RCP Interview series

To cite this interview:

An interview with Antonia Darder

Dr. Antonia Darder is a distinguished international Freirian scholar. She is a public intellectual, educator, writer, activist, and artist. She holds the Leavey Presidential Endowed Chair of Ethics and Moral Leadership at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles; is Distinguished Visiting Professor of Education at University of Johannesburg; and Professor Emerita of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. She is an American Educational Research Association Fellow and recipient of the American Educational Research Association Scholars of Color Lifetime Contribution Award, as well as the Freire Social Justice Award. Antonia has worked tirelessly for almost 40 years to fiercely counter social and material inequalities in schools and communities. The author of more than 20 books, her scholarship has consistently focused on issues of racism, political economy, social justice, education and society. Through her writings, she has extended the contributions of Paulo Freire to our understanding of inequalities in schools and society. Darder’s critical theory of biculturalism links human development questions to issues of culture, power, and pedagogy. Through her decolonizing scholarship on the body, ethics, and methodology, she has contributed to rethinking questions of empowerment and liberation in the lives of subaltern populations. Beyond academia, she is a poet and visual artist.
**Bülent Avcı:** What is CP? Knowing that there are many lines of thoughts within CP, would it be possible to come up with an overall definition of CP?

**Antonia Darder:** Critical pedagogy is a school of thought that emerged in the twentieth century. Shaped by a long tradition of critical social thought and progressive educational movements, critical pedagogy links the practice of schooling to democratic principles of society and to transformative social action. An underlying and explicit intent of critical pedagogy is a commitment to the unwavering liberation of oppressed populations and a belief in the historical possibility of societal change. Critical pedagogy also represents a significant attempt to bring together divergent radical views of education. Although, there is no recipe for the universal implementation and application of any form of critical pedagogy, its philosophical principles are founded on a critical theoretical tradition. Influential to its theoretical formation are major theorists of the Frankfurt School, along with Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas and Paulo Freire. Critical educational theorists drew upon the work of these thinkers to develop their notions of a critical pedagogy. Some of the most influential critical educational theorists include Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Michael Apple. However, since the 1990s, many educators, researchers, and theorist developed works that expanded on the foundational work of these critical theorist to address more deeply and specifically issues of culture, racism, gender, sexuality, disability, and the environment. The critical principles that loosely weave these different discussions together include cultural politics, the economy, the historicity of knowledge, dialectics, ideology and critique, the notion of hegemony, resistance and counter-hegemony, praxis, dialogue, and conscientization. It is then the combined engagement of these epistemological principles in the knowledge production of social questions of oppression that can be considered its conceptual lens for making sense of the world. Similarly, important critiques of critical pedagogy have been generated through efforts to flesh out the manner in which Western influences linked to these philosophical principles can unwittingly engender what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls an abyssal divide within critical pedagogy, where anything that exists outside its domain is rendered invisible or simply considered irrelevant or non-existent.
Bülent Avcı: *Whom should we consider as a critical educator/critical pedagogy researcher? If a teacher/educator/professor who writes books and publishes articles in journals, should he/she be regarded as a critical educator? Should we look at his/her teaching practices in the classroom?*

Antonia Darder: Given the definition provided above, teachers, researchers, and scholars who ascribe to the underlying tenets of critical pedagogical principles would be considered to be within the critical tradition. It is important here to recognize that beyond embracing the philosophical principles of critical pedagogy, key questions of classroom and community or popular education practices are key. The expectation here is that critical educators and researchers are practicing their labor, whether in the classroom, the community, or their personal lives, through enactment of critical consciousness. This is to say that they connect both their everyday lives and labor as teachers, researchers, or writers to a larger political project of liberation. Critical pedagogy cannot be enacted then in the classroom if an individual has not made a clear political commitment to integrity and coherence in her or his teaching or scholarly praxis, as well as relationships out in the world. This to say, that critical pedagogy must be a living pedagogy that extends beyond our labor in schools and communities into the arena of personal relationships. In my experience, many people may call themselves critical educators or researchers, but few seem able to live consistently a commitment to critical engage in thoughtful, humble, open, and loving ways. Nevertheless, I cannot sit here in judgment, pretending as if there is a recipe for laying out a set of standards by which the radical authenticity of all critical educators can be known. This would only replicate and reinforce dehumanizing forms of hierarchy and arrogance upon those whose lives I do not know nor understand. Instead, I would rather offer that we live and labor in a fundamentally unfree and violent world and, as such, we are daily confronted with oppressive forces, by way of exclusionary and repressive ideologies, policies, practices, and relational structures that systematically work counter to the evolution of critical or revolutionary educators. This, unfortunately, results in major conflicts, contradictions, and inconsistencies among individuals who consider themselves committed to social justice within institutions, communities, and society. Moreover, it is an exceedingly Western patriarchal tendency to construct measurable hierarchies from which we can
pretend that people or the world in which we reside can be controlled. Instead, I would encourage each of us to be more reflective and aware of bringing personal commitment, integrity, and vigilance to our enactment of critical consciousness with the classroom and our relationships in the world. This can assist us to acknowledge our frailties and fragilities in the struggle for our humanity within educational and societal contexts—contexts driven fundamentally by the disgraceful ruthlessness of capitalist greed. Just as revolutionary struggles out in the world do not occur in a vacuum, neither does our formation as critical educators, researchers, or scholars. Hence, what we require in these very difficult times, more than ever, is the willingness to create genuine relationships of solidarity—relationships that can support our critical political and pedagogical formation within community. There is no way that we can profess to live and enact a critical pedagogy, if we exist and labor alienated from others and if our boots never touch the ground.

Bülent Avcı: Some scholars claim that CP researches/publications do not impact/disrupt neoliberal agendas: Instead it just helps them to advance their careers. Would you agree?

Antonia Darder: I have heard this criticism about critical pedagogy scholars for more than 30 years. Frankly, I prefer not to put my limited energies and time in being my critical sister or brother’s keeper. I believe we have far more important labor before us. Not to mention, individuals who are primarily concerned with advancing their careers by publishing critical pedagogical scholarship would best seek other pastures. As someone who has been unswervingly committed to this arduous political project for more than three decades, I can confirm that there are psychologically distressed and politically contradictory people no matter where one tarries—whether in schools, universities, trade unions, or communities. So, why would it be different within the very small intellectual arena of critical pedagogy?

With respect to the usefulness of critical pedagogical publications, there are many politically committed people from different walks of life that sincerely appreciate and utilize the work of critical scholars who labor in consistent ways to disentangle the complexities of oppression within the context of advanced capitalism. In efforts to
disrupt the neoliberal agendas of our time, critical articulations that lay bare schemes related to racism, the privatization of education, the incarceration of impoverished and racialized populations, anti-immigrant politics, or the collapse of decent conditions of labor and wages have been and continue to be essential to revolutionary campaigns. However, radical scholarship alone will never bring down the structures of oppression. This can only be accomplished through the on-going collective organization of committed people at every level of society, who dare to utilize their labor to denounce tyranny, by proclaiming a revolutionary vision of social justice, economic democracy, and collective human rights.

**Bülent Avcı**: Should we openly discuss these different lines of thoughts in CP or would this be more harm than good to CP? Our journal, RCP (rethinking critical pedagogy), aims to be a democratic platform for this kind of CP discussions.

**Antonia Darder**: I believe that what should set critical pedagogy apart is the willingness to engage with a wide variety of perspectives and critiques generated within and outside the field. That is to say, we cannot pretend to be liberatory in our praxis and simultaneously silence perspectives with which we disagree. Moreover, we must mobilize our democratic capacities to engage with greater openness, curiosity, and solidarity the many differences and disagreements that emerge, given the multiplicity of perspectives at work in the world. This is not so that we can somehow arrive to one claim of absolute truth or an ultimate position, but rather so that we can more forthrightly acknowledge the importance and even democratic necessity of different ways of knowing and being in the world, which result in the diverse positionalities and histories that have shaped and influenced our understanding of education and society. I do not believe it is harmful to consider thoughtfully the differences in our perspectives, particularly when we take the time to engage carefully the human consequences to mind, body, heart and spirit associated with our different views and the practices these engender, particularly with respect to the transformations of schools and societies. Therefore, I very much support and appreciate the efforts of Rethinking Critical Pedagogy to bring different and contesting views of critical pedagogy into conversation with one another, particularly
when these views are expressed with love, respect, faith, and a genuine intent to build solidarity across our differences.

**Bülent Avcı**: CP is often criticized that it is too abstract (opaque) and non-practical. Let's say you visit a high school or college and are supposed to visit some classrooms and observe teachers as they teach. What kinds of pedagogical dynamics would you focus on to find out the oppressive and liberating aspects of these teachers' professional practices?

**Antonia Darder**: The philosophical principles or foundations of any educational school of thought can seem abstract if discussed solely with respect to theory. To move from the analytical or conceptual dimensions of critical pedagogy, we must then move, as you suggest, within the actual arena where a liberatory pedagogy is practiced. In your question, you speak of observing teachers within schools. Here are some very brief reflections I can offer regarding the assessment of a critical pedagogical classroom.

**Context**: Prior to observing teachers within a classroom, it is vital to have some understanding of the power dynamics, resources, and limitations at work in the context in which a teacher is laboring. What are the school expectations and purpose? Who are the students? What are characteristics of the community in which the school is located. Teaching in a school, for example, within Turkey or Palestine would be far different than teaching in a metropolitan school in the United Kingdom or the United States. By understanding the cultural politics, economics, and history of the educational context, you will have a better sense of the actual conditions under which a teacher must carry out her or his labor. With an understanding of the context, you will observe the teacher with a greater sense of grounded understanding as to why the teacher may enact particularly pedagogical activities or approaches.

**Teacher-Student Relational Dynamics**: That said, one of the primary aspects that interests me in my observation of a teacher is to access the relational dynamic that seems to be at work in his or her relationship with the students. Do students seem at
ease? Do students seem comfortable asking questions? Does the teacher elaborate on students’ questions and insights in ways that ground students’ engagement with the topic of discussion? Does the teacher redirect the movement of the discussion in ways that integrate students’ questions and insights and provide them ample room to connect their learning to their everyday lives?

**Pedagogical Engagement:** Pedagogical engagement or process is one of the most essential aspects that distinguish critical pedagogy from what Paulo Freire called *banking education*. Traditional pedagogies employ authoritarian approaches that place priority on competitive student learning as an individual phenomenon. In addition, the tendency is to encourage students to focus on material to be memorized and regurgitated, rather than to engage critically with curricular material in ways that ask them to consider carefully its meaning in terms of their own lives and communities. Hence, observation of the pedagogical engagement of students is significant to assessment. Does the teacher engage students in ways that provoke open dialogue among each other and dialogue with the teacher, as well? Are there classroom opportunities for students to engage the material with one another in small groups, so they can practice being communally active in the democratic process of knowledge production? What activities are included that provide students opportunities to ground their learning in their world, outside the classroom? Are students given concrete opportunities to move the direction of the classroom learning or dialogue?

**Curriculum:** Is there evidence that students participate in learning and designing the curriculum or activities associated with their classroom learning? If the community is bilingual, are there opportunities for students to speak and study in their language of origin? Is there evidence that parents and community members are involved consistently in the process of students’ educational formation? Are music, dance or other cultural art forms from students’ communities integrated into their learning?

**Classroom Environment:** Another important part of such an assessment would have to do with the classroom environment itself. Does the classroom seem to reflect the students in the room? Do the items on bulletin boards or the walls reflect the labor of students and teacher in collaboration? Do pictures or artefacts reflect the students’ cultural community backgrounds and everyday life? Is there evidence that students
have participated in contributing to the classroom environment? How is the furniture arranged? Does it seem easy for students to participate in group interaction on their own?

Bülent Avcı: **CP scholars teach in neoliberal universities; at the same time they are critical of neoliberalism? It must be very difficult for scholars to work this way. What are the major problems today CP academics face and have to cope with?**

Antonia Darder: One of the most pervasive manifestations of the neoliberal university is the alteration of the academic labor force, as university management and administrators seek to balance budgets or retain surpluses for future capital expenditures. These changes prioritize precarious, short-term, contracted and part-time employment. Universities have long employed a mix of permanent, tenured, and tenure-track academics, and contracted part-time and casual labor, particularly using adjunct or casual labor to cover unmet teaching needs. This shifting emphasis in favor of relatively cheaper and more ‘flexible’ casual employment has intensified to the point that neoliberal universities openly and blatantly advance policies and practices that privilege the aims of the powerful and wealthy.

For example, if you are a professor in the humanities, you will find few funding sources for research that provide support for liberatory forms of social critique. Meanwhile, the disciplines tethered to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (which are most traditionally positivist and acritical in their orientation) receive the lion share of the available funding and opportunities. Similarly, the hiring requirements for entering university professors with tenure has become more and more challenging. Where new positions exist, there is generally a focus on finding candidates who have many peer-reviewed journal articles already published by the time they graduate from a doctoral program and who can also demonstrate they are capable of raising funds for future research projects. These two requirements are employed to deceptively sift and sort tenure-track faculty candidates and eliminate from the pool those who have had lesser opportunities during their formation. In this way, candidates from racialized and working-class communities who might be considered more problematic to neoliberal aims can be “legitimately” eliminated,
while those candidates who come from privileged backgrounds and/or have attended more wealthy prestige universities are bound to make it to the final candidate list.

In tandem, these phenomena work to limit contesting discourses within the university and perpetuate policies and practices meant to more aggressively control faculty labor and undermine dissent. In these and many other ways, the neoliberal environment of the university negates the very principles of critical pedagogical labor, which is meant to open the field of critical engagement and to promote a humanizing educational agenda in the interest of emancipation. The consequence today is that senior professors who are critical scholars find themselves more and more marginalized with respect to the life of the university. Often our work and perspectives are deemed idealistic and out of touch with a world where the major objective of schooling is the vocationalization of working-class students and the ultimate aim of university education is to advance greater control over knowledge production across the disciplines. Rather than the university existing as an open and progressive arena for intellectual formation for both professors and students, it has become more and more an arena of vulgar professionalization, which narrow what is considered legitimate knowledge or valid research. Research projects or participatory research activities aimed at critically addressing the actual needs of communities or labor organizations, for example, are often viewed with disdain and suspicion and deemed “activist research”—a euphemism used to discredit the voracity of critical research claims.

**Bülent Avcı:** In times of corona-virus, online-distance learning became a popular topic in educational discussions. How should we understand the oppressive and liberating aspects of distance-online schooling?

**Antonia Darder:** The proliferation of on-line-distance learning is an issue that certainly raises concerns in the new educational normal, along with the wide marketization of piecemeal curricula to accommodate disembodied conditions of virtual learning. For critical educators, classroom conditions of democratic education provide opportunities for students to critically grapple together across their differences and similarities, in an effort to learn, communicate, and transform inequalities and exclusions within the complexity of their diverse humanity. Vital to
such an intellectual formation is the creative tension necessary to unfold lively relationships, which are best enacted through their embodied presence within the realities of everyday.

Given the stark separation and virtualized conditions of the new educational normal, students are expected to function in ways that, more than ever, disembowel their learning. Instead of dynamic classroom dialogues so crucial to a question-posing critical pedagogy, students are expected to learn within lonely on-line spaces, where they must respond to prescribed and standardized forms of curriculum developed and designed for them by experts, without student participation or input. Moreover, these virtual spaces reinforce a learning based on an individualized focus, memorization, and quantification. Instead of students being immersed in evolving social processes of critical engagement, the development of voice, and the construction of participatory knowledge, they are conditioned away from the human contact, social interaction, and the ethics of empathy so essential to democratic life.

Similarly, we must be concerned with the manner in which teaching in the new educational normal disfigures the labor of teachers. In the virtual classroom, the difficult labor of teachers now becomes even more routinized and tediously disembodied than previously, as teachers are expected to function as technological mediators, dispensers, and agents of a growing virtualized educational culture. No doubt, this points to the dangers of a deeply technocratic educational culture that initiates students into a commonsense acceptance of technological surveillance as a way of life. Here, we are well reminded that every historical instance of fascistic politics in this country or abroad—whether the tracing of suspected gang youth in the U.S. or the tracking of dissidents by the Pinochet regime in Chile—has been undertaken through systematic surveillance of youth, utilized as a means to trample dissent.

The liberating aspects of on-line teaching is a subject that I find difficult to speak to, because I fundamentally believe that student learning is deeply impoverished by such a form of education, despite the many critical educators who would retort that they have found ways to teach in a liberating manner. There is, for example, the assertion that on-line teaching makes education available for more students and hence, serves
as a democratizing force. This strikes me as a discourse of apologia for on-line learning because we are now forced to move to this virtualizing educational form and, as such, may inadvertently find ourselves trapped into virtual teaching, given that far less resources are required and greater profit can be garnered in the long run.

Bülent Avcı: *Education faculties and colleges of teacher education in the USA have been colonized by neoliberal policy and implementations. The majority of new teachers have never heard about CP. Do you think that something can be done to reach out to pre-service and in-service teachers who are frustrated with market-driven changes in education, and looking for alternative approaches to it?*

Antonia Darder: This colonizing phenomenon could be addressed by a scholarly stress on greater community participation and the use of popular education methods for initiating new teachers into critical pedagogical praxis. What I am suggesting is the development of revolutionary movement work that focuses, in particular, on the needs of new teachers. This would serve as on-going teaching collectives or community teaching networks that function outside of the purview or control of teacher education programs. Unfortunately, a problem within capitalist societies is that people have seldom developed a strong sense of participating in political labor or working with others communally as part of their on-going democratic participation. This refer to public collective work done outside of the traditional institutions that have created or perpetuated many of the problems we are struggling to transform in education.

Establishing independent popular teacher collectives that focus on supporting new teachers and providing them an on-going pedagogical space for reflection, dialogue, and building community would go a long way to activating critical pedagogical praxis on the ground. Some excellent examples, of work done outside the traditional educational establishment include the recent labor of critical educators in teachers’ unions such as the Chicago Teachers Union and United Teachers of Los Angeles, who worked with students, parents, small businesses, and community members beforehand and during strike actions that brought about some important changes to the conditions of teachers, beyond solely increases in wages. Yet, much more work must still be done by teachers’ unions and social movement organizations to address the pedagogical and political needs of young teachers who must work within
conditions that betray their commitments to a socially just world. Also important is a larger political effort to link the work of teachers with a variety of community campaigns and national actions focused on a variety of critical issues outside of education (i.e., health, housing, immigration, incarceration, etc.)—issues that in very fundamental ways impact the well-being of teachers, students, parents and communities.

**Bülent Avcı:** Neoliberal advocacy groups have been promoting STEM education. How should we understand STEM campaigns? Could this be another tactic stage of the neoliberal colonization of education?

**Antonia Darder:** I firmly believe that the wide spread promotion of STEM is a counterrevolutionary move by the right meant to suppress more critical academic fields, where open engagement with larger human issues, particularly with respect to politics, poverty, and racialized inequalities, would be more likely to be debated. I have watched, over the last 30 years, the manner in which STEM, as a project under neoliberalism, has moved toward the expansion of a scientism, where problems are deeply focalized and divorced of context and absolute and abstracted solutions are presented as panaceas. We see this, in particular, in the ecological arena of so-called natural disasters, where both human and planetary extractive practices by transnational corporations responsible for climate change are ignored, while privatizing capital schemes are funded to protect the interest of the powerful. In universities, education students are corralled into the STEM field with the promise of prestige, resources, and jobs. Yet, according to recent research in the field, over 50% of STEM jobs do not even require a bachelors’ degree. Hence, I would agree that this phenomenon is, indeed, another tactic of neoliberal colonization of education. However, we must also recognize that the current ideological dominance toward STEM is actually only an intensification of the wretched scientism of the last century, which has driven oppressive policies and practices of exclusion in education. To ignore the manner in which the pernicious rhetoric of scientism (i.e., evidence-based rhetoric) narrows our understanding of the world and how we seek solutions to human suffering, unfortunately, clouds our political and pedagogical reasoning, trapping us in a bankrupt ideology that leaves the underlying roots of oppression untouched.
Bülen Avci: Neoliberal ideology has shaped education over the last 30-40 years. Some think that neoliberal ideology outlived and will soon disappear. And others disagree saying that as long as opponents of neoliberal ideology come up with viable alternatives at local, regional and global levels, neoliberal hegemony will not go away. What do you think about this matter?

Antonia Darder: The current encroachment of neoliberalism into education is not a new phenomenon but rather the current face of the larger capitalist enterprise. As such, neoliberal educational reform must be properly understood as an extension of the greater hegemonic apparatus of the capitalist state. This to say, it is bred through what Antonio Gramsci termed hegemony, where general consent is given by the masses to the general direction imposed on social life by the ruling elite. In the U.S. educational arena, neoliberal policies emerged furiously and persistently on the heels of the 1983 A Nation at Risk report. In response to one of its basic tenets—schools should function as economic engines for the national economy—an unbridled process of ruthless privatization unfolded, while mean-spirited rhetoric of failing public schools shattered progressive educational efforts that had barely begun to take hold. Accordingly, neoliberal advocates and conservatives alike went after public education with a vengeance, resurrecting victim-blaming accountability discourses of the 60s and 70s and employing former political tactics to disrupt the progress of both the labor and civil rights movements of the time.

I would argue then that as long as we are embroiled in this ruthless system of capitalist accumulation and a racializing political vision founded on the interests of the ruling class—locally, regionally, and globally—capitalism’s authoritarian rule, under the guise of neoliberalism (or whatever new term is employed), will continue to thwart our liberatory educational efforts. This to say, as long as the greed and barbarity of capitalism persists, the educational system will remain hostile, adverse, and negating of critical pedagogical aims within schools and communities. What we are contending with is a political economy where fierce profit motives undermine the genuine human needs of people. Moreover, what the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted for us so clearly is the manner in which the transnational policies and practices of capitalism have raped the planet and resulted in an astonishing rate of impoverishment around the world.
Bülen Avcı: Can the CP community (if there is any) organize/mobilize and make historic moves? For example, can they initiate a global research center or university or K-12 schools to demonstrate what kind of education they want? Is it an attainable goal at this stage?

Antonia Darder: The critical pedagogy community should, indeed, organize and mobilize worldwide with and in the interest of the most oppressed communities. However, this requires that we rethink the manner in which we labor, how we define problems, and the tendency toward fragmented approaches in education, even on the left. For years, I have witnessed the inability of critical education scholars to fully divorce ourselves from the mainstream competitive pursuit of university accolades, prestige, and resources. Despite all the talk about solidarity and transformation, we have done so very little to shift the expectations or practices within our own spheres of influence. There is no question that to do this would be, indeed, a very difficult task, given the brutal conditions under which we labor within the university. However, there have been important moments where opportunities have arisen to do things differently and critical scholars have failed miserably to garner the courage and moral commitment to fight for real change. The consequence is that we remain compromised and unable to extricate ourselves from the whims of university expectations.

Moreover, given the small arena that is critical pedagogy, our wretched tendency to deal with comrades as competitors rather than as comrades has led to many missed opportunities to mobilize in tangible and effective ways. Yet, despite that fact that there is little prestige, resources, or accolades to be gained from mainstream institutions for our pedagogical work out in communities or within social and labor movement organizations, this is exactly where critical pedagogy as a movement for a humanizing liberatory education should be developing our work with students, comrades, and communities. Historic moves that can potentially shift the direction of societies can only be achieved through unifying progressive forces for change. We have seen examples of this in the work of the Zapatista in Chiapas, Mexico and the Black Lives Matters movement. To build an effective critical pedagogy movement would entail that scholars, researchers, and teachers bring their political and
pedagogical understanding and emancipatory approaches to the work of labor unions, social movement organizations, and other progressive campaigns, where people are committed to fighting for their self-determination, economic justice, and collective human rights. All this, however, will remain impossible, if we fail to come together democratically and in solidarity, in order to transform the deep structures of oppression that persist not only in schools and universities, but within the societies in which we struggle daily to live, labor, love, and dream.