

Joe Kincheloe

Marxist *Kritik* and the Tender-Hearted

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I want to thank Hongyu Wang and Adam Howard for allowing me the space to write a tribute to my dear friend Joe Kincheloe who recently died.

I dedicate this piece to Shirley Steinberg, Joe's longtime partner.

IT IS THE MORNING of January 20th, 2009. Today is the inauguration of Barack Obama, the first African-American to become President of the United States. Joe would have loved today.

I cannot believe I am speaking in the past tense about Joe. When we got the phone call about Joe's untimely death, we were stunned, horrified, shocked, and deeply saddened. How could it be? I just spoke with him via email about book projects and so forth. I can hear his voice and see his image. How is Shirley I wonder? For as long as I have known Joe, my association with him is with the word 'and.' Joe 'and' Shirley. How can Shirley *be* without Joe? I think of Shirley every day and hope she is okay. Scholarly life is more than teaching and writing; it is also about the friendships we build in our scholarly communities. Joe was my friend. I loved him dearly. I miss him and am very sad as I write this. The Personal is the Political and the personal matters. It matters what goes on in our personal lives, and when we lose one of our own, like Joe, our community of scholars mourns that loss.

What can I do, what can anyone do in the face of death? As a scholar, the best I can do is to write about Joe and what he meant not only to me but to the field of curriculum studies. Before going on here, I would like to say that Joe's loss is profound. We write not only for the dead but also for the living. The living live with memory and loss. This piece is written in memory of Joe, and it is also written in the spirit of my friendship with Shirley Steinberg.

Those of you younger scholars who do not know Joe's work should go back to his texts and study his work. What I would like to do here is touch on only a few of Joe's pieces that have meant a lot to me as a scholar. Joe was prolific; his books are many and various. The purpose of this piece is not to do a comprehensive survey of his work but to talk about pieces that have

made an impact on me as a scholar.

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of Joe is critical theory. I do not like to peg scholars, or categorize their work, but I think that Joe has always been associated with doing critical theory. If one studies his books, there is a critical theory through-line that runs throughout his work. In recent years, Joe and Shirley have founded a Center for Paulo Freire at McGill University. Students should consult the Freire Center website for more information on the projects undertaken there.

As I read Joe, it is Freire, I think, who influenced him most. One of the most moving autobiographical portraits that Joe paints of himself can be found in the introduction to the expanded edition of Freire's (2005) book titled *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those who Dare Teach*. Again, I urge you to read the text for yourselves but here let me make a few remarks. What strikes me in Joe's introduction is his heartbreaking story of growing up in the Appalachian mountains as a working class youth being insulted by a college professor who couldn't believe that somebody like Joe (a working class boy) could write about something like that (liberation theology). How could a young working class mountain boy write so eloquently about liberation theology, the professor wondered? Joe tells us, "I replayed the 'someone like you' portion of his soliloquy. In retrospect I think he was referring to my Appalachian markers: the Tennessee mountain accent, cheap clothes, the nontraditional scholarly persona. Whatever he meant, it was not a compliment" (p. xlv). Joe often joked about his Appalachian background but clearly in this piece, the memory of the way he was treated by a haughty professor marked Joe. It was painful to him. And out of that joking and pain came Joe's lifelong commitment to undoing that hurtful, classist insult to him. Anybody who has suffered the working class life understands where Joe is coming from. Classism is a terrible problem especially for working class kids who are constantly belittled. And then there is the terrible reality of working class life. I know: I lived it for many years in New Orleans. Poverty can happen to anybody. At any rate, Joe writes further on in his introduction to Freire's book about how he came across Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1994) and how this book changed his life. Joe tells us that,

Later that afternoon I found a reference to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Much to my delight there was a never-checked-out-copy of the book in the stacks. I began reading. The next thing I remember the lights were switched on and off as the library was closing for the night. I had been reading for hours with no sense of time, place, or the pain of my earlier encounter with Dr. L. (pp. xlv–xlv)

Many people report of this kind of experience when reading Freire. The profound influence that he has had on so many of us in education is truly astounding. But I mention this here because after I read Joe's intro, I began to understand him a little better in light of his love for Freire, his struggles growing up as a working class youth, and his struggles with his identity against a culture that does not have much sympathy for the working class. In the United States, class issues are not much discussed except among critical theorists like Joe and Shirley. It seems to me that class is a missing element in much of our literature(s) in education still, even though critical theory is one of the largest sectors of curriculum studies scholarship. In the larger arena of American culture, people do not really notice class issues—unless of course they are working class. Everybody else—that is, middle class and upper class people—act as if poverty is not their problem. But poverty is everybody's problem.

Reading Joe's story inspired me to return to the work of Paulo Freire. Although I had read

him in graduate school many years ago, I thought I might re-read him. Joe was right about Freire. He is a life changing read. He was the kind of writer that you cannot stop reading once you start. Recently I taught an undergraduate social foundations course and the entire course was built around Freire's (1970/1994) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. What surprised me was that some of my students—who are mostly white, Southern, rural, working class, and non-readers—said that Freire's book was the most important book they had ever read in college. This astounded me. Joe was right. Teaching critical theory in the deep South is no easy task. There was much resistance to this kind of knowledge as well. But I refused to whitewash or water down Freire's work. Some of the students protested of course.

Peter McLaren (2005) remarks that many of the scholars who do critical theory whitewash it. He says that for most, critical theory has become watered-down and sanitized. McLaren (2005) tells us that if we read Freire closely we know that he was not about the “domesticat[ion]. . . [of] both heart and mind. . . .” (p. xxxv). The U.S. is the land of domestication. Joe often writes about the way in which Disney has taken hold of our youth and domesticated their understandings of race, class, and gender. (See, for example, the book he edited with Shirley called *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (1997).)

Joe never domesticated anything. He understood the hard edge of critical theory and was not afraid to speak about that hard edge. Joe and Shirley together speak and write with a hard edge; they are not afraid to say what is on their minds. Here I am thinking of the Preface to a book called *Critical Pedagogy: Where are We Now?* (edited by Joe and Peter McLaren). Here, Shirley Steinberg (2007) puts it this way:

. . . wherever we are now, we are being insubordinate—at least I hope so. Refusing to compromise to the standards-wielding, neo-liberal, pedagogical pundits, the contributors to this book are engaged in a pedagogy of insubordination. Insubordination borne by the fact that we have been pedagogically violated by conservatives, liberals, quasi-critical pedagogues, and just about everyone else who just doesn't get it. (p. ix)

Insubordination indeed. Very strong words. Joe and Shirley have a book series with Peter Lang Publishing called “Counterpoints.” When we think about what this means, we think of what is counter to something or that which is “insubordinate.” You have points and then you have counterpoints. Counterpoints are counter to the points at hand. Counter-intuitive, similarly, means going against one's intuition to make sense of what does not make sense. Under the shadow of critical theory, counterpoints means taking power apart point by point. Or, another way to think of it is that a counter-narrative takes on and deconstructs corrupt power. Corruption is not just something politicians are good at. Education has a history of corruption in its tendency to colonize, as Joe points out in his remarkable collection of essays that he co-edited with Ladislaus M. Semali titled *What is Indigenous Knowledge? Voices from the Academy* (1999).

Thinking for a moment more about Shirley's emphasis on the “insubordinate,” I am also reminded of Paulo Freire's (2004) book titled *Pedagogy of Indignation*. Indignation is a very strong word. One should be indignant about wrongs done to people. A pedagogy of “insubordination” (Shirley) is also one of “indignation” (Paulo). Americans tend to be uncomfortable with such strong language. Anger is not something that Americans like to express. But just take a look around and you will find lots of reasons to be angry with this country and the way minorities are treated and the way children are (mis)educated and mistreated, at the way health care is only for the rich and good schools are only for those who are wealthy. Just take a look around at the

poverty in your own town, or the homophobia or the anti-Semitism or the sexism in your own university, and you will get very angry. Some scholars work out of this anger. I know I do. I think Joe also was a scholar who worked out of this angry place. And yet he was a tender-hearted man.

To further deconstruct Shirley's quote above, it is important to pay attention to what she calls "quasi-critical pedagogues." I think again of Peter McLaren's reminder that Freire taught that we ought not domesticate critical theory. Part of this domestication comes, I think, from not studying primary sources. I wonder if scholars who do critical theory have forgotten to read Freire or have forgotten to return to Marx. Returning to Marx is essential if one calls oneself a critical theorist. Studying Marx helps students to better understand not only Freire but also Joe Kincheloe, Shirley Steinberg, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and Michael Apple. These writers are all tough-minded critics of corruption. And they owe a debt to the writings of Marx. Marx is not easy reading; by the way, he is tough. So too are the critical theorists who have returned to him. Here I am thinking especially of Peter McLaren. And Joe. I am always thinking of Joe these days. I miss him and still am in a state of disbelief. I loved Joe for his toughness and his tender-heartedness.

Here, one of the reasons I mention tough-minded critique is also because of what Joe tells us in another important book that Joe edited with kecia hayes (2007) titled *Teaching City Kids: Understanding and Appreciating Them*. What strikes me in this collection is Joe's emphasis on the way city kids *feel* about being put down, oppressed, and belittled. Joe says that "the affective dimensions of urban education are very important" (p. 6). This is what separates Joe from the pack. Joe's sensitivity to feeling is a reflection of his character and personality. Joe was a tough-minded—tender-hearted—man. And he wasn't afraid to write about feelings. This is, I think, one of the missing elements in much of critical theory. How kids feel about being insulted or belittled is also a psychoanalytic question. That is the sort of question that I deal with throughout my own work which is primarily psychoanalytic. So when I read Joe's intro, I was delighted to see that feelings and critical theory could be discussed together. And whenever scholars talk about feelings, they take a risk. In academe, talking about feelings is sometimes thought to be well—unacademic, beside the point, not scholarly, soft. Tender-hearted. There is no place in the academy for the tender-hearted. But Joe was a tender-hearted man. Joe addresses this critique as he talks about tough-minded versus "soft" scholarship. Joe states,

Conservative critics often characterize scholarship such as *City Kids* as soft-pedagogy, lacking in rigor, concerned not with subject matter but with how students feel. This is such a cowardly misrepresentation of what critical educators are attempting in that it fails to account for the emotional/affective dimensions of marginalized students' lives. . . . (2007, p. 28)

Joe is right on the mark here. As soon as scholars begin talking about emotions they get ex-coriated—as if emotions don't matter. What strikes me here—once again—is that Joe has combined the emotional element with critical theory—this is something that many who domesticate critical theory do not do. If we go back to Freire, he talks of what he calls radical love. In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (2007) says, "Education is an act of love. . . ." (p. 33). And Freire (1970/1994) says in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for

people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. (p. 70)

Is love not an emotion? Does talk of love make Freire soft? I don't think so. Freire was a revolutionary thinker who changed the lives of millions of people through his work and his writings. Peter McLaren also talks about love in his work. He too has changed the lives of millions of people through his work and writing. And so too Joe. And so too Shirley. Being a Marxist does not mean being devoid of feeling. And sometimes these feelings are not nice either. Sometimes Marxists write under the shadow of anger. And this anger is justified. Marx clearly writes emotionally. He is not ashamed to express his rage. In a letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx (1843/1978) states, ". . . I am speaking of a *ruthless critique of everything existing*, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be" (p.13). To me, it seems that the word "ruthless" is a rage-filled word. A ruthless critique is an angry critique. I am thinking here of the work of Richard Wright. Here was a great fiction writer and a man who wrote through his rage at the injustices of American racism. If you ever have the chance to read his autobiography called *Black Boy* (1944/2006), do so. If you want to understand what it was like to live through the Jim Crow years in the USA, read Richard Wright. He too had a Marxist bent to his writings, although he eventually gave up his Communist affiliations because of the dogma associated with Communism. And Marx warned in his writings of not falling into the trap of dogma. But the Communists clearly lost their way, as history bares out. At any rate, if you are not angry about the inequitable conditions of your country, you are not paying attention.

Critical theorists engage in what Marx calls a ruthless critique of *everything*, especially now, as many have moved into an area called cultural studies. Cultural studies is about the critique of everything in culture. Culture is not just high culture but all culture. Here, scholars look broadly at issues of power and culture and critique what is wrong. Joe's work in cultural studies can be seen as a critique of everything from McDonald's to Piaget. (See for example, Joe's book called *The Sign of the Burger: McDonald's and the Culture of Power* (2002) and his book called *The Stigma of Genius: Einstein, Consciousness, and Education* (1999). In these books, Joe talks about everything from sweatshops and child labor violations to a critique of Piaget and problems of normalization, and a term Joe and Shirley talk about called postformalism, which is a critique of Piaget.)

Joe was always a fighter for the rights of children and the oppressed; he was always opposed to any kind of normalization. Here I am thinking of a book he edited with my dear friend Gaile Cannella called *Kidworld: Childhood Studies, Global Perspectives, and Education* (2002). Here Gaile and Joe talk about the ways in which children are colonized and abused. Colonizing is the act of normalization. Colonization is imposition and erasure. Talking against normalization, imposition, and erasure means talking about the importance of understanding difference. Joe didn't just talk the talk—about embracing difference—he walked the walk. Joe was one of the few men that I have ever met who was truly not racist, not homophobic, not anti-Semitic, and not sexist. I think he so identified with all of these struggles—with all of the dispossessed—partly because of his working class upbringing and the insults he endured and the pain of living the working class life. Joe was truly a good man. Joe was a tender-hearted man. I cannot say this about many people. Joe was generous and was always there when you needed him.

Marx and the Embodiment of *Kritik*

Joe Kincheloe not only worked out of Kritik but lived it. And sometimes Kritik can be angry. I think Joe worked out of anger. But he also worked out of love. Kritik is driven by anger and love.

Here I want to deconstruct Marx's notion of *Kritik* because it has everything to do with the way Joe lived his life. *Kritik*—in the sense that Marx meant it—is a sustained analysis of the mis-use of power and the subsequent wrongs done to people. Marx was certainly insubordinate—to draw on Shirley's word and he certainly was indignant—to draw on Paulo's word. Marx was angry.

Here I want to emphasize the German spelling of the word *Kritik* because I think when this word gets translated it loses its meaning in a way. *Kritik is not just critique*. First off, returning to Marx, we read that *Kritik* means avoiding “dogmatic abstraction” (1843/1978). I am thinking that Marx was responding to his dislike of Hegel's abstract system of Spirit or the Idea. Recall, that for Hegel, Spirit makes history and people get swept up in history. The Spirit is a force and abstraction that people have no control over, and Spirit gets its way. Marx had no truck with abstractions because he saw what poverty did to people, he saw what was happening in Prussian society, and he anticipated revolution because he knew that people could only take so much abuse. Hegel did not see people; he saw abstractions. For Marx, people make history. People make revolution. Abstractions are “specters.” Marx (1845–1846/1978), in “The German Ideology: Part I,” says,

It has not, like the idealistic view of history, in every period. To look for a category, but remains constantly on the real ground of history; it does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice; and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism. . . or transformation into “apparitions,” “specters,” “fancies,” but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which give rise to this idealistic humbug. . . . (p. 164)

Ghosts, *Geist*. It is interesting to note that in Marx the term ‘specter’ was used in two different ways. In early Marx, specter was used as a slam against Hegel's notion of *Geist* or Spirit. We see in Marx in the above quotation the fundamental idea that it is people who make history and that ‘material’ reality is what needs to be unpacked, not the ghost in the machine of abstractions. Not to say that Marx's writings are not abstract. But his abstractions were always made concrete, material. We read later on in his “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1883/1978) that “a spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism” (p. 473). Here the notion of specter gets turned on its head as now the ghost seems a helpful one. The ghost warns that those who oppress will be overpowered by those who are oppressed. Revolution is at hand. And revolution is about the material conditions in which people struggle.

When I read these passages, I think of Joe and how he fought for the little guy, the underdog. How he really lived this Marxist dream. He wrote about fighting for the underdog and he fought for the underdog. Joe was not an armchair philosopher. Joe was a fighting man and lived the *Kritik*. I think of Joe when I read the following passage from Marx (1843/1978): “Nothing prevents us, then, from tying our criticism to the criticism of politics and to a definite party position in politics, and hence from identifying our criticism with real struggles” (p. 14). Joe's work was always about the struggles of people, and he helped people and opened avenues for

marginalized scholars to publish. The many book series that Joe and Shirley have edited demonstrate this openness to the scholarship of marginalized people and ideas that run counter to the status quo. The scholarship you find in the Counterpoints Series (Peter Lang Publishing) or Transgressions (Sense Publishers) is the scholarship of real struggle, of concrete struggle, of struggle left out of the conversation by a sterile academe. Joe and Shirley have opened many doors to people who otherwise would not get published. And as I see it, this is doing the real work of *Kritik*. As I have said a million times to my colleagues, Joe and Shirley have done so much for our field. They have opened so many doors to us; they have allowed us to speak when otherwise our voices would not be heard. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

In the spirit of *Kritik*, Joe and Shirley have never been afraid to take on people—in academe—who have done wrongs. Here I am thinking of the likes of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) in their scandalously racist book called *The Bell Curve*. Joe, Shirley, and Aaron Gresson (1996), in their edited book *Measured Lies*, take these conservatives to task for their racist arguments. *The Bell Curve*=*specters of Eugenics*. This is a good example of *Kritik*. *Measured Lies* (1996) is one of the most important texts students need to read to understand what is wrong with using numbers to ‘measure’ intelligence. One of the points that stands out to me in *Measured Lies* is that the racist pseudo-science of phrenology (measuring skulls) is not that much different from using numbers to ‘measure’ intelligence. The history of intelligence testing is clearly racist. Intelligence, in a word, cannot be measured, and to think that we can do so, is a lie. This is the thesis of their book. We learn also from Steven Seldon (1999) and Ann Gibson Winfield (2007) that the social efficiency movement (measurement of intelligence was part of this movement and was a pre-cursor to the standards movement today) dovetailed with the Eugenics craze, and many of the advocates of social efficiency in the early 20th century like Bobbitt, Charters, and Thorndike were actually advocates of Eugenics!! Here is an example of the way in which education has been used as a tool of colonization and racism. What are the implications, then, of the standards movement and standardized testing today? The answer to this question is not a happy one.

Kritik is sustained analysis of oppression. It is the sustained analysis of power gone wrong. It is intellectual labor. And it is study done in the spirit of love and anger; it is the intellectual labor of telling what is wrong in order to try to make what is wrong, right.

Kritik is the heart of what Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg’s work has always been about. Much of their work has been a collaboration of love and anger. Anger against the machine of right-wing lunacy and corporate corruption. Education should be about righting wrongs, not about colonization and racism. And as I’ve mentioned, Freire teaches that education—at root—is about love. This is what Joe and Shirley have always been about: love. The tender-hearted ones.

I hope that younger scholars who are not familiar with Joe’s work (or the many collaborative projects in which he was involved not only with Shirley Steinberg but also with many, many other scholars) read the primary texts, read Joe’s writings, and study his thought. We are a scholarly family, and we need to pay homage to people especially when they vanish from our world; we must work at memory and archive the work that has been done so as not to forget the legacy they leave. Many of the readers of *JCT* are young scholars trying to find their way in the academy. I hope that they take the time to study the important contributions Joe Kincheloe has made to our field. I am sure that Joe’s work will help you find your way through academe. Let us follow Joe’s example and do our work in the spirit of *Kritik, love, and tenderheartedness*.

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