The alienation and anomic disengagement of youth has been a major source of concern in the United States since World War II, generating continual media discourse and public concern. In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, "alienation" became a frequent buzzword employed by the U.S. media, and the source of renewed interest in the social science research of the day. Both media and scholarly accounts continually associated the term with youth and the life phase of adolescence. This link between alienation and youth (constructed as a general, undifferentiated population class but with a focus clearly on white boys and young men) was firmly established when influential public writers such as Paul Goodman (1960) and Kenneth Keniston (1965) published dramatic accounts of the perceived legions of "disaffected youth" sprouting up in all geographical corners of the United States.

Since the 1960s, youth alienation, both real and imagined, has continued to be a source of fear and institutional reaction as reflected in the many channels of U.S. cultural discourse and in those institutions responsible for socializing the young for participation in adult life—namely the family, schools, and the criminal justice system. Drug use, teen pregnancy, gangs, school dropouts, suicide, violence, political apathy, casual sex, rock and rap music, and more recently depression, video games, raves, and the internet have all been understood as symbolic representations of an underlying phenomenological and existential estrangement, or even nihilism, in the lives of youth (a term which I am using as a general category for the group of teenagers and young adults collectively subject to the large-scale social and cultural forces at work in late capitalism) and expressions of youth cultures. While these empirical indicators are taken to reflect an interior emptiness, distress, or turmoil in the selves and lives of youth, rarely are they—or the existential experiences of youth—connected to the larger social, economic, and cultural formations that give rise to the substance of everyday life and that are the basis of specific historical relations of domination and resistance. Alienated youth are imagined as essentially "other" in relation to those who conform, and in comparison to hegemonic models of psychological maturity, social progress, and individual development (Lesko, 2001), alienated youth are positioned outside arenas of history, relations of power and domination, and social change. Their alienation, now as in the 1960s, is considered a more or less transitory form of individual or group deviance, if not an *inherent* vulnerability to the risks of adolescence itself.

In contrast to this dominant discourse on youth alienation, theorists and critics in education grouped under the rubric "critical pedagogy" have made a significant contribution to a contemporary *critical* understanding of alienation in education as part of their overall project to illuminate the politics of education. Beginning from and inspired by the pioneering work of Paulo Freire in the philosophy and sociology of education, critical pedagogy has used an

interdisciplinary empirical and theoretical project to critique the dominant perspectives in the field of education and in public discourse. Since much of Freire's philosophy of education is itself based on an analysis and critique of student alienation or "objectification," critical pedagogy seamlessly moved towards an investigation of this phenomenon in contemporary schooling. Incorporating the Frankfurt School, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, structural Marxism, and the Birmingham School, critical pedagogy—as reflected in the early work of Henry Giroux (1981, 1983), Paul Willis (1977), and Peter McLaren (1986)—revitalized and extended Freire's critical theory into a critical social theory of education. More recent work in cultural studies and critical ethnography (Bettie, 2002; Dimitriadis, 2003; Fine, 1991; Gaines, 1991; Valenzuela 1999; Weis, 1990; Wexler, 1992) has broadened the field and brought attention to numerous forms of alienation in U.S. schools. Thus, prior to a recent split in the field between cultural studies and political-economic approaches, the result was a plethora of empirical and theoretical interrogations of contemporary ideology and practice in capitalist schooling. However, despite critical pedagogy's initial interest in the problems of culture, subjectivity, and ideology in education, the current division between interrogation of representations in popular culture and the reconstruction of materialist frameworks necessitates work that links student alienation—understood as both a material *and* cultural phenomenon in everyday life—to the larger social and cultural structure of American schooling and late capitalist society. This paper asserts that Freire's critical pedagogy, with its central theme of alienation in all relations of social life and being, may provide the basis for a renewed critical social theory of youth alienation.

Freire's analysis of alienation in education is rooted in the same theoretical and empirical trajectory as the philosophical and social category *entfremdung* (estrangement), one of the key concepts in the development of the Western Marxist project. From its origins in Hegel's analysis of the historical subject's attempt to attain the object in different forms of consciousness, the Hegelian-Marxist tradition has sought to understand alienation in terms of the numerous forms of separation that prevent a subject from realizing his or her historically conditioned humanity. Since Feuerbach and Marx, Hegelian-Marxism has dialectically located these separations in the cultural, phenomenological, and material existence of life in capitalist society. From Karl Marx (1964) and Georg Lukacs (1971), to Theodor Adorno (1973), Erich Fromm (1955), Herbert Marcuse (1964), Guy Debord (1994), Henri Lefebvre (1971, 1991) and Raoul Vaneigem (1994), the analysis of alienation has targeted the capitalist mode of production for inverting the relationship between subject and object in the totality of social life. Whether in Marx's uncovering of commodification or Lukacs's reification thesis, the deformation of the subject into

an object in all spheres of everyday life has been the crucial phenomenon of critical theory and the crux of the imperative for revolutionary transformation.

Yet contemporary theories of alienation, including those pertaining to youth, must be reconstructed and positioned within a renewed critical theory and critical pedagogy project. Alienation has to be thought anew for the age of late or postmodern capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Just as youth in the late nineteenth century were required to undergo dramatic reorientation in adjusting to the new era of modern industrial capitalism, contemporary youth face a severe challenge in forming new identities and bases of meaning and participation in postmodernity. This social formation has not altered the basic rule of capital, but intensified processes of commodification and mediated reification have altered the lifeworlds of youth and foreclosed earlier modern forms of identity formation. Before outlining some of the essential features of a critical theory of youth alienation, I will first elaborate on Freire's seminal critique of the oppression and alienation of everyday life.

Freire's Analysis of Alienation

Critical pedagogy's promise for understanding and transforming youth alienation lies in its theoretical roots, both in Freire and in the larger problematic of critical theory. A return to the centrality of the phenomena of alienation and dehumanization found in Freire's *pedagogy of the oppressed* can provide critical pedagogy with a renewed basis for the illumination and political transformation of the everyday alienation stunting the humanity and social participation of large groups of contemporary youth. Freire's focus on both the social and existential subordination of the oppressed, as reflected in phenomenological experience and the objective socio-economic conditions of individual lifeworlds, is central to a critical social theory of youth alienation in everyday life. In fact, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is specifically concerned with the transcendence of alienation and oppression through the development of a critical literacy with revolutionary intent. However, unlike most contemporary traditions of critical theorizing, Freire's pedagogy, with its roots in Marx, is based on *praxis*, explicitly combining theory and practice in its pedagogical program.

As best evidenced in his major work, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire's problematic was constructed out of a complex combination of historically distinct theoretical, philosophical, and political traditions. Among the more influential strands of Freire's writings are strong influences from Hegelian Marxism, existentialism, liberation theology, phenomenology, and some form of critical hermeneutics. In his introduction to the English translation of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Shaull quotes Freire's own statement on his intellectual

roots as including "Sartre and Mounier, Eric Fromm and Louis Althusser, Ortega y Gasset and Mao, Martin Luther King and Che Guevara, Unamuno and Marcuse" (p. 11). Other Freire scholars have indicated his indebtedness to Hegel (Torres, 1994) and the humanist existentialism of Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel (Peters and Lankshear, 1994). Certainly, the figure of Marx—especially the early Marx—remains a significant, if not *the* most significant and powerful influence throughout Freire's work. For Freire, what these intellectual and political figures share is a concern with the problems of alienation and existential and social oppression.

The potential for reflective, thought-infusing activity is a crucial aspect of what Freire terms the "ontological vocation" of being human. For Freire, to be human in any meaningful sense is to be a subject—a conscious social actor who has the ability, the desire, and the opportunity to participate in social and political life. However, a subject is not just a citizen who performs her perfunctory tasks in a formal democracy. Rather, a full subject is an intellectual who continuously "reads the world" as she or he simultaneously reads the word. The preconditions for individual engagement, democracy and social freedom are therefore "educational."

The dialectical negation of subjectivity is alienation. For Freire, alienation resides in the separation of the subject from her ontological vocation of active human participation in the world. The oppressed, submerged in conditions of existential violence, do not exercise their human capacities. They do not reflect on their lives, their experiences, their misery, or the reasons they find themselves among the dominated. Therefore, the ultimate significance of social and economic domination is the establishment of a class of dehumanized and alienated "objects." Objectification of potential subjects is a form of violence for Freire, since it is a process that violates the human essence at all levels of its being and expression: psychological, existential, political, and ontological. Thus, the oppressed are turned from potentially active subjects to dominated objects; from critically reflective actors, who participate in society democratically, to passive instruments of elite authoritarian control.

Freire's theory of objectification parallels Marx's theory of alienation in several respects. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1964), Marx argues that the worker in capitalist society is estranged in several respects: from the product and process of labor, from other workers, and from him or herself. What is common to and underlies all these aspects of estrangement is the *process* whereby the laborer is transformed into a commodity, an *object* to be bought and sold on the market like any other commodity. The laborer not only loses herself in the creation of a product and loses the product to the capitalist; she *becomes* an object and exists in a condition of objectification. Alienation, for Marx, is not only or primarily an *experience* of estrangement, but is also a material and

ontological condition of distorted historical being formed within the capitalist relations of production. Laborers can only enter into the realm of human being, of human subjectivity, by transcending the alienated labor and social relations of capitalism.

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is based on Marx's critique of alienation as commodification. However, instead of limiting his focus to production and labor Freire, like earlier theorists such as Lukacs and Marcuse, sees objectification as a pervasive social phenomenon saturating the totality of capitalist societies. The individual is turned into an object not only as a laborer, but also through a whole constellation of objectifying forces such as the state, schools, the media, the family, and other cultural spheres. The oppressed are particularly vulnerable to objectification given their marginal and subordinate status, and their general submersion in a "culture of silence." They are not expected to participate in the political affairs of their societies and are valued only as menial laborers. Freire argues that:

> The oppressed, who have been shaped by the death-affirming climate of oppression, must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanization, which does not lie *simply* in having more to eat...The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order *later* to become men (p. 55, italics in original text).

As objects, the oppressed have been prevented from becoming human subjects. They are not actors, but are the acted upon. They do not desire freedom, but live in constant fear of it. They do not reflect on their lives and their social conditions, but are told what to think and whom to be. In short, they are non-beings whose place in the world is like any other dead object.

The goal of the pedagogy of the oppressed is to turn objects into subjects. This is no individual matter, but entails a revolutionary project carried out by the oppressed for their own collective emancipation, and with it, the emancipation of society as a whole. In this sense, Freire's pedagogy is the precondition for the class struggle Marx envisions, although his project produces not only class consciousness, but the intellectual, emotional, and ontological basis for revolutionary struggle by the oppressed. Revolution for Freire is fundamentally an educational project of radical humanization. The oppressed must develop a critical consciousness of their objective situation—"The struggle begins with men's recognition that they have been destroyed" (Freire, 1972, p. 55)—but they

must simultaneously struggle to become subjects capable of creating a free society.

When the oppressed see themselves as cultural members of the oppressor class, they do not recognize either their own material subordination to that class or their potentially authentic selves, which preserves a condition of alienation. Identifying with the oppressor preserves a divided self and prevents the development of critical consciousness and the struggle for emancipation. It locks the oppressed into an ontological situation of objectification, alienation, and dehumanization. The oppressed are subjectively divided between their own authentic being, consciousness, and knowledge, and the inauthentic oppressor within. According to Freire, "They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting him; between human solidarity or alienation" (pp. 32-33). Freire asserts that this situation of alienation "is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account" (p. 33).

The alienated condition of the oppressed necessitates a revolutionary pedagogy for humanization and critical consciousness. This pedagogy is no mere collection of methods or technical teaching skills to be applied within the framework of traditional schooling. It is impossible to separate Freire's methodology from his philosophy and social theory of the dialectic of oppression and liberation. For Freire, the pedagogy of the oppressed must be consistently dialogical. Education for liberation cannot be imposed on or imparted to the oppressed; it can only be created with them in the *process* of humanization.

Dialogical education is based on the assumption that human beings are potentially active, conscious agents capable of knowing and transforming the worlds they live in. Drawing upon Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jaspers, Freire argues that libratory pedagogy must recognize that students can learn to think actively, and with intentionality and purpose—in other words, with a critical consciousness. Cognition for Freire is not passive or unfocused but always a part of our actions in the world and our intentions to carry out acts in the situations we confront. Corresponding to this unique feature of human being, Freire advocates a critical and dialogical education that poses problems for students. Teacher and students work together as equals to actively solve problems about the nature of social reality and, in the process, to change it. If consciousness is intentional and active, authentic education cannot be based on depositing facts into it, or what Freire termed "banking education." For Freire, the banking notion of education is motivated not by a concern for the student, but by a kind of interest in death—of the self, of the critical faculty of consciousness, and therefore of the soul.

The dialogical education that forms the foundation of the pedagogy of the oppressed is not a pedagogy of or for isolated individuals, but is a process carried out by the class of the oppressed and alienated. Liberation is inconceivable in individual terms and without historical intentionality. Authentic praxis consists of a *movement* of the oppressed to simultaneously understand and change the conditions of oppression. In this regard, Freire argues that:

> Problem-posing education is revolutionary futurity. Hence it is prophetic (and as such, hopeful). Hence, it corresponds to the historical nature of man. Hence it affirms men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future. Hence, it identifies with the movement which engages men as beings aware of their incompletion—an historical movement which has its point of departure, its Subjects and its objective (p. 72).

Thus, in contrast to banking education which seemingly craves a kind of existential death and affirms the inevitability of a violent present, the pedagogy of the oppressed loves life, development, and the flourishing of the individual through collective understanding and historical struggle to transcend the condition of estrangement.

Freire and Contemporary Youth Alienation

Freire's philosophy and praxis of education, based on the recognition and transcendence of alienation[1], offers crucial insights into some of the key roots of contemporary youth alienation. Just as Freire's work has proved to be of enormous value in the development of critical pedagogy, his core problematic can inform a critical sociology and pedagogy of youth for the late modern age. A critical sociology capable of recognizing and confronting contemporary youth alienation needs to expand the scope of Freire's thought while still drawing upon his most seminal contributions to educational praxis. While maintaining Freire's understanding of alienation as objectification and dehumanization, and as the denial of active participation in political life and intellectual activity, a critical theory of alienation must chart novel and historical forms of youth alienation in everyday life, and define a new relationship between this contemporary study of estrangement and critical pedagogy.

Just as Freire's radical pedagogy links the problems of everyday oppression, existential violence, and the subordination of education to objectification, I argue that a critical theory of late capitalist youth alienation must: 1) interrogate the cultural logic of everyday life; 2) confront the production of existential nihilism and loss of meaning amidst commodification and spectacle in capitalist society; and 3) investigate the subordination of education as a political and social project, as well as ethical end, amidst an intensification of the spectacle society. A renewed critical pedagogical project of emancipation must envision a response to pervasive youth and student alienation and work toward transcendence in and through education. This return to alienation as a core problematic in critical pedagogy links Freire's social, philosophical, and political project to the context of a late capitalist, post-industrial spectacle society. This new social formation has been explored by a number of critical theorists in the past two decades.

Social theorists of postmodernity such as Guy Debord (1994), Fredric Jameson (1991), Douglas Kellner (1995, 2003), David Ashley (1997), and Jean Baudrillard (1983) have concentrated on the cultural and social impact of new communications technology and the mass media to define the novel conditions that have emerged in capitalist societies since the modern industrial era. Together, the body of work known as postmodern theory has been focused on the power of mass mediated images and messages to transform, if not dissolve, social life, individual consciousness, and identity. The power of a new media age to construct and simulate social reality is said to have dislodged the modern foundations of identity, the self, morality, and the real. In fact, according to Baudrillard, the transition from modern to postmodern is said to occur when the real referents of signs are lost in the endless proliferation and circulation of media images and representations. For Baudrillard, postmodernity consists of the production of endless series of simulacra—copies of copies with no authentic original.

Building on the seminal work of Lefebvre (1971, 1991), who programmatically defined the sociological and philosophical study of everyday life in modernity, Debord and the Situationists asserted that the "spectacle" phase of capitalist society and mass communications inaugurated a more thoroughly reified movement of capitalism into a "spectacle-commodity" society. In Debord's terms, the "society of the spectacle" is one in which everyday life is increasingly governed by the images, messages and fantasies of consumer society (Debord, 1994). With increasing corporate control over mass communication, the production and circulation of signs becomes integrated into the material and cultural processes of commodification. Signs as commodities and commodities as signs become spectacles for public consumption. Thus, according to Debord

(1994), late modern capitalist societies can now be characterized as *fully* integrated societies of the spectacle.

For young people, everyday life in postmodernity generates new forms of estrangement and anomie which make growing up, to borrow Paul Goodman's (1960) telling phrase, even more "absurd." Contemporary youth alienation must be understood within the context of dramatic new material and cultural constellations that generate social fractures and undermine stable bases of meaning and identity for the self, even as these same conditions create different forms of estrangement by race, class, gender, and sexuality. While the alienation of groups marginalized by these postmodern modes of oppression must be connected to earlier forms of economic exploitation, racial domination, and patriarchy, the near universal cultural and economic transformations of the post-industrial digital age, with its corresponding malaise, existential nihilism, and fragmentation of identity, transcend class, race, gender, and sexuality. Youth alienation transcends the boundaries of sub-culture. It is part of the very logic of postmodernity, the spectacle, and consumer capitalism.

For many U.S. youth, including those privileged by class, race, sexuality, and gender status, the problem of adolescence continues to revolve around the creation of some form of existential meaning anchored to a transcendent yet stable everyday identity. Yet in the contemporary society of the spectacle, this task becomes even more difficult. While the possibility for struggle and resistance still lies in the spirits of youth and those marginalized subcultures that stand outside the dominant images of success, the advanced development of commodity capitalism has changed the landscape of alienation and the possibility of its transcendence. The processes of struggle with society, and the meanings of existence and identity, are now more obscure and confusing in everyday life. Meaningful bases of authentic existence and rebellion are more difficult to locate and strive for in spectacular society. The conditions in which the young must define themselves and their purposes have become more abstract and absurd.

Moreover, youth identity in the society of the spectacle has itself become a commodity that is bought by media conglomerates and sold back to youth themselves. The production and circulation of mass-mediated images has become the defining ground upon which youth must locate a sense of self. Their selves are always presented *to them* in the spectacle, and these images conform to a restricted range of choices young people are allowed to integrate and express. The struggle to define oneself that Edgar Friedenberg (1959) asserts to be the central task of adolescence is itself incorporated into this pre-selected set of images for public consumption. Teenage nihilism and violence become a spectacle. Youth style, rebellion, and marginality are targeted and integrated into the media before their cultural roots can spread and stable identities can form.

Thus, just as in Freire's diagnosis of oppression and estrangement in everyday life, contemporary youth alienation speaks to a multi-dimensional cultural and existential crisis for all groups of youth, including those privileged by class, gender, and race. It is a crisis of identity, of the self, of existential nihilism, and of the possibility of growing up on terms that oppose the commodification of contemporary life. Through new suburban and rural estrangement, young men and women struggle to maintain the integrity of self in the face of the larger alienated society of spectacular life. This is particularly the case for American boys. Groups of vulnerably masculine "outsiders" form anomic detachment, nihilism, anger, and resentment in response to the perceived mediocrity, meaninglessness, and absurdity of life in the society of the spectacle. For instance, the nihilistic rage that underlay recent "spectacular" school shootings among rural and suburban boys transcends any particular adolescent biology or youth culture. This existential despair, anger, and resignation rises organically from social terrains devoid of everyday meaning and participation.

Paradoxically, the horizons of everyday life appear limited to these boys during the exact historical moment in which the opening up of new worlds of communication, knowledge, and images in the age of new media has occurred. Regardless of the new possibilities this globalization provides, estranged school shooters see no alternative to the closed worlds of status hierarchy, or the mediated diversions from boredom in the hollowed-out world of suburbia or rural towns, and therefore take momentary gratification in revenge. Cruelty, hypocrisy, and absurdity appear to them to be impossible to change; they are just part of the "way things are." Therefore, the problem of postmodern alienation exemplifies, above all, the power of historically specific capitalist relations to commodify everyday life and subjectivity itself. Both the quotidian practices and experiences of young people are profoundly shaped (though never fully determined) by the overlapping, internal estrangements of self and society in the spectacle society's abstract world of commodities.

In sum, drawing upon Freire's alienation problematic allows for the critical examination of the everyday life, passivity, and nihilism that constitute central aspects of postmodern youth alienation. Freire's sophisticated synthesis of Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism provided him with intellectual and political tools capable of penetrating the dialectical relationship between everyday alienation, the phenomenology of existential objectification, and structural relations of domination. In the contemporary conditions of the spectacle society, this constellation of relationships has changed in substance but not in form, and a critical sociology and pedagogy of youth alienation can continue to draw upon Freire for illumination and guidance. Although everyday life and existential nihilism for postmodern youth are formed within postmodern media culture, consumerism, status conflict, and a network of rationalized and hierarchical

institutions, alienation and objectification formed by patterns of domination are still significant.

Freire's radical pedagogy also analyzed the negation of education in traditional modes of pedagogy and the negation of this negation in dialogical literacy. He made numerous explicit links between the process of education, democratic engagement, and the ontological vocation of human beings to be free participants in the making of their lives. For Freire, any educational process worthy of the name necessarily entailed active engagement on the part of the learner in a dialogical, problem-posing movement of critical awareness into the world. Freire's analysis of banking methods and his alternative program for the pedagogy of the oppressed can provide a critical model for analyzing the contemporary subordination of education in the spectacle society. For Freire, the essence of oppression is a form of existential and social negation; for Debord, passivity is the mode of "life" sanctioned by the society of the spectacle. According to Debord, the ubiquitous channels of mass communication promote the desire for passivity in all spheres of (former) activity. The modern individual is encouraged to be a mere spectator—a passive viewer of life as it is mediated for the public by corporations and political elites. In this spectacle society, an individual is to renounce attempts to control her own affairs or construct the ground of meaning by which her life becomes a transcendent project. As students in large bureaucratic school systems whose leisure time is governed by the production and circulation of commodity images, contemporary youth are typically confronted by wide gaps between schooling and what Freire could term authentic education. Education has become systematically alienated from the institution of schooling and overwhelmed by pervasive cultures of consumption and entertainment with their corresponding production of continually circulating desires and fantasies for status, power, and "happiness."

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, U.S. schooling is, as a whole, devoid of an educational purpose. The modern industrial capitalist society which gave public schools their direction and institutional purpose for over a century has given way to a new dizzying post-industrial landscape of bewildering communications and information technologies, massive transformations in the nature of work, the proliferation and circulation of images on an unprecedented scale, and the steady decay of uprooted foundational norms and dislocated ethical narratives. Just as public schools in the late nineteenth century were forced to adjust to the new era of modern industrial capitalism, contemporary schools will either generate a new pedagogical purpose in the early stages of today's post-industrial social order or will dissolve into a fragmented simulacrum. At stake is the very possibility for education in advanced capitalist societies—a possibility that has been systematically denied in previous modern periods.

In the face of these historical transformations in late capitalist educational discourse and practice, the United States has witnessed the gradual erosion of learning as even one of the main goals, let alone *the* central purpose of schooling. To be sure, learning and education continue to be a part of schooling discourse and parents', students', and teachers' unconscious motivation for participating in schools. And, no matter how technocratic or instrumental schools become, it is impossible to completely dissolve all ties between schooling and substantive education. However, the now entrenched ideological linkages between school participation and competition, whether for national superiority in a globalized economy or individual market attainment in a consumer society, have submerged the substantive ends of schooling beneath layers of instrumental rationality.

Furthermore, for youth, the process of schooling has become integrated into a type of spectacle society predicated, as Debord argued, upon dividing populations. Sustained competition for decent neighborhood schooling (beginning in some areas with preschool), and for grades and standardized test scores, forces students into the commodification process and separates them from one another. *Institutionalized* competition in capitalist schooling generates the material separation of student from student, and class from class. Moreover, as the state decreases school autonomy, individual teachers become deskilled (Apple, 1993), constrained to organize their lessons to prepare students for standardized examinations. Thus, the everyday life of schools becomes a kind of spectacle in itself, one based on modes of abstraction that separate schooling from the process of education. In other words, to echo Freire's argument about traditional teaching, post-industrial schooling has been alienated from the purposive end of education itself. Despite the best intentions of many dedicated teachers, education takes place in the vast majority of U.S. schools only through a profound struggle by a much smaller group of teachers and administrators against the forces of the market, rationalized accountability schemes, and media culture.

Alienation and the Crisis of Postmodern Youth: The Challenge for Critical Pedagogy

For many good reasons, the majority of recent scholarly attention has been given to youth who confront poverty and racism, since working class and poor racialized youth face a crisis based on the "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991) they experience at a young age. Millions of economically and racially marginalized youth must confront the harsh conditions of a post-industrial America that has witnessed massive job loss in the inner-cities, the decimation of the federal welfare system, the re-segregation of schooling, and an intensified, legitimation crisis for children growing up without real opportunities for a decent

future. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to a related dimension of youth in crisis: the alienation of far more economically and racially privileged youth. For middle-class children, particularly white suburban and rural youth who drift toward or are pushed to the margins, the problem of post-industrial life is the pervasive anomie and absurdity of consumerism and abstract social life. This set of conditions undermines and creates widespread fragmentation of identity within hyperreal media worlds. The society of the spectacle can make growing up more absurd, especially when disciplinary projects attempt to reinforce the abstract identities they promote. Thus, when identity crises are fueled or reinforced by cultural waves of hostility and punishment, the already existing separations between youth and society only grow larger. The frequent result is depression, rage, detachment, and for some, homicide or suicide: nearly half a million American teenagers attempt to kill themselves every year and the "rate of teenage suicide… has tripled in the past thirty years (Gaines, as quoted in Spina, 2000, p. 107).

Nanette Davis has been in the forefront of connecting contemporary punitive trends in the criminal-justice system to this larger social crisis of youth. As David Matza writes in the introduction to Davis' (1999) book, contemporary youth are in a widespread postmodern crisis that ranges from "suburban meaninglessness to inner-city war zones" and amounts to nothing short of a "breakdown of the current society's capacity to raise the next generation of youth" (p. ix). She asserts that, while differentiated, this pervasive condition stems from a lethal combination of two fairly recent social developments; youth today grow up in both a "high risk environment" and a punitive "low-justice society" (p. vii).

However, the contemporary crisis of youth transcends the problem of institutionalized risk. It is not solely a product of a risk society, or of some undefined postmodernity in and of itself. Rather, youth are in crisis within a specifically late capitalist social formation that integrates its members into a spectacle-commodity economy. The society of the spectacle colonizes the lifeworlds of youth and makes the formation of identity an overriding challenge that threatens to undermine the development of self and relations of mutual recognition in everyday life. In this social landscape, youth identity becomes commodified and young people are assigned value on the basis of how closely they resemble other objects of consumption. Moreover, in this form of society youth—as a class in and of itself—comes to attain sign-value in terms of their ability to excite, scare, and enrage adult consumers. Objectified as "alien" symbols in the spectacle, youth find it even more difficult to develop selves with substance, meaning, and purpose.

With a renewed sense of purpose and a return to its origins in Freire's critical theory, a contemporary critical pedagogy is in a position to address this

youth crisis and become an important analytic and political force tackling the problem of alienation and its transcendence once again. Just as Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed combated the dehumanization, objectification, and forced passivity of the learner, as well as the undermining of active intellectual and political engagement in the everyday lives of the poor and downtrodden, a contemporary critical pedagogy could help interrogate current forms of everyday youth alienation. By placing the alienations of late capitalism at the center of its problematic, critical pedagogy would be able to speak to the new forms of objectification and dehumanization pervading the lives of youth. Armed with a critical sociology of everyday life, critical pedagogy might once again speak to the economic, cultural, existential, and political realms of estrangement that undermine the potential active participation of youth in both their lifeworlds and in the larger political and economic life of contemporary societies.

Notes

[1] As in Marx and the Western Marxist tradition, Freire's conception of alienation posits a human nature or essence that can be divided or estranged. This assumption has been interrogated by poststructuralist thinkers on identity and the subject to the point that all claims about human essences, or universal foundations of human identity and subjectivity, have been rendered suspect (politically and intellectually). The following argument implicitly acknowledges the theoretical and political inadequacies of such humanist and modernist theories, while retaining Freire (and Marx's) basic critiques of alienation in the social, ontological, and existential spheres of everyday life. While I do not examine the theoretical differences between modern and postmodern conceptions of alienation in this work, I do discuss some of the substantive changes in estrangement (historical, social, and individual) brought about by postmodernity.

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