I’d been teaching in a School of Education for several years when it dawned on me how frequently talk of “theory” filled the offices and halls. I would overhear the term in random snippets of conversation, but I would also hear it in faculty meetings, thesis proposal defenses, and appointments with students. Alas, most of this talk was not very positive; theory was a bugaboo, it seemed. People either had too much of it (our poor undergraduate students, pre-service teachers, would soon be told that everything their professors taught was “just theory”), or too little of it (our poor graduate students would be asked frequently, “Where’s the theory?”). And when those who’d had too “little of it” tried to engage seriously with theoretical questions and literatures, often their work was subsequently judged “too theoretical.” What a Catch-22! Damned if you theorize, damned if you don’t.

Another phenomenon that I began to notice is the practice by which both scholars and students of education cite particular theories and theorists as a kind of bid for social acceptance, or symbolic legitimacy. I’ve done it myself, and we all know it happens frequently, in print and in speech: Theories and theorists are mentioned, or displayed, as justification for a particular project, position, or argument. Yet this kind of mention often betrays little substantive understanding of the broader contexts and aims of such theories. I began to wonder if I was observing the more flamboyant behaviors of *Homo Academicus*, a peculiar social creature who sometimes lets the rules of the academic game trump intellectual depth and honesty (see Bourdieu, Chapter 4). When the game rewards symbolic displays, there is always a risk that fashion triumphs over substance.

Finally, it has become clear to me that we need a better accounting of the differences between theories particular to the research fields and traditions of education, on the one hand, and the broader field of social theory on the other. As part of their training, education scholars and practitioners must become familiar with the theories that inform their field of practice: Psychologists may study “learning theory” or “counseling theory,” teachers and curriculum scholars “theories of pedagogy” and “curriculum,” and scholars of language education “literacy theory” or “language acquisition theory.” Such field-specific theories attempt to organize and account for the evolving empirical findings of an area of educational research and practice; they also serve to orient and inform further research and practice. They are akin to what sociologist Robert Merton called “middle range” theories. But what about “social theory,” which, as we elaborate below, provides a set of interlinked concepts that aspires to give an account of how and why “society” works the way it does? How does social theory, as a broad, interdisciplinary
field that attempts to account for the dynamics of power and social relationships in the modern era, relate to these more field-specific theories, and why should we care?!

Our goal in writing this book has been to introduce educational practitioners and scholars to the people, concepts, questions, and concerns that make up the field of critical social theory. In doing so, we guide you into a grand conversation, centuries old, about how education can contribute to reinforcing or challenging relationships of power and domination in the modern era. We also wish to present and critically examine a number of examples of educational scholarship informed by such theories. Now, what is “critical” about critical social theory? you may ask. That’s a very good question, and our answer to it runs throughout the book (Well, it may be better to say that our answer “waffles” throughout the book, but that’s deliberate, as you’ll see). As a quick shorthand, we can say that critical social theories are those accounts of the social world that attempt to understand the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity. This begs even more questions, of course, such as, “What the heck do you mean by “structural” domination and “human emancipation?” Hang on, we’ll get there, I promise. For now, instead of proclaiming a particular definition of critical theory and thereby placing some theorists “in” and “out,” we prefer to adopt an eclectic stance which leaves open the question of membership in the “critical” club. We follow the decisions made by most other scholars about what counts as critical work, but by the end of the book we also engage thinkers and traditions who’ve typically been left out of the critical club. We wonder aloud whether such thinkers might also be fruitfully engaged in broadening the canon.

Demystifying Theory, Demystifying Critical

If you’ve picked up this book, and you’ve made it this far, then we probably don’t need to convince you that theory matters. But we may need to help you understand just HOW and WHY theory matters, in particular those we call critical social theories.

Because so many misconceptions abound, we have to start with the most basic notion of what theory is altogether. We have to clear the decks of some of the many competing definitions and understandings of theory in order to arrive at what we mean by “critical social theories.” That’s why we developed Figure No. 1, a chart that sketches the dynamics of social theory.
The first thing we would note for you is that the term “theory” has developed a number of unfortunate associations in the modern English vernacular. In particular, it has come to mean the opposite of that which is “real” or “really observable.” To talk about something “in theory” is often to consider it abstractly, separate from real conditions in the world. In much of our everyday talk, that which is “merely theoretical” is only abstract, not pertaining to real practice. Indeed, intellectuals are often accused of being too theoretical, too divorced in their thinking from the immediacies of practice.

We wish to keep this tension alive, but also challenge this colloquial usage by drawing on the meaning of theory developed in Western science. Theory has its origins in the Greek term for viewing, or being a “spectator.” In the history of the Western human sciences, then, theory has referred to a way of conceptualizing, or “seeing” some aspect of the world. Most broadly, it is about the way that human beings come to know and understand the world. Yet over time there have developed disparate senses of theory in scholarly and scientific usage.

As the left side of Figure 1 indicates, one sense relates theory very closely to what anthropologists would call culture, “worldview,” or “folk theory” (Levinson, 2000; Spradley and McCurdy, 1999) It is in this sense that all human beings develop and transmit “everyday social theories” of how the social world around them works. This is a kind of knowledge that is relative to a cultural tradition, developed historically in a particular context. In other words, through our primary enculturation, our primary socialization into a particular social group, we inherit a symbolic map of social relations, a “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998), that we use to negotiate our experience. Yet this symbolic map may fail us when we find ourselves on new terrain; we may have to adapt the map’s features in new ways to make sense of novel situations, and by doing so, we...
may have contributed to changing the map itself. Another way to think of this is through the work of the sociologist Alfred Schutz (1973), who we discuss in Chapter 1. For Schutz, we all have “stocks of knowledge” for negotiating our way through the world, and we use “typifications” in these stocks of knowledge to interpret specific situations. Typifications are like little social theories that attempt to condense a welter of experience into a manageable mental model. When a novel situation presents itself, typifications may change to accommodate the unexpected.

We can bring this back to education: Think of a boy from a U.S. family who attended public school in New York City through 5th grade and then moved to a small village in Mexico. He now attends a small rural primary school. There is much here that is familiar to him, like a chalkboard, rows of desks, and a teacher who commands the group’s attention at the front of the class. Yet there is also much that is unfamiliar to him—the teacher wears a suit instead of a polo shirt, the girls keep very separate from the boys, each student must stand when responding to the teacher’s questions, and they’re all speaking a different language. As he adjusts to this new social world, the boy will have to quickly develop new social theories about “how school works.” His academic success will likely depend on his ability to develop a theoretical perspective that aligns well with the social norms and phenomena where he now finds himself.

The scholarly tradition that aligns itself with this “cultural” view of theory can be called hermeneutic theory, or interpretivism (actually, here we’re lumping together a number of disparate traditions, so bear with us). Hermeneutics is a lively branch of inquiry in literary criticism, linguistics, and philosophy, which is concerned with the problem of meaning, especially the meaning of spoken language and other devices through which human beings communicate (writing, art, film, etc.). Though often associated more with the humanities than the sciences, interpretivism made its way into the social sciences through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, and Alfred Schutz, who each insisted that the study of human society required a focus on the meaning of social action for the people involved (see Chapter 1). Now, much of the early discipline of sociology dispensed with the problem of meaning and sought explanation through the articulation of “lawlike” social structures and processes, similar to those that could be found in the physical world. The interpretivists, on the other hand, attempted to shift to the more modest, human-scale goal of understanding rather than explanation.

Early sociologists of the mid to late 1800s, like August Comte and Herbert Spencer, followed by Emile Durkheim, represent the “positivist” conception of scientific theory. In this tradition, which we depict on the right side of Figure 1, theory constitutes a way to organize and represent “positive” knowledge of the empirical world, as revealed through the instruments and tools of science. In this sense, theory is precisely a guide to liberate us from our entanglements in culture and arrive at a “truer” understanding of the empirical world, which includes human society. After all, as Durkheim (1982 [1895], p. 73) said, the sociologist must free himself from those fallacious notions which hold sway over the mind of the ordinary person, shaking off, once and for all, the yoke of those empirical categories that long habit often makes tyrannical. Such a sociological theory stands apart from, and is even dismissive of, the knowledge that constitutes culture. Only scientific theory, which corrects for the biases and
distortions of cultural knowledge, can guide the way to a fully rational understanding of society.

In Figure 1, we try to show how the broad **interdisciplinary field of social theory** relates to the more specific academic discipline of **sociology**. Sociological theory is the formal body of theory that orients empirical research in the discipline of sociology. Though our chart indicates the prevalence of a positivist view of theory in sociology, it’s important not to draw this distinction too sharply. Certainly, the interpretivist view of society, coming from the “left” side of the chart, has also made significant contributions to sociology. So how ought we to define social theory in relation to sociology? For many authors, “social theory” refers principally to that body of work that emerges out of the discipline of sociology. Others prefer to delimit this work by the term “sociological theory,” and then apply the term social theory to a much broader set of writings, which include the sociological tradition but go beyond it in many ways (see Lemert 2005; Allan 2005, 2006). Others, like Baert (1998, p.1), may still privilege a definition of social theory as “a relatively systematic, abstract, and general reflection upon the workings of the social world.”

For us, a social theory is a set of interlinked concepts that minimally aspires to give an account of how and why “society” works. This definition distinguishes social theory from related fields of inquiry such as literary theory, cultural studies, or philosophy proper. Yet we also want to keep clear that “society” need not only refer to those highly abstract or broad-scale collectivities that have characterized so-called “grand” theorizing, such as Karl Marx on the class structure of capitalism, or Jurgen Habermas on the “public sphere.” By society we simply refer to an organized set of social relations. And of course, there is nothing in our definition that excludes the possibility that all individuals develop their own social theories, or that particular “cultures” (rooted perhaps in families, organizations, social movements, and the like) have their own implicit social theories. Indeed, our definition takes this for granted. We try to maintain a dynamic sense of tension between these “everyday” social theories that all of us have, and the rather more explicit and organized theories that constitute a professional literature. In fact, we think that the role of theory in the academic sense is precisely to stimulate dialogue with, to continually nourish and be nourished by, the kinds of everyday theories that inform our educational practice.

Thus, to get back to Figure 1, the interpretive side of social theory, like culture itself, helps us to “see” the world better in order to orient our action in it more successfully. Clearly, the visual metaphor for theory is alive and well. As Allan (2005, p. 3) puts it, “Theory is that which lifts the veil and connects the dots. It lifts the veil because it can show us what is going on beneath the surface.” Calhoun (1991, p. 9), echoing Habermas’ contention that social theory “resembles the focusing power of a magnifying glass” (in Seidman, 1989, p. 85), puts it this way: “[Critical social theory] helps practical actors deal with social change by helping them see beyond the immediacy of what is at any particular moment to conceptualize something of what could be.” And what critical social theory, and interpretive social theory more generally, would seem to share is a skepticism toward the possibility of final “right answers.” As Calhoun (1991, p. 7), again, says, our goal is “epistemic gain,” that is, an advancement of knowledge, in moving from “less adequate accounts to more adequate accounts, with our criteria of adequacy always shaped in part by the practical problems that command our attention.”
As Figure 1 indicates, professional social theory continually nourishes, even as it is nourished by, “practical problems” and debates in the public sphere, social movements and associations, and the everyday social theories that arise and circulate amongst people. Through a kind of ongoing dialogue, the best of professional social theory presumes to enrich and extend the analytic power of everyday social theories. Social theory is relatively abstract, insofar as it “sees beyond the immediacy” of everyday practice, yet paradoxically, it requires this engagement with practice.

Mainstream sociological theory, on the other hand, may not have such an engaged, organic relationship to everyday social theories. As our figure indicates, sociological theory may itself contribute to everyday theories and social movements, but it fancies itself rather insulated from their effects (hence, the one-way arrows). Increasingly, mainstream sociological theory limits itself to the elaboration and refinement of middle-range theories (e.g., “institutional theory,” sociological theories of medicine), and to the formation of what we call elite public policy—rules and laws created by elected or appointed specialists in high social positions. Policy processes in modern society still generally follow the rationalist prescriptions of Enlightenment thought. Thus, policy makers typically look for “sound” scientific theory and “objective” data upon which to base, or at least to justify, policy. Sociological theory often purports to provide such theory and data.

Thus far we have attempted to chart the different meanings and uses of theory in the human sciences, and to distinguish between social and sociological theory. Now, it’s important not to make this distinction between positivist and interpretivist thinking too rigidly. We’ve been using it as a convenient scheme for understanding different approaches to social theory, but in reality it’s hard to find “true positivists” these days. Important work in the philosophy and sociology of science itself has effectively undermined most of positivism’s facile notions of objectivity (Bernstein, 1976), giving rise to much “postpositivist” work that stands in the space between the poles of strong positivism and strong interpretivism.

In this broad sketch of theory, you should ask, what counts as a “critical” social theory? We can only begin to answer this question now. Because of its multi-faceted nature, in Figure 1 we locate the critical circle in the area of overlap between social and sociological theory. Critical social theory is often traced back to the writings of Karl Marx. In many ways, Marxism and other strains of critical social theory defined themselves against the emerging 19th-century consensus around political liberalism. Liberal political philosophy, which has its roots in British philosophers like John Locke and Adam Smith, places particular emphasis on individual rights, civil liberties, free markets, and private property. Liberalism was a product of the broader Enlightenment movement of the 17th and 18th centuries, which sought to replace the power of the church and other collective, faith-based determinants of behavior with a rational, individualist apprehension of the world. Such a philosophy provides the premises for representative democracy and capitalist economy of the sort currently practiced in most parts of the world.

As we will see in the next chapter, Marx was writing at a time when the initial enthusiasm for industrial capitalism gave way to an awareness of its abuses. From Marx’s perspective, the gains in overall societal wealth could not justify these abuses and the extreme inequalities that resulted. Political liberalism seemed like an elaborate apology
for a new system of domination that replaced the vassal-serf relation under feudalism. Under liberalism, individuals were now “free” to sell their labor-power on a market, and to vote for their leaders. Yet the markets were skewed toward those who already had wealth, and political democracies only permitted leaders who would facilitate the ruling of the capitalist class. Marx thought that capitalism simply represented a new mode of domination, and that after it had run its course it would crash under the weight of its own contradictions, giving rise to the utopian age of communism.

Marx has been proven wrong in many ways, of course, but one kernel of his critical theory of capitalism that survives is its wariness about political liberalism. Those who align themselves with a critical project still fundamentally question some of the premises of liberalism, but as we will see throughout this book, they may also incorporate or engage with some liberal thinking. We, too, wish to challenge this dichotomy by including discussion of work in the liberal tradition that might ordinarily be excluded. We do not believe that critical social theory necessarily involves a wholesale dismissal of progressive liberalism, just as we do not believe that a practical progressive politics or education can deny the demonstrative benefits of capitalism, such as the incentives for quality improvement.

For many, critical theory has become synonymous with the so-called Frankfurt School, a group of theoreticians, influenced largely by Karl Marx, Max Weber, George Lukacs, and Sigmund Freud, who developed a set of concepts for understanding modern forms of domination (Held, 1980). The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School developed their project against what they called “traditional” theory (see Horkheimer, 1972). According to them, critical theory would be oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory, which was oriented only to understanding or explaining it—and thus complicit with a ruling order. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno tried to account for how the promise of reason provided by the so-called Enlightenment thinkers could go so awry in the 20th century. For example, how could we explain the ravages of war, genocide, inequality, totalitarian rule, and environmental degradation, which seemed to be worsening all the time? Marx had laid the blame at the door of capitalism, and Weber had blamed the “iron cage” of bureaucracy. Yet more than capitalism itself, Horkheimer and Adorno placed the blame on modern “science” and the “objectification” of the natural and human worlds. It was through modern science, and the entanglement of science with both capitalism and state government, that reason could be deployed instrumentally, and ultimately, against the very subject of reason—human beings themselves.

Despite the prominence of the Frankfurt school, the concept of critical theory has long been inseparably linked with a specifically Marxist critique of capitalism as the primary cause of much modern domination. Indeed, for a long time, critical theory was a kind of academic code for Marxist approaches. As such, critical theory has also often been connected to a political project of socialism, with a corresponding rejection of liberal political theory and philosophy as elaborate apologies for capitalism. Certainly, a good portion of the Frankfurt School’s work was devoted to understanding how to recover certain human capacities (for expressive love, creative reason, etc.) that had been increasingly distorted under capitalism (e.g., Marcuse, 1964). Yet as we shall see, the Frankfurt School also tried to account for domination under fascism and state socialism,
and critical social theory now more generally accounts for multiple modes and systems of domination.

So then, how should we distinguish “critical” from non-critical social theories? Earlier we proposed to call critical social theories those accounts of the social world that attempt to understand the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity. Such a definition already is quite expansive; like Ben Aggers, in his book Critical Social Theories, we include a variety of theories and theorists, from Bourdieu’s practice theory to postmodern feminism, and from Habermas’ theory of communicative competence to Foucault’s discursive poststructuralism. At the end of the book, we introduce a number of “fellow travelers” who we suggest might also be placed in the critical club. Yet many self-proclaimed critical theorists would reject such an expansive conception. So what do these theoretical traditions have in common, what enables us to be audacious enough to call them all “critical,” when their influences, goals, and assumptions may otherwise be so varied?

Perhaps it is best to articulate this in terms of common values and common goals. What are the values and goals, then, that inform a critical project? Here are a few, just for starters:

- Participatory democracy, and self-determination
- Social justice, equity, and respect for human dignity across lines of cultural difference: class, nation, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.
- A redistributive, sustainable, and community-oriented economy
- Equality of opportunity and an abatement of severe income inequalities
- Environmental awareness and responsibility
- Critical awareness of power and social inter-dependence

This is a dangerous list, we realize, in the sense that it projects the values of the present onto thinkers of the past. Few critical theorists would self-consciously embrace all of these values and goals; certainly, Gramsci was not an environmentalist, nor was Horkheimer a great friend of women. Some, like Foucault (Chapter 5), might even reject these values, insofar as they represent a singular normative vision. Still, we suggest that such a list provides a handy reference for the contemporary critical theorist. How do you know if you, dear reader, are a “critical” type? Well, if you share most of the values and goals just articulated, then you may well be a critical theorist at heart!

But of course that is not enough. A lot of “liberal positivists” may indeed hold these values dear as well. So we have to go a bit further. Following Ben Agger (1989, pp. 4-5) and Kenneth Allan (2005, p. 16), we would add just a few more defining characteristics. Critical social theory is:

- driven by “value-rationality” rather than instrumental rationality. In other words, it is not neutral in reference to values, and has a definite conception of “progress” and the social good, often a utopian vision or concept of “liberation.”
- driven by the assumed need to dismantle and critique taken-for-granted ideologies, to challenge the “false consciousness” (Lukacs) or “misrecognition” that enables domination.
• driven by an understanding of **domination** as **structural**, yet dialectically connected to agency in peoples’ “everyday lives.”

The first two points should be relatively clear by now, and they’ll get unpacked further as we go along. But just what do we mean by “structural domination,” and what’s this talk about structure and agency? By domination, we refer to the condition in which some people are unfree, unable to realize their full human dignity in society, and unable to fairly access the basic social and material goods of a society. For domination to be structural, we mean that it is patterned and enduring, not just momentary. This begs the question of agency, or how people get out of structural domination.

The terms structure and agency point to a perennial problem in social theory: How to account adequately for elements of creative action and self-determination in each person, while also acknowledging the social conditions and constraints on such action? Agency is the transformative capacity of the person, while structure is the historically produced “rules and resources” (Giddens, 1979) that personal agency encounters in every moment of practice. So when we say that domination is structural, we are pointing to the ways in which it is deeply patterned and enduring, but also the way it is perpetuated through the agency-based practices and decisions of many people. Consider a male teacher who lets a boy tease a girl and then gives the boy a higher grade for equal work. He may be engaged in a rather localized, and perhaps temporary, form of gender discrimination. But more likely than not, we can document many such recurring examples, not only from this teacher but other teachers in his school and the broader society. We may also document other practices that privilege boys over girls, and we may find such practices enabled by precedent and perhaps even law. Then we might do well to refer to this as part of a **structure of male domination**. And to say that such domination is “dialectically connected to agency” means that the structures can be altered through awareness and action. In other words, there is no transcendental power or law that makes such structures impervious to human intervention. The structures came to be through the long accumulation of human agency and practice, and they can just as easily be undone by agency as well.

No doubt one of the strongest and most frequent criticisms leveled at the critical tradition is in regard to the sense of “emancipation” or “liberation” it seeks to achieve. Critical social theory is best at enabling us to see more clearly how domination works. It is good at critiquing power and the mechanisms of oppression. It is not so good at indicating “what transformation would look like,” as students of social theory often say. So critical theory tends to be too, well…critical! This is especially problematic for educators, who, after indulging in a weekend of critical carousing, must always deal with the so-called “Monday morning question”: how to work with students on Monday morning, day in and day out, with an eye toward “improvement,” if not transformation. How can educators regularly travel from critique, and perhaps its associated vision of emancipation, to the immediacies of everyday practice? That question has been answered (I’m not going to say satisfactorily!) by a number of the critical educational scholars and practitioners we discuss throughout the book.

Criticalists are notoriously vague (and hopelessly naïve, some would also say) about the details of emancipation. Yet if we take a brief jump forward into the book, and
we exercise some creative license, we may be able to identify some of these theorists’ largely implicit indicators of a “healthy” and “emancipated” person or society. It’s telling, in fact, that criticalists tend to shift back and forth between “individual” and “society” in their discussions of emancipated practice. This is because, in the critical conception, one cannot exist without the other. To be sure, in certain conceptions, like that of Marx, the account of an emancipated society (communism) is much better developed than an “emancipated person.” In other cases, like perhaps that of Gramsci or Marcuse, the profile of the emancipated person comes into fuller view. So, what, indeed, does a free/emancipated person or society look like? Here is some creative extrapolation:

- The person engaging in “sensuous,” hence unalienated, labor, able to realize and enjoy the fruits of one’s labor (Marx)
- The critical thinker; able to discern demagogues and logical distortions, able to penetrate the fog of prevailing hegemony (Gramsci)
- A society in which we are encouraged, even required to see each others’ full humanity when we interact; the abeyance of instrumental rationality and commodity fetishism (Marx, Gramsci, Frankfurt School)
- The “free” public sphere and the active participation by all in “ideal speech situations.” Someone who strives for and achieves undistorted communication? (Habermas)
- The triumph of practical reason, and unrepresed sexuality (Horkheimer and Marcuse—Frankfurt School)
- Greater transparency of social rules, equal access to the means of “symbolic struggle” (Bourdieu)
- A society that questions categories, combats marginalization, and tolerates and promotes a plurality of “insurrectionary knowledges” (Foucault)
- A society that fosters the power of love to direct the process of social reform (M. Gandhi/M.L. King, Jr.)
- A gender-equitable and respectfully intercultural society; A person oriented toward loving interdependence, allergic to categorical discrimination, who does not put individual gain or growth entirely above collective needs (Feminist/critical race theory)
- A society with a low infant mortality rate? High literacy rate? Very low levels of income inequality by race, class, or gender? (Sen and Nussbaum)

Quite a varied list, huh? And unfortunately not a very clear recipe for transformative action. Yet a concept of liberation or emancipation animates virtually all critical social theories, though some are more explicit than others. The bottom line is that criticalists want to alleviate or minimize human suffering. They do not accept the necessity of suffering, and they do not buy the “real world” justification for suffering. They also do not accept the trade-offs of short-term suffering (e.g., bloody revolution) for some distant utopia where suffering has ceased. Of course, nearly every religious, if not philosophical, tradition has some conception of alleviating suffering through transformation and liberation, so how can the secular critical theorist offer an alternative or supplementary conception—liberation on earth, so to speak? Well, regardless of the stance one holds regarding “ultimate” spiritual emancipation, critical theorists can help to identify
strategies for maximizing human potential and freedom. And of course, education is a key social activity for realizing such freedom. The fact that critical theorists have become less clearly prescriptive (Communism is the way! Long live Matriarchy!) and more circumspect about what liberation entails, does not necessarily indicate an exhaustion of the paradigm. Rather, it is one of the outcomes of social diversification. It may also signal a rise in humility, and a healthy agnosticism about the contingencies of human evolution. Is it so bad, after all, to say: “I don’t know what the perfect society looks like, but it certainly ain’t this!”?

Why Theory? Why Not?: How Education and Critical Social Theory Inform One Another

There are many good reasons for studying critical social theory and applying it to educational research or practice, but perhaps the best reason is what we call the “getting real” factor. One of the enduring insights of critical social theory is that all social practice, including the practice of education or education research, is deeply informed by interests and value-commitments that have political consequences. Another way of putting this is that no social practice is innocent, and that all social practice is “interested.” So part of the process of “getting real” is seeing beyond facile statements about educating “for the good of the kids,” or for the “betterment of society,” and understanding the specific value-commitments that inform educational policies and practices. It also means shedding the objectivist fallacy that we can somehow stand above the fray to produce untarnished knowledge. Critical social theory enjoins us to continually make explicit what are normally our implicit assumptions. It insists that we get real by critically examining the values and worldviews that inform our own social practice, and by engaging these values with those of other people in our sphere of work. That is why the concept of reflexivity is so important in critical theory. Being reflexive in critical theory means always keeping ourselves honest about getting real, too.

One of the ways we have found useful to think about the mutual importance of education and critical social theory to one another is through the broad concepts of power, knowledge, and identity. Throughout human history, but perhaps especially under the stratified social conditions of modernity, the relationships between power, knowledge, and identity have been constitutive of society. One’s social position and social possibilities are strongly shaped, if not determined, by the sense of who we are in relation to others (identity), what we know about ourselves and the world (knowledge), and what we can do with ourselves and others in the world (power). If it is true that, historically, brute force often determines who controls power, it is no less true that knowledge and identity are integral to power as well. Indeed, as we shall see, critical social theory—through concepts like ideology, hegemony, and doxa—has attempted to understand the unique ways that modern capitalism employs “knowledge” to manipulate “identity” in the service of “power.”

No doubt it will have occurred to you that power, knowledge, and identity also have a lot to do with the topic of our interest—education! Education, after all, is fundamentally about the transmission (and production) of knowledge in society. Informal education, such as what we learn growing up from our parents, or by watching television, gives us a lot of our knowledge and sense of self, just as participation in formal
education—schooling—does. And who would deny that this transmission of knowledge, formal and informal, is shot through with power. Through the various educational means of a society, we are constantly learning about who we are, and about what we can or should become. Our life opportunities, our chances for material and spiritual success of various kinds, are strongly conditioned by the organization of education. It is in this sense that education is a dimension of human activity that bears upon the key questions of sociology: the nature and power of social structures to affect human beings and their activities, the role of knowledge in maintaining and transforming social relationships, etc. In other words, looking at education helps illuminate how society more generally works. It’s no coincidence that many of the most prominent theorists in the sociological tradition have written about formal processes of education at one time or another. Durkheim, Bourdieu, Giddens (on willis)

But perhaps more importantly for us, and looking the other way around, using critical social theory and a sociological imagination helps us understand how education works, about how education is a big part of the way social structures do their work to distribute power and knowledge and life chances unevenly. In other words, looking at social theory helps illuminate educational processes—from the micro-level negotiation of relationships between teacher and student in the classroom, to the macro-level structuring of national education policies and systems….

Finally, there is an important sense in which critical social theory, and the kind of critical educational scholarship it inspires, has a broadly educative dimension as well. After all, critical scholarship aims to contribute knowledge for emancipation. The basic premise of such work is that some educational processes aim to obscure and ratify existing power arrangements, while others aim to clarify and equalize such power. Critical work aligns itself with the latter. Critical education scholars pretend to construct knowledge in the service of human freedom and social justice. Not only can such knowledge inform the transformation of formal educational practices and policies (i.e., school systems), it can also inform the development of popular consciousness. Critical social theorists have always been educators of a sort, even if their stance vis-à-vis non-professional everyday theorists has often been detached or elitist. As the Korean scholar Kyung-Man Kim (2005) notes, critical social theorists have themselves wavered in their conception of the “educational” role of theory and the theorist. Some, like Bourdieu and Giddens, have maintained a special role for the professional intellectual as someone who uses theoretical concepts to “see” structural domination and then communicates such insights to everyday “lay people.” Others, like Habermas, have tried to erase such a professional distinction by professing to enter into a hermeneutic “dialogue” with everyday actors in order to mutually clarify and reciprocally educate about domination. Few if any, it must be said, have provided compelling illustrations of how their critical theory has effectively transformed power relations or “emancipated” a social group. We try to give a few examples of critical “success stories” later in this book, but they are scarce. Perhaps it is through books like this, and readers like yourselves, that the transformative educational work of critical theory will be advanced.

What’s In, What’s Out: The Logic and Organization of the Book
As you’ve already guessed, the ground we’re attempting to cover here is vast. Yet we want people to buy and read this book, and this means keeping a lid on the book’s weight, thickness, and price! So we’ve had to make some difficult choices about what to include and what to leave out. We have not tried to be exhaustive, and we are sure to have left out many important theorists and theoretical traditions. To keep ourselves honest and to help you in your own discovery process, we’ve tried to indicate connections with theorists that we don’t cover in any great depth. Ultimately, we see ourselves as entering an ongoing conversation about critical theory in education, rather than making a definitive statement.

Our choice of theories and theorists for this book is also influenced by a concern for qualitative types of research and the kinds of interactive educational exchanges that occur every day around the world. I was trained as an anthropologist, and my work has been mostly ethnographic, so I gravitate toward those theories that help me understand what I’m seeing “on the ground.” If my research involved attempts to survey or model more “macro” level processes, this book might emphasize a different set of critical theories. But there’s another reason for the theorists we emphasize. Most educators live their lives in classrooms or other interactive spaces, so we wish to focus on theory that permits educators to “see” their own practices, classrooms, and institutions more clearly, hence to make possible interventions into social life with transformative possibilities. Even as we say this, though, we don’t want to get trapped in the classroom. We recognize that to focus exclusively on “the classroom” runs the risk of neglecting the many other dimensions of teachers’ and students’ lives, as well as the many other dimensions and levels of power in education. In the examples of critical educational scholarship that we discuss, then, we also turn critical theory on the dynamics of school organization, curriculum, politics, law, policy formation, and so forth.

The ordering of the book’s chapters follows roughly the chronological development of different strains of critical social theory, but only roughly. Perhaps more importantly, the chapters move out from a focus on class as the primary dimension of inequality, to the inclusion of wider and more complexly intertwined dimensions of domination. With Marx, a tradition of critical theory began which focused exclusively on class domination. As we will see, other traditions have broadened out the structures and categories and processes by which domination may be effected. According to our broad definition of CST, class came first, but then race, gender, and other dimensions of structural domination were included.

We begin with a chapter on “precursors, classics, and perennial themes.” Here we introduce the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber, two of the oft-acknowledged “fathers” of critical social theory. Each in his own way, Marx and Weber attempted to theorize the new forms of class domination that emerged with modernity and industrialism. Yet in this same chapter, we introduce a number of theorists and theoretical traditions whose work would not be considered part of the critical tradition, properly speaking. The symbolic interactionists and phenomenologists, like G.H. Mead and Alfred Schutz, were not especially concerned with power and domination. Rather, they were concerned with how local social order and meaning was produced. Yet their work laid an important foundation for later critical theories, which try to link the “micro” dynamics of social interaction with the “macro” dynamics of political and economic systems. We conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of key terms and concepts that recur “perennially” in
the critical theory literature—concepts like self and society, agency and structure, reproduction and transformation, or scene and system.

The next six chapters are organized around key theorists and theoretical traditions. Each of these chapters begins with some biographical notes and an attempt to situate the work of the theorists historically and conceptually. From there, we introduce and explicate some of the key concepts in the theorists’ body of work (Let us emphasize that these are only some of the concepts—again, our choices are governed largely by the kinds of qualitative educational work that has been informed by these concepts). What follows in each chapter is a section called “Theory into Practice: The Educational Connection.” This is where we introduce and review a range of educational work that clearly draws on the concepts from that theoretical tradition. We provide citations to work that is more clearly academic, along with work that is oriented toward educational practitioners. Along the way, we try to indicate some of the implications for practice entailed by this work. Finally, each chapter closes with a section called “Theory and Education Scholarship: A Close Examination.” In this section, we choose just two or three examples of critical educational scholarship and submit them to close analysis. We pay particular attention to the ways that critical theory concepts are drawn on to frame research questions, designs, and conclusions.

In Chapter 2, we introduce the work of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, and his key concept of hegemony. We situate Gramsci in relation to the broader intellectual movement called “cultural Marxism,” which eventuated in some very important empirical educational work from the 1970s forward. Though Gramscian notions of hegemony are not always explicit, the core themes—cultural reproduction, consent, ideology, and economic production—frequently lie below the surface of much educational scholarship. In this chapter, then, the central features of Gramscian hegemonic theory are discussed and differentiated from uses of hegemony in the tradition of classical realism, such as in political science or international affairs. Next, applications of Gramscian theory to our understanding the social and political functions of education are considered. Finally, the chapter concludes by looking closely at the uses—both implicit and explicit—of Gramscian theory in three pieces of education research.

From Gramsci, in Chapter 3 we move on to the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, a group of theorists writing mainly from the 1930s through the 1960s, whose work draws on cultural Marxism, as well as Weber and Sigmund Freud. The “Frankfurt School” of social thought was a major force shaping critical theory during the middle of the 20th Century, and it sought to expose the forms of domination common to capitalism, fascism, and “state socialism.” In the 1960s and 70s, Jurgen Habermas emerged as the school’s star student. At the heart of this strand of critical theory lies a sharp critique of the notion of Enlightenment, especially the suffocating effects of its faceless bureaucracies and institutions. While the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School have been powerfully influential in many fields, including education, their work is often found to be esoteric and inaccessible. This chapter seeks to identify key themes and concepts shared by Habermas and the Frankfurt School, and to explore possible tensions between them. We also survey various ways in which insights flowing out of the Frankfurt School have been and could be utilized in our thinking about education.

In Chapter 4, we introduce the work of the influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Although class domination is Bourdieu’s primary concern, he doesn’t really
come out of the Marxist tradition. Rather, he develops a unique synthesis of different concepts and traditions, including phenomenology and structuralism. Like Gramsci, he wants to show how class domination is effected largely through symbolic means. This is why the education system becomes so central to his work on cultural reproduction and symbolic domination. For Bourdieu, schools often serve to legitimate, and select for, the cultural capital already possessed by those of higher class standing. Therefore, …Along with Bourdieu, we also briefly introduce the work of British sociologist Anthony Giddens, whose notions of structuration are very similar to Bourdieu’s notions of strategic practice.

In Chapter 5, we discuss the work of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, and we situate his work as part of the broader postmodern movement in the social sciences. We introduce his unique concept of “capillary” power, and the notion of subjectification and discourse through which power operates. We also discuss the various modes of power, such as governmentality…Foucault is the first thinker in the book to get us thinking about domination along other dimensions than class…

In Chapter 6, we introduce the rich history of feminist thought, with particular emphasis on certain strands of feminist work that have been influential in educational scholarship. The concept of gender is obviously central to feminist scholarship; the implications of gender for education include the themes of mothering in teaching/guidance, the opportunities and limits in education that are based on gender, the ways that gendered social inequities are entrained through early interactions, as well as the exportation of Western notions of gender into other cultures/worlds/ways. In more recent work, concepts of standpoint, embodiment, and voice have created new openings for “queering the theory,” post-colonial transnational feminisms, hybridities in identity, and performative genderings.

In Chapter 7, we take up the challenge of critical race theory (CRT) to place the modern category of race squarely into the discussion on modes of domination. Building upon the class and gender based analyses of the social world that have preceded this chapter, the modern concept of race is considered to be fundamentally linked to the capitalist strivings of European colonization and the African Slave trade, which ushered in a new wave of “science” aimed at proving the inferiority of Blacks and other people of color. This chapter situates critical race theory broadly within the critical intellectual tradition among formerly colonized, enslaved, and usually “racialized” peoples, whose scholarship and activism may have its roots within postcolonial discourse and theory. Still, emphasis will be placed on critical race theory as a body of scholarship that speaks mainly, and directly, to the challenge of race and racism in the post Civil Rights Era of the United States. The theoretical and practical implications of CRT for educators will also be explored in this chapter through an in depth examination of select journal articles and books that speak to how to transform educational systems bound by the legacy of racism.

Finally, in Chapter 8, rather than “concluding” the discussion about critical social theory and education, we open it even further. We return to some of our questions and definitions in the introduction to invite a dialogue with possible “fellow travelers” on the critical path. In so doing, we introduce a number of different thinkers from an exuberant variety of traditions and locations, and we wonder whether the Western critical tradition might be made compatible with versions of progressive liberalism, liberation theology,
radical environmentalism, or other forms of social theory that may share some, but not all, of the values and assumptions of critical social theory.

Chapter 8: Fellow Travelers and Friendly Critiques?: The Critical Tradition Evolves Through Dialogue and Synthesis (30)

a. Liberalism, on freedom and justice: the Sen/Nussbaum capabilities approach, Appiah on ethics and cosmopolitanism
b. Pragmatism—concentrate on R. Rorty, with some attention to J. Dewey and others
c. World-systems theory and critical accounts of states and social movements (Focus on Wallerstein, and the Open the Social Sciences project, with mention of M. Carnoy, C. Tilly, Arturo Escobar, etc.)
d. Bruno Latour on actor-network theory and “object-oriented” democracy
e. Bent Flyvbjerg on phronetic social science and Making Social Science Matter
f. bell hooks and Leila Fernandes on non-essentialist, multicultural feminism
g. Cornel West’s original blend of Marxism, race theory, spirituality, and pop culture
h. The problem of modernity from the perspective of radical ecology and spirit: C. Bowers (mention W. Berry, T. Merton, B. Kingsolver?) and K. Wilber
i. Paolo Freire (and liberation theology)
j. M. Gandhi, Arundhati Roy on non-violence and sustainable development
k. Drawing in Vygotsky and Bakhtin (e.g., Holland et al)
l. Drawing in de Certeau and reviving Goffman (e.g. Erickson)

Bibliography

Key Primary Sources


Key Secondary Resources
Our task has been made easier by the fact that in recent years, field-specific theories within educational scholarship have indeed engaged more fruitfully with social theory. To take just one example: Theories of “situated cognition” and “communities of practice” have in recent years made significant contributions to the fields of educational psychology, instructional systems design, and the “learning sciences.” One of the key references here is Etienne Wenger’s book, *Communities of Practice*, which builds on his earlier collaboration with Jean Lave in *Situated Learning*. Indeed, what makes Wenger’s book so powerful and influential is that it draws on social theories to make an argument about learning and education. In particular, Wenger draws out the implications of theories of “practice” (See Chapter 4, Bourdieu, this volume). Because most social theories,
indeed most accounts of learning, presuppose dualisms that are endemic to Western thought (individual/society; inner mind/outer world; self/other, etc.), practice theories offer a significant challenge. They dismantle the dualisms of conventional accounts by portraying practice as the process through which person, setting, and knowledge are mutually constituted. Learning, in Wenger’s synthesis, thus becomes the interplay of knowledge and context in the person’s negotiation of the social world. Those educational scholars and practitioners whose work has been influenced by Wenger have opened up the dynamics of education to social theorizing, and there is little chance of going back.

2 It is not coincidental that Sigmund Freud was, and in some cases still is, a strong influence on traditions of critical theory. His model of psychological wholeness implies bringing into conscious awareness those repressed elements in the unconscious; the person is “emancipated” by freeing up repressed thoughts and images. In critical social theory, sometimes an analogy is made to the more broadly social process of emancipation from repressive social and economic structures. If, through ideology-critique, we can come to an awareness of how we’re repressed and of what we’ve repressed (the need for a fuller, more healthy work and love life, for instance), and if we put that awareness into action to change the structures that bear upon us, then we’ll be emancipated.