Critical Pedagogy in Action:
A brief, comparative examination of educational systems in Bhutan and among the Zapatistas of Mexico

José M. Tirado

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Supervisor: Professor Brynja Elisabeth Hallsdottir

Faculty of Education Studies:
University of Iceland, School of Education
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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between education and social transformation, using a critical pedagogic perspective. I focus on two case studies: the Zapatista education system in southern Mexico and the educational reforms related to Gross National Happiness in Bhutan. I contend that there is no such thing as an “objective” pedagogy, for each context, each theoretical underpinning, and each policy implementation, serves some agenda somewhere. I also contend that bottom-up innovations are preferable to top-down mandates and the examples I cite have relevance to the shifting demographics and rapid social changes in Icelandic society. I assert that at this stage of human development, a period of late stage capitalism and “neo-liberalism”, education must be a force for transformative change and, with the case studies provided, demonstrate areas where this can be clearly seen, documenting some of the successes as well as some limitations. I contend that without a serious commitment to making education a tool for radical social and economic changes necessary to the survival of humankind, the value of said education, already under the invisible aegis of hidden curriculums or political agendas, is of little use; an assertion somewhat beyond defending in this brief comparative analysis between systems.
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Preface

It was never my intention to begin another BA but, happy that I made the choice to pursue one, I want to thank all the professors who worked so hard to make the 3 years in this program very valuable to me. I want to single out three in particular: Brynja, my Supervisor for her remarkable tolerance for delays and problems which arose in the writing of this work and for being an invaluable ally in the program, to Auður for pushing me when I wanted coddling and who saw that this degree should be entry into the PhD program (which I have been fortunate enough to have been accepted into), and to Allyson whose patient ministrations and probing enabled me to take the understandings from this program to inform my goals for the next one.

Lastly I wish to thank my children for being patient with their Papa as he labored on all these classes while they needed my attention. I think I gave them enough, but just in case, my deepest thanks to Sonja and Alvar.

This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the university code of conduct (November 7, 2003, http://www.hi.is/is/skoliinn/sidareglur) and have followed them to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited to all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with me and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work.

Signed:

Reykjavík, _14_February_.__________________ 2016_

José M. Tirado
1 Introduction

In this, my final paper for the International Studies in Education Program at the University of Iceland, I hope to present the driving motivations which have carried me to this point in the field of education and to present them unfiltered utilizing the case studies of two societies I have come to regard as emblematic of the challenges education faces in the future. That is to say, while I brought to the program many already formed ideas about the revolutionary impact of education, I have benefited from the theories, authors, lectures and materials presented in the program and have therefore expanded my own ideas (becoming further radicalized some might argue) and their content is sharper than before. Thus the occasional need to self-censor so as not to offend or challenge too severely the sensibilities of my instructors or the theoretical underpinnings of the very program they have honorably allowed me to participate in as a guest in this country. But my commitment to education has deepened and expanded and I offer this Final Thesis as not the end of my international studies in education, but as their formal beginning.

Assessments of educational systems typically center on traditionally well-trodden themes such as curriculum evaluation, teacher training, student academic outcomes, and the pluses and minuses of engaging any of those aspects with a plethora of studies and statistics. Common to most systems is the desire to educate children in reading and writing (in their primary, secondary, or other languages), mathematics, the respective history of the people, region, state or culture, training in geography and the various cultures of the world, and the sciences which may include (but are not limited to) astronomy, chemistry, physics, etc. But the “outcomes” of those changes in aspects of the educational systems, the ultimate “products” of all forms of education, are the future citizens of the country. And we may ask, if systems of education were, in fact, teaching critical thinking skills and/or effectively inculcating democratic values, then why do we have so many places bereft of even the barest hints of democracy and millions of citizens in many countries laboring under ideologies that ill-serve them and are intransigent to change? Is this the fault of education or is education only one part of the factors which go into producing an educated citizenry? And then, if an “educated citizenry” is, in fact, created and we know they are, all around the world and under
many differing forms of government, then why is our world still suffering the ravages of war and deadly competition in nearly every corner of the globe? Banks (2007) addresses this (and a bit laconically at the end) when he writes,

> Although it is essential that all students acquire basic skills in literacy, basic skills are necessary but not sufficient in our diverse and troubled world. Literate citizens in a diverse democratic society should be reflective, moral, and active citizens in an interconnected global world. They should have the knowledge, skills, and commitment needed to change the world to make it more just and democratic. The world’s greatest problems do not result from people being unable to read and write. [Emphasis added] (p. 153).

Education, as such, does not create morally upright individuals or societies. And between civil society and religious institutions, indoctrinating children, and creating a society according to the needs of either, is a necessity for the furtherance of ends not necessarily in the interests of the beneficiaries of said education. As Thomas Paine said, “One good headmaster is of more use than a hundred priests” (Royle, 1971, p. 59), obviously having more faith in a civil versus religious education. That is, as religious instruction proceeds from overtly ideological presumptions, a civil education can (and theoretically should) create an informed citizenry whose knowledge and values would be more tolerant and thus more complementary to a broader, more cosmopolitan society. And yet, civil societies too, have education systems which have not produced an end to militarism, war, pollution and other issues of deep concern. So what kind of education is needed?

Of Banks’ assertion about the “world’s greatest problems” I would suggest that they are the result of very cunning small groups of people who have neither their country nor their people’s interests at heart but only their own enrichment and that of a circle of close associates. In short, I suggest that oligarchic tendencies, whether de facto or de jure, occupy the central position of education around the world and that radical change is necessary to counter this trend. (An oligarchy is “a government in which a small group exercises control esp. for corrupt and selfish purposes”, Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2005.) Thus the need for examples of radical pedagogies around the world in order to guide this most important task of transforming the wider societies into more democratically run and just places for all its inhabitants.
All around the world, people are literally risking their lives to receive an education and a fine example of the sacrifices made is Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan. Shot through the head as a result of her crusading for the education of girls in an area with significant Taliban influence she nevertheless survived and went on to more enthusiastically continue her advocacy work for which she became the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner. She has said, in a widely circulated quote, “With guns you can kill terrorists, with education you can kill terrorism.” (Malala’s story, 2015). But one must ask, “What kind of education must we give in order to end terrorism or other ills?” That is the real question I am trying to address. As one educator has put it,

I see the role of teachers as a that of transforming the world, not just describing or interpreting the world...revolutionary critical pedagogy sets as its goal... to reclaim the public life under the relentless assault of the corporatization, privatization, and businessification [sic] of the lifeworld (which includes the corporate-academic complex) and to fight for new definitions of what public life should mean and new formations that it can take (Moraes, 2003, 130-131).

I have chosen to present and briefly examine two educational systems which were created to address significant social and cultural stresses within their respective countries, (though in both cases, not limited to the field of education) Bhutan and Mexico. However, while the first example represents a country-wide, state sponsored reevaluation of a system that was already in place, the latter example is of a breakaway section of poorer Native Amerindians (primarily Maya) in their embattled region of southern Mexico not only an attempt to preserve their way of life but also to challenge their own ideological presumptions in an ongoing way.

First, some crucial definitions of essential terms and an explanation of how I will be using them will be necessary. When we say “education” we are speaking of “the action or process of educating or of being educated [and] the knowledge and development resulting from an educational process” But what does “educating” suggest? While one meaning of education is “to provide schooling for” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary) the origin of the word (“fr. educere, to lead forth” Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary) is more suggestive of eliciting critical thought (to educe, or, “bring out”) rather than the depositing in of information. This notion of eliciting from the learner suggests a respect for the autonomy of the individual and a confidence that with guidance, the learner can evaluate the material and use it to their advantage. There is also, as will be seen here, a different, perhaps more political
dimension to education which I regard as salient. It may be represented by McLaren (2015) who wrote:

Education is that which intrudes upon our instincts and instruments of mind and augments them; it pushes us along the arcs of the stars where our thoughts can give rise to new vistas of being and becoming and to new solidarities with our fellow humans and non-humans alike. Our responsibilities for creating critical citizens should be proportional to our privilege. Today a good education is no longer seen as a social responsibility but as picking carefully from an array of consumer choices provided by a number of new gluttonous companies and corporations (McLaren, 2015, p.139).

Pedagogy too is another word we need to define, in order to understand what is meant by a critical pedagogy. Pedagogy is defined as “the art, science, or profession of teaching” or, according to the website Oxford dictionaries, “The method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept. ...” (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com). Freire (1970) uses the phrase “pedagogy of the oppressed” to refer to the special needs and intellectual frameworks essential to utilizing education for the benefit of its poorer and more oppressed recipients in a liberatory fashion. A special concern for a society’s more disadvantaged members is a hallmark of writings in this field.

But what, specifically is critical pedagogy? According to Henry Giroux, critical pedagogy refers to the process “whereby students acquire the means to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (Spring, 1994, p. 27). He further believes that “critical pedagogy gives people the ability to participate in a democratic state and the tools to equalize the distribution of power...” (Spring, p. 57). Therefore, there is a direct relationship between a pedagogy that is critical, and the state, more specifically, the proper governance of the state or we might say even more specifically, the proper state. And what would a proper state look like? It would be a democratic one, yes, but a radically democratic one. Giroux argues that there is a close interdependence between critical thinking and the democratic state; one cannot exist without the other. “For Giroux, the primary task of education is to help students understand the social construction of knowledge in the framework of power. The method of achieving this goal is critical pedagogy. [Emphasis in original]” (Spring, p. 56).
This linkage between education and the proper functioning of a democratic state is an essential component of this paper and will be referred to in the next section.

1.1 CRITICAL PEDAGOGY – ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

“Critical pedagogy is a transformational educational journey, with an outcome of guiding conscious social transformation which builds personal and communal awareness into the daily practices inside and outside the classroom” (Young, 2012, p. 16).

Critical pedagogy is a field which grew out of critical theory. According to Henry Giroux "Critical pedagogy attempts to:

1) create new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplines and creating interdisciplinary knowledge.

2) raise questions about the relationships between the margins and centers of power in schools and is concerned about how to provide a way of reading history as part of a larger project of reclaiming power and identity, particularly as these are shaped around the categories of race, gender, class, and ethnicity.

3) reject the distinction between high and popular culture so as to make curriculum knowledge responsive to the everyday knowledge that constitutes peoples' lived histories differently.

4) illuminate the primacy of the ethical in defining the language that teachers and others use to produce particular cultural practices." (Giroux, n.d. What is critical pedagogy?)

Our engagement with critical pedagogy requires that we explore, at least in brief, its broad theoretical dimensions. The key aspects of critical pedagogy as used here are centered on the broader understanding of critical theory which has as one of its core commitments a desire of social theory (including education) to change the world and not just “record information” about the world. (http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/ct1.html ). According to Giroux, there are two objectives needed in the use of a critical pedagogy, first, is to link for the students the “connections between the methods, content, and structure of a course and its significance within the larger social reality”; this is the “macro objective”, and second, the “micro objective” of unraveling the course content’s “narrowness of purpose and their content-bound path of inquiry” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, pp. 62-63). Critical pedagogy then specifically (and crucially) asks “whose future, story,

These are serious questions in any education system as the differences between elite education and that obtained by the poorer citizens in any country are easily grasped if not easily articulated. For example, the interests of a richer school obviously benefit the wealthier citizens for whom an elite education is available. Wealth is certainly a factor and privilege as well but they are social constructs which arise from particular histories and social relations. From these relations a normative (if not always clearly articulated) pedagogy is constructed within the wider society for the education of its members. Giroux and Simon define pedagogy as the “deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities [sic] are produced within and among particular sets of social relations” (Giroux and Simon, 1989, p. 239). This production of “knowledge and identities” is one which can be manipulated and organized to serve particular interests, as implied above in Giroux’s twin objectives. Thus the education system in a particular country provides an immensely powerful tool in the creation and maintenance of not only the “knowledge and identities” of a people but of the particular social and political power arrangements surrounding the people in which those identities are formed. Thus, pedagogy is an excellent window into the construction of social relations. But such an examination is not simply about school systems. As Brookfield (2003) notes,

Critical pedagogy should not be equated with just thinking reflectively about teaching practices … It springs from a deep conviction that society is organized unfairly and that dominant ideology provides a justification for the uncontested reproduction of a capitalist system that should be seen for what it is - as exploitative, racist, classist, sexist, and spiritually diminishing (Brookfield, 2003, p. 141).

Some examples wherein a critical pedagogy might have the most impact are in gender, class and race analysis. Marxist theoretician and feminist Angela Davis wrote that, “Within the existing class relations of capitalism, women in their vast majority are kept in a state of financial servitude and social inferiority not by men in general but rather by the ruling class. Their oppression serves to maximize the efficacy of domination” (Davis, 1998, p. 185). This domination is partly sustained and supported by the system of education in place, which in turn is supported by assumptions about the role of women and thoughts about gender relations in the wider society. (This issue has particular relevance in the example of the Zapatista communities).
McLaren and other theorists who remain connected to Marxist analysis also believe that “schools... act as vital supports for, and developers of, the class relation, at the core of capitalist society and development.” (Moraes, 2003, p. 119). Examination of this is a threat, however, as hooks notes because, “[t]he unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained” (hooks, 1994, p. 39). This unspoken need for containment both reinforces the sense of powerlessness to change things, and internalizes the very unwillingness to challenge relationships within the classroom or even to engage in such questioning. Development of a consciousness around these issues is the first and possibly most important step towards understanding the deep set assumptions within the classroom for “[t]he development of the conscience is the foundation of critical pedagogy” (Young, 2012, p. 16.). And of course, in order to transform society, we must first understand it.

We can see then that critical pedagogy entails a practical and transformative element designed to break away from mere theorizing and instead actively engage, for the purpose of real transformation, the society we are examining. Brookfield (2003) is explicit in this regard:

As such, [critical pedagogy] has an explicitly transformative dimension [for] it is concerned to teach people how they can recognize and resist dominant ideology and how they can organize to create social forms that are genuinely democratic and that reject capitalist domination. To the extent that it ushers in these forms, critical pedagogy can be called transformative.” (Brookfield, p. 141).

This relation to transformative education or transformative learning is a related step as he adds, most relevantly for me and my own research that, “Transformatiive learning is learning in which the learner comes to a new understanding of that causes a fundamental reordering of the paradigmatic assumptions she holds and leads her to live in a fundamentally different way.” (Brookfield, p. 142). In this view, education becomes a powerful tool for human liberation. Many of those working in the field of critical pedagogy become, in effect, radical educators, revolutionaries of a sort who are at the forefront of the various modern-day struggles for liberation.
2 TWO CASE STUDIES: BHUTAN AND THE ZAPATISTAS

2.1 BHUTAN

2.1.1 Background/History

Located between Tibet (China) and India, Bhutan is a small - under half the size of the US state of Indiana (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015) – mainly mountainous, forested country in south Asia. Estimates of its population vary, from 741,000 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015) to “766,000” (UN Data, 2016) to “810,000 to 2.2 million” (Mustafa, 2005, ¶ 1). These disparities are due, in large part, to amounts which include or exclude the large percentage of Bhutan’s population who are of a different ethnic background than the politically dominant Ngalop’s, only one of the country’s many minority groups.

According to Giri (2004) Bhutan is a “multi-ethnic, -cultural, -lingual and – religious society with three major ethnolinguistic groups” (p. 353). These are the Ngalung (also known as Ngalong, Ngolop, or Drukpa), the elite from where the monarchy originate who are practitioners of Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism and who were originally from Tibet until the 17th century CE (18%); the Sarchhop (Indo-Burmese farmers who live in the East) at 33% (Giri, 2003) though other estimates say they are 1/6, or almost 17% of Bhutan’s population (Acharya, 2010) and who are possibly the “earliest inhabitants of Bhutan” (Wolf, 2012, p. 8); and the Lhotsampas, literally “those living in the south or southerners” (Wolf, p. 8) a group of mainly Hindu Nepalis “who migrated from Nepal and India to Bhutan where they settled along the Bhutan/India border between 1865 and 1939” (Evans, 2010, p. 26) and who represent between 25-43% of the population (Giri, 2004, p. 354). The Lhotsampas, a “borderland” people (Evans, 2010) are not a monolithic group although their shared efforts to maintain Nepali culture and customs “are recognized by some factions of the ruling elite as a threat to the integrity, culture and identity of the country” (Wolf, p. 8). In addition to these large groupings, other smaller ethnic minorities include Brokpas (nomads from Tibet), Mons (who regard themselves as the oldest inhabitants) Khens, Birmis (nomads in the east), Lhops or Doyas (who claim to be aboriginal inhabitants), Lepchas (from Sikkhim or Indian-Nepali descent), Bodos, and finally, Tephoos (Wolf, p. 9). The Ngalong “dominate the socioeconomic and political elite and decision-making institutions of the
country” (Wolf, p. 8). This domination has led to some controversy as in 1985 a “Citizenship Act” was passed “introducing strict requirements for citizenship that are very difficult for most Lhotsampa to meet” (Niestroy, Schmidt, & Esche, 2013, p. 59). Thus, one can see where selective population estimates might benefit one group or another according to the interests of those publishing and making policy according to those figures.

2.1.2 The system in question: Gross National Happiness and educational reform

In a 2005 Time Magazine article, “What about Gross National Happiness?” GNH was presented as an alternative to the traditional economic measuring tools of Gross National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and which focused instead on a different set of well-being standards over assuming that citizens are “better off” if they are “consuming more apples and buying more cars” (Mustafa, 2005, ¶ 2). The article listed the “four pillars of GNH” as “economic self-reliance, a pristine environment, the preservation and promotion of Bhutan’s culture, and good governance in the form of democracy” (Mustafa, ¶ 1). In addition, nine broad “domains” further expand the GNH scope: “psychological well-being, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, ecological diversity and resilience” (http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/nine-domains/).

It began in the 1970’s when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck transferred power to a constitutional monarchy which “was precipitated by extensive administrative reforms, decentralization and democratization efforts, the latter carried out at the local level” (Niestroy, Schmidt, & Esche, p.57). One can describe the interest in replacing measuring standards such as GNP with GNH as “an attempt to redefine development philosophy away from material-centric focuses, and more toward holistic and non-material ones” (Chua, 2008, p. 3). In their article “Bhutan: Paradigms Matter” (2013) Niestroy, Schmidt, and Esche describe the Bhutanese effort in this way: “Bhutan is a model of independent and strategic policy development in which intelligent, effective and comprehensive sustainability practices adhere to the concepts of the common good and intergenerational justice” (p. 55). Their assessment continues to tout the higher economic growth, increase in HDI (Human Development Index) indices, lower poverty rates and a more sustainable set of environmentally-friendly practices (p. 56).

But what exactly is the GNH relationship to education? Cokl & Cokl (2010) describe the educational system in Bhutan as “based upon the unique notion of Gross
National Happiness (GNH) which assumes that, for the wellbeing of the people, it is essential to include their spiritual and cultural needs in the process of development” (p. 4). They add,

[T]he current Bhutanese philosophy of education is ... based on the following objectives: ensuring the realization of the innate potential of each and every child; instilling an awareness of the nation’s unique cultural heritage and values, both traditional and universal; preparing young people for the world of work, instilling in them the dignity of labour and creating an awareness of the importance of and the many opportunities which can be found in agriculture as an occupation (p. 4).

Nevertheless, they admit that while “there is no compulsory education in Bhutan” the languages of educational instruction are in Dzongkha and English (p. 6), two languages in which only the dominant ethnic Ngalung have an advantage. In addition, as clear-cut curricula objectives do not exist in any one place, Riley (2011) and Adler (2015) describe several governmental initiatives to address this by inviting outside educators to assist them in concretizing the broad theoretical objectives of GNH into workable and practically applicable curricula. Adler (2015) describes 10 “non-academic life skills” which were created to be used as an experimental design in a number of Bhutanese schools totaling over 8000 students. (The ethnic makeup of the students is however, not mentioned). Two hypotheses were tested, “(1) Does the GNH Curriculum raise well-being? and, (2) Does increasing well-being improve academic performance?” The results were statistically positive on both counts. Of particular interest to us here it can be noted that “increased academic performance by more than .5 standard deviation” was connected to 3 factors “higher connectedness, more perseverance, and more engagement” (http://www.ipositive-education.net/gross-national-happiness-and-positive-education-in-bhutan/) Riley (2011) notes that a teacher training program she attended in 2009 was designed “to develop the capacity of teachers to develop and implement actions to promote GNH schools” (¶ 4). However, both these initiatives occurred, it should be noted, more than 30 years after the proposal of GNH was introduced.

2.1.3 Discussion
Bhutan presents us with a challenging task: to separate the remarkably humane and lofty sentiments behind its desire to submit GNH as an alternative measure of a country’s well-being, from the less romantic realities on the ground made up of
reported ethnic tensions, refugee creation and accusations of torture, rape, and ethnic cleansing in an effort to promote a homogenous culture on a heterogeneous populace. This more critical perspective, however, is not one this writer encountered a great deal in looking at the literature on GNH. Agreeing with McDonald (n.d.) that “in the absence of a detailed articulation of what GNH exactly means, many commentators have been left to fill in the unspoken blanks with suppositions and propositions which may or may not be appropriate given the unwritten grounding of a Buddhist development philosophy” (n.d., pp. 1-2). That is, given the historical allure of Shangri-la-like Eastern kingdoms in the Western imagination most descriptions have been positive and, in fact, glowing. But a practical assessment must try to be more cautious. Asserting that Bhutan’s “transition to institutionalized democracy has been much smoother than that of Nepal, largely because the process in Bhutan has been ‘top-down’ and controlled” (Lawoti, 2010, p. 171) we should not assume a benevolent character to all such top-down prescriptions for the well-being of a people. Bhutan, in that regard, is lucky, it has its own unique Buddhist culture and the pressures to open what was once a very closed society should also be taken into consideration. In addition, critiques of the GNH ideals are not limited to traditionally left assertions of the rights of minorities.

2.1.4 Review

Our review of Bhutan’s system should not shy away from critical examination nor diminish its positive goals and accomplishments. Nevertheless, the system in place in Bhutan can be distinguished for our review. We might summarize the Bhutanese example then in seven major points:

1. Top Down
2. Religious-oriented (Buddhism vs. Hindu)
3. Ostensibly apolitical No overt discussions but implicit favoritism to certain groups over others
4. Gender issues not overtly addressed
5. Static
6. Exclusive - concentrated on buttressing Buddhist (elite) values for the ethnic elite power structure in whose service the entire project was built
7. Enthusiastically sharing its vision of GNH--to gain elite support (and mask internal conflicts?)
It is a system of ideals founded by the previous King, fostered by directives which came from the government of ministers made up of the King’s subjects and from his ethnic group and puts into place a decidedly Buddhist framework; one of the two major religions of the country. Political reform or overtly political issues (the country’s large minority population, drug abuse, etc.) are avoided and gender issues appear not directly spoken of. As a system, it seeks out input from the international community (sponsoring conferences and papers via the International Conference on Gross National Happiness, http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/2015-gnh-conference/) but one would think the aim for “democracy” should come from the people. It presents a system that is adjusting to realities but is aimed for a static and uniform implementation and it’s exclusively Buddhist reliance alienates the large numbers of Hindu and others whose cultural practices and ways are also worthy of consideration. Thus the focus on the Buddhist identity and active promotion of only that “face” of the society appears to be a strategy aimed at securing foreign support for a very specific internal agenda of a specific elite part of the country’s population. Education in this manner represents the opposite of eliciting from the people solutions to problems which plague them and from whom practical, applicable solutions might best be found.

2.2 THE ZAPATISTAS

2.2.1 Background/History

The Zapatistas form the most important resistance movement of the last two decades. They are a visible counterweight to the despoiling and rape of the planet and the subjugation of the poor by global capitalism [and] gave global resistance movements a new language, drawn in part from the indigenous communal Mayan culture, and a new paradigm for action...

- Chris Hedges, 2014

In Chiapas, Mexico’s southernmost and poorest state, live about a million Native Amerindians of three main groups: the Mixes-Zoque, the Maya, and the Chiapa. Representing almost a million of the total 3.5 million inhabitants of the state (whose remaining population, about 65%, is mainly mestizo, or mixed indigenous and European with some small numbers of African ancestry descended from slaves in the 16th century) a third do not even speak Spanish making Chiapas one of the most highly concentrated indigenous sections in the country. The Tzeltal, the Tzotil and the Ch’ol are the major linguistic sub-groups, all Maya-related languages. For over 500 years they
have fought to maintain their languages and culture, and avoid the assimilation which has been a part of many indigenous people in Mexico. The region also hosts important archaeological sites such as Palenque (of the historic Maya and now a World Heritage Site) and the older stone structures of the Olmecs. (Chiapas, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiapas#Indigenous_population). It is also a region extremely rich in coffee production.

On Jan. 1, 1994, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect and was being heralded as a new day for “free trade” in both the US and Mexican press, the EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista Liberacion Nacional, or the Zapatista National Liberation Army) initiated an uprising in the Chiapas region, declaring war against the Mexican government (http://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/1st-Declaration-of-the-Lacandona-Jungle.pdf) occupying governmental offices and land and engaging in a 12 day insurrection which resulted in hundreds of casualties (Zapatista timeline, n.d.). While overwhelmed by military forces the Zapatistas managed to arouse international indignation against the Mexican government’s treatment of the native population and achieved a huge amount of solidarity from people around the world causing the Mexican government considerable embarrassment and forcing a ceasefire. The precipitating element within the international agreement which prompted the insurrection was the removal from the Mexican Constitution guarantees for the ejido agricultural system, a system which ensured preservation of communal land for the people. With the removal of the 2 acts preserving the system, the Indians knew that they would soon be landless squatters, subject to removal and permanent destitution. They felt no choice and while armed with few weapons and little training, they still captured the world’s attention for their Sisyphean struggle.

Subcommandante Marcos, the public face of the Zapatista rebellion from its begins to 2014 when he stepped down, was one of the interested Mexican intellectuals who, some years before, seeing the plight of the people, decided to help (he is said to be a Mestizo former university professor, named Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, who as “a member of a Marxist-Leninist sect in Mexico City … somehow found the imagination to move to the Lacondón jungle in the 1980s …” (Lynd & Grubacic, 2008, p. 12)). The plight of the indigenous is poignantly described in a letter written in 1994 to children in Guadelajara schools:

For our children there are no schools or medicines, no clothes or food, not even a dignified roof under which we can store our poverty … For our boys and girls
there is only work, ignorance and death... Our children have to begin work at a very young age... our children’s toys are the hoe, the machete, and the axe; when they are barely able to walk, playing and suffering, they go out looking for firewood, clearing brush and planting... They cannot go to school to learn Spanish because work kills the days and sickness kills the nights. This is how our children have lived and died for 501 years (Davies, 2010, ¶ 3).

What he found was not only immense poverty and sickness but something else that was remarkably inspiring: “In the jungle, these Marxists encountered Mayans who had been living a decentralized, communal, essentially anarchist way of life for hundreds if not thousands of years” (Lloyd & Grubacic, p. 13). This discovery led to an amalgamation of ideas, anarcho-syndicalist, Marxist, and indigenous from which the Zapatistas were able to carve out some autonomy in their own regions.

2.2.2 The system in question: Zapatista Education

Johnston (2000) describes the paradoxical Zapatista rebellion nicely:

Defying expectations of rigidity and violence, the Zapatistas embraced pluralism, eschewed Marxist rhetoric, maintained a relatively horizontal organizational structure, and even introduced a revolutionary law on women. They demanded democracy, yet steadfastly refused to turn in their arms. At the same time, the EZLN members have not acquired any new weapons since the cease-fire, but have instead used their resources to alleviate poverty in the indigenous communities (p. 463).

Even the armed aspect of the Zapatista struggle receives de-emphasis from an unlikely source, its former leader, Subcommandante Marcos who said of their weapons, that they are ultimately, “weapons that aspire to uselessness” (Johnston, p. 464). In short, being an armed movement is not their goal. Staying alive—and autonomous—is, however. Esteva (1998) confirms this contradictory nature of the Zapatista project by saying of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) that they are “a revolutionary group with no interest in seizing power; an army shooting civil resistance and nonviolence; a social and political movement renouncing any public position; a locally and culturally rooted organization with a global scope...” (p. 153). So what of their educational system? The education the children receive is uniquely geared to their circumstances. It is written that

[c]hildren go to school carrying maize, beans and firewood. They know that if they go to the government schools they will lose their culture, language and
tradition. In the government schools they are taught as individuals, in order to lose their sense of community as the basis of life... This is truly education from below (Davies, ¶ 31).

The education system among the Zapatistas (or, “neo-Zapatistas” as Rodriguez, (2006) uses) relies on local control within each of the caracoles, (“snails”) or regional areas. Teachers are called “education promoters” under the belief that all people have something to contribute to each other, and none are paid. All are selected by the community being given housing and food and it is considered an honor to receive this cargo, a Maya concept of service to the community. They receive two levels of training spanning a six year period. In the last two years they learn how to teach adults reading and writing (Davies, ¶10). Once an education promoter has gained experience, they are then charged to teach others. In one caracole, four levels of education, three days a week from 7am to 1pm are recognized: “Wake up” is a preschool level ages 4-5 where songs and games predominate, “New Dawn” is next, “New Creation” third, and then “Path Towards the Future” last. Beginning in New Dawn, learners are taught how to read, write, do math, and learn “life and environment”, languages and history. (Davies, ¶¶ 8-10). At Oventik, another caracole, primary education lasts about 6 years with secondary lasting three more. Schools are open five days a week with the main instruction in their native language but Spanish is also required to be able to communicate with other communities. Non Zapatista community members are also welcome to send their children. (Davies, ¶¶ 12-16). Other caracoles have similar structures. A common theme is that “Education ...is compulsory until old age...as it is essential for the construction of autonomy” (Davies, ¶ 23). At La Realidad caracole, it was said that the “system is to provide the children with the basic skills and knowledge needed to hold positions of responsibility within the autonomous government structure” (Rodriguez, p. 77). At Nuevo Horizonte caracole, if an education promoter needs to leave for a period of time his/her home is taken care of, animals are looked after, and the work they would normally provide is done by others so that their other community responsibilities are met (Rodriguez, p. 78).

The system throughout the Zapatista autonomous regions is supported by many from outside those communities, students, activists, and others from urban areas in Mexico as well as from overseas. Assistance in building schools, selling locally made products and coffee are some of the ways they have both remained in the public eye and have protected themselves from governmental interference. The role of women has also received a great deal of attention. “Since 1994, Zapatista women of all ages
have been gradually incorporated into the political administration of agrarian, education, health, and productive sectors on the communal, municipal, and regional levels”. This is a significant step up although “we cannot yet speak of participatory equality” (Barronet, 2008. p. 120). The deep patriarchal mores of the indigenous peoples is something openly examined and addressed although the EZLN admits there remains a significant way to go.

2.2.3 Discussion
On the website Schools for Chiapas we read that,

Education in Zapatista communities is not confined to the classroom: teaching and learning takes place in the health centers, in the women’s cooperatives, and most significantly out in the fields of the traditional Mayan corn field, known as the milpa. (http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/advances/schools/).

There we also read about the four major divisions of the schools’ success: schools “of dignity”, “women’s empowerment” “sustainable agriculture” and “community-based education for health”. An entire way of life is being presented and worked on, apparently seeking a well-rounded system. As mentioned above, while there remains work to be done in the area of women’s equality, we can also see that,

Zapatista women wrote their Revolutionary Women’s Law in 1993 to guarantee women the right to a fair wage, to choose their partner, to decide the number of children they want to have, to healthcare, to education, to participate in community affairs, and to hold political office.

(http://www.schoolsforchiapas.org/advances/womens-empowerment/)

This is one important area which keeps expanding as the Zapatistas regularly address old ways (“bad customs” (Baronnet, p. 120)) or new developments which arise. The system as a whole however, is one geared to “provide children with the knowledge and skills needed to understand the oppression and exploitation to which they have become subject; to make them capable of representing and governing themselves autonomously; and to be able to defend their rights as indigenous people and Mexican citizens” (Rodriguez, p. 87).

2.2.4 Review
In reviewing the Zapatista community schools and education system, we can see some clear differences from the earlier Bhutanese example. We can compare the seven factors thusly:
1. Bottom-up
2. Areligious
3. Heavily political (anarcho-syndicalists, Marxism, etc.)
4. Gender issues organically came to the foreground and are addressed
5. Dynamic - accepts ongoing dialectical criticism and renewal
6. Ostensibly inclusive - though geared to favor the original Maya tribes who supported the Zapatista agenda
7. Not too concerned with “teaching” its values externally, though quite open to visitors (and funding to assist their project)

The Zapatista struggle, while ostensibly about the preservation of a group of indigenous peoples against neo-liberalism and the attendant degradation of their livelihoods and cultural existence is also quite openly an educative struggle. Johnston (2000) refers to this as the “pedagogical motivations” of the Zapatistas and describes them as “more motivated by the desire to communicate the truth of their suffering than [...] a program to obliterate their enemies” adding that their goal was “to educate and raise consciousness using one of the only tools available to them – armed uprising” (p. 466). Such consciousness raising should lead to innovative but determined efforts to expand their autonomy and with that, ways to survive in a hostile political environment which continues to seek their land. Raising consciousness is not only a Freirean goal, it is a Gramscian goal and a Fanonian goal as well. It is the desire of all revolutionary movements to raise the consciousness of their people in order to empower the people and thereby transform their world. And this is precisely what the Zapatistas are attempting.
3 DISCUSSION

“Critical revolutionary educators seek to realize in their classrooms democratic social values and to believe in their possibilities - consequently, we argue that they need to go outside of the protected precincts of their classrooms and analyze and explore the workings of capital there as well, to workplaces, to neighborhoods, to urban zones, to rural communities, and so forth.” (Moraes, p. 117)

Critical pedagogy presents a challenge to normative ways of speaking about education. For example, two of the authors cited here, bell hooks and Angela Y. Davis were both on a list of the “top ten most dangerous academics in America” (Horowitz, 2006). Challenging not only right-wing and corporate aspects of modern education in the West but the very understanding of education in a world beset by innumerable crises, critical pedagogy requires that we engage the education system in such a way, wherever it is examined, that it can be remade to benefit people and the planet. This can only be achieved if it directly confronts the current system in ways which maximize the potential to change said system. And confronting a system as large and powerful as the one in which these two scholars work is dangerous activity indeed.

Harris (2004) gives another excellent definition of critical pedagogy using McLaren’s voice to articulate it saying that “in a nod to the original Freirian vision...the purpose of critical pedagogy [is] simply taking ‘responsibility not only for how we act individually in society, but also for the system in which we participate’” (Harris, 2004, p. 404). This should not be something controversial or particularly unusual and yet this is not the sense we get from most students exiting school, certainly not in most places in the West. Harris uses McLaren again when she quotes him as saying that “critical theorists are united in their objectives: to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices” (Harris, 2004, p. 404) [Emphasis added]. Again and again we see this theme among critical theorists and, in particular those who write about critical pedagogy: that education must be in service to broad human demands for freedom, equality, justice, and democracy in ways it has not, up to now, been fulfilling.

Giroux argues that the “existing social order” contains a “deep grammar” (Giroux, 1983, p. 3) which is generally unspoken but ever-present. For Giroux,
education is the primary locus of ideological control over the masses by its inculcating values and structures of thought, in addition to overt ideas, which serve the interests of this social order which, in our present time, is both connected to and dominated by capitalism. Thus it is capitalism which needs to be openly addressed and yet, such open questioning of the economic system within which education in most of the world occurs is rarely discussed. Critical pedagogy must then address, and then question the intrusion of capitalist ideas or capitalist intellectual intrusions into the education systems we look at. One example perhaps would be the use of standardized tests.

Bennett & Brady (2014) say that the “original motivations for securing standardized outcomes on a national level are rooted in conservative movements for industrial management” (Bennett & Brady, p. 149) Thus, critiques that critical pedagogy and its adherents should be rejected because their ideological moorings are rooted in Marx and the Left, ring hollow. These capitalist inspired “alternatives” or reforms do not even have the benefit of educational primacy in their orientation and are, instead, by-products of capitalist, corporate and factory oriented processes intended not for education purposes but in producing cookie-cutter employees who can produce for their owners the right amount of “products” which are to be enjoyed by their owners! This is not education. They add, “the original motivations for high stakes assessment are rooted in undemocratic movement for social efficiency that arose from scientific management, which categorized and tracked students as different kinds of workers, maintaining a strict divide among social classes” (Bennett & Brady, p. 149). For them the “learning oriented assessment” (LOA) emphasis “is not at all a genuine attempt to decrease the ‘race gap’, improve education, and get students onto an even playing field. It is part of the broad bipartisan campaign to privatize the system of public education. It is also a way for the wealthy to control the working class (increasingly becoming the working poor) and maintain class stratification (Bennett & Brady, p. 150) [Emphasis added].

Alternative theoretical schools or systems often come from the Marxist left traditions of anarchism or, libertarian socialism from which many Zapatista structures are influenced by. This is partly because “libertarian-anarchists locate the forces working against the free exercise of reason in the political control of education by the state and powerful economic forces” (Spring, 1994, p.89). Breaking that control then becomes necessary for the critical pedagogue. Spring believes that “authoritarian and democratic states, as well as global corporations, are increasingly managing citizens and workers by using educational systems to shape behaviors and attitudes and to
control the types of ideas distributed to the population” (Spring, p 167). Establishment of schools and school systems which arise out of the communities which will make use of them, uninfluenced by corporate demands or financial considerations then seems a practical idea. This would then open up the people to development of a higher consciousness which included awareness the class divisions which formerly kept them divided. Such a consciousness would, Freire argued, “allow people to understand that humans make history and that, as participants in history they also can make history...The major goals of Freire’s educational method is to free the consciousness of all people and to change necrophilic personalities [controlling] into biophilic [loving life and freedom] ones. This goal is linked to his beliefs about revolutionary change” (Spring, p. 157). Finally we can say that critical pedagogy theory gives us a language with which we can translate these real world political concerns into something usable in the classroom, to inform and enlighten learners “not only into mundane social relations but into the very sensibilities and needs that form the personality and psyche” (Giroux, 1983, p. 5). Critical pedagogy can play a crucial role in the early development of that personality and psyche, and it is for that reason I believe education to be an essential part of the struggle for human liberation from all oppressive bonds.
4 CONCLUSION

“Education has fundamental connections with the idea of human emancipation, though it is constantly in danger of being captured for interests. In a society disfigured by class exploitation sexual and racial oppression, and in chronic danger of war and environmental destruction, the only education worth the name is one that forms people capable of taking part in their own liberation” (Giroux, 1983, p. 114).

We live in a time when continuation of the status quo, economically, politically and socially seems inadequate to the enormity of the challenges facing humanity as a whole. As one commentator put it, “When 85 individual people have more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the population, it causes a ripple effect that has lasting implications for humanity.” (From http://www.truth-out.org/progressivepicks/item/33992-runaway-inequality-is-ripping-us-apart). These “ripple effects” extend to all corners of the globe because the massive transformation of wealth and resources to a tiny group is certain to have choking effects on the wealth of those not so fortunate. And while the larger group of poor may not have the power to effect much in the way of change, the effects on future generations, on those children who will grow up seeing one reality around them and another in the schools which act as de facto institutions of the status quo, will be great. We must ask, what role can education play to remake the world into a better, fairer one? The objectives of critical education are in that direction and the two examples presented are instructive.

We could most basically summarize the two cases in this way:

4.1 Two Case Studies


2. Zapatista communities: Bottom up revolutionary community changes which involve constant reassessment, changing even gender dynamics in traditional society.

There have been a number of critical pieces done on the reforms and system in Bhutan which, in other media receives otherwise glowing reviews. B. R. Giri’s, “Bhutan: ethnic politics in the dragon kingdom” (2004) is a significant look at the ethnic troubles which
underlie the near manic push towards a unified culture and educational system advocated by the dominant minority. Mishra uses the term “demographic engineering” (which appropriately sounds like a euphemism for “ethnic cleansing”) to describe the forced relocation of “about 100,000 people – about one-sixth of the population, nearly all of them of Nepalese origin” (Mishra, 2013, ¶2) in order to fulfill royal directives to unify the country under its own ethnically preferred group the Buddhist Ngalop (or Bhote) which represent perhaps 50% of the population over the ethnically Nepalese and predominantly Hindu Lhosampa or, “people of the south” (Mishra, ¶ 5).

In critiquing GNH we should not focus on the lack of practical applications to date nor should we exclusively look outside the framework of GNH into longstanding national policies designed to continue policies which arose from conflicts which originated long before the concept was conceived. But it cannot be ethically forgiven to ignore the contradictions of GNH promotion by a government accused of forced relocation, terror, rape, torture and intimidation of people who simply because they are not part of the dominant ethnic group and despite their having resided in Bhutan for generations. If we are legitimately eager to promote widespread happiness as a societal goal, then that goal must be uniformly applicable and utilized on all members of a given society, even if, by governmental definition, such persons are not counted as citizens.

That said, one writer (McDonald, n.d.) suggests that the bulk of articles written on the subject of GNH fall into three categories: first, “Western ways” of doing things must be carefully checked as they cannot be wholesale adopted without some cultural disruption, second that wholesale adoption of Buddhist principles is recommended, and third, a look at parallel efforts which are attempting analogous changes in their systems (¶¶1-2).

Secondly, the reliance upon and carefully selective presentation of laudable Buddhist values upon which the GNH system is built masks the fact that about half the country is Hindu or non-Buddhist and thus, this intentionally excludes huge sectors of the country’s population (for the political purposes of ethnically “cleansing” the society of its non-Buddhist population to ensure elite stability?). Lastly, the existence of “universally” applicable standards regarding ambiguous, culturally relative notions such as happiness is debatable to say the least. Without distinctly comparable factors which can be compared and clearly desirable objectives and outcomes, what we are left with is well-articulated, well-intentioned pabulum. Thus, any government’s efforts to promote a purportedly universally applicable standard for measuring the well-being of
people should at the very least provide some evidence that its efforts within its own borders are universally applied and have had demonstrably salutary effects on the populace. Anything less is, in my opinion, manipulative or hypocritical and warrants dismissal.

But on the other hand we must also be wary of Romantic notions of revolutionary struggles which elicit our sympathy solely with the allure of dashing, balaclava-clad, pipe smoking leaders on horseback whose brave pronouncements against inequality and injustice stir the passions. The Zapatista struggle is a real one but also a near-desperate one, facing phenomenal odds and a system which remains determined to consolidate its hold on coffee-rich regions for a world determined to sate its coffee consumption at all costs. Those costs are high. They are the blood of those resisting moves to break up the land guarantees contained in the old Mexican Constitution guaranteeing the stability of the ejidos which has now been already rescinded and is slowing whittling away the last hopes of the indigenous peoples of the Chiapas region.

This would be an easy summary, neglecting cultural, religious, national and even geographical differences between the two societies in question. It would be a gloss at what are extremely different places with very different histories facing very different circumstances. And yet, we can still make a comparison because what we are examining here is the educational dimension of the changes both societies have endeavored to implement. In that, we can see areas of convergence and distinct divergence.

In the examples given here, subtle coercion to abandon previously held religious identity and conform to the dominant political structure’s Buddhism represents a challenge to the notion of an education which ostensibly is designed to impart Buddhist values such as “empathy … and reciprocity” (Cokl & Cokl, 2010, p. 4). In Bhutan, an elevated (some argue, pie-in-the-sky elevated, e.g., without practical feasibility) system is produced and then mandated and then international scholars are invited, symposia are held and the intractable poverty, increasing drug usage and enormous refugee and minority issues remained unresolved. Among the Zapatistas, education means teaching the people to re-think their existential viability in creating new autonomous zones for their people within which new forms of education and living are being experimented with.

Thus “education” has a role to play, a role it must play if any of us are to survive.
Examples from the world of “alternative education”, from Montessori to Waldorf (as pedagogically theoretical systems), from St. John’s to Schumacher College (as institutions), abound but what might be missing is the “real-world” penetration of the curricula, lectures, theories and practices of these schools into the life of their respective societies. In this paper I have presented two cases from non First World societies which attempt, in varying degrees of successes just that. A critical pedagogy which seeks relevance must be courageous enough to advocate for a universal education for all but must address as well the contexts in which education occurs, global as well as local. Both examples provided here have universal components and have been touted as exemplars for others to follow. In that sense both are models which can be utilized in the creation of education systems elsewhere. Both have valuable components and both possess built-in values which are valuable. In the Bhutanese case, compassion, empathy and respect for all life are key Buddhist ideas incorporated into the system. Among the Zapatistas, independence, equality, and solidarity are valued and taught. But which system has both practical applications and yet universal values which might be adapted to other, local needs elsewhere?

If the purpose of a critical pedagogy is to teach, at the most fundamental level of what that word teach means, the relationship between the world outside the classroom and the relationship to what happens in the classroom, then what is being taught in the two examples provided? In the Zapatista case teaching is the on-going, dialectically charged activity which empowers the Zapatistas to both resist outside forces which threaten them but also to constantly engage critically internal forces which require constant reconsideration – relations with women are a clear example here. In the case of Bhutan, Buddhist values are clearly but cleverly emphasized in order to promote a system designed to buttress the political power of one ethnic group over several others. The Zapatistas accept visitors who wish to learn from them but most are met with friendly admonishments to go back to their home countries and enact what they need specific to their needs and not copy the Zapatista way which, after all, is uniquely based upon a specific historical and cultural context. The Bhutanese authorities on the other hand, actively promote GNH, hold international seminars on the topic and have received a considerable amount of favorable press coverage along with increased tourist monies associated with the hidden Buddhist kingdom mystique.

These are different responses and one may be forgiven for being skeptical about this latter case but in the review here, I have gotten the distinct impression that
only one of the examples will survive, and one will thrive and yet, perhaps counter-intuitively, my sad conclusions assume that the more authentic of the two, the Zapatista struggle, is the one which will be destroyed, and the example more conducive to a message the West enjoys hearing, of the successful and enlightened Buddhist kingdom’s Buddhist value approach to their economy, will be the one which wins. Only time will tell, this is certain. But while time in a relatively isolated Bhutan may yet insure relative stability, time is not on the side of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico. With that in mind I still believe the Zapatistas offer us an example we can modify and adapt to suit communities all around the world. Because, in the final analysis, the combined crises facing all of us requires a new, and comprehensive approach. As Lynd and Grubacic write,

Latin American liberation theology, and the Zapatistas most incisively, have given us a new hypothesis. It combines Marxist analysis of the dynamics of capitalism with a traditional spirituality, whether Native American or Christian, or a combination of the two. It rejects the goal of taking state power and sets forth the objective of building a horizontal network of centers of self-activity. Above all the Zapatistas have encouraged young people all over the earth to affirm: We must have a qualitatively different society! Another world is possible! Let us begin to create it, here and now! (Lynd & Grubacic, pp. 10-11)
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