

## **The Question Concerning Curriculum Theory:**

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After finishing my graduate work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1980, I accepted a short-term offer to teach at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. It so happened that Madeleine Grumet was chair of the Education Department there, and through her, I was introduced to William Pinar, who taught nearby at the University of Rochester. Subsequently, when he took a leave of absence to teach at Colgate University, he asked me to cover his course for secondary English student teachers and supervise them in the field. One of the books he had selected for the course that term was Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1978). It was a difficult text for the students, and I remember that some complained that they could not understand what this had to do with the concerns they faced as student teachers "in the trenches" each day. But the struggle with this text, like all struggles, was necessary; and in the end, everyone in the seminar agreed that the book had made them think about their work in new ways, and had renewed their sense of commitment to teaching. Sartre called upon these student teachers, myself, and the graduate assistant for that seminar (a young man named William Reynolds), to make a difference through our work, and to teach within "the situation," to use Sartre's term. "The situation" was, for Sartre, the situation at hand, the situation that confronted us personally and concretely, but also culturally and historically. Literature was not just literature, not just art for art's sake. The writer speaks to the present, to our times, wittingly or unwittingly, and for Sartre it is best that we speak wittingly, as active subjects of history, engaged in the battles currently being waged over the course and direction of democratic public life.

The same can be said of all intellectual work, including the work of teachers and teacher educators. We always speak and write from “within our own situatedness” in the historical moment, and that we do as mind, body, and soul (see Kohli, 2002).

It is this commitment to the work of the engaged, public intellectual that is infused throughout Pinar’s new book, *What is Curriculum Theory?* The result is an important text that no doubt will be talked about, and written about, for some time to come. Its importance is related to the fact that in it Pinar pushes himself and the curriculum field in the direction of a more engaged cultural politics – even if, ironically, the public intellectual Pinar envisions may be less engaged in public school reform, at least given current conditions in public schools and teacher education. Pinar’s book is not a standard (or non-standard) text on the curriculum field, the kind of text that lays out various “paradigms” or movements among curriculum scholars, or identifies various “perennial” ideas in curriculum theory, the kind of book that seeks to establish curriculum theory upon firm, stable, unshakable foundations. Instead, Pinar’s aim is to awaken us to the “nightmare” that has become a reality in public education, and to engage us in the battle to take back teaching and teacher education from those forces that have taken it over. He invites us to become “temporal” subjects of history, living simultaneously in the past, present, and future – aware of the historical conditions that have shaped the current situation, engaged in the present battles being waged over the course and direction of public education, and committed to re-building a democratic public sphere.

What is curriculum theory? The short answer, Pinar writes, is that it is “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience.” A somewhat more elaborate answer is

that curriculum theory is “a distinctive field, with a unique history, a complex present, and uncertain future.” It is, he says, influenced by disciplines in the arts and humanities, by social theory (including psychoanalytic theory), and, to a lesser extent, by the social sciences; and it is a critical field, which sets it in opposition to contemporary school “reform” (2). To speak of the field of curriculum theory in this way is useful -so long as the category does not become reified, so long as it is used as an historical construct assembled out of cultural battles over power and knowledge, and so long as it is treated as a “slippery” category whose meaning is unsettled and even contested. Indeed, a close reading of *What is Curriculum Theory?* reveals that Pinar means to use both “curriculum theory” and the “field” of curriculum theory in ways that trouble, unsettle, and subvert any simple attempt to say – here, this is what they are! Rather, Pinar invites the reader to “complicate” her or his understanding in ways that do not lead to closure or easy answers, although I suspect some readers might prefer the latter. To frame the title of the book as a question is, indeed, to suggest that questions are what we, as educators, are about, more than we are about supplying answers.

The book is organized as a collection of ten essays (divided into five sections), all woven together around a core set of themes, primary of which is the idea that curriculum is a “complicated conversation.” Those who are familiar with Pinar’s work will recognize many of these themes, for they have concerned Pinar over the course of three decades now – from his early work with Madeleine Grumet (Pinar & Grumet, 1976) to his more recent work, influenced by cultural studies, on the intersection of gender and racial politics in America, particularly in the South (Pinar, 2001). This is not, however, a collection of essays that have been published elsewhere. It is new work, although it

revisits some historical research that the author has presented elsewhere. It is, in my view, Pinar at his best, and moving in new and important directions. It is not possible for me to do an adequate job of covering the broad territory opened up by this text. It is rich in both argument and historical detail, and it resists reduction to a few key ideas. That is, I think, one of the book's strengths; but it means that the book is not easily summarized. It is a complicated, and complicating text. Consequently, I want to limit my comments to some of the more salient concerns the book raises for curriculum scholars, teachers, and public intellectuals.

In some ways, this book reads as a manifesto, and Pinar speaks in a register that is meant to shake educators awake, to waken them to the “nightmare of the present” as he calls it, a time in America when teachers and education faculty have effectively lost control of the curriculum, “the very organization and intellectual centering of schooling”(5). These are strong words, but I share Pinar’s conviction that it is a time for strong words from progressives. One of the reasons why we face the “nightmare of the present” has to do with the fact that we have been silent for too long – at least as public intellectuals. We have gone about our business, building our academic careers out of scholarly journal articles, feeling protected in the academy, and essentially letting bureaucratic state elites (now in league with corporate elites and religious evangelical leaders) take over the public schools. But progressive teachers and teacher educators must do more than take on bureaucratic and corporate state elites in taking back their profession. Pinar argues that they also will need to take on the continuing legacy of racism and misogyny in America, and, as Pinar writes, to address the “deferral and displacement of racism and misogyny onto public education” (9). Public school teachers’

disempowerment has to do with the feminization of the field, and also the fact that they increasingly teach poor black and Latina/Latino youth. The challenges facing teachers and teacher educators are thus considerable, and if we are to have some idea of how to get out of the nightmare that is the present, we must know something about how we got here.

In this regard, one of Pinar's central arguments, and one he develops in historical specificity and detail, is that the current situation in the schools has its "origins" in the curriculum reform movement of the early 1960s that developed in response to the so-called "Sputnik" crisis, the fear that Americans were losing their military and technological preeminence to the Soviets, and the fear that American youth (particularly white, male youth) were getting "soft." Here Pinar points to the work of Robert Griswold (1998), who links the Cold War ideology of curriculum reform with a gendered ideology, one that sought through the glorification of athleticism and physical fitness, to produce a white male body that symbolized manliness and strength. Pinar notes that just as the new discipline-based, "process approach" curriculum reforms were being instituted in the nation's schools, the Kennedy administration was pushing ahead with a "fitness crusade" to get young people exercising. All of this got linked to Kennedy's three rhetorical themes – freedom, toughness, and courage. Thus, Pinar argues, to understand curriculum reform movements over the past several decades one must attend to these efforts "to resuscitate a masculinity in 'crisis,'" efforts that echo earlier reform movements in education (91). Certainly, there is evidence that early progressives, such as the developmental psychologist Granville Stanley Hall, shared these concerns with the

reestablishment of a disciplined form of masculinity, organized around physical fitness, competitive sports, and military training (see Curti, 1959, 396-428).

Another piece of this history has to do with the South, and hegemonic forms of white, male identity in the South. For example, he associates Southern culture with a more pronounced and rigidly enforced split between public and private spheres, with women and blacks relegated to the latter. Relegated to the private realm, women teachers have not been listened to when they take their case to the “public,” much as black parents and community groups have not been listened to when they “go public” with their grievances against the schools. Furthermore, the public sphere has remained underdeveloped in the South, which means that public schools have remained under-supported. Pinar argues: “This retreat from the public sphere, while perhaps national and historic, has specific antecedents in the South”(118). He does acknowledge that poor whites have sharply different interests than middle class or elite whites in the South and might be expected to stand up for public schools and teachers. But as Pinar observes, “poor whites have allowed their racial prejudice to keep them politically complacent”(106). If this is a bit of an overgeneralization, it has more than a bit of truth to it. Because of all this, according to Pinar, the (white reactionary) South has culturally and politically triumphed; and recent national elections would seem to prove him correct. “Only when the South is (finally) reconstructed,” he writes, “ can the nation resume a progressive course toward democratization”(11). Until then, “We are still at (Civil) War” (121). Again, this may ,strike some as a bit extreme, even provocative, and as participating in blaming the South for problems which are clearly to be found in the North as well. Furthermore, it is a little unclear what “reconstruction” might mean. The

South, along with North, need to be reconstructed, but in ways (hopefully) that avoid occupation, submission, and domination of the South, that do not play into the North/South binary and the Northern tendency to blame everything on the South. Still, Pinar does build a compelling case for the need to address the unfinished legacy of the Civil War in American public life; and his narratives of Southern life and politics are an important contribution to the cultural studies of the South.

What complicates Pinar's analysis of the South, in a good way, is his recognition that it historically has been a place of struggle and resistance – and he points especially to the struggle and resistance of black women. Ida B. Wells is one example Pinar offers - an “uppity” black woman and anti-lynching activist in the post-Civil War South whose journalistic writings drew linkages between economic, racial, and gender oppression and challenged conventional moral codes. Another example he documents is the “freedom schools” organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights groups in the 1960s that brought black and white youth together in dialogue and action to resist racism. These narratives of Southern resistance and struggles for civil rights, Pinar argues, have also shaped the historical present and serve as examples for all who are struggling to be free – including teachers.

Aside from the formidable forces of racism and misogyny that stand in the way of teacher empowerment, there are the formidable forces of business and bureaucratic state elites. Business and bureaucratic values, in turn, are closely linked to what Pinar calls “instrumental pragmatism” in American culture and public schools in particular. Interestingly, he suggests that public school reform discourse and practice has been far more influenced by the pragmatism of William James than that of John Dewey. Indeed,

the pragmatism of James was of the scientific, instrumental sort, and ultimately tied to an individualistic psychology of experience, whereas Dewey's pragmatism was about self and social transformation simultaneously. At the same time, James was hardly a "vulgar pragmatist," to use Cleo Cherryholmes (1988) term, and his emphasis upon a return to experience is in many ways consistent with the reconceptualist movement in curriculum theory. What is clear is that the pragmatism that prevails in the schools today has its roots in business values more than anything else, and Pinar sees its influence everywhere. This is the pragmatism of objectified outcomes, of school productivity, of the "bottom line," of "accountability," and "standards." It is also, he says, the pragmatism that rules in the use of the new computer technologies in the classroom, with individualized, skill-based instructional programs. He concludes that "the current obsession with the computer in schools is part of the nightmare that is the present" (134). To wake from the nightmare will thus require that we deconstruct instrumental pragmatism, identify its social source, and trace its historical roots.

While Pinar is skeptical of computer technologies, for they generally serve to turn us into disembodied and alienated subjects, he does not dismiss computer technologies as much as the instrumental use of computers, for example, in drilling students to pass standardized tests. Such use of computers is not only alienating for students, but it also turns teachers into technical managers of a programmed process. He turns to the work of Pierre Levy (2001) for a more liberatory "thinking" of cyberculture and cyberspace, associated with a desire for reciprocal communication and collective intelligence. Like Donna Haraway (1991), to whom he also refers, Pinar finds hope in the metaphor of the



free cyborg learner connected to webs of self-constituting and overlapping learning communities, engaged in her or his own self education and re-education.

Pinar suggests a multi-pronged response to the “nightmare that is the present.” Nevertheless, in one way or another, these responses all lead back to the concept of curriculum as currere. As Pinar and Grumet (1976) have developed this term, it refers (from Latin) to education as the running of a course, or a course of study. The key here is that the emphasis is upon the active running of a course, one that is always circling back over the past, bringing the past into the present, and heading out into the future. Currere makes curriculum an active process, and as such it does not separate curriculum from pedagogy or learning, or either from the historical situatedness of the educative process and teaching act. In this sense, the curriculum is pedagogy, and vice versa. Curriculum is the coming together of teacher, student, and text within a situated moment in space and time, in which we are called upon to produce (or co-produce) both themselves and culture. This requires, according to Pinar, that the curriculum be autobiographical and self-reflexive. Some have misinterpreted the autobiographical method as an endorsement of subjectivism, but Pinar is very insistent that this should not be the case. Autobiography is revolutionary, Pinar argues, to the extent that it encourages people to “talk back” to power, and to engage in the reconstruction of self in ways that are empowering and affirming. Through autobiography, slaves were able to undermine the authority of the master, and also create “culturally self-affirmative rituals and behaviors.”(97) If Pinar is still a subjectivist, he is a subjectivist who would not situate the knowing subject in a private and depoliticized world of experience and meaning, but rather in the thick of cultural battles that have histories and trajectories. Here he draws

insightfully upon Christopher Lasch's (1978) theory of the culture of narcissism to argue that as the public sphere of school life has become more alienating and less rewarding for so many, teachers (like their students) are tempted to retreat into the safety of a private, subjective world of experience which (ironically) autobiography can help them move beyond. Pinar writes that "the significance of subjectivity is not as a solipsistic retreat from the public sphere...The significance of subjectivity is that it is inseparable from the social" (4). The role of the teacher is thus simultaneously autobiographical and political.

It is also intellectual. Pinar laments "the profoundly anti-intellectual conditions of our professional labor" – both as teachers in public schools and (in a related way) as education faculty at the university (8). This anti-intellectualism is ironic in an institution (public education) supposedly devoted to the intellect, but it is pervasive. Pinar relates it to a widely held assumption that curriculum theory is not really an academic discipline, that it does not produce useful or legitimate knowledge, and that it is thereby "incidental" to "teacher training," which is regarded "as the "induction into a bureaucracy by learning 'what works' in classrooms"(178). Pressured and cajoled, if not required, to enforce business models of teacher education, which are promoted by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), "deans and department chairs (not unlike schools principals and superintendents) are caught between right-wing 'reformers' and rightfully resisting, sometimes alienated and discouraged, faculty"(178-179).

For this to change, Pinar argues, teachers and education faculty will need to reassert the centrality of intellectual work. They must find time in their schedules each day to read, take notes, and write, and to keep up with the latest scholarship; and they must engage their students in serious intellectual engagements with texts, pressing them

beyond their intellectual stuck points. “We must make clear,” he writes, “that education coursework is intellectual work, not simply the sharing of personal experiences in the classroom and popular prejudices about ‘effective’ teaching” (180-181). Beyond this, Pinar suggests the importance of establishing a critical space for skepticism. This means, among other things, the cultivation of a certain exile, “an intellectual position from which one is not easily seduced by success or by the solidarity of colleagues” (181). He points to Edward Said (1996) as an example of such an engaged public intellectual writing and speaking from a position of exile from the dominant culture – although (ironically) an engaged exile, always crossing the borders between being an insider and an outsider. While Said wrote books for a primarily academic audience, including his landmark Orientalism (1978), they were always written as interventions in the present, in this case to help people un-think the legacy of European colonialism as a discourse and practice that constituted the colonial Other as an exotic object of both desire and fear (see Carlson, 2003, and Williams, 1997). Finally, Pinar links the reassertion of the role of the teacher and curriculum scholar as intellectual to the reassertion of academic freedom, which he characterizes as “freedom to devise the courses we teach, the means by which we teach them, and the means by which we assess students’ study of them” (9). In teacher education, he calls for a movement toward “intellectually independent” faculty no longer tied to business-oriented, bureaucratic state reform discourses and practices(19).

This leads us to back to curriculum theory. Pinar looks to the curriculum field (perhaps a bit hopefully) as a cultural space from which it might be possible to wage a counter movement in public education by teachers and teacher educators to take back, and to reassert intellectual and academic freedom. If that is to be the case, he argues,

curriculum faculty and public school teachers will need to become more grounded in theory, a theory that complicates rather than simplifies what teaching and learning are all about. Pinar's own work has long been grounded in the theoretical roots and rhizomes of psychoanalytic theory, and he continues to develop a psychoanalytic theory of the curriculum here. He is especially interested in the psychoanalytic concept, borrowed from Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), of "fantasmatic." The fantasmatic, as the unconscious source of desire and fantasy is involved in structuring social action, "especially 'overdetermined' (often ritualistic) actions (such as lynching) structured by transferences and other forms of repetitive behavior" (59). He links this to the psychoanalytic notion that action is "overdetermined." As Pinar explains, 'overdetermined' suggests that... rhetoric carries more 'freight' – has embedded within it a concealed agenda – than it claims to carry" In the case of public education, this concealed agenda is "simple scapegoating." (60). Public schools, and public school teachers become the victims of a displaced cultural desire to find some "Other" (including women, African Americans, and gay people) to blame for their troubles – what Nietzsche called *ressentiment* (see Carlson, 2002; McCarthy, et al, 1998).

This is a very insightful and I think important line of inquiry, and it reveals the power of a critical psychoanalytic theory to inform an analysis of the conditions of teachers work. Pinar goes so far as to suggest that "curriculum conceived as currere requires not only the study of autobiography, history, and social theory, it requires as well the serious study of psychoanalytic theory"(57). This is quite a claim, at least if it is taken to mean that psychoanalytic theory must be given a privileged spot in curriculum theory. I presume Pinar is not arguing that. If we take the statement on "face value," it suggests

that curriculum scholars and teachers cannot afford to ignore, or deliberately exclude, the contributions of various strands of psychoanalytic theory. At the same time, the challenge is to make psychoanalytic theory, particularly of the Lacanian variety, more understandable, which is to say less esoteric and abstract. Of course, the response will be that we should not always strive for understandability, or even intelligibility in our writing, for that would be to foreclose the meaning making process. Still, there is a point at which the desire to engage public issues and the “real” battles going on over the course and direction of public education may require the use of a more public and accessible language. This is one of the things I like about this book. Pinar is one of those who makes psychoanalytic language intelligible and relevant, without taking away any of the complexity of what is being argued. It does this by keeping his focus on the situation we face and the battle at hand rather than upon theory as theory. In the end, it is a tribute to Pinar that a book that begins by questioning curriculum theory not only offers some partial and tentative answers along the way, but also plays a part in deconstructing the borders that separate theory from practice, questions from answers.

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