



PART I
Advancing the Conversation

The Value of a Multicultural and Critical Pedagogy: Learning Democracy Through Diversity and Dissent

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... Prevents public schools in Arizona from including any courses, classes, or school sponsored activities within the program of instruction that feature or promote as truth any political, religious, ideological, or cultural values that denigrate or overtly encourage dissent from the values of American democracy and Western civilization, including democracy, capitalism, pluralism, and religious toleration.

The above text is excerpted from Arizona Senate Bill 1108 introduced by State Legislator Russell Pearce in 2008. The bill passed the legislative committee which Pearce chairs but failed to gain momentum in the full Arizona legislature. Although the bill died in the 2008 legislative session, Pearce and political ally State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne will continue their aggressive stance in the “culture wars” to rid Arizona schools of any multicultural content that dissents from the master, Euro-centric narrative while highlighting diverse indigenous perspectives and values. Considering their ideological history, Horne and Pearce’s conception of democracy is unsurprisingly devoid of diversity and dissent. Russell Pearce is a representative from the notoriously ultra-conservative Mesa district

in Arizona. He is a steadfast opponent of immigration and has supported many initiatives, which some would describe as anti-Latino. Tom Horne won the election for state superintendent by leading the campaign for ballot proposition 203, which ended bilingual education in 2001.

In this article, I argue that true knowledge of democracy requires learning about the values of diversity and dissent. The American brand of democratic ideology has inspired numerous movements for inclusion through the securing of rights and opportunities for marginalized populations. Multicultural education is a recent historical movement that follows the same path of inclusion—sustaining the values of diversity and dissent in American democracy. I therefore argue that multicultural education provides the rare opportunity to practice and experience this unique form of American democracy by explicitly striving for the diversity of perspectives and dissent from domination. A culturally relevant curriculum is not by any stretch of the imagination anti-American. Rather, efforts to determine by law the ideological content that can and cannot be taught in our schools seems strikingly un-American.

As an example of teaching democracy through diversity and dissent, I discuss the critical pedagogy of the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), a multicultural curriculum I helped to design for the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). While this curriculum meets the senior-year government requirements for graduation, it also supplements U.S. government content with non-traditional social and cultural theory and methods, including critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and

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participatory action research.¹ This supplemental material enhances students' critical thinking and opportunities to engage in what Freire (1993) calls *praxis*—"reflection and action to transform the world." Students study a particular problem in their social world and then present research-based solutions to various stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members. Typical research topics include racism in education, sexism in media, and language and cultural discrimination against immigrant students.

The multiculturalism of the SJEP adopts a serious social and cultural critique of contemporary American society. It is a multiculturalism that Sonia Nieto (1996) would describe as promoting "discussions" that "center on concerns that heavily affect culturally diverse communities—poverty, discrimination, war, the national budget—and what students can do to change them" (316–17). Although the SJEP provides content on cultural diversity, its primary focus lies in analyzing the historical struggles that the marginalized encounter in their plight to attain first-class citizenship while promoting an intellectual praxis with which to overcome these struggles.

My discussion of the SJEP is informed by my own experience teaching in the classroom for the last six years. Weekly, I assist the instructor of record with the implementation of the social and cultural critique. Currently, there are five SJEP classes throughout the school district. Due to time constraints, I attend one class while graduate and undergraduate students handle the teaching assistance in the other classes. I document my teaching experience in weekly notes and hold regular conversations with graduate and undergraduate teacher assistants and SJEP high school students. Occasionally, I conduct more formal interviews with SJEP students to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the program. My notes, conversations, and interviews support the discussion of the SJEP's role in learning democracy through diversity and dissent. The program evaluation data support social studies standards that value diverse perspectives and critical thinking while student responses to these values represent indicators of program effectiveness.

Dissent and Diversity in American Democracy

The first amendment of the United States Constitution lays the foundation for a steady flow of multiple and

¹For more on Chicano studies see Noriega (2001). For critical race theory, see Delgado and Stefancic (2001). For participatory action research, see Whyte (1991) and Selener (1997), and for critical pedagogy see Freire (1993) and Darder et al. (2003).

critical voices from civil to political society. The framers recognized the contradiction of preventing tyranny and promoting democracy without citizenship rights based on freedom of thought and expression, thus pushing "freedom" one step further by introducing the idea of protesting against the state if the public believes the government has acted unjustly. Hence, the first right conferred by the first ten amendments to the constitution is freedom of speech—the right to speak and protest against any ruling authority.

Although "consent of the masses" is another consonant idea within this foundational document, some historians believe that the value of "dissent" was promoted to ensure society remains on task with providing all individuals the same rights and opportunities (Carter, 1999; Zinn, 1999). The framers realized there were contradictions to their democratic ideology, such as slavery and disenfranchisement of women and the landless. However, they recognized that dissent was necessary to keep tyranny at bay and make progress toward the ideal of human equality, regardless of whether or not progress was realized in their lifetime (Loewen, 1995).

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It was almost one hundred and fifty years after the publication of the U.S. Constitution that a fuller expression of democracy emerged. The civil rights movement of the latter part of the twentieth century took to heart the foundational ideals of equality and dissent by challenging the laws of the land that harbored discrimination and segregation. The civil rights movement's target—reversal of the Supreme Court decision of "separate but equal"—elevated the value of diversity in American democracy. Direct dissent from institutional racism and disenfranchisement led to the participation of more Americans in political society.

Diversity and Dissent in Democratic Education

John Dewey was arguably America's premier philosopher of democracy and education. Diversity is perhaps Dewey's most important theme in his treatment and discussion of the development and implementation of democratic principles. Dewey (1966) argues for the unfettered expression of ideas and experiences to preclude ruling class domination stating that "In order to have a large number of values in common, all members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences." (p. 84)

Presenting a radical idea even by today's standards, Dewey declares that the increase of common values occurs from the liberty to contribute and adopt a variety of perspectives. Therefore, instead of the traditional approach of shaping commonality by narrowing interests (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), he suggests expanding the diversity of points of interests so people can easily intersect and learn from each other. Expanding the diversity of values allows for greater possibilities of social intersection within a society.

Dewey (1966) claims that devaluing diversity will render "intellectual stimulation unbalanced." (p. 85) Diversity is necessary to prevent the emergence of a static sensibility that solidifies the domination of the ruling elite's culture and political views. Through Dewey's perspective, diversity and dissent are linked. In order for progress to continue and equality to triumph over domination, diversity of ideas, experiences, and values are required to dissent from any perspective that may become too dominant and thus oppressive.

Diversity is introduced into democracy through public education. Moreover, the pedagogical expansion of diversity is necessary for the establishment and maintenance of democracy. Dewey (1966) perceived the true character of democracy as being based in "the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities." (p. 87) The role of public education in democracy is to expand the diversity of capacities by relating to the experiences of a broader humanity, striving toward a more organic relevance—as opposed to a standardized mechanical learning—and understanding multiple traditions. Inclusion is not rendering everyone similar but cultivating and embracing differences so that individuals can analyze their actions through multiple perspectives and learn how their choices affect not only themselves but also the lives of others.

Paulo Freire (1970, 1993) shared similar ideas about democracy and education. Freire believed that democratic education should promote diversity of perspectives by emphasizing student and teacher collaboration in the construction of knowledge. He argued that the most

undemocratic approach to learning is the traditional lecture style in which the teacher represents the primary authority while students passively absorb his or her elocutions. Freire (1993) called this approach "banking education," which tends to promote passive subjects unwilling to question or contribute to the development of knowledge.

Freire (1993) asserted that democratic education should follow a "problem-posing" approach in which students receive the power to question any and all reified beliefs, values, understandings, or information. Moreover, learning through the problem-posing method requires the construction of knowledge through the democratic, collective participation of teachers and students in which they represent equal subjects—simultaneously being and becoming learners and experts.

The educational context for the problem-posing approach is what many describe as "critical pedagogy" (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; McLaren, 2002). A key aspect of critical pedagogy includes diversifying or decentralizing the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge while fostering participatory, collaborative leadership among teachers and students. Another vital element is to encourage the attainment of a critical consciousness capable of questioning or dissenting from oppressive orthodoxies. Dominant, and in many cases, institutionally sanctioned beliefs, whether they be political, social, or cultural, often suppress human agency, thereby limiting one's ability for self-determination. The goal of critical pedagogy is to provide students with the analytical tools to dissent from oppressive, and often widely accepted and thus hegemonic, traditions to attain the consciousness that determines freely their identities and human potentialities for change. Critical pedagogy encourages the development of engaged, active citizens ready to participate in democratic society and contribute to its overall health and progress.

With critical pedagogy's emphasis on diversity of knowledge, many prominent multicultural scholars (Banks, 2002; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; hooks, 2003; McCarthy, 1998; McLaren, 1997; Nieto, 1996) realize that the problem-posing approach must accompany the multicultural curriculum. A teacher presenting educational content focused on diverse knowledge, values, and cultures yet disseminating it through a banking education format would unwittingly create an enormous contradiction. The primary goal of multicultural education is to challenge any master narrative by demonstrating that our world and its history consists of multiple stories and experiences. Having the multiplicity of life presented through the insular fashion of lecture-style education would reduce its impact and funnel diverse perspectives through a singular authoritative lens. Thus, diversity becomes one person's story—the teacher's—based on his or her experience and

knowledge base. The consequence of an authoritarian multiculturalism would be stuffing diverse perspectives back into a master narrative in which they no longer appear diverse but rather monolithic. All the subtleties, specificities, and details of human experience—the substance that truly represents “reality”—become lost.

Presenting the complexity of life with all its color and pallor requires a critical pedagogy that emphasizes the diversity of knowledge by rendering unmitigated democratic collaboration between teacher and students as the cornerstone for erudition and discovery. Anything less would represent humanity in nebulous terms. Discussing the nexus between multicultural education and critical pedagogy, Sonia Nieto (1996) states: “[S]tudents learn to view events and situations from a variety of perspectives. A multicultural approach values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection, and action.” (p. 319)

A global perspective gained through multiple lenses requires diversity in the construction of knowledge. Students must have a voice in what counts as knowledge, while also being allowed to question or dissent from any authoritative discourse. Multicultural education that fosters diverse thinking and perspectives along with valuing the students’ ideas, thoughts, and opinions models democracy better than most pedagogical approaches. Democracy is a dialogue of diverse perspectives with the right of any interlocutor to contest and dissent from any given perspective. A multicultural-based critical pedagogy would facilitate such a dialogue.

A Multicultural and Critical Pedagogy in Practice

Since 2003, I have collaborated with TUSD administrators and teachers to implement a specialized year-long social science program, the SJEP for high school students. The goal of the program is to provide students with a multicultural-based critical pedagogy by emphasizing the experiences of people of color, particularly Latinos, in American history and providing them with the opportunity to analyze and address contemporary social problems. The SJEP is implemented in three high schools that serve primarily Chicano/Latino students and is the capstone program of TUSD’s Mexican American/Raza Studies department. Students enroll in the program on the advice of their counselors and teachers. Recently, the Mexican American/Raza Studies department, along with the SJEP, has been under attack by local media and state officials for being “anti-American” (Sanchez, 2007). Because the SJEP and Mexican American/Raza studies produce excellent academic outcomes (Romero, 2008), many from the local community completely support the programs. However, as Tom Horne has stated, the attacks

are not about academics; they are about “values” (Horne, 2007b).

The SJEP provides students with social science credits for graduation, therefore, the program must cover state-mandated content in American History and U.S. Government. The government component of the program begins with Howard Zinn’s (1999) discussion of the U.S. Constitution. This discussion helps to accomplish several objectives. First, students meet the state-mandated requirement for reviewing the Constitution. Second, this document demonstrates that the nation values the important democratic principles of equality and fair representation. Third, Zinn’s analysis adopts a multicultural perspective that demonstrates how this foundational democratic document did not immediately extend rights to the poor, people of color, or women. However, the amendment process granted and accepted the possibility of dissent and revision so that those failing to receive protections or rights from U.S. law can protest and initiate changes to the Constitution.

In the SJEP, the conversation around oppression continues with the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This book moves the discussion of oppression beyond the realm of a historical problem to a contemporary matter, particularly as it relates to students’ current educational experiences. We review Freire’s concept of “banking education” to demonstrate how traditional pedagogies tend to present the “official, legitimate” knowledge, which undermines the diversity of perspectives and thus the democratic potential of the classroom. To highlight democracy in education, we promote the problem-posing method by consistently requiring students to question and contribute, along with the teacher, to the construction of knowledge. This method ensures the existence of diverse perspectives in classroom dialogues and learning activities.

The benefit of the problem-posing method is that students no longer have to accept the world in which they were born “as is”. They can make judgments about life circumstances and determine whether they accept or reject the situation. These judgments lead to positive critical assessments of how justice can be elevated. SJEP student Maria Rodriguez² expresses this sentiment of gaining a new sight and ability to assess conditions in her life. The following is an excerpt from my field notes taken after I had attended Maria’s SJEP class:

Maria turned to me and said that she was thinking how these classes have influenced her. She said this class, the Social Justice Government course, has made it impossible to view or see or observe something without making a critical judgment as to whether what she is seeing is good or bad, conscious or not conscious, oppressive or

²Names of student have been changed to protect their privacy. I have explicit IRB approval to use student responses for evaluation data.

liberating. She said she makes a judgment whether she is watching television, listening to music, watching a movie, or going to the store.

The problem-posing method provides students with a certain kind of acumen and an attendant moral lens. This lens helps them to determine whether the content they are seeing or hearing oppresses or liberates people. They may have had this moral framework before or at least had the capacity prior to the SJEP, but problem-posing confers the confidence to apply their moral framework to real life situations. The students' level of consciousness has increased to the point in which they cannot ignore injustice.

Unfortunately, the alternative to problem-posing—banking education—has been the normative model of learning for most SJEP students. Students often express the failures they have experienced with banking education in their other (non-SJEP) courses. A SJEP coordinator asks SJEP student Juan Lopez about his experience in other classes at the school.³

Coordinator: Do you think teachers make all the decisions in the class and you settle for the decisions, why or why not?

Juan: Yeah, some teachers, yeah. They make all the choices. And we have to settle even though we don't want to.

Coordinator: Ok. Do you ever voice your opinions in class or is the teacher always right?

Juan: No, the teachers think they are right . . . sometimes are not right. But I don't show them. Say nothing.

Coordinator: Ok, why do you think you don't say anything?

Juan: Because I don't really care.

Coordinator: Do you feel the teachers have more input in discussions than the students do?

Juan: Yeah they get more input and stuff.

Coordinator: Do you feel that students should get more involved in discussions?

Juan: Yeah. But teachers should make the discussions more interesting, too.

Coordinator: Like what is an ordinary day in a classroom?

Juan: You just sit there and listen to the teacher and they'll give you the work. Something to do and you'll have to do it or else.

³The coordinator in this interview was a graduate from the same school as the interviewee. This coordinator may be leading with questions but was attempting to understand the apathy that was acknowledged publicly and extensively throughout the school campus. In other words, most students were well aware that apathy existed everywhere.

Another SJEP student, Christina Gonzalez, describes the atmosphere of a course designed to prepare students for the Arizona Instrument for Measuring Standards (AIMS), the state-mandated exit exam for high school graduation.

Conversations are flying around the room. But nothing "real" is being said. It is bothering me that the students are off task and don't care. I do not agree with this. I think that the students are tired of this AIMS and don't care anymore because it just stresses them out. A problem I see is that the teachers aren't into this banking education system. They seem to not care also. Students are still off task waiting for class to end.

Christina and other students have observed that "teaching-to-the-test" emphasizes banking education, which foments disengagement. Students become disengaged with the content because its sheer repetition and remedial nature turns to boredom and thus stress (Cammarota, 2007). In addition, teachers turn off because unmitigated banking education undermines their own creative potential.

The rare opportunity to experience problem-posing uplifts students and engages them in learning. This opportunity becomes exceedingly engaging and inspiring to the extent in which students quickly lose interest in forms of education lacking diversity and dissent. One of the SJEP undergraduate coordinators discusses the lack of diverse and critical content in standard social science courses with high school student Luis Martinez.

Coordinator: So is it important to be self-aware and to think critically in your history class?

Luis: Yes, because all we learn about is Europeans and Christopher Columbus.

Coordinator: Ok so do you think that the school is not doing a good job by not teaching you to be self-aware and to think critically?

Luis: No. they are not doing a good job.

Coordinator: Why aren't they doing a good job?

Luis: Because we should think critically in all our classes and everything should matter to us. And why something is some way and not another.

Some students prefer to engage by questioning standard knowledge and dissenting from the master Euro-centric narrative. The ability to question and think critically allows students to feel they are participating, not only in their education but also in their own lives, communities, and society. This sense of participation is a key step in becoming an active citizen in a democracy. It is through citizen participation—the contributions of individuals hoping to ameliorate oppressive conditions for all—in which democracy grows and sustains.

The following is an excerpt from an exit interview I conducted with SJEP student Arturo Ramirez.

Before this [SJEP] I didn't know who I was. I didn't know where my family came from. I just was thinking about Christopher Columbus. And it just made me realize what everything is and who I am. You know, be proud. You know, be proud of who you are. It's the power, you know. I don't know how to explain it. To know who you are and to be proud of who you are. It just like [em]powers you to do better for yourself.

Learning diverse perspectives and those perspectives relevant to one's life allows the student to understand and appreciate his or her place in the world. From this appreciation, the student gains the confidence to take ownership of his "place" and cultivate a better position within it.

A multicultural and critical pedagogy demonstrates real benefits for many SJEP students. Students improve their critical thinking abilities, increase their overall engagement in education, and develop an enhanced sense of self that leads to the commitment to care for and better the world around them.

A Place for the Silenced to Speak

For SJEP students, the most important lesson from a multicultural and critical pedagogy is that they attain a public presence and speak up for what they believe in. Having a say in their education and realizing they can play a key role in the learning process is ultimately inspiring for them. I asked a group of students who had recently graduated if they thought the SJEP was interesting.⁴

Julio Cammarota: Was the program (SJEP) interesting?

Maria: Ahuh [agreement]. We had a big part in it.

Validia: The project was interesting because we had a part in it. And usually we don't have a voice in nothing. So that's why it interested us and plus what it was about. . . it was about us. And plus all our subjects on oppression and stuff like that.

Julio Cammarota: Did you have any other opportunities like this in other classes?

Maria: No.

Manuel: No

Validia: In other classes it's like open your book; do this. That's it.

⁴I may have been leading with this question and could have phrased it, "How did you feel about the class?" But, I need to directly measure interest level with the students, and I thought the best and most direct question at that time was to ask them if they thought the class was "interesting or not."

Manuel: And they just say. . .

Validia: Write this.

Manuel: Tell you what to do.

Validia: Yeah. You couldn't be like, "Well, could I do this?" "No!" . . . I think that if we had more classes like that, a lot more kids would be interested.

Many prefer to participate with not only eyes and ears but with tongues and brains articulating new possibilities and generating alternative ideas. Having a say in their learning leads young people down the democratic path and into a place where their creative, intellectual praxis bears meaning and value. If their thoughts and actions have value, then students most likely will feel valued. Blurring the line between teacher and student tends to render diverse perspectives central to the pedagogy, generating multiple points of intersection among students along with sharing power and responsibilities in the classroom. While other course instructors often curtail dissent, SJEP educators wholeheartedly suggest cultivating changes and putting forth higher investments in alternative approaches. Democracy is not about following orders but making sure one's interests and needs are adequately represented in the quotidian undertakings of societal institutions.

Dialogue in the SJEP classroom often embraces topics rarely discussed in the traditional educational environment. After a discussion of the racist and sexist oppression that Chicana women face in their daily lives, SJEP student Celina Hernandez articulated the positive affect of focusing on feminist challenges:

People do notice how women are treated. But it is not everyone, so that's why we need to find a way to send the message that women have rights too, and they have voices and they should be heard and given a chance. Because you might not know that Chicanas can change the world.

Celina clearly understands the importance of how oppression silences Chicanas. This silence restricts their rights and voices that can bring about positive changes. Therefore, learning about oppression is the first step in understanding how Chicanas are silenced while clearing space to speak and be heard. Keeping their voices in silence will only undermine the value that their expressions bring to the democratic process.

In the multicultural and critical pedagogy, youth must learn to use their voices to dissent against injustice and improve conditions by advocating for diversity. SJEP student Bernardo Chavez describes the cumulative effect of students fearlessly and wholeheartedly contributing to the democratic dialogue in the classroom:

Young Chicanos/as are making a better place for people in the future. People [students] start to care more, they look at certain people to talk when that person was crying because they lost a family member trying to cross

the border trying to survive. People started waking up and speaking out against anti-immigrant politics. Making more comments than I heard before. Everybody uses their words and putting it all together to represent. So our class is getting organized to help immigrants dying in the desert so they know we're not dumb.

Once they start speaking up and sharing their ideas, it becomes hard for others to claim they lack the knowledge to make important contributions. The value of a multicultural and critical pedagogy is to counter those diatribes declaring intellectual deficiency. Fostering the wealth of perspectives will render a richer intellectual development and thus greater democratic potential.

Dissent from Diversity and Dissent

Despite the clear benefits of the SJEP's multicultural and critical pedagogy, the program receives consistent criticism. Perhaps the most vehement and visible critic has been Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne. He has subpoenaed the SJEP curriculum and textbooks, citing the subversive nature of the program to rationalize his actions. After his curriculum review, he made this statement about *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in an open letter to the city of Tucson. "[S]tudents should be taught that this is a land of opportunity. And if they work hard, they can achieve their goals. They should not be taught that they are oppressed" (Horne, 2007a). He has not published any formal review of the book to date, but often cites it when criticizing the program (Sanchez, 2007).

The criticism of Freire was picked up in Russell Pearce's legislative attack with SB 1108. Pearce argues that his bill is not opposed to teaching "diverse cultures" but it is aimed at "anti-American" sentiment and "sedition" (Fischer, 2008). Senate Bill 1108 grants the state the right to confiscate books deemed un-American, which putatively attack American values such as "democracy, capitalism, pluralism and religious toleration." The inclusion of capitalism in this list is aimed at the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* since Pearce and Horne often criticize it based on the sheer complaint that Freire was a "Marxist". Commentators have assumed this complaint and fear Freire's Marxism may radicalize students to revolt against capitalism (Robb, 2008). An *Arizona Republic* editorial contends, "Marxist- education theorist Paulo Friere [sic], author of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* . . . decries traditional education methods as a dehumanizing conspiracy of evil capitalists bent on subjugating the masses" (Arizona Republic Editorial Board, 2008).

The misreading, or perhaps solecism, of Paulo Freire is an unfortunate failed opportunity to learn

about democracy and education. Although Freire may have challenged the antagonisms of class dynamics in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, those who understand and apply the text usually are not trying to undermine capitalism. Most draw from the book to bolster democracy in the classroom and empower those who may feel powerless for a variety of reasons—being young, female, minority, poor, or just different from the mainstream ideal (Darder et al., 2003; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Wink, 2005). At minimum, a critical pedagogy provides students with a sense of hope that their ideas, words, and actions have real meaning and that they too might contribute to the rendering of their world. This pedagogy challenges any undemocratic system or method that impedes students' opportunities for self-determination.

Democracy in Western Civilization

The attacks on the SJEP rendered by SB 1108 amount to state censorship inconsistent with constitutional rights. U.S. history includes the drive to critique government policies that put into question the right to fairness and dignity. Laws that protect the sanctity of "Western civilization" surely miss the point about the value of diversity and dissent in American democracy. Although many ideas about American democracy derive from Western civilization, several of its byproducts (i.e., slavery, racism, sexism, fascism, capitalism, etc.) rightfully deserve criticism or condemnation. Certain philosophical formulations, including modernism, post-modernism, Marxism, feminism, structuralism, and post-structuralism produced within Western civilization allow for this self-reflection (Giddens, 1991). Therefore, criticisms of Western civilization are not always exogenous ideological beliefs but sometimes endogenous.

The irony of claiming that certain forms of dissent and diversity can somehow undermine democracy and Western civilization is that Dewey and Freire, who advocated practicing democracy explicitly through dissent and diversity, were well versed in the eruditions of Western civilization. The American Dewey was acquainted with Greek philosophy, and the Brazilian Freire studied European scholarship. Through their "Western" perspectives, democracy requires the validation of multiple interests and experiences and the contestation of ideas and practices that maintain the dominance of a ruling elite. A democracy that fails to value diversity and dissent is not a democracy at all but rather an inert political process that tends to lack creativity, dialogue, and criticism. Democracy is learned and practiced through the diversity of multiculturalism and the dissent of critical pedagogy.

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