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Social Theory, Critical Pedagogy and the Pedagogy of the Privileged

Mark Cresswell

School of Applied Social Sciences,

Durham University

E-mail: mark.cresswell@durham.ac.uk

'The sociologist who chooses to study his own world in its nearest and most familiar aspects should not, as the ethnologist would, domesticate the exotic but…exoticize the domestic through a break with his initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought that remain opaque to him because they are too familiar.'

Pierre Bourdieu, 1988, *Homo Academicus*.

'…politics is out of place in the lecture-room'

Max Weber, 1918, 'Science as a Vocation'

Abstract

This paper reflects upon my personal experience of teaching social theory at an elite institution of higher education in the UK. It deals with practical pedagogical questions of how ostensibly abstract elements of social theory may be brought into engagement with topical, power-laden and concrete real-world states-of-affairs. In this respect the productive usage of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is emphasised. But the paper is also concerned with deeper questions of critical sociological pedagogy – in the Gramscian and Freirian traditions – and its conditions of possibility within an elite milieu. If critical pedagogy has traditionally and rightly been concerned with the 'pedagogy of the oppressed', the paper asks, is it even possible to make coherent sense of the 'pedagogy of the privileged'? To what extent, contra Max Weber, should teaching in such an environment be overtly politicised? Finally, in the spirit of critical auto-ethnography, the paper is framed in terms of my own life-course and my personal experience as a man of working-class origin of teaching at a 'posh' university.

Introduction

These critical reflections upon the task of sociological pedagogy took a long time to gestate in my mind and their tardiness indicates the sign of a traumatic birth. Moreover, the troubled origin of this paper is not unrelated to a problem inherent in very exercise of 'turning back' (see Butler, 1997) to examine *one's own* pedagogical practice in a hopefully critical but simultaneously painful perspective. That process of 'turning back' turns out to be the structuring theme of this paper.

The act of 'turning back' to examine one's own practice – what sociologists call *reflexivity* (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) – can be both a personal and political challenge. In rendering one's own practice, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, 'exotic' - which is simply to say that we 'exoticize the domestic' (Bourdieu, 1988: xi) whenever we problematise a taken-for-granted datum of knowledge (see Foucault, 2001) - what has hitherto been a familiar 'mode of life' becomes, in the psychoanalytical sense, an 'uncanny' experience (Freud, 2003). The '"uncanny"', said Freud, 'is that class of the *terrifying* which leads back to something long known to us, once very *familiar*' (ibid.: 1-2, emphases added). The constitutive value of these reflections, then, I would suggest, is precisely the sense in which they render that apparently most 'familiar' act of the university lecturer – the practice of *pedagogy* in its various forms (lecturing, seminar teaching etc.) – quite 'uncanny' and, therefore no longer, in Bourdieu's felicitous term, 'opaque'. For, in becoming transparent, in exoticizing the domestic act of teaching through a 'Gestalt-switch' (see Rubin, E. 2001: 225-229; also Rubin, N. 2001: 857) or an 'epistemological break' (see Bachelard, 1949; also Althusser, 2005; Canguilhem, 1990), the experience of the 'uncanny' opens up a pedagogical space which is simultaneously one of 'perils *and* possibilities' (Brown, 2000: 230).

These perils and possibilities are explicated within these reflections in the following way. The next section provides some background to certain pedagogical problematics and conundrums which have motivated my work and my experience of *teaching social theory* as a *sociologist* at an *elite* higher education institution in recent years. They may be summarised as a triptych:

- First, as a means of addressing the perennial question posed by social science students as to *what is the point of social theory*? This question turns upon the relationship between the *abstract* and the *concrete* elements of theory in both its substantive but, increasingly, its pedagogical forms. The excellent question – 'What is the *point* of theory?' – and the dialectic between its abstract and its concrete elements (see Bhaskar, 1989: 115-145) turns out to be inextricably connected to *the practice of teaching social theory* itself.

- Second, this question has turned upon the discrete relations obtaining between pedagogical *elements* – which is to say, the interactions between the didacticism and the oracular properties of the *lecture* format, the face-to-face and small group interactionism of the *seminar* format, and the more fluid and heterogeneous 'hyper-reality' (see Baudrillard, 1983) made possible by the resources emanating from the *Virtual Learning Environment* (VLE).

- Finally, the conundrums posed for a *sociologist* of teaching social theory in an elite institution raises the question of the 'perils and possibilities' of a truly *critical pedagogy* (see Giroux, 1988). If critical pedagogy, in the sense associated with the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Paolo Freire (1970) invokes a challenge to neo-liberal *hegemony*, the transmission of which is a central function of higher education under conditions of advanced capitalism, what then would a critical pedagogy in an elite institution look like *in practice*? A corollary but unavoidable question is this:

given that sociology as a discipline has, since its very inception in Marx (e.g. 1968), valorised its status as *critical* theory (see also Mills, 2000) - arguably a counterpart or even a precondition one might think for *any* critical pedagogy (see Blake & Masschelein, 2003) - what, then, would a critical *sociological* pedagogy look like, in an elite institution, at this time (2012), *in practice*?

Having fleshed out these problematics, the rest of the paper demonstrates their development in my teaching in the last five years. The three problematics are shown to be dialectically inter-related in that the response to the question, 'What is the *point* of theory?' demands to be *demonstrated* in pedagogical practice - in other words, demonstrated *concretely* rather than through the power of *abstraction,* and this concrete act of demonstration constitutes the 'lived experience' of teaching and learning (see Van Manen, 1990). This 'lived experience' is not only the subject matter of the discrete pedagogical elements (lecture/seminar/library usage/VLE) but increasingly involves the *articulation* of those elements (see Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), interpreted dialectically, *together.* The articulation of these elements, so the argument goes, creates the possibility, at least, of a holistic teaching and learning experience which is potentially *more* than the sum of its constituent parts. The indexical signs of these elements and their articulation constitute the evidence-base of the paper.

A final discussion reflects upon the relations obtaining between social theory, critical pedagogy and my personal experience of teaching in an elite institution.

Teaching and Learning Social Theory

So, I began with the excellent question - what is the *point* of theory? - and I diagnosed a 'pathology' lying behind it, which was a pathology of 'depth'. This pathology was Janus-

faced in that it referenced an issue which was of substance to social theory itself but also an issue which was central to pedagogical practice. In truth, I had been teaching social theory as if its substantive *theoretical* elements were purely *abstract* and forgetting that they were equally *concrete* – which is to say that they referenced real world states-of-affairs which were interesting, topical and shot through, from pillar to post, with relations of power. Picking up on certain aspects of pedagogical theory – especially in the works of Biggs & Tang (2007), Exley & Dennick (2004), Horgan (2003) and Martin (2003) – I started to redesign the sequencing of lectures in such a way that that they built a model of teaching that moved systematically from a *concrete* level of understanding to an *abstract*, or more *metatheoretical* level. The innovation here was that the 'concrete' was to be the perpetual point-of-departure.

This model of learning has involved considerable modifications at the level of practice:

- First, at the level of power-point presentations, my overly abstract pedagogical strategy had been mirrored by a tediously linguistic presentation which has now been systematically displaced by a briefer and more graphic presentational style (see Craig & Amernic, 2006).[1] This 'style' moves from the concrete *to* the abstract and never vice versa.

- Second, the actual model of teaching that moves systematically from concrete to abstract needs to be explicated. As it has now developed, it involves a conceptual movement through four distinct levels:

  i) At the level of *common-sense* in which students are encouraged to consider their own 'gut' feelings and views about topical states-of-affairs (e.g. the 'credit crunch', the 'oil spill in the gulf', 'the summer riots' etc.'). This 'gut feeling' level may be monitored by students through the practice of keeping personal journals (e.g. Hatcher & Bringle, 1997)

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[1] Don McMillan's 'You Tube' presentation, 'How NOT to use powerpoint' is both funny and a reasonable indictment of my former style. This has been very helpful in clarifying my use of powerpoint and its integration in the rest of my teaching. URL: http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=cagxPlVqrtM.

on-line blogs (e.g. Ferdig & Trammell, 2004) etc. and through the sociological methodology of 'auto-ethnography' (see Reed-Danahay, 1997). 'Auto-ethnography', has been defined as 'autobiographical writing that has an ethnographic interest' (ibid.: 2) and its deployment in pedagogical practice seems, to my mind, to be under-developed (cf. Banks & Banks, 2000; Pennington, 2007).

ii) Next, at the *journalistic* level in which aspects of the tabloid and broadsheet press (including virtual media) plus 'official' reports and 'think-tank' disseminations are made available for discussion in lectures, seminars and via the VLE.[2]

iii) Then at the level of what Robert Merton (1968) once called 'middle-range theory', namely, the sociological concepts of 'markets', 'hierarchies' and 'networks' (see Thompson et al [Eds.], 1991) as mechanisms for understanding the *co-ordination* of social life by, respectively, supply and demand, command and control, and solidaristic 'norm circles' (see Elder-Vass, 2010; also Simmel, 1955).

iv) Finally, at the level of 'grand' or meta-theory when - and only when - issues of 'first philosophy' (see Armstrong, 1978) in sociology come to the fore: questions of 'social structure' and 'human agency', 'power' and 'oppression' and the problem of, alternately, the maintenance *and* the destabilisation of 'social order'.

So far, so good. Student feedback, informally and formally, in the form of unsolicited e-mails, staff-student consultative committees, VLE administered evaluations and peer-reviews of teaching were excellent. There remained, however, a lacuna at the level of theory. True, I was innovating at the coal-face of my *own* practice and I was achieving a paradigm-shift *away* from a pre-occupation with the abstract level of teaching towards a more diverse dialectic between the 'concrete' and the 'abstract' which took the former, rather than the latter, as the point-of-departure. I was gradually overcoming what Gaston Bachelard (2002) once referred to as an 'epistemological obstacle'. Nevertheless, although the shift was substantive I yet remained operative within the confines of a somewhat oracular *style*. The truth is – and this became apparent to me from colleagues feedback – that whilst I was developing a pedagogical model of *teaching* including a healthy serving of reflexive auto-critique, I had yet to develop a pedagogical model of *learning*. This 'epistemological obstacle' needed to be circumvented.

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[2] Numerous examples of the very accessible 'journalistic' deployment of 'low flying' theory may be provided e.g.: i) the House of Lords' Select Committee on the Constitution report , *Surveillance: Citizen's and the State* (2009) to support lectures and seminars on the 'Surveillance Society'; ii) Philip Collins' article from *The Times* (Oct 21, 2008) entitled 'Karl Marx: did he get it all right?' relating Marx's theories to the current financial crisis; iii) the animated film 'In our hands – the human right to water' which appeared on the *OpenDemocracy* website and was employed to support lectures and seminars on the topic of 'Human Rights'.

At this stage, the theorists that proved of assistance were Braa & Callero (2006), Canaan (2002), Dahlgren (2005), Entwistle (2005), Laurillard (2005), Light & Cox (2001), Marton & Säljö (1984), Meyer (2001), Pettit & Mason (1999) and Ramsden (2003). Through them, a sharp and practical problem had swung into view. It found its nodal point in the 'hyper-reality' of the VLE. If, as I suspected, one key to integrative learning, of really maximising the pedagogical potential of what Manuel Castells (1996: 171) has called the 'quantum leap' in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) since the mid-1990s, was understanding *how* students *actually* deployed the VLE, then it became imperative to research *their* usage in practice. This I accomplished methodologically through a running series of individual student interviews.

The results were surprising and the interpretation of the interview data required considerable analysis. I had thought, at first, that I had *theoretically* problematised the venerable contrast between 'surface' and 'depth' approaches to learning familiar from the general pedagogical literature (e.g. Biggs, 1987; Entwistle, 1982) and simultaneously valorised by sociologists with an orientation towards 'critical pedagogy' (e.g. Braa & Callero, 2006; Canaan, 2002). This problematisation took the form of an exposé. The contrast between 'surface' and 'depth' was revealed as a *metaphor – not* a literality - which stressed *spatial stratification* at the expense of *temporality*, the *synchronic* dimension of the learning experience at the expense of the *diachronic*. My interview data, on the other hand, rather tended to emphasise the ostensibly *superficial* question of *when* and *how* students consulted the VLE vis-à-vis lectures and seminars, rather than qualitative 'depth'.

What, then, are the consequences of stressing this diachronic dimension? They are simultaneously *theoretical* but, also, I now realise, *practical*. Theoretically, the diachronic dimension emphasises the *sheer heterogeneity* of the learning experience, a heterogeneity which the hyper-reality of the VLE only augments. It reveals the learning experience to be an

essentially dialectical process in a way that the synchronic metaphor *simpliciter* tends to elide. Indeed, at this point I would adapt an epistemological critique of synchronic metaphors that the historian E.P. Thompson once levelled at sociologists who, in wielding their spatially stratified metaphor of 'superstructure' and 'base', tended to 'have stopped the time-machine' (1965: 357) in their apprehension of phenomena which were as much *historical* as sociological. And just as Thompson elsewhere remarked of 'social class' – a candidate for a 'threshold concept' (see Meyer & Land, 2005) in sociology without doubt – that it is not 'a "structure", nor even a "category"' (1966: 9) but a process 'which in fact *happens*' (ibid., emphasis added) 'in the medium of *time*' (Thompson, 1965: 357, emphasis added), so I want to repeat that, likewise, the learning experience is also a process that happens 'in the medium of *time*'. That process *is* dialectical and *not* teleological: students do not just start at the 'surface' and then, after donning their intellectual wet-suits, 'dive down deeper' – another synchronic metaphor – but, instead, they oscillate back and forth as the contextual response to specific pedagogical challenges.

Since I reached this realisation, my diachronic 'turn' has had at least five *practical* pedagogical consequences. These are significant for me for, whilst, I immediately detected the *theoretical* significance of my problematisation of 'surface' and 'depth', it has taken some time to work through the following practical ramifications:

i)   A move to lectures of an *hourly* rather than a *two hourly* duration.
ii)   A move to *fortnightly* rather than weekly *seminars*.
iii) The increased use of *multimedia* interventions via the VLE.
iv)   The use of (ostensibly) 'superficial' multi-choice tests and crosswords administered and self-assessed via the VLE.
v)   An increased use of the 'Announcement' tool on the VLE to communicate with the student cohort en masse.

Such transformations have not been easily achieved and have been the source of some debate amongst the student body and, administratively, by colleagues. Concern, in short, surrounded the ostensible 'cuts' in face-to-face teaching implemented by me systematically since

assuming the convenorship of a 2nd level, 40 credit compulsory undergraduate course in social theory since 2007/08. This was a difficult argument for me to confront insofar as 'cuts' is, on the face of it, an unobjectionable description of cumulative changes which have seen face-to-face teaching hours (lectures plus seminars) indeed 'cut' from *55* in 2007/08 when I first inherited the course to, what was, in the most recent session, *27*. Obviously, in an age of increasing austerity, the allegation of 'cuts' to public sector service provision is a particularly powerful one.

Do I still justify such 'cuts'? Certainly – and my reasoning is this. The emotive word 'cuts' is, in this context, a *non sequitur*. The rationale remains underpinned precisely by my learning *about* student learning – which is to repeat that that the learning experience is at heart a dialectical process as an element of which the VLE constitutes not just *one* element of an aggregated series but, rather, the nodal point, the organising principle, of that series itself. This nodal point is not synchronic but diachronic. The temporal to-ing and fro-ing between the lecture, the seminar, the library and the VLE is one in which the VLE adopts a *mediating* relation. It represents both the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* of the learning experience insofar as students consult it *before* the lectures and seminars and they return to it *after* the lectures and seminars. And this mediating relation does not signify a synchronic relation of 'surface' and 'depth' s*impliciter* but, rather, what Laurillard (2005: 175) calls productive 'affordances' through which heterogeneous opportunities to 'dive deeper' and, alternatively, to 'come-up-for-air' at the surface are made systematically available 'in the medium of time'.

Hence, finally, the importance I have come to attach not just to the VLE as a vehicle for making available the 'deep' accomplishments of sociological abstraction[3] but as simultaneously the vehicle for making available ostensibly superficial multi-choice tests,

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[3] A good example would be Stuart Hall's important but very difficult essay 'Who needs identity?' (1996), which was one of the digitized readings provided on the VLE.

crosswords and multi-media interventions etc. That moment of 'coming-up-for-air', in other words, may be every bit as significant as the intellectually death-defying 'dive'.

Critical Pedagogy, Reflexivity and Social Theory

'Politics', Max Weber famously opined (1958: 112), 'is out of place in the lecture-room'. And the question I want to pose in conclusion is this: Is Weber correct? These final reflections suggest that the answer is, in a certain sense 'yes', but in an important sense 'no' and, why, ultimately, this response is so 'uncannily' related to both the reflexive 'turn' stimulated by my aspiration towards a truly *critical sociological pedagogy*. This final discussion requires the prolegomena of a brief 'auto-ethnography' (see Reed-Danahay, 1997) or what Kathryn Church (1995) once described as a 'critical autobiography' and which I have referred to elsewhere, in the specific context of academia, as 'reflexive auto-critique' (see Cresswell & Spandler, 2012).

Part of the reason that teaching social theory within an elite institution is such an 'uncanny' experience for me is that it was not predictably on the horizon in terms of my 'habitus' (see Bourdieu, 1990: 52-65; cf. Crossley, 2001) – Bourdieu's term of art to refer to those unconscious dispositions which structure human behaviour. Coming from a northern working-class background – my father was a coppersmith, my mother a cleaner, the industrial milieu a shipbuilding one – I had left school at sixteen without qualifications and, notwithstanding some sporting ability, without prospects. Eventually, after labouring jobs, I trained as a psychiatric nurse and worked in a variety of health and social care settings and in the '3rd' sector for many years. I was active politically within various 'new social movements' (see Habermas, 1981) and within trade unionism and was, and remain, of a generally 'socialist humanist' persuasion (see Thompson, 1957) if of a 'social movement'

rather than a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' kind. My drift into academia was gradual, via trade union education and the Open University. I studied part-time for an MA in my mid-30s and eventually secured Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding to pursue doctoral study. That was the one and only occasion that I have been a permanent full-time student in higher education. I secured a lectureship within elite academia when I was 43.

Why, then, has the experience felt so 'uncanny' for me? Partly because I never envisaged that I would be teaching at what, to express it in the vernacular, is a 'posh' university and, partly because I never expected to be teaching, or even associating with, so many well-to-do young adults. My 'habitus', one might say, has been put 'out-of-joint'. To transpose this into the terms of Gramscian or Freireian 'critical pedagogy', the experience has felt less like 'the pedagogy of the oppressed' to me and much more like 'the pedagogy of the *privileged*'.

Hereabouts, a crucial question intrudes. Is it even possible to make coherent sense of 'the pedagogy of the *privileged*'? That the issue should matter to me and, therefore, be a source of reflection arises from the previously stated commitment to a *critical sociological pedagogy* 'actionable' in *this place* and time. I'm definitely committed to 'actionable theory' (see Meyer & Shanahan, 2004). Yet, there is a dearth of models to guide me in this in the context of elite academia. Indeed, two of my intellectual heroines/heroes of the New Left and second wave feminism respectively, E.P. Thompson (e.g. 1964) and Sheila Rowbotham (2001)[4] embarked on pedagogical journeys to a certain extent in the *contrary* direction to my own, being both Oxford-educated but nevertheless *under*whelmed by the 'ivory tower' and passionately committed, instead, to teaching for the Workers Educational Association

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[4] There is a certain 'lineage' apparent here in that I was one Sheila Rowbotham's teaching assistant and she, of course, was mentored by E.P. Thompson.

(WEA).[5] Thompson (e.g. 1970), in particular, could be scathing about what he called the 'University Ltd.'.

Yet, as inspiring as these exemplars remain, there is a sense in which the notions of 'critical pedagogy/pedagogy of the oppressed' were unproblematic for them in the context of teaching for the WEA – the task itself may have been difficult but the theoretical underpinnings were not (see Collins, 1991). The whole weight of the Gramscian tradition of the 'organic intellectual' buttressed their efforts (e.g. Gramsci, 1971; cf. Barker & Cox, 2002; Cresswell & Spandler, 2012). The problematic which I encounter is just not the same.

But if I am hardly in the business of polemicising for 'socialist humanism' and I *am* in partial agreement with Weber that 'politics is out of place in the lecture-room', how, then, may I configure a critical sociological pedagogy? At this point I can only sketch a response, but it does seem to me that if politics, indeed, has *no* place in the lecture-room – understood as the *oracular* emanations of a *charismatic* leader (see Weber, 1968) – then it must, all the same, *find* a place within that heterogeneous ensemble of pedagogic elements the nodal point of which, I claim, is the VLE. I am teaching *sociology* at the end of the day and the *critical* element – whether in its substantive or its pedagogical forms – must find its space. In saying that, 'socialist humanism' is, of course, grist to the critical mill just as much as anything else.

It is not a case of labelling students 'bourgeois' and then watching as the ideological scales fall from their eyes, any more than it is a case of labelling them as 'purely instrumental', merely concerned with 'making the grade' (see Becker *et al*, 1995), or engaging in 'shadow games' with academics concerning modes of assessment which pursue, not real and not critical, but 'imitation subjects' (see Ramsden, 2003: 39-40). I am not in the

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[5] See the following biographical material and commentaries, respectively, for EPT (URL:http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/163834.htm) and SR (URL :http://www.jrank.org/literature/pages/5605/Sheila-Rowbotham.html).

slightest bit interested in 'blaming the student' (Entwistle, 2005: 14). The student 'habitus' is not *determined a priori* by social class – or by anything else for that matter - anymore than mine is. At any rate, there is at least some space for manoeuvre – some of it located, as I've tried to point out, in virtual 'space'. In stressing the *heterogeneity* of approaches to learning and the complementary but hardly isomorphic *heterogeneity* of approaches to teaching, I am merely trying to augment the possibilities which inhere in that space. Inevitably, it's a work in progress.

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The epigram that prefaces this paper (Bourdieu) suggests that in order to 'exoticize the domestic' and reflect upon one's *own* pedagogical practice, the sociologist must first effect an 'epistemological break'. In other words, they must render their own practice 'uncanny'. And this requires a reflexive engagement which is, at one and the same time, a *delight* and a *trauma*. The trauma, as always, lies in confronting the limitations of one's own 'habitus' – in rendering its formerly unthinking presuppositions transparent. The delight is that, for every painful experience that exposes a 'peril' – Weber's admonition of the pedagogical polemic – through *other* experiences, a 'possibility' is revealed. Weber (1965: 181-183), perhaps, was too imperilled by his own 'iron cage' – too thoroughly, as Ian Craib (1997: 256-60) has said, the 'tragic liberal'. He just couldn't get out of that 'habitus'. But it may just be the case that a critical sociological pedagogy always just *is* a dialectical pedagogy of 'perils *and* possibilities'. In which case, the challenge would seem to be to remain just on the positive side of the 'possibilities' side of the scale.

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