impact research" (Zeuner, Kessl & Schmidt, 2015, p. 5).

One of the fundamental categories for adequately illuminating the connection between politics and pedagogy is the analysis of the societal conditions under which education occurs. This includes examining the role of state regulations within the educational system, which shape the living conditions, life stages, and socialization of adolescents.

Numerous pedagogically established frameworks exist that draw upon reference theories from political science to further define the relationship between politics and pedagogy (e.g., Collier, Koller & Ricken, 2016). Although pedagogy is inconceivable in isolation from societal conditions—and a state of interdependence prevails—both national and international critical research highlight the importance of not losing sight of pedagogy's potential as a political medium capable of transforming practice.

Within this framework, the following analysis focuses on Rancière's conceptualization of politics and "the political," as well as the scholarly integration of pedagogy into social analysis and subject-theoretical, politically inspired perspectives provided by Gramsci, Freire, and Giroux. These perspectives have been widely received in educational theory and pedagogy, emphasizing their significance for conceptualizing the political dimension within the field (Sternfeld, 2009; Casale, Koller & Ricken, 2016).

In addressing the question of what constitutes politics and its relationship to pedagogy, I initially draw upon selected reflections by Rancière. Rather than attempting a comprehensive reception of Rancière's political theory in its entirety, this inquiry focuses specifically on the overlapping domains of politics and pedagogy. This includes thematic areas such as the question of equality and inequality within a democracy, systemic injustices, and the societal conditions under which subject-formation (*Subjektbildung*) occurs within pedagogical contexts.

In his socio-political reflections, Rancière points toward a fundamental problem that must be recognized from a pedagogical perspective and requires constant identification. He departs from a strict separation of disciplines, such as politics and pedagogy,

arguing that it is precisely this separation that renders "the political" within pedagogy unthinkable. Rancière emphasizes that this compartmentalization of spheres remains difficult to identify and often stays concealed. His attention is directed toward this non-transparent relationship between politics, the political, and pedagogy (Rancière, 2007; Sternfeld, 2009).

A cornerstone of Rancière's inquiry into the nature of politics and "the political" within a democratic society is the concept of equality. The "equality of all human beings"—regarded as a core value of democratic societies and an inspirational paradigm in education—is virtually impossible to reject, which paradoxically makes it harder to perceive the political dimension underlying it. For this reason, Rancière critically examines this maxim of equality, which is often taken for granted. He argues that it is frequently postulated as a given—implying that all members of such a society already experience equality or equal treatment—thereby obscuring actual power dynamics (Rancière, 2023, p. 5ff.).

For Rancière, equality is a fundamental political concept rather than an abstract category. In his view, it constitutes the discursive site of the political—the very space where injustice or "the wrong" (*le tort*) is established, thereby creating a distinction between human beings (cf. Wetzel & Claviez, 2016, p. 49).

According to Rancière, the postulate of equality establishes a paradoxical connection in which equality and inequality emerge simultaneously. In this sense, the "democratic assertion of equality" does not necessarily aim for the homogenization or identity of all individuals (Wetzel & Claviez, 2016, p. 49). For instance, so-called migrants or women may not be included within a communally constructed nation or national identity. By making equality a central theme and assertion, an "indeterminacy of human relations" is perpetuated, meaning that structures of inequality remain concealed (Wetzel & Claviez, 2016, p. 49). Within this paradigm of equality, political practice unfolds in a non-transparent manner—specifically, as a paradoxically interwoven relationship between equality and inequality.

According to Rancière, this is also linked to a narrative or an "utterance of the unidentifiable" (Wetzel & Claviez, 2016, p. 49), which complicates the recognition of the political within societal and pedagogical relations. Rancière views the indeterminacy of the political in the context of equality as a condition of possibility for the expansion of liberal politics and the liberal understanding of democracy. In this framework, the primary objective has become the "authentication of conventional views on right, the rule of law, legislation, and consensus" (Rancière, 2023, p. 1).

Liberal political practice manifests itself in the suspension of the political; that is, the political is increasingly marginalized, thereby denying its right to exist within social movements and the social sciences (Rancière, 2023, p. 1). In this regard, he criticizes approaches that decouple politics from the social sphere and establish them as separate domains. This form of "purifying" politics from the social—and reducing it to state-level institutionalism—reserves politics for those who possess a formal title to exercise it (Rancière, 2003, p. 210).

Furthermore, Rancière argues that the concept of democracy was actually invented by its opponents. What these opponents share is a reliance on specific qualifications—such as age, birth, wealth, knowledge, or virtue—as sources of legitimate authority and the basis upon which power is justified (Simons & Masschelein, 2016, p. 172). The logics of sphere separation (e.g., public vs. private)

and the democratic assertion of universal equality, combined with the simultaneous categorization of people (e.g., man/woman, self/other), serve to consolidate the power of the privileged. This is often justified through arguments of property acquisition based on personal industry or the possession of specific competencies. Through this logic of legitimacy, the intelligence of the subordinates (e.g., workers) is denied in the very same breath.

By employing these logics of separation, liberal frameworks and semantics of equality—which, according to Rancière, are oriented toward consensus and agreement—aim to trivialize discrepancies and dissensus. Their objective is to neutralize or render invisible the conceptions of justice held by those "without part" or the "uncounted" (e.g., marginalized groups). According to Rancière, democracy is equated with consensus, leading to the erasure of alternative "politics"—specifically, the erasure of resistant voices that challenge the claim that democracy is a lived reality for all. This occurs through a refusal to listen and the marginalization of resistant articulations that oppose a consensus presupposed as non-negotiable—a consensus that functions as a "state apparatus" (*dispositiv*) (Rancière, 2008, p. 45).

Furthermore, Rancière finds the subordination of the social sphere to state-political premises of consensus unacceptable, viewing it as a means of stigmatizing those who resist:

"Theories regarding the 'return of the political' and the 'common good,' etc., are essentially ideal justifications for the machinery of consensus. Wherever one listened, the primacy of the political over the 'social' was asserted. In reality, however, this claimed primacy served to stigmatize social movements that resisted the equation of democracy with the state management of economic necessities. The alleged return of the political was, in fact, its liquidation" (Rancière, 2003, p. 114).

According to Rancière, consensus—or the creation of consensus—is the primary medium through which a disconnect between state politics and the social sphere is established. Through this process, dissensus is annulled, and the subjects of the political—those who embody dissensus and resistance—are excluded from the political realm. In Rancière's framework, consensus functions as a control mechanism and a means of domesticating dissensus; by legitimizing politics as a mere representation of interests, consensus effects the "reduction of politics to the police" (Rancière, 2008, p. 45). Here, "the police" refers to methods of domestication or the disciplining of opinions and positions held by those segments of the population who are treated unequally within a socio-economically hierarchical society. Consensus thus serves as an instrument of hegemony, consolidating and maintaining dominant subject positions, while being discursively framed within official state policy under the matrix of "democracy as a practice of the political" (Rancière, 2016, p. 105). This liberal-connotated "political," upheld by institutions, must not be confused with the politics and the "political" of the "partless" (*the uncounted*) in society.

The "political" of the partless, in Rancière's sense, emerges when the existing consensus is disrupted by the protest of those who have no place and no voice within the system. Consequently, from a perspective critical of injustice, the central question is: "To what extent (...) is the political ignited by the identification of something unfair (*le tort*), or even an injustice?" (Wetzel & Claviez, 2016, p. 47, emphasis in original). This question is vital in the context of claims of democracy and equality within society, educational

institutions, and pedagogical settings. Another idea circulating within the discourse of equality is that of "community" and the notion of the identical—for example, "the people" (*Volk*). Rancière illustrates how identity politics is conducted under the guise of democracy. By subjectifying "the people" as the true embodiment of democratic order, popular sovereignty is claimed; yet, the people are excluded from structuring "real" democracy—that is, from equal speech, participation in social resources, and the shaping of the social and societal sphere (Rancière, 2016, p. 114f., Yıldız 2016a, 2016b).

Precisely because of these systemic inequalities, Social Work appears as the site where the deficiencies of democracies are meant to be corrected. However, neither pedagogy nor Social Work is capable of fundamentally resolving these inequalities, as socio-structural and political frameworks profoundly restrict their scope. This reflects the delegation of governmental responsibility for the "social" to Social Work. Practitioners and actors in Social Work are hindered by the logic of consensus and the hegemonic state-political discourse of "equality," which prevents them from systematically and publicly challenging structural inequalities and classifying social hierarchies. Ultimately, the question of how individuals and collectives are categorized, positioned unequally, and treated unjustly within a market-oriented, liberal-political society is disregarded.

Social Work fulfills its mandate by advocating for the equal participation of disadvantaged individuals across all social spheres. However, in doing so, it paradoxically and unintentionally functions as a consensus-building mechanism, as fundamental social critique is neglected. For a (re-)politicization of pedagogy and Social Work to occur, it is essential to adopt a conceptual understanding of politics that can be further developed through the lens of Rancière's theories.

According to Rancière, "the process of politics begins" with the identification of a wrong (*le tort*), a fundamental dispute over differing calculations of the communal (Tanke, 2011, p. 51, as cited in Wetzel & Claviez, 2016, p. 47), and a dispute over what is just and unjust. What, then, is perceived within the discourse of equality, and what remains unheard? How is the inegalitarian logic justified in the name of equality—an inequality perpetuated in the name of democratic parity, human rights, ethnic division, and the decomposition of the social whole into its constituent parts? (Rancière, 2016, p. 115; Simons & Masschelein, 2016, p. 176f.).

According to Rancière, politics constitutes an act of contention—a refusal to participate in the production of consensus. Instead, it involves remaining within a state of dissensus, maintaining alertness to the disagreement over what is perceived and what is ignored in the name of a subjectified equality. Since "the essence of consensus is the annulment of dissensus," injustices are rendered invisible (Rancière, 2008, p. 45). This represents the core question for a critical examination of the theories and concepts within pedagogy and Social Work. Such an inquiry is necessary to empower practitioners to recognize the injustices experienced by individuals in practice and to advocate effectively on their behalf.

### **Critical Pedagogy as Resistant Politics and an Expression of the Political**

There is a broad spectrum of international critical research that, from various theoretical backgrounds, addresses the question of overall societal conditions and their connection to politics and pedagogy. Theoretical reflections on a politically understood

pedagogy are not viewed in isolation from pedagogical practice. The possibility of establishing relationships and identifying the political dimension within pedagogy is intrinsically linked to the idea that pedagogy must be seen as an agent of change for both society and pedagogical practice itself.

Internationally prominent representatives of Critical Pedagogy illuminate the nexus between politics and pedagogy from a perspective of social critique, and their central arguments are received here. In this context, the role of teachers and practitioners also comes into focus. Of particular relevance are the foundational ideas of Antonio Gramsci—one of the most frequently cited thinkers in Italy regarding the concept of hegemony and the potential impact of a political pedagogy (Mayo, 2017)—and Paulo Freire, who, partly drawing on Gramsci's thought, developed concepts such as the "Politics of Pedagogy" and "A Pedagogy for Liberation" (Esteve, Prakash & Stuchul, 2025). Finally, Henry A. Giroux is considered, who productively utilized Gramsci's idea of hegemony for his social-critical thought but was primarily influenced by Freire's core ideas of the "Politics of Education," "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," and "A Pedagogy for Liberation," further advancing the perspective of Critical Pedagogy (Schneider-Bertan, 2024).

At this point, it should be noted that in international and Anglo-American contexts, the term "pedagogy" is often used interchangeably with "education," implying a broad rather than a narrow conceptualization. Consequently, the terms "pedagogy" and "education" will be used hereafter with the intention that both represent a shared focus on the critical investigation of inequalities and injustices.

The introduction of the concept of "hegemony" into educational science allows for an analysis of the modes of leadership and governance of subjects, thereby making the term applicable to pedagogical teaching and learning relations. According to Gramsci, the "fundamental pedagogical relationship" is thus "not reduced to an interpersonal teacher-student perspective; rather, it is conceptualized as a comprehensive societal structural relationship embedded within dynamics of power and dominance" (Merkens, 2007, p. 159).

Consequently, "the pedagogical relationship (...) exists within the whole of society in its entirety and for every individual in relation to other individuals—between intellectuals and non-intellectual strata, between the governors and the governed, between elites and followers, between leaders and the led (...). Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily a pedagogical relationship" (GH 6: 1335, as cited in Merckens, 2007, p. 159).

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'hegemony' is necessarily a pedagogical relationship" (GH 6: 1335, as cited in Merkens, 2007, p. 159).

Since, according to Gramsci, state-regulated education contributes to the maintenance of hegemony, it is necessary to conceive of education as a critical political project directed against hegemonic structures. Such a project aims to enable the transformation of society into more just conditions through critical educational processes (Pizzolato & Holst, 2017, p. 25). To achieve this, one of his fundamental theses posits that education critical of hegemony must render "the governed intellectually independent from the governors" (Merkens, 2007, p. 157ff.).

An analytical framework informed by hegemony theory—aimed at defining the fundamental pedagogical relationship within a society that characterizes itself as a democratic migration society—can build upon Merkens' reception of Gramscian theory. It can be maintained that "the educational structure of hegemonic relations" can be illuminated through "themes [...] that are commonly not regarded as pedagogical fields of theory or action," thereby creating pathways for the political emancipation of individuals (Merkens, 2007, p. 159). For Gramsci, politics and "the political" exist within the processes of upbringing, interactions, and educational content. In these spaces, societal conditions, practices of socialization, behavioral regulations, and emotional states are reflected and influence the consciousness of subjects. Through a Gramscian lens, pedagogy can be read as politics; it is a tool of the state, the governors, and society (ibid.). Recognizing the societal nature of pedagogy and its inherent political dimension thus represents a turning point for a theoretically grounded analysis of the relationship between pedagogy, education, and politics, as well as societal conditions of injustice. Consequently, it is essential to liberate pedagogy and education from their submissiveness and to insist upon their emancipatory potential.

According to Gramsci, educational actors (educators, pedagogues, teachers) also operate within social conditions characterized by contradictory transformations; they are socially situated and positioned within these very conditions.

Consequently, upbringing and education do not only pertain to adolescents. The question "who educates the educators?" implies that in their role as mediators, practitioners can also educate themselves through the critical reflection of societal hegemonic relations, thereby exerting a transformative influence (Merkens, 2007, p. 159).

From a perspective critical of hegemony, the political dimension of pedagogy entails positioning oneself against the modes of oppression that Paulo Freire considers constitutive of a social-critical pedagogy.

Paulo Freire (teacher and professor of the history and philosophy of education), who was inspired by Gramsci's ideas on hegemony, developed a theory and conceptual framework for pedagogy aimed at education and upbringing based on liberty. With his assertion that "education is politics"—or rather, that "education is never neutral" (Lange, 1973, p. 13)—he establishes a definitive stance for a political pedagogy designed to counter oppression.

This line of thought and analysis—which is explored in depth in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and can only be partially addressed here—defines Freire's understanding of education. He conceives of education as a complex overarching phenomenon comprising cultural practices and hegemonic

narratives of the ruling class, designed to subject individuals to existing structures of dominance. He describes this process as a "cultural invasion," in the sense that the values and worldviews of the oppressors permeate the lifeworld of the oppressed.

According to Freire, this powerful cultural influence acts as a form of "domestication" aimed at profound internal subjugation. In this state, the oppressed begin to accept the perspectives of the rulers—their myths and narratives regarding values such as "equality"—ingesting them as an alternative-less reality. This dynamic leads to a "culture of silence" and can even result in the denial of one's own identity (Schneider-Bertan, 2024, p. 85).

Freire's conceptualization of pedagogical social critique, originally situated within the Brazilian context, can be directly transposed to Western industrial nations, where, according to Freire, a "Third World" exists within the "First World" (Lange, 1973, p. 9). In these settings, oppression does not necessarily manifest through physical violence but rather through the systematic marginalization of social groups. These groups are labeled as minorities and are positioned as such primarily through dominant discourses. Through these discursive processes, individuals are pushed into marginal positions, an exclusion that is subsequently legitimized institutionally—for instance, through the educational system.

In this context, Freire fundamentally scrutinizes "the phenomenon of social marginality" and rejects the term itself as an analytical category. "For him, there is no such thing as marginality, but only marginalization—the pushing of minorities, and often enough majorities, against the wall as a necessary consequence of the domination of human beings over other human beings. Wherever marginal groups exist, one must always investigate the conditions that marginalize them" (Lange, 1973, p. 11).

Freire's conception of the political crystallizes at the moment when historically and socially evolved modes of thought—along with structurally anchored logics of separation, causalities, and taken-for-granted assumptions—are called into question. These are the same elements expressed in Rancière's political theory. According to these authors, relations of hierarchy, hegemony, and oppression within society are mirrored in pedagogical (relational) dynamics between teachers and learners. These dynamics serve as an expression of societal hegemonic relations, which manifest as social hierarchies during the processes of upbringing and education.

Hier ist die Übersetzung für diesen komplexen Satz, der die globalen Machtstrukturen mit der Notwendigkeit einer emanzipatorischen pädagogischen Praxis verknüpft.

Given that these nationally and internationally dominant societal relations of hegemony and rule—along with certain discursive control mechanisms over the subjectification of individuals through liberal-connotated discourses—represent socio-historically and politically evolved realities worldwide (manifesting, for example, in the form of colonially shaped relations, practices of distinction between classes, strata, genders, national affiliations, etc.), the question of how a politically understood, emancipatory pedagogy can become a guiding principle for thought and action is of central importance.

According to Freire, the core objective within the lines of argument of a "Politics of Education" is to contribute to free and just societal conditions through education that is critical of existing structures. In this context, the analysis of society and inequality serves as a

necessary foundation for fundamentally rethinking the function of pedagogy. The central question arises as to what role pedagogy plays within dominant, unjust structures—an inquiry that underscores the inherently political character of all pedagogical action. Without an awareness of the political dimension of their situation, individuals remain in a state of adaptation rather than actively transforming their circumstances through structural-critical education.

To break through this form of adaptation to relations of dominance—which Freire considers a form of subjugation—his theories (later received through Giroux's framework of Critical Pedagogy) aim to discursively design a type of subject that can and should function as a condition of possibility for societal change. The construction and education of such political subjects thus becomes the central concern:

The objective is to empower individuals to critically reflect on the relational and interlocking connections between pedagogy, society, and politics, and to actively transform hegemonic conditions. According to the theorists of Critical Pedagogy received here, this requires the promotion of modes of subjectification rooted in political thought—modes that only become possible through a subject's process of (self-)education as they reflect upon the conditions of societal inequality.

By actively reflecting upon and questioning conditions of societal inequality, individuals first emerge as emancipatory political subjects. In this context, Freire introduces the concept of resistance as an analytical category and explains how the thought processes of political subjects can be designed and become a guide for action. For him and other representatives of Critical Pedagogy, there is no such thing as value-free learning. Consequently, it is necessary to recalibrate pedagogical categories—such as politics, political thought, and the politicization of thought and action. This recalibration serves to make constant consciousness-raising regarding forms of oppression and injustice applicable toward the pursuit of a free society.

According to Gramsci, Freire, and Giroux, the categorical insertion of the political into pedagogy presupposes a reflection on the entanglement of educators within state-political calculations. These practitioners operate as agents of the state and its politics, a role enacted through the definitions of their mandates and responsibilities (for instance, through the civil servant status of teachers).

By actively reflecting upon and questioning conditions of societal inequality, individuals first emerge as political subjects. From the perspective of Critical Pedagogy, "becoming political" and "being political" are not inherently given states; rather, they must be understood as a permanent, dynamic process of developing a consciousness regarding relations of inequality.

Perceiving the political positioning of teachers, for example, can contribute to the conceptualization and design of anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian learning processes. This is achieved by providing students and activists with the media and instruments necessary to defend themselves against dominant positions (Mayo, 2017). Framed as a "Pedagogy of Resistance" (Kirylo, 2013) or "A Pedagogy for Liberation" (Paulo Freire), these approaches are linked to the ambition of strengthening theory and practice as mutually dependent instances of action. Such a synthesis serves to liberate subjects from positions of subjugation and disenfranchisement.

### **Henry A. Giroux: "Critical Pedagogy"**

Like Gramsci and Freire before him, Giroux's critical pedagogical theories and approaches proceed from the premise of a structured and institutionalized silence regarding the political within educational processes; they therefore insist upon a "Pedagogy of Resistance" (Kirylo, 2013). This "silence" does not signify literal muteness; rather, it is constituted by a specific manner of arguing and articulating opinions through dominant discourses. In the sense of Antonio Gramsci, silence can be interpreted as an attitude that crystallizes as a consensus with the cultural hegemony of the ruling class. However, a "cultural counter-hegemony as both a prerequisite and a product of society-changing practice" remains possible through an "exchange of experiences among actors from subaltern social groups" (Bernhard, 2005, p. 105). Furthermore, the theme of neutrality in educational contexts must be identified as a factor that flows into and shapes political subjectifications.

If injustices and relations of inequality are maintained or remain unresolved specifically through and within institutions such as schools, these sites appear as spaces where the concept of neutrality is understood—in Rancière's terms—as an expression of a liberal-hegemonic politics. Consequently, a constant identification of this "neutrality" within learning processes is required to break the silence (Simons & Masschelein, 2016).

The specific manner in which students are oppressed—manifesting through their adaptation and subordination to rules, norms, and so forth—renders pedagogy political in the sense of an institutional policy that is sanctioned by the state (Bernhard, 2005, p. 120).

Drawing upon the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, but primarily influenced by Paulo Freire's theories on the "Politics of Pedagogy," "A Pedagogy for Liberation," and "A Pedagogy for Resistance," as well as Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Giroux developed the framework of Critical Pedagogy. While this approach remains largely under-received in the German context, it is considered one of the most significant frameworks in the English-speaking world. His radical pedagogical approach—centered on the thesis that education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but a profoundly political act—has significantly sharpened the contours of the politicization of pedagogy as a socially critical discipline.

A central aspect of his work is the critique of neoliberalism. Giroux warns that the commercialization of the educational system leads to a replacement of critical thinking by a sheer pursuit of efficiency. His thought is rooted in the conviction that schools and universities are not neutral spaces but sites where power relations are either consolidated or challenged.

Following Gramsci's assumption that pedagogy and education occur throughout society as a whole, Giroux advocates for conceiving of teachers as "public intellectuals." These intellectuals should empower students to recognize social injustices and actively participate in shaping a democratic society. Beyond pedagogical policies related to schools and universities, he coined the term "Public Pedagogy." This describes how conservative discourses in educational settings and popular culture influences—such as media, cinema, or corporations like Disney—often shape human consciousness more powerfully than the traditional classroom. According to Giroux, these influences must be included in the consciousness-raising processes facilitated by teachers and educators (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Giroux & Simon, 1989).

In this way, Giroux illustrates how comprehensively pedagogy and education must be understood and why he speaks of a "radical pedagogy." According to him, true societal change is not possible through structural interventions alone; it imperatively requires a pedagogical reshaping of the human being. Without the socially critical consciousness of those involved, structural reforms remain, for Giroux, purely mechanical and risk a regression into obsolete pedagogical-cultural patterns.

Therefore, in his view, pedagogy does not serve a "pure" logic of explanation or cognition. In his numerous publications, he calls for a return to the social responsibility of science and the transformative power of pedagogy. The significance of Critical Pedagogy in an international context is characterized by its introduction of resistance against injustice and oppression as a substantial category of thought within a politically understood pedagogy. The aim is to make resistance "readable" for subjects and actors, providing them with concrete orientation for their own actions (Kirylo, 2013).

### **Conclusion: Critical Pedagogy – Critical Social Work is Possible**

As outlined with Rancière and the representatives of Critical Pedagogy, reflections on politics, "the political," and pedagogy are never detached from neo-conservative and neo-liberal societal conceptions and conditions. For Gramsci, Freire, Giroux, and other proponents of Critical Pedagogy, there is no such thing as value-free learning. Consequently, a recalibration of pedagogical and social work categories—such as politics, political thought, and the politicization of thought and action—is necessary. This process, fueled by a continuous development of consciousness regarding forms of oppression, must be utilized in the pursuit of a free society. The common key categories for analyzing dominant liberal societal relations are inequality and injustice; these must be constantly decoded, as they occur under—yet remain obscured by—the liberal-political paradigm of "equality."

According to Armin Bernhard, what is discussed discursively in critical pedagogical theories and social-scientific models is of fundamental importance for Critical Social Work, even if the latter cannot be assumed to be a homogeneous school of thought. What they share is the "principle of social critique" to which they are both open (Bernhard, 2012, p. 400). In contrast, through the paradigms of justice and human rights, Critical Pedagogy and Critical Social Work provide a stance for practice and learning processes—both within and beyond formal education—through which marginalized people affected by discrimination, racism, and social exclusion can resist, as can pedagogues, social workers, and teachers.

As Stender and Kröger point out, the task of Social Work is not merely to provide aid and care, but to take the principles of human rights and social justice seriously as maxims for action. The authors emphasize that it should not be forgotten that Social Work has always been political and can certainly reflect on a critical tradition, even if that tradition was not hegemonically dominant. "In this line of tradition, which extends from Jane Addams to Siegfried Bernfeld and Janusz Korczak, and into the social work movement of the 1970s (...), Social Work always understood itself as political. Its mandate was not 'aid and control,' but 'social justice'" (Stender & Kröger, 2013, p. 9). To reflect on exactly this history means to remain political.

Although one must assume different theoretical directions and varying political emphases in social critique, the common emancipatory claim of critical-political pedagogy and the (re-)politicization of Social Work lies in positioning oneself against "the historically fundamental fact of a rule experienced as illegitimate" (Stender & Kröger, 2013, p. 9) and making this a principle of action. This requires engaging with concepts of dominance, hegemony, and power relations, especially within the context of the democratic postulate of "equality." Only in this way can pedagogy and Social Work contribute to the liberation of marginalized people.

To advocate for a more just, dignified society and a dignified life, it is therefore necessary to create and act as an emancipated political subject. This is achieved through a political-critical pedagogical practice, utilizing critical thought, the appropriation of discourses critical of hegemony, and the sciences of pedagogy and Social Work. Such work must dedicate itself to the responsibility and the claim of creating discursive points of connection for subjects—as suggested by Freire, Gramsci, and Giroux—thereby contributing to the conception of political subjects as a necessary prerequisite for Critical Pedagogy, Critical Social Work, and the realization of a practice worthy of human dignity.

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