

Joe L Kincheloe and Shirley R Steinberg, *Changing Multiculturalism Changing Education Series, Buckingham, Open University Press 1997. Pb 0 335 19483 4*

Review by Dr Stephen Bigger, 1998.

This book avowedly comes from the stable that leads from John Dewey to Paulo Freire, in whose memory the book is dedicated. Freire's emancipatory and transformative work with the "oppressed" provides a powerful theme. It explores how our consciousness of race, class and gender has been produced, and how it impacts upon our sense of identity. It brings together two American scholars, Kincheloe from cultural studies and Steinberg from educational drama. It focuses on the diversity of 'multiculturalisms' and begins its analysis from the perspective of the many who are in 'diaspora', living and even born into a land not their ancestral home.

Multiculturalism, a problematic term, is clarified into a position called 'critical multiculturalism', described with approval insofar as it explores "the way power shapes consciousness" [p.25] and has an "emancipatory commitment to social justice and the egalitarian democracy that accompanies it" [p.26] in contrast to "a moral emptiness to pedagogies that attempt to understand the world without concurrently attempting to change it". Teachers need to have experienced transformation if they are to teach transformatively. The pedagogy comes out of the "concern with the intersection of power, identity and knowledge"[p.29]. White people therefore need to "rethink their understanding of their own ethnicity" and reformulate whiteness in terms of justice, egalitarianism and community [p.30]. In a similar way, a study of the status of women requires a reformulation of masculinity by men. Race, gender and class are seen as linked as forms of oppression rooted in social and economic structures. These forces of oppression play out in the classroom, through which pupils construct their own understandings, sense of identity and aspirations. The result is a playing field that is by no means level. This demands a reconceptualising of curriculum from the principle of taking "the lives of all students seriously" [p.40]. Powerful organising concepts include "the power of difference" valuing the power and importance of difference. In fact we can view the classroom as "a central site for the legitimization of myths, lies and silences about non-white, lower socio-economic class and other marginalized individuals"[p.41]. In contrast, "different ways of seeing" could be a powerful concept to underpin a challenging and transformative curriculum, encouraging "learning from difference". Subjugated knowledge, whether of African American, native American or working class or women, suppressed because dangerous, can if openly explored, critically contest "the dominant culture's view of reality"[p.46].

Two chapters on power open out the political nature of the agenda, one on democracy, the second on the struggle for justice: "As the new century dawns, we stand at a dangerous crossroads"[p.105]. On class, the oppressed have a (subjugated) power of their own to subvert the system and laugh at the inadequacies and incompetence of the powerful. On gender, there is a strong attack on patriarchy and a focus on women's subjugated knowledge - on the living, the interpersonal and the communal. To these new ways of seeing, the patriarchal power edifice is particularly resistant, downgrading it as inferior. On race, "critical multiculturalists see race as an ever-shifting, unstable social construction with no essential biological

justification”[p.169]. Humans have made race an important factor that shapes people’s lives so we need to put pressure on the power bloc in the name of racial justice. A substantial review of racism in America leads to an important concluding section “Mismatch: non-white students in white schools”[pp.203-5] in which non-white pupils and ignored and “racism is expelled from the curriculum”. Attempts to intervene is subject to extreme political reaction. How might the curriculum take account of non-white and women’s issues? A key chapter discusses uncritical “eviscerated” (i.e. selective) history, the importance of subjugated memories and histories, multiple perspectives of the marginalised. This leads to a curriculum of “affirmation”[p.248].

This is an important book reassessing the multicultural debate from an American point of view. Although drawing on a broad literature base, it is essentially polemical, promoting a transformative, politicised “critical multiculturalism”. This is largely what we would have termed “anti-racist education” in the 1980s, although this is not explicitly recognised, and key figures as Barry Troyna and Chris Mullard are not referred to. The authors recognised that their agenda is politicised, from which a serious further question needs to be asked, how best can education be influenced to change in the light of reactionary tendencies? Anti-racist education had its fangs drawn with the abolition of ILEA and the Greater London Council. Can its equivalent win by confrontation in America?