

2016

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### Recommended Citation

Doughty, H. A. (2016, November 2-6). Critical Skills and Critical Pedagogy in an Era of "Permanent Crisis" in Postsecondary Education. Paper presented at the *Higher Education in Transformation Symposium, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada*.

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# CRITICAL SKILLS AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical Skills and Critical Pedagogy in an Era of "Permanent Crisis" in Postsecondary Education

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Presented at the Higher Education in Transformation Symposium

November 2 - 4, 2016 in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

## Author Note

The writer would like to thank Dr. Kim Fedderson (Principal, Lakehead University, Orillia, Ontario), Dr. Gregory Gaydos (Political Science, Hawai'i Pacific University, Honolulu, Hawai'i), Dr. Philippe Gross (Social Science, Kapi'olani Community College, Honolulu, Hawai'i), Dr. Philip H. King (Psychology & Quantitative Methods, Hawai'i Pacific University, Honolulu, Hawai'i – retired), Dr. Diane E. Meaghan (Sociology & Canadian Studies, Seneca College, Toronto, Ontario – retired), and Dr. Jonathan Singer (English & Liberal Studies, Seneca College, Toronto, Ontario) for their relentless encouragement and thoughtful criticism. Since it is said to be within my power, I hereby absolve them from blame for remaining errors of fact or argument.

## Abstract

"Critical thinking," is widely celebrated as a "soft" employability skill, like the communications and human relations capabilities deemed essential for work in the precarious twenty-first-century. We are told it enhances problem-solving skills and contributes to employee flexibility in the competitive global economy. Intellectually, critical thinking derives from the European Enlightenment. It favours the "scientific method," strives for conceptual clarity and evidence-based statements. It eschews "bias" in all its forms. It opposes metaphysics and historicism, is critical of sentimental romanticism and authoritarian demagoguery, and seeks to purge "ideology" from public discourse. "Critical pedagogy" also criticizes ideology, but differently. It interrogates power and authority in the interest of human emancipation. Inspired by non-revolutionary anarchism and mild-mannered Marxism, it opposes the technocratic reasoning implicit in critical thinking. Regarding education as both a moral and a political project, it decries the naïve positivism of critical thinkers whom it accuses of hiding an unacknowledged neoliberal ideology in a fog of instrumentalism. The result plays out in a conflicted postindustrial world that faces overpopulation, ecological degradation, socio-economic inequity, technological domination, a democratic deficit, and a state of seemingly permanent war. The debate between critical thinking and critical pedagogy is ultimately about what education is *for*.

*Key Words:* critical thinking, critical pedagogy, critical theory, neoliberal, ideology

## Critical Skills and Critical Pedagogy in an Era of "Permanent Crisis" in Postsecondary Education

Despite its popularity, the phrase *critical thinking* seems only vaguely to be understood by those who claim to practice, to teach and to profit from it. For example, the experts at the Foundation for Critical Thinking in California acknowledge that few educators who endorse, administer or teach critical thinking skills can give a coherent definition of the concept (Nilson, 2016; Paul, Elder & Bartell, 2015). This is to be expected not only because the term may be listed among the many innovations that are merely passing fancies among aspirant executives in business, government and education, but also because it was, is and will remain a subject of controversy among those genuinely interested in its content and not just in its utility as a fleetingly popular slogan for ambitious leadership contenders in various private and public sector education and training facilities. Clarity on the matter is important. At stake is a foundational definition and not “just semantics.” Let us remember: If we are careless in our choice of basic terms and their meaning, then we will literally not know what we are talking about.

### **Critical Thinking**

The “critical” in critical thinking is part of the legacy of the European Enlightenment. It derives from empiricism, positivism and the age of progress. It is associated with “ordinary language” philosophy, which was stylish early in the twentieth century and remains influential today. Critical thinking is particularly well connected to the twentieth-century taste for *analytical philosophy* (Anglo-American through and through) and especially to distinctively American theories of *pragmatism*. Like any other idea, it cannot be fully understood without considering the influences of political economy and culture. For the moment, however, it suffices to say that, for its promoters, critical thinking aims and claims to be dispassionate and objective, clear and precise, meticulous and rigorous, and dedicated to setting and solving problems in an ideology-free zone. So, its supporters say, it guards against sloppy thinking and gives philosophical

credibility to all those who believe that “personal” opinions or explicitly “political” thought have no place in the classroom. Critical thinking is *not* associated here with “critical theory” as used by the Frankfurt School including such luminaries as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and, later, Jürgen Habermas (Schroyer, 1970).

### **Critical Pedagogy**

The “critical” in critical pedagogy initially draws on the idealist tradition associated with Hegel and expanded, altered and not, as is commonly said, turned upon his head by Marx’s materialism, but “turned right side up again” in order to “discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Marx, 1843). In *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx also assured us both that “the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism,” and that Hegel had already completed that critique. Seeking not just to understand the world, but also to change it in the human interests of overcoming “philosophical” alienation and ruling-class “economic” domination, Marx inspired a vast array of reformist and revolutionary movements. He spurred intellectual dissent from hegemonic ideas and political opposition to existing power relations. He sought to transform society so that individual liberation and social justice would jointly emerge, perhaps by evolution, perhaps by revolution (but dialectically in either case).

An inventory of the principal themes in critical pedagogy was presented by Ira Shor (1992) a quarter-century ago. It included: “habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse” (p. 129). No small agenda!

As inclusive as Shor’s list may be, it should also contain the advocacy of *praxis*—a term dating back to Aristotle’s triad of human activity: *theoria* (thinking), *poiesis* (making) and *praxis*

(doing). Praxis comes to its current meaning through thinkers as diverse as the Young Hegelian August Cieszkowski (Liebich, 1979) who took it as a “philosophy of action,” Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci (1971, pp. 321-472) who elaborated it as an instrument of revolution, and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1998) who revived its ancient roots as a matter of scholarship for a later generation. Positively, it establishes the unity of emancipatory theory and transformative practice; negatively, it excoriates mere critical thinking as a “bourgeois affectation” providing intellectual cover for corporate capitalist ascendancy. In critical pedagogy, expressly and consciously *political* thought and action are essential to authentic education. Critical pedagogy criticizes critical thinking’s implicit ideology, which already pervades the classroom in curricular content, pedagogical technique and technology, and the modelling of social relations in the form of uncontested management/worker/student roles—whether we know or admit it or not.

### **Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy Compared**

As a pedagogical tool, critical thinking was designed to deliver the *coup-de-grace* to the hideous totalitarian ideologies that devastated the twentieth century. It celebrated “the end of ideology.” In opposition, critical pedagogy, as actionable political thought, was presented as an effective way to end the “end-of-ideology” ideology and to disclose both the methodological and the political problems with purportedly impartial pragmatism.

By relying on the alleged dichotomy between “facts” and “values,” most prominently featured in the sociological texts of Max Weber, critical thinking constructs a model of inquiry on ideals of clarity, accuracy, relevance, logic and fairness. It stresses reasonable assumptions, painstaking data collection, sound interpretation, appropriate inferences and logical deductions to provide workable solutions to clearly stated problems. Critical thinking presumed an independent domain of “facts” to provide the foundation of knowledge and create an arbiter of judgement. It

relied on proven standards of observation, description and empirical analysis through which our beliefs could be seen to conform to external reality and our projects to be deemed “realistic.”

Critical thinking holds the optimistic view that, regardless of circumstances, things could be otherwise. With due attention to universal intellectual standards, critical thinking produces superior problem-solving skills to help transcend egocentrism and ethnocentrism. Enhanced intellectual discipline improves mental acuity. Improved cognitive skills expand opportunities for social and material progress. Healthier minds create a happier body (politic). It “works.” So, critical thinking is in high demand among employers in an ever more taxing global labour market. As two enthusiasts opine (Paul & Elder, 2006) “critical thinking is, in short, self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrected thinking. It requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use” (p. 4); it is the key to success in the bold new world confronted by recent graduates, Associate Professors and Walmart associates alike.

Although profitable problem solving is critical thinking’s main expressed benefit (it offers mainly an epistemological “how-to” manual), the precise ways to identify, prioritize, analyze and assess our problems are left unstated. We are just encouraged to assume that rational, meticulous and open-minded people will be able to manage any residual ambiguities. Critical thinking is, after all, a mode of reasoning that comes as straight as its nature allows from eighteenth-century optimism and its “promise to liberate humanity from the curses of famine, sickness, and ignorance, to accommodate our lives with the riches of the world, and to do all this in the powerful and systematic way that modern science opens up” (Griffis, 1986, p. 24).

Critical pedagogy is less sanguine. It posits that science is socially constructed and reflects specific human interests. It doubts pristine scientific methods and affirms the relativity of facts. It produces both ontological and epistemological skepticism. This is *not* to say that critical

pedagogy descends into regressive relativism and its normative endpoint in moral nihilism. To be skeptical is not to deny the possibility of either empirical knowledge or ethics, but to be modest in their pursuit. It also maintains the hopeful view that, regardless of circumstances, things could be otherwise, but only if relentless interrogation of political domination, economic power, and cultural authority lead to coordinated political action in pursuit of tonic change (Doughty, 1997).

For critical pedagogues, the main restrictions on progress are imposed not just by those who, in traditional Marxian terms, own and control the means of production, but also by those who dominate cultural forms that defer to the authorities, dull the senses, inhibit self-awareness and derogate social consciousness and solidarity—whether based on class, race or gender. People thus deprived of a critical understanding of their situations risk being distracted or driven into cynicism and despair. Resigned to what Linda McQuaig (1998) called “the cult of impotence,” the masses (and many members of the peripheral elites) may withdraw into alienation, anomie, and advanced mental disorders or channel their repressed frustrations into well-orchestrated, scripted and choreographed rituals of xenophobia, racism, misogyny and homophobia in some version of what is now called “populism” or, *in extremis*, the euphemistic “alt-right” and overt “neofascism.” The US election of Donald Trump, the UK “Brexit” vote and the rise of right-wing extremism in parts of the EU and elsewhere are disturbing cases in point.

Critical pedagogy recognizes that teaching and learning are not ahistorical, apolitical, and value-free activities. What is taught, to whom it is taught, how it is taught, and why it is taught are intimately connected questions. The answers reveal that education is a social enterprise. It is planned and administered as a matter of public policy mainly to meet the “cognitive, affective and behavioural objectives” deemed necessary for personal security and social stability. It includes education/socialization/indoctrination (call it what you will) into the manners and morals of a community in which the interests of those who exercise dominance over the political



economy and its sustaining culture are generally protected. For those who aspire to lead the “masses” out of their doldrums, it thus becomes essentially contested turf.

Calling upon the legacy of gentle liberal philosophers from John Stuart Mill (Ryan, 2011) and William James (1978) to John Dewey (1916; Reich, 2008), critical pedagogy is sustained by critical theorists of the Frankfurt School—notably Herbert Marcuse (1964)—liberation theorists and practitioners such as Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) and Ivan Illich (1971), and, later, bell hooks (1994), Peter McLaren (2005, 2010), Michael Apple (2013) and Henry A. Giroux (2014). It is also supported by conservative critics of technology (Badertscher, 1978; Borgmann, 1987; Ellul, 1967; Grant, 1969, 1986, 1995; Heidegger, 1977; Kroker, 2002). Critical pedagogy places the contemporary enthusiasm for “technologically enhanced learning” and its stress on distance education, machine-based student evaluation, “flipped” or “blended” classrooms, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other abbreviated learning experiences. It castigates the current trend away from traditional academic disciplines and toward technologically mediated instruction, standardized evaluation, student-centred pedagogy and (who knows?) perhaps compulsory use of “virtual reality goggles” as facilitators not merely of “cultural [il]literacy,” but of declining standards of literacy itself as well (Doughty, 2006a).

If there is a common thread among these diverse sources of scorn for the proponents of critical thinking and the devalued and degraded education they accommodate, it is this: the belief that education *matters*, that it is essential for social and cultural awareness, and a prerequisite for full citizenship, the reclamation of the “commons,” and the revitalization of “public” spaces. It proceeds from the belief that education is both a moral and a political enterprise—moral insofar as the educator can help students to distinguish between right and wrong and political insofar the educator can assist students in seeking to enhance what is good and to inhibit what is evil. It requires the dissolution of the distinction between elite and ordinary students which give the

privileged access to liberal studies and confines the others to vocational education and job training alone (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 24-43). It entails a contrarian impulse to detect and to thwart attitudes and actions that are life-destroying/thanatotic rather than life-affirming/erotic (Marcuse, 1955).

### **Critical Thinking as Naïve Positivism**

The main theoretical argument against critical thinking is that it is a version of naïve positivism. The basic premise of critical thinking as it appears in managerial texts, administrative documents and institutional brochures is the philosophical, political and practical dichotomy between “facts” and “values”; it is this premise that I wish to contest. As MacIntyre (1971) pointed out, critical thinking’s critique of ideology “failed to entertain one crucial alternative possibility: namely that the end-of-ideology, far from marking the end-of-ideology, was itself a key expression of the ideology of the time and place where it arose” (p. 5). Originating in Cold War America, it pressed the advantage of the defeat of fascism against the remaining totalizing ideologies of (too often conflated) Soviet Marxism and Maoism.

It was “the heroic age of sociology” when social science was deployed against no less an intractable foe than Hitler—aggressive, monolithic international communism. Rather, however, than cleansing the mind of obscurantism and extremism, Vincent (2014) argues that American social science contains “certain evaluative assumptions about human nature, how rationality ought to function, the value of consensus, and details on the characteristics of a tolerant, pragmatic, civil society which ought to be cultivated. To try to claim,” he continues, “that these views are premised simply on a social scientific perspective and that all else is ideology is intellectual chicanery” (p. 11). That “radical Islam” has been substituted as an enemy of convenience for the “international communist conspiracy” does not alter the basic point.

The apex of the end-of-ideology movement in the social sciences came a little over fifty years ago. Daniel Bell published *The End of Ideology* (1960), claiming that the murderous era of Nazism and Stalinism had rendered political extremism unthinkable. Seymour Martin Lipset (1960) added that political philosophy itself was finished, since the United States was already to be “the good society in operation” (p. 403). That, of course, was shortly before the assassination of President Kennedy, the freedom marches, the escalation of hostilities in Vietnam, the rise of the “counter-culture,” the emergence of an inchoate second wave of feminism, the further assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the collapse of Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” initiative in the rice paddies of south-east Asia.

A further attempt to bury the political imagination came a generation later when Francis Fukuyama (1992) announced the “end of history” and said the world would finally supersede the conflict-ridden, evangelical, messianic and teleological politics of the past, leaving only an eerily Leninist-sounding “administration of things” to take up our public time. We were, he affirmed, entering a post-political age. That, of course, was just before Samuel Huntington (1996) raised the spectre of the “clash of civilizations,” the events of September 11, 2001 were said to have changed the world forever, and the permanent “war on terror” and the insidious “national security state” increasingly defined Western foreign and domestic public safety policy.

The momentary confidence at the end of the Cold War has now changed into a disturbing constellation of global ecological, economic, military, and human rights threats that are powering incessant waves of crisis-driven pessimism, cynicism and occasional extremism. The prominence of the plea for critical thinking, however, has not been extinguished. If anything, it has been amplified. After all, as its advocates say (Paul & Elder, 2006, pp. 6-7), critical thinking is *purposive*. It seeks to resolve practical difficulties and find solutions to realistic problems. It regards itself as ideology-free and intellectually justified in moving from assumptions through

evidence to conclusions as long as it does so methodically, lucidly, competently in conformity to such scientific notions as operationalism and falsification. So, even though (or, perhaps, because) we seem to be living in an extraordinary “evidence-free” world where the authorities, competing interests and the general populace alike invent their own “realities,” engage in duelling spin-doctoring and trade rule-based debate for grotesque incivility, critical thinking is praised as the most expeditious and efficacious way for responsible people of good will to regain control and restore reason and order to public life. In the Trump era, this will be “critical.”

### **Frames of Reference and the Pedagogy of the Rubik’s Cube**

Our disturbingly ungrounded politics of divisiveness and uncertainty was fearsomely captured two decades ago when Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (1996) commented on the seemingly serendipitous and very peculiar conjunction of the introduction of new computer software and attempted genocide in the euphemistic “former Yugoslavia.”

Windows 95 opens out onto the dominant ideology and privileged life position of digital flesh. It installs the new codes of the master occupants of virtual worlds: frenzied devotion to cyber-business, life in a multi-media virtual context, digital tunnel vision, and, most of all, embedded deep in the cerebral cortex of the virtual elite an I-chip: I, that is, for complete indifference. Technological acceleration is accompanied by a big shutting-down of ethical perception.

The Krokers continued:

In technology as in life, every opening is also a closing, and what is closed down by the tech hype of Windows 95 is consciousness of surplus flesh. That’s Srebrenica: the surplus flesh of Bosnian Muslims who do not have anything to contribute to virtual worlds: fit subjects only to be ethnically, and physically, disappeared. They can be

ethnically cleansed because they have first been technically cleansed. They are surplus to world domination in a cyber-box. (p. 36)

Critical thinking offers a cheap escape from the confusion and an easy path to civility. It furnishes an approach, a method, and a philosophically defensible set of “how-to” instructions, a conceptual framework or *frame of reference*, but without the encumbrances of explicitly political commitments. As Glazer (1955) noted, the scientific “frame of reference constitutes the fundamental habits of thinking which the scientist carries into research” (p. 287). Critical thinking’s application of that scientific logic to all practical problems is a variation on an oft-played theme.

The Weberian distinction between facts and values has, of course, been relentlessly attacked by phenomenologists, deconstructionists, semioticians and hermeneuticists; however, it does not require either a graduate degree in arcane continental discourse about discourse about discourse, or the risk of sinking into a nihilistic hole of infinitely regressive moral relativism to raise questions about the implications of science or, rather, a simplistic version of scientific method that is at the core of critical thinking. Setting aside what actual *scientists* have to say about the problematics of their own field, naïve positivism has been taken to task by thinkers wholly within the Western mainstream (Brulé, 2015; Gunnell, 1969, 2014; Harris, 2015; Putnam, 2002). It is therefore sufficient to allow that the domains of fact and value may be distinguishable, but mainly as a matter of analytical convenience; in fact (so to speak), the relationship between the two is inextricably entangled and ultimately symbiotic.

As Reshaur and Gunther (1971) argued, “the frame of reference precedes and conditions any use the social scientist might make of the hypothetico-deductive method” (p. 114) which is essential to any allegedly scientific inquiry worthy of the name. Indeed, it affects concept formation, data collection, categorization and interpretation, statistical analysis, and logically

valid conclusions—however tentative. There may be no obvious evidence of value propositions in any particular project, but every “empirically measured fact is embedded in a theory that [gives] it significance and meaning...” (p. 114). Indeed, Weber himself would not fall victim to the fallacy of “mere description.” As the closing pages of his remarkable analysis of the Protestant ethic (Weber, 1958, pp. 181-182) amply reveal, his treatises were often packed with passion that call his entire distinction into question. As Weber (1949) himself put the conundrum:

The objective validity of all empirical knowledge rests exclusively upon the ordering of the given reality according to categories which are subjective in a specific sense, namely, in that they present the presuppositions of our knowledge and are based on the presupposition of the value of those truths which empirical knowledge alone is able to give us. (p. 110)

Applied to real-world situations, critical thinking may well assist those wishing to solve problems, but it avoids discussion of the nature and importance of the problems and the social power relations that determine what counts as a legitimate problem and what does not.

So, for example, well-meaning social reformers may campaign for practical solutions to poverty based on the false premise that poor people are the problem rather than the class system that makes them poor. By identifying the victim as the source and substance of social problems, the entire frame of reference leads inexorably to questions and answers that are anything but apolitical. Obvious examples are governmental and journalistic accounts and recommendations for the amelioration of poverty. Canadian federal and provincial political parties of the centre and the centre-left, self-consciously “progressive” mass media outlets (notably the *Toronto Star*) and civil society organizations regularly inquire into the alleged causes of poverty and factors which inhibit upward social mobility. Singled out is inadequate or absent social support (e.g.,

affordable daycare, educational opportunities for culturally deprived populations and accessible adult education, lack of appropriate employment and a “living wage,” facilities for dealing with addiction and mental health.). Endless formal inquiries, an abundant academic literature and accounts of previous efforts (including inventories of successful programs and diagnoses of failures leading to catalogues of “best practices” and the like), have surely facilitated minor improvements, permitted small bureaucratic reforms, led to occasional innovations and partial remedies. None, however, have altered the overall class structure, chiefly because the problem of poverty is misstated. Economic distress, poor living conditions, consequent social and psychological troubles, despair and disengagement have been detected and noted as part of the “culture of poverty” approach that has dominated social policy thinking for at least a half-century (Lewis, 1969). By confusing the symptom with the disease and reversing effects and causes, critical thinking becomes complicit in maintaining the problems that it ostensibly seeks to solve. Answers are thwarted by the initial assumptions and the consequent misstating of the question.

I call this the pedagogy of the Rubik’s Cube. Using the language of political health, problems are defined so that therapeutic strategies are predetermined by diagnostic models which permit only observations and analyses that comport with the *ideology* that is inherent in the approach. This is not “problem solving” but finding the quickest way to a designated conclusion. So, just as most explanatory models of diabetes and substance abuse inevitably blame the victims as the cause of their distress, while social determinants of health explanations are dismissed (McGibbon, 2012; Raphael, 2016), so also problems of poverty are reduced to correlative factors such as low educational achievement that are *not* master variables, much less direct causes.

The victims, of course, can become implicated and subjected to the moral judgement that they are at least partly responsible for their ongoing troubles, but personal flaws are not the foundational source of social circumstances. In fact, people become culpable only to the extent

that they “buy in” to the approach that has already compromised them. Once a frame of reference is established, the results of inquiry are effectively preordained. So, under the critical thinking rubric, what matters is not creating a systemic solution to a systemic problem, but finding the speediest, most efficient and effective path to a specific preset result—a result that may show the face of successful research (often, a plea for further research), but will keep all the facts in the same conceptual box, ready and destined to map the chaos again. As long as critical thinking operates within the constraints of corporate capitalism’s dominant ideology (call it a “social science paradigm”), entire lines of inquiry will be predismitted and closed off at the start. The tragedy is that most promoters of critical thinking are sincerely convinced that they have outlined the best method for overcoming difficulties when they have only succeeded in disguising them.

Said Noam Chomsky in his famous essay, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” (1967): “it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies.” This, however, cannot be done if questions entail answers that neglect the *real* issues. The game is rigged. And, as Martin Nicolaus (1968) added somewhat more forcefully at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association a year after Chomsky set down his ethical standard:

Sociology is not now and never has been any kind of objective seeking-out of social truth or reality. Historically, the profession is an outgrowth of Nineteenth Century European traditionalism and conservatism wedded to Twentieth Century American corporation liberalism. ... The eyes of sociologists, with few but honorable (or honorable but few) exceptions, have been turned downward, and their palms upward.

He goes on ...

Sociologists stand guard in the garrison and report to their masters on the movements of the occupied populace. ... To raise and educate and train generation after generation of the brightest minds this country's so-called educational system has let survive in this



sociological ethic of servility, to socialize them into this sociocracy, is a criminal undertaking... The crime which graduate schools perpetrate against the minds and morals of young people is all the more inexcusable because of the enormous liberating potential of knowledge about social life.

The people about whom Nicolaus complained are like us—products of graduate schools in Anthropology, Economics, Politics, Psychology, Sociology and Education, the Humanities, the practical arts and the professions. We are at least tacitly complicit in, tainted by, or coerced or seduced into working in systems of (re)production and dissemination of knowledge and skills which persist, with or without our conscious awareness. We have a social responsibility to become aware of our circumstances. So, we are not innocent bystanders. I believe no one is.

### **Critical Thinking as a “Brand”**

The question is now: if critical thinking is such a flawed approach, why does it so often mentioned in college calendars, touted in university programs, evident throughout the curricula, featured in advertisements and required by funding agencies and accreditation authorities?

A cynical answer (but no less accurate for that) is that critical thinking is an empty trademark, part of a “branding” exercise to make postsecondary institutions more attractive to potential students and to make their graduates more attractive to potential employers. In a competitive marketplace, rival higher education providers—like any other manufacturers and merchants—must do what is necessary to sell their wares. So, academic experience is reduced to an inventory of catchphrases each one of which encapsulates and communicates an allegedly desirable aspect of the institution to potential “customers.” Marketing tactics, regardless of the product, must generate consumer interest with attractive packaging and promotion, reinforced by repetition and, recently, adapted for use by new social media devices.

Complex ideas (which would seem to be what higher education should be all about) must shrivel into engaging images and slogans. Retail principles and marketing campaigns sell education like soft drinks and children's clothing. A short list of popular tags make the point: innovation, entrepreneurship, job-ready, student-centred, core competencies, digital literacy, creative thinking, global perspective and, of course, problem solving and critical thinking are parts of an inventory of interchangeable terms that are vacuous, but necessary to those following their "passion" on a "pathway to success." In the mish-mash of labels, no specifics are needed and few promises need be fulfilled once tuition fees are paid and the customer is enrolled.

Even if, however, the brand's components are intended to be valued and actual curricular and pedagogical policies are put in place, little improves. Branding requires centralized power and top-down message control, standardization in implementation, and repression of intellectual creativity and diversity. The curriculum, said Canada's beloved conservative philosopher George Grant, is the "soul" of higher education (Grant, 1969, pp. 125-133); but, we are spiritless. In our world, the dominant template is built upon frivolous notions of "conscious human purpose" (Bateson, 1972, pp. 426-439) and the "mastery of human and non-human nature" (Habermas, 1971, pp. 303-317). The venerable notion that the purpose of postsecondary education should transcend mere vocationalism, instrumentalism and the demands of the marketplace makes us confront the "fact" that we have sold our souls for purely material gain while swapping our venerable traditions for a smorgasbord of pseudo-technical banalities, predigested ideas, prescribed "learning outcomes," and technologically mediated "curriculum delivery" systems.

Inside the corporate campus (Tudiver, 1999; Turk, 2000; Polster, 2012; Reimer, 2004), the ivory tower is redesigned as an academic *discount department* store. Associate Professors are remade as the functional equivalents of Walmart Associates, and every aspect of education is

quantified, measured and assessed using the same corporate language that is found in the internal control mechanisms of factories (classrooms) and computer call centres (distance education).

Branding, according to Alex Marland (2016) is “an amalgam of the outcome of marketing theory, image management, centralized decision making, and communications simplicity” (p. 350). To the extent that colleges and universities have redefined themselves as market-driven educational commodity merchants, the deeper meaning of higher education has been jettisoned. How did this existential shift in the meaning of academic life and work come to pass? What (if anything) can be done to re-establish and redeem higher education?

### **The Context of the Contest**

Since World War II, postsecondary education has changed its social purpose, its internal organization, its curriculum and pedagogy, and its mode of production and dissemination of knowledge—both the dominant methods and the labour processes through which it strives to fulfill its ever evolving mission. According to Trow (2010), it has shifted from “elite” (roughly 15% of secondary school graduates enter institutions of higher learning) to “mass” (about 50% pursue further education), and on to “universal” education (with 80% or more of high school graduates attending public and private colleges, polytechnical/vocational institutes, universities, and the like). Whether these people are suited to academic life or practical studies and whether the diverse institutions offer anything of material value for use or exchange or of immaterial value for personal fulfillment, social development or cultural improvement is uncertain.

As well, in recent decades public funding has declined precipitously. Tuition fees have increasingly led to unsustainable student debt and forced reliance on private sector support which comes at a high price in terms of commodified curriculum, commercialized research, “business” models that alter and automate teaching and learning (Noble, 1999). Work roles and power relations have been radically restructured with as much as 75% or more of teaching now done by

contingent faculty (Hoeller, 2014) most of whom suffer low wages, poor working conditions, few benefits and little job security, and most of whom are exquisitely vulnerable to “termination without cause,” making them timid and intimidated lest some passing remark or controversial course material bring them to the attention of the authorities. The implications for high academic standards and the last vestiges of academic freedom are both awful and obvious.

It was, in some sense, ever thus. Education has always been about the transmission of practical knowledge, skills and the norms that sustain specific modes of production. So, elite universities functioned as training facilities in the liberal arts for the upper classes fated to join the clergy, practice law and diplomacy, hold high public office or find similarly worthy careers. Then, with modernization came mass universities which met the increasing needs of occupations that required postsecondary training and attracted increasing numbers from the middling classes. Even in mass universities, however, attention was paid to *both* liberal arts *and* “employability skills.” The benefits of a liberal education were esteemed and programs leading to entry into the professions gave a nod of approval to liberal arts’ “electives” that softened strict vocationalism and graduated students with at least a minimal exposure to other forms of sometimes critical knowledge than those upon which the young people would rely to earn a living.

Now, however, as postsecondary education is becoming a universal expectation and employers are demanding critical thinking, the commitment to “general education” is perhaps paradoxically shrinking. Diploma and degree programs in the liberal arts are disappearing as the engineered (so to speak) popularity of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs is tied to the expectation of financial rewards in the “real world.” So, are colleges and universities even meeting the critical thinking (problem solving within set ideological/occupational parameters) demands of the labour market?

Is there still an expectation that education can or should be more than the acquisition of job-ready skills appropriate for ambitious young people destined to become dentists or financial advisors, engineers or law clerks, chemists, fashion designers, nurses, social workers or real estate agents? If, after all, the principal motive for postsecondary education is narrowly defined as preparation for gainful employment and, if customers/students expect that their higher education experience is properly to be judged by its post-graduation outcomes in terms of steady employment, wages and salaries, and opportunities for promotion and advancement, then upon what basis can anyone seriously disparage officially sanctioned critical thinking and insist that it be replaced by critical pedagogy—a project that may strike education managers, public and private funding agencies, program accreditation boards, students, parents and the undifferentiated general public as unnecessary, vaguely subversive, potentially insurrectionist and a great overall waste of precarious financial resources and precious time?

### **In Support of the Critical Spirit**

The purpose of critical pedagogy is to promote critical consciousness and coherent critiques of the decline and degradation of democracy and human rights, the explosive increase in the gap between wealth and poverty domestically and globally (noticeable reductions in “extreme poverty notwithstanding”), the persistence of permanent war and the imminent ecological catastrophes promised by overpopulation, pollution and climate change beyond anything the planet can sustain. It is also to make people personally aware of the vacuity of (post)modern culture, the increase in emotional distress, the malaise that accompanies the loss of a sense of civic obligation and a belief that citizens can thrive despite an omnipresent democratic deficit. The purpose of developing such critiques is not to encourage wallowing in misery, further isolation behind computer screens, and virtual lives as transhuman cyborgs in augmented reality (Wittes & Chong, 2014). It is to address authentic crises of survival for human

civilization(s), planetary environmental stability and, *in extremis*, our (and many other) species by expanding the public commons so that the prevailing neoliberal doctrines of corporate practices can be disclosed, confronted and overcome ... before it is too late (if it isn't already).

If this smacks of apocalyptic hyperbole, that is as may be, but some overstatement is justified to break up or, at least, significantly to shake up the smothering effects of the academy as it exists in the hands of angry gods. As a teacher entering my 50<sup>th</sup> year in public and private postsecondary classrooms in Canada and the USA, I have witnessed the degradation of higher education with increasing anxiety. The promises of an educated working and middle class—not, perhaps, Gramsci's ideal of “worker-intellectuals,” but a passable version thereof—has been compromised. More general hopes for growing prosperity and equity at least in the developed countries have dimmed as faculty are disenfranchised, students treated as mere income units, and managers of various sorts exercise ever-greater control over teaching and learning.

Especially in such jurisdictions as Ontario, Canada colleges, where academic freedom is a concept denigrated and dismissed as even a negotiable concept in collective bargaining, the atmosphere is one in which intimidation and timidity describe management/faculty relations, particularly for contingent teachers. So, as I have written elsewhere (Doughty, 2006a), “in today's somewhat chilly political climate, teachers criticize specific environmental, economic and social policies of governments, private corporations or influential ‘special interests’ at their peril.” To engage in robust exercises in critical thinking is risky enough, but to adopt the morals and methods of critical pedagogy is to risk disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.

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