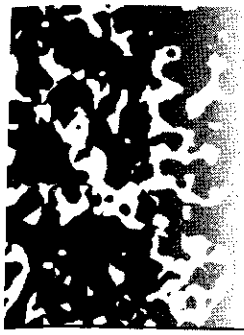

CHAPTER TWO

The Foundations of Critical Pedagogy

With these basic characteristics of critical pedagogy in mind, it is important to explore the ideas that have shaped critical pedagogy. Such background will provide us with a deeper understanding of this complex topic. This understanding will provide us with tools that will help implement a pedagogy that promotes social justice, cultivates the intellect, and expands the horizons of human possibility. There is so much human beings can do and accomplish that is not being done in the first decade of the twenty-first century. I can think of few things being more exciting than being a part of the larger effort to go where human beings have never gone before. Critical pedagogy takes us on that journey.

Critical theory forms the foundation for critical pedagogy. The notion of critical pedagogy—the concern with transforming oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains that lead to human oppression—that we're working with finds its origins in critical theory and evolves as it embraces new critical discourses in new eras. In Chapter 2 we trace an evolving critical pedagogy that studies the ways how new times evoke new manifestations of power, new consequences, and new ways of understanding

and resisting them. Concurrently, this evolving critical pedagogy devises new social arrangements, new institutions, and new forms of selfhood.

The Roots of Critical Pedagogy: The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory

Some seventy years after its development in Frankfurt, Germany, critical theory retains its ability to disrupt and challenge the status quo. In the process, it elicits highly charged emotions of all types—fierce loyalty from its proponents, vehement hostility from its detractors. Such vibrantly polar reactions indicate at the very least that critical theory still matters. We can be against critical theory or for it, but, especially at the present historical juncture, we cannot be without it. Indeed, qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces, in our view, undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth.

Critical theory is a term that is often evoked and frequently misunderstood. It usually refers to the theoretical tradition developed by the Frankfurt School, a group of scholars connected to the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. However, none of the Frankfurt school theorists ever claimed to have developed a unified approach to cultural criticism. In its beginnings, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin initiated a conversation with the German tradition of philosophical and social thought, especially that of Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber. From the vantage point of these critical theorists, whose political sensibilities were influenced by the devastations of World War I, postwar Germany with its economic depression marked by inflation and unemployment, and the failed strikes and protests in Germany and Central Europe in this same period, the world was in urgent need of reinterpretation. From this perspective, they defied Marxist orthodoxy while deepening their belief that injustice and subjugation shape the lived world (Bottomore, 1984; Gibson, 1986; Held, 1980; Jay, 1973). Focusing their attention on the changing nature of capitalism, the early critical theorists analyzed the mutating forms of domination that accompanied this change (Agger, 1992; Gall, Gall, and Borg,

1999; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe, 2001a; Kincheloe and Pinar, 1991; McLaren, 1997).

Only a decade after the Frankfurt school was established, the Nazis controlled Germany. The danger posed to the exclusively Jewish membership of the Frankfurt School and its association with Marxism convinced Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse to leave Germany. Eventually locating themselves in California, these critical theorists were shocked by American culture. Offended by the taken-for-granted empirical practices of American social science researchers, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were challenged to respond to the positivistic social science establishment's belief that their research could describe and accurately measure any dimension of human behavior. Piqued by the contradictions between progressive American rhetoric of egalitarianism and the reality of racial and class discrimination, these theorists produced their major work while residing in the United States. In 1953, Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany and reestablished the Institute of Social Research. Significantly, Herbert Marcuse stayed in the United States, where he would find a new audience for his work in social theory. Much to his own surprise, Marcuse skyrocketed to fame as the philosopher of the student movements of the 1960s. Critical theory, especially the emotionally and sexually liberating work of Marcuse, provided the philosophical voice of the New Left. Emerging in the 1960s, the New Left was politically influenced by the anticolonial liberation movements breaking out in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The group supported the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and opposed the Vietnam War and American imperialism abroad. Concerned with the politics of psychological and cultural revolution, the New Left preached a Marcusian sermon of political and personal emancipation from the conventions of dominant power (Gibson, 1986; Hinchey, 1998; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997; Surber, 1998; Wexler, 1991, 1996a).

Many of the New Left scholars who had come of age in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1960s focused their attention on critical theory. Frustrated by forms of domination emerging from a post-Enlightenment culture nurtured by capitalism, these scholars saw in critical theory a method of temporarily freeing academic work from these forms of power. Impressed by critical theory's dialectical concern with the social construction of

experience, they came to view their disciplines as manifestations of the discourses and power relations of the social and historical contexts that produced them. The "discourse of possibility" implicit within the constructed nature of social experience suggested to these scholars that a reconstruction of the social sciences could eventually lead to a more egalitarian and democratic social order. Critical pedagogy clearly reflects these dimensions of critical theory.

Critical theory is a difficult animal to describe because (a) there are many critical theories, not just one; (b) the critical tradition is always changing and evolving; and (c) critical theory attempts to avoid too much specificity, as there is room for disagreement among critical theorists. To lay out a set of fixed characteristics of the position is contrary to the desire of such theorists to avoid the production of blueprints of sociopolitical and epistemological beliefs. Because of these facts, what I am offering in this primer is one idiosyncratic "take" on the nature of critical theory in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Please note that this is merely my subjective analysis, and there are many brilliant critical theorists who will find many problems with these descriptions. In this context, I offer a description of an ever-evolving critical pedagogy, a critical theory that was critiqued and overhauled by the **postdiscourses** of the last quarter of the twentieth-century and has been further extended in the first years of the twenty-first century (Bauman, 1995; Carlson and Apple, 1998; Collins, 1995; Giroux, 1997; Kellner, 1995; Peters, Lankshear, and Olssen, 2003; Roman and Eyre, 1997; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998; Weil and Kincheloe, 2003).

postdiscourses the theoretical ways of understanding that developed in the last third of the twentieth century that questioned the assumptions about the world put forth by modernist, scientific Western frameworks. They would include postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and postformalism.

In this context, critical theory questions the assumption that societies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the nations in the European Union, for example, are unproblematically democratic and free. During the twentieth century, especially after the early 1960s, individuals in these societies were acculturated to feel comfortable in relations of domination and subordination rather than equality and independence. Given the social and technological changes of the last half of the century that led to new forms of information production and access, critical theorists argued that questions of self-direction and democratic egalitarianism should be reassessed. In this context, critical researchers informed by the postdiscourses

(e.g., postmodernism, critical feminism, poststructuralism) came to understand that individuals' view of themselves and the world were even more influenced by social and historical forces than previously believed. Given the changing social and informational conditions of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century media-saturated Western culture, critical theorists have needed new ways of researching and analyzing the construction of individuals (Agger, 1992; Flossner and Otto, 1998; Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom, 1996; Smith and Wexler, 1995; Sünker, 1998; Steinberg, 2001; Wesson and Weaver, 2001). The following points briefly delineate my interpretation of a critical theory in the twenty-first century.

In this context, it is important to note that a social theory is a map or a guide to the social sphere. A social theory should not determine how we see the world but should help us devise questions and strategies for exploring it. A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler, and Puigvert, 2003; Flecha, Gomez, and Puigvert, 2003). Critical theory—in the spirit of an evolving critical pedagogy—is always evolving, changing in light of both new theoretical insights and new problems and social circumstances.

The list of concepts making up our description of critical theory indicates a critical pedagogy informed by a variety of discourses emerging after the work of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, some of the theoretical discourses, while referring to themselves as critical, directly call into question some of the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. Thus, diverse theoretical traditions have informed our understanding of critical pedagogy and have demanded understanding of diverse forms of oppression including class, race, gender, sexual, cultural, religious, colonial, and ability-related concerns. In this context, critical theorists become detectives of new theoretical insights, perpetually searching for new and interconnected ways of understanding power and oppression and the ways they shape everyday life and human experience.

Thus, critical pedagogy and the knowledge production it supports are always evolving, always encountering new ways to

irritate dominant forms of power, to provide more evocative and compelling insights. Operating in this way, an evolving critical pedagogy is always vulnerable to exclusion from the domain of approved modes of research. The forms of social change it supports always position it in some places as an outsider, an awkward detective always interested in uncovering social structures, discourses, ideologies, and epistemologies that prop up both the status quo and a variety of forms of privilege. In the epistemological domain, white, male, class elitist, heterosexist, imperial, and colonial privilege often operates by asserting the power to claim objectivity and neutrality. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter I, the owners of such privilege often own the "franchise" on reason and rationality. Proponents of an evolving critical pedagogy possess a variety of tools to expose such oppressive power politics. Such proponents assert that critical theory is well served by drawing on numerous liberatory discourses and including diverse groups of marginalized peoples and their allies in the nonhierarchical aggregation of critical analysts (Bello, 2003; Clark, 2002; Humphries, 1997).

Obviously, an evolving critical pedagogy does not promiscuously choose theories to add to the bricolage of critical theories. It is highly suspicious of theories that fail to understand the malevolent workings of power, that fail to critique the blinders of Eurocentrism, that cultivate an elitism of insiders and outsiders ("we understand Foucault and you don't"), and that fail to discern a global system of inequity supported by diverse forms of hegemony and violence. It is uninterested in any theory—no matter how fashionable—that does not directly address the needs of victims of oppression and the suffering they must endure. The following is an elastic, ever-evolving set of concepts included in our evolving notion of critical pedagogy. With theoretical innovation and a shifting *Zeitgeist* they evolve. The points that are deemed most important in one time period pale in relation to different points in a new era.

I. *Critical enlightenment.* In this context, critical theory analyzes competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society—identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations. Privileged groups, critical pedagogists argue, often have an interest in supporting the status quo to protect their advantages; the dynamics of such efforts often become a central focus of

critical research. Such studies of privilege often revolve around issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Allison, 1995; Carter, 1998; Howell, 1998; Rodriguez and Villaverde, 2000). To seek critical enlightenment is to uncover the winners and losers in particular social arrangements and the processes by which such power plays operate (Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Fehr, 1993; Pruyn, 1994, 1999).

2. *Critical emancipation.* Those who seek emancipation attempt to gain the power to control their own lives in solidarity with a justice-oriented community. Here, critical research attempts to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives. In this way, greater degrees of autonomy and human agency can be achieved. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, we are cautious in our use of the term *emancipation* because, as many critics have pointed out, no one is ever completely emancipated from the sociopolitical context that has produced him or her. Concurrently, many have used the term emancipation to signal the freedom an abstract individual gains by gaining access to Western reason—that is, becoming reasonable. Our use of emancipation in an evolving critical pedagogy rejects any use of the term in this context. In addition, many have rightly questioned the arrogance that may accompany efforts to emancipate "others." These are important caveats and must be carefully taken into account by critical researchers. Thus, as critical inquirers who search for those forces that insidiously shape who we are, we respect those who reach different conclusions in their personal journeys. Nonetheless, critical theorists consider the effort to understand dominant power and its effects on individuals to be vitally important information needed in the effort to construct a vibrant and democratic society (Cannella, 1997; Knobel, 1999; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998).

3. *The rejection of economic determinism.* A caveat of a reconceptualized critical theory involves the insistence that the tradition does not accept the orthodox Marxist notion that "base" determines "superstructure"—meaning that economic factors dictate the nature of all other aspects of human existence. Critical theorists understand in the twenty-first century that there are multiple forms of power, including the aforementioned racial, gender, sexual axes of domination. In issuing this caveat, however, an

evolving critical theory in no way attempts to argue that economic factors are unimportant in the shaping of everyday life. Economic factors can never be separated from other axes of oppression (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Carlson, 1997; Gabbard, 1995; Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996; Kincheloe, 1995, 1999; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1999).

4. *The critique of instrumental or technical rationality.* A reconceptualized critical theory sees instrumental/technical rationality as one of the most oppressive features of contemporary society. Such a form of "hyperreason" involves an obsession with means in preference to ends. Critical theorists claim that instrumental/technical rationality is more interested in method and efficiency than in purpose. It delimits its questions to "how to" instead of "why should." In a research context, critical theorists claim that many rationalistic scholars become so obsessed with issues of technique, procedure, and correct method that they forget the humanistic purpose of the research act. Instrumental/technical rationality often separates fact from value in its obsession with "proper" method, losing in the process an understanding of the value choices always involved in the production of so-called facts (Giroux, 1997; Hinchey, 1998; Kincheloe, 1993; McLaren, 1998; Ritzer, 1993; Stallabrass, 1996; Weinstein, 1998).
5. *The impact of desire.* A reconceptualized critical theory appreciates **poststructuralist** psychoanalysis as an important resource in pursuing an emancipatory research project. In this context, critical researchers are empowered to dig more deeply into the complexity of the construction of the human psyche. Such a psychoanalysis helps critical researchers discern the unconscious processes that create resistance to progressive change and induce self-destructive behavior. A poststructural psychoanalysis, in its rejection of traditional psychoanalysis's tendency to view individuals as rational and autonomous beings, allows critical researchers new tools for rethinking the interplay among the various axes of power, identity, libido, rationality, and emotion. In this configuration the psychic is no longer separated from the sociopolitical realm; indeed, desire can be socially constructed and used by power wielders for destructive and oppressive outcomes. In contrast, critical theorists can help mobilize desire for progressive and emancipatory projects. Taking their lead from feminist theory, critical researchers are aware of the patriarchal

poststructuralism a social theoretical position that questions the universalizing tendencies of structural approaches to scholarship—for example, Piaget's universal stages of child development or Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Thus, poststructuralism emphasizes the historical and cultural contextual contingencies of all human experience—child development for boys and girls in isolated tribal groups in Botswana may be different than with Swiss boys from the middle and upper-middle classes. As it uncovers these dynamics, poststructuralism fosters resistance to the power they exert in the regulation and discipline of individuals.

bourgeois middle class, conventional, unimaginative, and selfish.

inscriptions within traditional psychoanalysis and work to avoid its **bourgeois**, ethnocentric, and **misogynist** practices. Freed from these blinders, poststructural psychoanalysis helps researchers gain a new sensitivity to the role of fantasy and imagination and the structures of sociocultural and psychological meaning they reference. Such explorations clearly illustrate what we mean by an evolving critical pedagogy (Block, 1995; Britzman and Pitt, 1996; Gresson, 2004; Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Villaverde, 1999; Pinar, 1998; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 1995).

6. *The concept of immanence.* Critical theory is always concerned with what could be, what is immanent in various ways of thinking and perceiving. Thus, critical theory should always move beyond the contemplative realm to concrete social reform. In the spirit of Paulo Freire, our notion of an evolving critical theory possesses immanence as it imagines new ways to ease human suffering and produce psychological health (A. Freire, 2001; Slater, Fain, and Rossatto, 2002). Critical immanence helps us get beyond egocentrism and ethnocentrism and work to build new forms of relationship with diverse peoples. Leila Villaverde (2003) extends this point about immanence when she maintains that critical theory helps us "retain a vision of the not yet." In the work of the Frankfurt School critical theory and the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) we find this concern with immanence. Gadamer argues that we must be more cautious in our efforts to determine "what is" because it holds such dramatic consequences for how we engage "what ought to be." In Gadamer's view the process of understanding involves interpreting meaning and applying the concepts gained to the historical moment that faces us. Thus, immanence involves the use of human wisdom in the process of bringing about a better and more just world, less suffering, and more individual fulfillment. With this notion in mind critical theorists, critique researchers, educators, and political leaders who operate to adapt individuals to the world as it is. In the context of immanence, critical theorists are profoundly concerned with who we are, how we got this way, and where do we go from here (Kincheloe and Weil, 2001; Weil and Kincheloe, 2003).

7. *A reconceptualized critical theory of power: hegemony.* Our conception of a reconceptualized critical theory is intensely concerned with the need to understand the various and complex ways that

power operates to dominate and shape consciousness. Power, critical theorists have learned, is an extremely ambiguous topic that demands detailed study and analysis. A consensus seems to be emerging among critical pedagogists that power is a basic constituent of human existence that works to shape both the oppressive and productive nature of the human tradition. Indeed, we are all empowered and we are all unempowered in that we all possess abilities and we are all limited in the attempt to use our abilities. The focus here is on critical theory's traditional concern with the oppressive aspects of power. An important aspect of critical pedagogy, however, focuses on the productive aspects of power—its ability to empower, to establish a critical democracy, to engage marginalized people in the rethinking of their sociopolitical role (Apple, 1996; Fiske, 1993; Macedo, 1994; Nicholson and Seidman, 1995). In the context of oppressive power and its ability to produce inequalities and human suffering, Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony is central to critical research. Gramsci understood that dominant power in the twentieth century was not always exercised simply by physical force but also through social psychological attempts to win people's consent to domination through cultural institutions such as the media, the schools, the family, and the church. Gramscian hegemony recognizes that the winning of popular consent is a very complex process and must be researched carefully on a case-by-case basis. Students and researchers of power, educators, sociologists, all of us are hegemonized as our field of knowledge and understanding is structured by a limited exposure to competing definitions of the sociopolitical world. The hegemonic field, with its bounded social and psychological horizons, garners consent to an inequitable power matrix—a set of social relations that are legitimated by their depiction as natural and inevitable. In this context, critical researchers note that hegemonic consent is never completely established, as it is always contested by various groups with different agendas (Grossberg, 1997; Lull, 1995; McLaren, Hammer, Reilly, and Sholle, 1995; West, 1993).

8. *A reconceptualized critical theory of power: ideology.* Critical theorists understand that the formation of hegemony cannot be separated from the production of ideology. If hegemony is the larger effort of the powerful to win the consent of their "subordinates," then ideological hegemony involves the cultural forms,