Wanted - Theories and Research that Explain Privilege and Oppression in Education and U.S. Society*

by Alan Singer, Hofstra University

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Abstract: Educators concerned with ways that United States institutions address issues related to race, gender and class, especially the maintenance of inequality and injustice, are participating in the development of postmodern explanations of education and society that emphasize the ways that subordinated groups describe their own experiences. These approaches contest the hegemony of received truth by demonstrating that the same institutions a society describes as democratic, pluralistic, open, and able to meet the material needs of its citizens, are experienced by many people as discriminatory and oppressive. But despite their challenge to hegemonic assumptions, postmodern approaches have limitations. While they expose examples of privilege and oppression, they are less successful at explaining the complex relationships within and between groups, the historical roots of privilege and oppression, their resiliency within societies, and their points of vulnerability. The concepts of privilege and oppression, as applied by postmodernist educational theorists, can be critical concepts for understanding race, gender and class in education and society, but only when they are applied in the context of a broader explanation of a class stratified society.

Key words: Postmodernism, multiculturalism, critical theory, privilege, oppression

In August, 1997, I visited the town of Oradour-sur-Glane near Limoges in central France. On Saturday, June 10, 1944, 4 days after the allied invasion at Normandy, a German SS Division entered the town without warning, rounded up its population, and slaughtered 642 people, including 205 children (New York Times, 1944: 1:4; Hébras, 1994). No one is quite sure of the reason for the massacre. Town residents had no known ties with resistance forces. Some chroniclers suspect the Nazis simply made a mistake and attacked the wrong village. Another possibility is that the German occupying army wanted to make a statement to the French people that despite D-Day the war and occupation were not over.

When local people rebuilt Oradour-sur-Glane after World War II, they decided to use a neighboring site, and keep the ruins of the original town as a tribute to the people who died there and as a memorial to the horror of Nazi occupation. As visitors walk down cobblestoned streets, past crumbling brick walls, twisted bicycles, and rusting cars, there is a heavy quiet and an eerie timelessness. A statue of Jesus on the cross remains in front of a no longer used Roman Catholic Church where women and children were gathered together and then were shot and where bullet holes are still visible in the altar. A metal sign on a rusted gasoline pump carries the Texaco star; outdoor water pumps look operational; and bread ovens still await the arrival of a baker.

However, the memorial presents only one portion of the town's involvement in World War II. Why were the residents of Oradour-sur-Glane living peacefully on that Saturday in the middle of the bloodiest war in human history? The only answer I can conceive of, an answer that has yet to be tested, is that they had sought safety, and for a time had succeeded in withdrawing from the war by cooperating with the occupying forces. While similar villages and people in Russia, Greece, Yugoslavia, and France, had resisted and died, Oradour-sur-Glane may have chosen to collaborate, and then met the same fate.

There is an important difference between what happened in Oradour-sur-Glane between 1940 and 1944, both collaboration and destruction, and the way survivors have reconstructed memories to describe who they were after the war, witnesses to an unannounced and irrational slaughter. As educators, we must be concerned with both of these realities -- with explaining actual events and institutions and also with explaining how people remember and understand what they believe happened. To complicate the situation even more, we must also try to understand positionality: why different groups of people understand the same events in different ways. and the potential for human action to rename and reshape education and the world.

* The difficulty of dealing with these multiple, yet related, goals, and developing theories that explain the relationships between multiple variables, is at the heart of discussion of privilege and oppression, and their relationships with concepts of race, class, and gender.

Postmodernism, Multiculturalism and Critical Theories

In the last two decades, educators concerned with inequality and injustice participated in the development of postmodern explanations of education and society that legitimized multiple perspectives on events and institutions. They also pursued research agendas that emphasized the ways that subordinated groups describe their own experiences. I include critical multiculturalism and critical race and gender theories within the galaxy of postmodern explanations. Collectively, these approaches contest the hegemony of received truth by demonstrating that the same institutions a society describes as democratic, pluralistic, open, and able to meet the material needs of its citizens, are also experienced by many people as discriminatory and oppressive.

But despite postmodern challenges to hegemonic assumptions, these approaches have serious limitations (Hobsbawn, 1997: 192-20, 266-277; McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2000: 25-33). They have not pointed to new, alternative, integrative,

explanations of society. While they expose examples of privilege and oppression, they are less successful at explaining the complex relationships within and between groups, the historical roots of privilege and oppression, their resiliency within societies, and their points of vulnerability. Roslyn Walach Bologh and Leonard Mell of the City University of New York go so far as to argue that the "metatheory of postmodernism helps to undermine the development of any rational alternative to contemporary political economy and the current world (dis)order(Bologh and Mell, 1994: 81-120)."

*In a related, I believe the postmodern focus on **subjective reality**, how individuals and groups experience and make meaning of race, class, and gender, while valuable, has interfered with their examination of the other crucial reality I identified earlier in my discussion of Oradour-sur-Glane -- what actually happened in the past and the way a social system functions in the present.

While individual and group perceptions provide insight into a society, they can be limited, misleading, or even contradictory. For example, are postmodern researchers prepared to credit the perspective on society offered by right-wing groups in the United States that rally white voters to oppose affirmative action, taxation, social services, cities, and immigration? The resentment and bitterness expressed by working-class white males who consistently vote for reactionary political candidates can be genuine and at the same time mask the deep inequalities and exclusionary practices that exist within the social order. In a similar way, William J. Wilson (1996), Orlando Patterson (1997:15), Manning Marable (1983), and others argue that while racism is a real force in the United States, there are phenomenon that many African Americans experience as racism which are actually the product of class stratification in a capitalist society. I am convinced that if educators want to understand and change education and participate in renaming the world, we must examine the function of racial and gender distinctions within a

stratified class society like the United States and the role that its schools play in both reproducing social inequality and maintaining social cohesion (Apple, 1979; 1982; Giroux, 1983). If we are to understand society and not just the meaning people make, explain positionality and identify possibility for change, our definitions must be historically based and our explanations rooted in broader theories (Foucault, 1980). Otherwise, we will be condemned to generalize from microstudies that may be examining special cases that lack broader applicability.

In the rest of this essay, I focus on problems within educational research that I believe arise from the examination of categories like race, gender and class as if they were independent variables, instead of aspects of a broader system of social stratification that developed in the United States, a system that has historically had elements of fluidity as well as caste-like rigidity that have been used to justify the unequal division of scarce social and economic resources. While I am convinced that a broader theory must start from a historical and class explanation of society and that other forms of discrimination must be studied within his context, developing that theory is a much larger project than we can undertake here. At this point, I am primarily raising questions, not providing answers.

People of Color

In 1903, W.E.B. Dubois (1961), referring to the racial divide separating Americans of African and European ancestry, wrote that "the problem of the Twentieth century is the problem of the color line." In contemporary educational discourse, the notion of a color line is often redefined, so that the division is drawn between people of European ancestry, who are supposedly privileged, and all other people living in the United States, who are considered subjects of oppression and natural allies in movements for social and educational change. However, there are problems with this reconceptionalization. The categories are ahistorical and monolithic, denying the individual experiences of different ethnic groups in the United States, and

suggesting that one variable, skin color, overrides all other considerations, including ethnicity, religion, gender, and economic status.

This dichotomous way of looking at the population of the United States also leads to some puzzling conclusions, particularly when people of Asian ancestry are included in the category "people of color." For example, in 1997, 69% of students at University of California Berkeley (Barron's, 1998), and 59% of the students at New York City's prestigious Stuyvesant High School were people of color (New York State Department of Education, 1997. At Berkeley this meant that 40% of the students were Asian, 31% were white, 14% were Latino/a, and 15% were members of other groups, including African Americans. At Stuyvesant the figures were 50% Asian and others, 41% white, and 4% Latino/a. Although African American children make up over 38% of the students in New York City public schools, less than 5% of the students at Stuyvesant High School were African American. While the initial figures for people of color suggest that the racial barriers described by DuBois have been broken, the second group of figures makes it clear that African Americans continue to be underrepresented in these elite educational institutions.

Defining Ethnicity

In December 1996, the Harvard Educational Review (1997) sponsored a forum on Ethnicity and Education and excerpts were published in a special theme issue of the journal. During discussion, Sonia Nieto of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst grappled with some of the problems involved in defining ethnicity. One issue was whether an English-speaking person born in New York City and a Spanish speaker born in the Caribbean were both ethnically Puerto Rican. Another concerned a young woman who told her, "My face is Korean, but that's not who I am, that's not my culture. I was adopted and raised by a (W)hite family." Nieto's response in both cases is that the definition of ethnicity is subjective. It is primarily a form of personal identity and people can be part of an ethnic group in "their own way."

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While Nieto offers an emotionally satisfying response, there are problems with this approach to defining ethnicity. The relationship between an immigrant group and its initial homeland is historically contingent, varying from group to group and era to era, and it changes over time. People of German ancestry living in the United States rarely still consider themselves German. Most Jews who came to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century were glad to sever ties with Poland and Czarist Russia.

Groups of people from the same political entity have also identified themselves in different ways. Sicilian immigrants between 1880 and 1920 did not view themselves as, and had not been considered, Italian before they arrived in the United States (Glazer and Moynihan, 1964; Weiss, 1982). Current immigrants from Vietnam are often ethnic Chinese. While it may be valid and useful to describe mainland and island Puerto Ricans in the 1950s (or 1990s) as a single ethnic group, this is something that needs to be established through research. And while the young woman has a right to describe herself as Korean if she chooses, because her family's culture and her individual experience significantly differs from the experience of members of Korean communities in the United States, an examination of her life will not explain theirs. For ethnicity to be a useful and predictive concept in educational research, definitions must include objective criteria for membership.

The Social Construction of Race

The Harvard forum on Ethnicity and Education also examined differences between concepts of race and ethnicity, focusing on the way they are experienced by people. A problem here is that race is not constructed by individuals or groups in isolation, but by and within specific societies with particular histories. In the United States, the racial designation "African American" includes people of predominately European biological ancestry (Jordan, 1971:167-178) and the category Native American includes people whose genetic make-up is predominately African (Katz, 1997). In Latin

American, people of mixed ancestry are considered members of distinct social groups, and Native Americans are members of cultural groups categorized primarily by language (Mörner, 1967).

I would argue that within the United States, the most significant difference between race and ethnicity are the way they are used to maintain social stratification within a class society that distributes power and rewards unevenly, but because of its democratic features, requires a relatively high level of hegemonic social support. Race, because it is presumed to be based on biological differences, and because these differences are more easily recognizable, creates semipermanent caste like groups that can be denied rights and scarce resources (Ogbu, 1978). Ethnicity is a more fluid category that uses cultural assimilation to expand and contract citizenship and the labor force based on the needs of the system. Both are socially constructed categories and neither is permanent. In the 19th century, the Irish, and to a lesser extent, Eastern European Jews and Sicilians, were considered distinct racial groups with inherited and inferior physical, moral and intellectual characteristics (Roediger, 1991). They later were recognized as ethnic groups, and have since largely been assimilated into a more broadly defined category of "whiteness". Asians, who were historically defined as members of subordinate races and excluded from the United States, are now being redefined as ethnic groups capable of assimilation and mobility within American society. It is conceivable that economic expansion or the formation of a new subordinate caste could lead to similar changes in the African American experience in the United States. In a recent doctoral dissertation, Martin Eisenberg (1999: 371-418) of the City University of New York, makes an interesting argument in favor of viewing attitudes towards race in the United States through a Weberian lens as an independent status category that provides for an unequal distribution of social honor, with its own historic dynamic related to, but also independent of, class

hierarchy. In this study, Eisenberg extends theoretical work done by sociologists Bologh and Mell (1994) and Gabriel and Gideon (1979: 190-212).

Race and Class

Racism remains deeply rooted in the United States and its continuing impact on African Americans as a group is well documented in a number of areas, including educational inequality, police harassment and brutality, high rates of unemployment, and segregated housing patterns. However, the impact of racism is not uniform across the black community. The breakdown of many legal and some social barriers suggests the possibility of further change in the future and creates a problem in the use of race as an isolated variable in social analyses without also taking into account class differences among African Americans. For example, while 26% of all black families and over 40% of all black children live in poverty, 74% of all black families and 60% of all black children do not live in poverty, and there is a sizable African American professional community that is not trapped in urban ghettoes (Patterson, 1997:15; Aronowitz, 1997: 189). Someone like Professor Cornel West of Harvard, as a black man, is subject to racial prejudice and exposed to continuing indignities, however his experiences as a world-class academic are significantly different from the experiences of teenagers inhabiting inner-city housing projects.

In *Race Matters* (1993), Cornel West wrote about an incident when "I left my car - a rather elegant one - in a safe parking lot and stood on the corner of 60th Street and Park Avenue to catch a taxi....After the ninth taxi refused me, my blood began to boil." West finally had to take the subway to an appointment in East Harlem. But why didn't he drive his car to the appointment? Was it because West knew the same thing that the East Asian, African, and European American cab drivers who passed by a black man heading uptown knew, that East Harlem is a dangerous place to be if you look out of place? That world, the product of both racism and class division, is

poignantly described by two black teenagers in a book about life in a housing project on the South Side of Chicago. In a section where they discuss the murder of two friends, the young men explain, "If you act like a kid in this neighborhood, you're not gonna last long. 'Cause if you play childish games in the ghetto, you're gonna find a childish bullet in your childish brain (Jones and Newman, 1997:33). West and these teenagers are all black, but they do not inhabit the same world.

Whiteness and White Skin Privilege

In "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack (1990)," Peggy McIntosh wrote, "I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege,...an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious....My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture (31)." She goes on to detail the small things in daily life that constitute white skin privilege for her.

What is missing in this statement and in McIntosh's other writings (McIntosh, 1988) is recognition that all white people do not experience life in the same way. While a social system may collectively benefit one race, ethnicity, or gender, over others, most individuals in a stratified, competitive, class society, do not experience life as advantaged. Charles Gallagher in "White Reconstruction in the University" (1995:166-185) studied white college students who view themselves, not as a privileged group by virtue of their skin color, but as people who are at a disadvantage as they enter a competitive job market. Is it more useful to describe the young people in Gallagher's study as mislead and miseducated, conveniently blind to race, ethnic, and gender inequity, or as people engaged in a struggle for limited economic rewards in an era when they are less readily available? Stanley Aronowitz argues that what has been described as the development of white ethnicity in the United States is largely a response by white workers to deindustrialization as they

struggle to maintain their economic position at a time when Blacks, women, and ethnic minorities are demanding a larger share of a shrinking number of blue collar jobs (Aronowitz, 1997). Educators must decide if examining the feelings of individuals is sufficient to explain the working of social systems.

Unity of the Oppressed

It is sometimes assumed that groups like African Americans and white women, who have experienced similar oppression in the past, share common interests and are natural allies in challenging social injustice. However, if the hallmark of capitalist society is competition between groups and individuals for limited resources and power, this is probably an unwarranted assumption. In *America Now: The Anthropology Of A Changing Culture* (1981:136-137), Marvin Harris arrived at some startling conclusions about the relationship between social mobility for African American men and white women. During and after World War II, large numbers of Blacks migrated to urban factory centers seeking economic advancement, while at the same time blue collar jobs were disappearing. New employment opportunities tended to be in the service and information industries, and in these areas, white women were preferred as employees over Black men. According to Harris, white women enjoyed a decisive advantage because they tended to be better educated, were more likely to speak standard English, were more willing to accept subservient work positions and harassment from white male supervisors, and because, while white male supervisors were prejudiced against hiring women, they were far more prejudiced against hiring Black men. Harris argues that for similar reasons, affirmative action promotions also tended to favor white women.

Dealing with Racism

In an article in the *Harvard Educational Review* , Beverly Tatum (1992) examined the sources of college student resistance to talking about race and learning about

racism, and effective classroom strategies for overcoming their resistance. I will comment on this article to help summarize the points I address in this paper.

My problem is not with the author's teaching, which is exemplary, but with the article's underlying theoretical assumptions. It distinguishes between racism, defined as a "system of advantage based on race," and prejudice, a "preconceived judgment or opinion, often based on limited information (3)." However, the author also argues that while all people have prejudices, there is a difference between the "prejudices of students of color" and "the racism of Whites students" because the "attitudes of Whites ... carry with them the social power inherent in the systematic cultural reinforcement and institutionalization of those racial prejudices" and "the system of advantage clearly operates to benefit Whites as a group."

My responses to the article are framed in the form of questions I believe educators need to consider:

* If racism is a system of advantage that is part of the way a society is organized and not just a collection of individual biases, can it be effectively analyzed independently of other aspects of the social system?

* If the problem we are analyzing is social and institutional in nature -- if we are talking about a racist system rather than the beliefs of individuals -- should the prejudices held by white students be placed in a qualitatively different category than prejudices held by students from other groups?

*When the author argued that "the system of advantage clearly operates to benefit Whites as a group," does that mean what every white person is advantaged in comparison with every person from any other group?

* Does the existence of racism in the United States mean that people who are white can never legitimately perceive of themselves as disadvantaged by the social inequalities inherent in the economic system?

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* Are the experiences of whites, blacks, students of color, or members of any social group so uniform that group members always share the same social status and ideas?

If educators want to understand the role of education in the United States today we have to design studies that take into account its history as a highly stratified, yet partially fluid society, where advantage is relative rather than absolute; where the marginally advantaged view their achievements as earned through hard work; and where the disadvantaged accept the legitimacy of stratification and the assignment of personal blame for failure. We must reject dichotomies like privileged and oppressed and white and people of color, and focus on understanding an entire society where social categories overlap, interact, and change over time. I believe that privilege and oppression are critical concepts for educational research and debate, but not when they are used to create simple dualities, and only if they are applied in the context of a broader explanation of a class stratified society.

I am aware that I run the risk of being accused of privileging class over race and gender as a category of oppression, an issue that has sharply divided activist and theorists on the left for at least the past one hundred years. However, in this paper I am not discussing degrees of oppression or evaluating the experiences of different marginalized groups. Instead, I am arguing that a class-based economic and political system, hierarchical and unequal by its nature, generates and is supported by all of these inequalities. We need to understand this system if we want to change it.

* A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in 1998 in a session sponsored by the Critical Examination of Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Gender SIG. Panelist who commented on the paper include Harry Morgan, West Georgia State University, Francisco Rios, California State University-San Marcos, Christine Sleeter, California

State University-Monterey Bay, William Watkins, University of Illinois-Chicago, and Estrella Williams-Chizhik, University of Maine.

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