

Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research

JOE L. KINCHELOE
PETER L. McLAREN

The Roots of Critical Research

SOME 70 years after its development in Frankfurt, Germany, critical theory retains its ability to disrupt and challenge the status quo. In the process, it elicits highly charged emotions of all types—fierce loyalty from its proponents, vehement hostility from its detractors. Such vibrantly polar reactions indicate at the very least that critical theory still matters. We can be against critical theory or for it, but, especially at the present historical juncture, we cannot be without it. Indeed, qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces, in our view, undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth.

Critical theory is a term that is often evoked and frequently misunderstood. It usually refers to the theoretical tradition developed by the Frankfurt school, a group of writers connected to the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. However, none of the Frankfurt school theorists ever claimed to have developed a unified

approach to cultural criticism. In its beginnings, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse initiated a conversation with the German tradition of philosophical and social thought, especially Marx, Kant, Hegel, and Weber. From the vantage point of these critical theorists, whose political sensibilities were influenced by the devastations of World War I, postwar Germany with its economic depression marked by inflation and unemployment, and the failed strikes and protests in Germany and Central Europe in this same period, the world was in urgent need of reinterpretation. From this perspective, they defied Marxist orthodoxy while deepening their belief that injustice and subjugation shaped the lived world (Bottomore, 1984; Gibson, 1986; Held, 1980; Jay, 1973). Focusing their attention on the changing nature of capitalism, the early critical theorists analyzed the mutating forms of domination that accompanied this change (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989).

Only a decade after the Frankfurt school was established, the Nazis controlled Germany. The danger posed by the exclusive Jewish membership of the Frankfurt school, and its association with Marxism, convinced Horkheimer, Adorno,

AUTHORS' NOTE: Thanks to Yvonna Lincoln and Norman Denzin for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this chapter.

h
n
s
p
a
a
Q
s
h
e
d
f
a
i
n
C
r
e
a
n
f

Edi
Noi
s
ren
Qui
for
e
volu
ISBN

and Marcuse to leave Germany. Eventually locating themselves in California, these critical theorists were shocked by American culture. Offended by the taken-for-granted empirical practices of American social science researchers, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were challenged to respond to the social science establishment's belief that their research could describe and accurately measure any dimension of human behavior. Piqued by the contradictions between progressive American rhetoric of egalitarianism and the reality of racial and class discrimination, these theorists produced their major work while residing in the United States. In 1953, Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany and reestablished the Institute of Social Research. Significantly, Herbert Marcuse stayed in the United States, where he would find a new audience for his work in social theory. Much to his own surprise, Marcuse skyrocketed to fame as the philosopher of the student movements of the 1960s. Critical theory, especially the emotionally and sexually liberating work of Marcuse, provided the philosophical voice of the New Left. Concerned with the politics of psychological and cultural revolution, the New Left preached a Marcusean sermon of political emancipation (Gibson, 1986; Wexler, 1991).

Many academicians who had come of age in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1960s focused their scholarly attention on critical theory. Frustrated by forms of domination emerging from a post-Enlightenment culture nurtured by capitalism, these scholars saw in critical theory a method of temporarily freeing academic work from these forms of power. Impressed by critical theory's dialectical concern with the social construction of experience, they came to view their disciplines as manifestations of the discourses and power relations of the social and historical contexts that produced them. The "discourse of possibility" implicit within the constructed nature of social experience suggested to these scholars that a reconstruction of the social sciences could eventually lead to a more egalitarian and democratic social order. New poststructuralist conceptualizations of human agency and their promise that men and women can at least partly determine their own existence offered new hope for emancipatory forms of social research when compared with orthodox Marxism's assertion of the iron laws of history, the irrevocable evil of capitalism, and the proletariat as the privileged subject and anticipated agent of social transformation. For example, when Henry Giroux and other critical educators criticized the argument made by Marxist scholars Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis—that schools are capitalist agencies of social, economic, cultural, and bureaucratic reproduction—they contested the deterministic perspectives of Bowles and Gintis with the idea that schools, as venues of

hope, could become sites of resistance and democratic possibility through concerted efforts among teachers and students to work within a liberatory pedagogical framework. Giroux (1988), in particular, maintained that schools can become institutions where forms of knowledge, values, and social relations are taught for the purpose of educating young people for critical empowerment rather than subjugation.

Partisan Research in a "Neutral" Academic Culture

In the space available here it is impossible to do justice to all of the critical traditions that have drawn inspiration from Marx, Kant, Hegel, Weber, the Frankfurt school theorists, continental social theorists such as Foucault, Habermas, and Derrida, Latin American thinkers such as Paulo Freire, French feminists such as Irigaray, Kristeva, or Cixous, or Russian sociolinguists such as Bakhtin and Vygotsky—most of whom regularly find their way into the reference lists of contemporary critical researchers. Today there are criticalist schools in many fields, and even a superficial discussion of the most prominent of these schools would demand much more space than we have available.

The fact that numerous books have been written about the often-virulent disagreements among members of the Frankfurt school only heightens our concern with "packaging" the different criticalist schools. Critical theory should not be treated as a universal grammar of revolutionary thought objectified and reduced to discrete formulaic pronouncements or strategies. We have chosen to define the critical tradition very broadly and heuristically, and this will undoubtedly trouble many researchers who identify themselves as criticalists. We have decided to place our stress on the underlying commonality among these schools of thought, at the expense of focusing on their differences. This, of course, is always risky business in terms of suggesting a false unity or consensus where none exists, but such concerns are unavoidable in a survey chapter such as this. We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social

relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g., class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and, finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression.

In today's climate of blurred disciplinary genres, it is not uncommon to find literary theorists doing anthropology and anthropologists writing about literary theory, or political scientists trying their hand at ethnomethodological analysis, or philosophers doing Lacanian film criticism. We offer this observation not as an excuse to be wantonly eclectic in our treatment of the critical tradition but to make the point that any attempts to delineate critical theory as discrete schools of analysis will fail to capture the hybridity endemic to contemporary criticalist analysis.

Readers familiar with the criticalist traditions will recognize essentially four different "emergent" schools of social inquiry in this chapter: the neo-Marxist tradition of critical theory associated most closely with the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse; the genealogical writings of Michel Foucault; the practices of poststructuralist deconstruction associated with Derrida; and postmodernist currents associated with Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Ebert, and others. In our view, critical ethnography has been influenced by all of these perspectives in different ways and to different degrees. From critical theory, researchers inherit a forceful criticism of the positivist conception of science and instrumental rationality, especially in Adorno's idea of *negative dialectics*, which posits an unstable relationship of contradiction between concepts and objects; from Derrida, researchers are given a means for deconstructing objective truth or what is referred to as "the metaphysics of presence." For Derrida, the meaning of a word is constantly deferred because it can have meaning only in relation to its difference from other words within a given system of language; Foucault invites researchers to explore the ways in which discourses are implicated in relations of power and how power and knowledge serve as dialectically reinitiating practices that regulate what is considered reasonable and true. We have characterized much of the work influenced by these writers as the "ludic" and "resistance" postmodernist theoretical perspectives.

Critical research can be best understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name *critical* must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness. Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world. Traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation, or reanimation of a slice of reality, whereas critical researchers often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself. Horkheimer (1972) put it succinctly when he argued that critical theory and research are never satisfied with merely increasing knowledge (see also Giroux, 1983, 1988; Quantz, 1992).

Research in the critical tradition takes the form of self-conscious criticism—self-conscious in the sense that researchers try to become aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform their research as well as their own subjective, intersubjective, and normative reference claims. Thus critical researchers enter into an investigation with their assumptions on the table, so no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them to the research site. Upon detailed analysis these assumptions may change. Stimulus for change may come from the critical researchers' recognition that such assumptions are not leading to emancipatory actions. The source of this emancipatory action involves the researcher's ability to expose the contradictions of world of appearances accepted by the dominant culture as natural and inviolable (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989, 1992a, in press). Such appearances may, critical researchers contend, conceal social relationships of inequality and injustice. For instance, if we view the violence we find in classrooms not as random or isolated incidents created by aberrant individuals willfully stepping out of line in accordance with a particular form of social pathology, but as narratives of transgression and resistance, then this could indicate that the "political unconscious" lurking beneath the surface of everyday classroom life is not unrelated to issues of race, class, and gender oppression.

There exists among critical researchers a firm recognition that ideologies are not simply deceptive and imaginary mental relations that individuals and groups live out relative to their material conditions of existence, but are also very much inscribed in the materiality of social and institutional practices (Kincheloe, 1993; McLaren, 1989).

in press). For instance, people act *as if* certain social and cultural relations were true even when they know them not to be true. They choose, in other words, essentially to misrecognize these relations of power (e.g., state power exists only because we obey its rules). Generally speaking, people do not necessarily want to give up this misrecognition (Zizek, 1990) because of the power it affords them as dominant groups, or, in the case of subordinate groups, because "the ruled accept their subordinate position for the sake of a degree of freedom that indulges certain libidinal drives, sutures fissured egos, fulfills fantasies, and so forth" (San Juan, 1992, p. 114). This willful misrecognition on the part of both dominant and subordinate groups creates a quarantined site where the political dimensions of everyday life can be shrouded by commonsense knowledge and, in effect, rhetorically disengaged. This also explains how the ascendancy of a historic bloc of forces is able to reproduce its economies of power and privilege hegemonically (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony is secured when the virulence of oppression, in its many guises (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation), is accepted as consensus.

Critical Ethnography: Reclaiming the Marxist Legacy in an Age of Socialist Decline

Still in its infancy as a research approach that has developed within the qualitative tradition over the past 20 years, and lacking that obviousness of meaning that would secure its disciplinary status, critical ethnography continues to redefine itself through its alliances with recent theoretical currents. As a nascent transdisciplinary project, it is more readily identified with its celebrated exponents and protagonists (e.g., Paul Willis, George Marcus, Christine Griffin, James Clifford, and Michael Taussig) than with the way it has spawned innumerable alliances with leftist political agendas in general and neo-Marxian ones in particular in both Britain and the United States. It is hardly surprising, then, that its distinctive mode of entry into mainstream anthropological and sociological discourses has been stalled because of the quickening predicament generated by the recent demise of Marxism following the collapse of Soviet communism.

The loss of favor accorded to Marxist theory is certainly a partial explanation for critical ethnography's current—and sometimes narcissistic—inclination with certain inflections and mutative combinations of postmodern social theory that have found their way into the writings of critical ethnographers. We are not suggesting that the turn to high-vogue postmodernism and the fash-

ionable apostasy of deconstruction among some critical ethnographers is simply a substitute for the flagging credibility of Marxism. Rather, we are in basic agreement with Cornel West (1991), who notes that the "fashionable trashing of Marxist thought in the liberal academy" is primarily the result of the misunderstanding that vulgar Marxist thought (monocausal accounts of history, essentialist concepts of society, or reductionist accounts of history) somehow exhausts the entire Marxist tradition. West argues that the epistemic skepticism found in some strands of faddish deconstructive criticism and the explanatory agnosticism, or nihilism, associated with the work of descriptivist anthropologists and historians have made the "category mistake" of collapsing epistemological concerns of justification in philosophy into methodological concerns of explanation in social theory. This has caused ironic skeptics to avoid any theory that promotes purposeful social action for social and economic transformation. This category mistake has also caused the aesthetic historicists to illuminate the contingency and indeterminacy of social life "with little concern with how and why change and conflict take place" (p. xxii).

We follow West in arguing that, although nationalism, racism, gender oppression, homophobia, and ecological devastation have not been adequately understood by many Marxist theorists, Marxist theory nevertheless "proceeds within the boundaries of warranted assertable claims and rationally acceptable conclusions" and that it has helped to explain how "the dynamic processes of capital accumulation and the commodification of labor condition social, and cultural practices in an inescapable manner" (p. xxiii).

Douglas Kellner (1993) has recently argued that blaming the failure of Soviet communism on the work of Marx is highly unwarranted, dishonest, misleading, and, ultimately, philosophically indefensible. This is especially the case when one recognizes that Marx's writings support the claim that he was a consistent democrat, argued for workers' self-activity as the locus of popular sovereignty, and refused to advocate a party state or communist bureaucracy. Instead, Marx argued passionately and lucidly for a free society and democratically empowered citizenry. In fact, Kellner maintains, rather convincingly in our view, that the ideas of Rousseau and those of the Right Hegelians actually go much further in legitimating forms of societal oppression and the modern totalitarian state than Marx's theoretical work. Further, Kellner maintains that it is precisely the case that Marxian theorists have themselves produced some of the most trenchant and powerful criticisms of the repressive incarnations of socialism in the Soviet Union, such as the work of the Frankfurt school theorists. Admittedly, however,

one of the serious flaws of Marxist discourse is that it regularly fails to incorporate the work of bourgeois revolutionary traditions (i.e., bourgeois traditions of rights and individual liberty) and the Marxian revolutionary socialist heritage into its system.

We suggest that there is nothing inconsistent in the critical and historical impulses of Marxian thought that would preclude the formation of a theoretical alliance with some of the more political strands of postmodern social theory. In fact, postmodern social theory could help to deepen and extend current incarnations of Marxian critical thinking significantly by helping to problematize what Stuart Hall (1990) refers to as "the disappearance of unified agency, like the 'ruling class' or 'the state,' as the instrumentality of oppression" (p. 31). In our view, postmodern criticism does not so much weaken the Marxian tradition as help to expand the Marxian critique of capitalist social relations by addressing the ambiguity currently surrounding the reconstituted nature of classes and class consciousness and by interrogating "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (to cite the now-famous phrase coined by Frederic Jameson to describe the postmodern condition). According to Jameson (1990), arguably the most important Marxian literary critic in the United States, "Democracy must involve more than political consultation. There must be forms of economic democracy and popular control in other ways, some of them are very problematic, like workers' management" (p. 31). The popular sovereignty practiced by the Paris Commune and celebrated by Marx and Engels as a democratic mode of worker self-management is a good example of what Jameson means by "economic democracy."

We agree with Jameson that the Marxian tradition still has an indispensable role to play in the reconstitution and reformation of capitalist democracy. We further share Kellner's (1993) sentiment that "only with genuine democracy can socialism provide a real alternative to the democratic capitalist societies of the West and East" (p. 34). The current crisis of Marxism suggests to us not that Marxist discourse is dead and should be displayed, like Lenin, in a glass case as an embalmed reminder of our debt to the founding fathers of the communist state. Nor in a more postmodern sense do we feel it to be destined to lie frozen like the corpse of Walt Disney, hidden away in a theme park vault, waiting to be reanimated at some future moment during the technological triumph of late capitalism. Rather, we believe that a Marxian-inspired critical ethnography deepened by a critical engagement with new currents of postmodern social theory has an important if not crucial role to play in the project of constructing new forms of socialist democracy.

Babes in Toyland: Critical Theory in Hyperreality

Postmodern Culture

In a contemporary era marked by the delegitimation of the grand narratives of Western civilization, a loss of faith in the power of reason, and a shattering of traditional religious orthodoxies, scholars continue to debate what the term *postmodernism* means, generally positing it as a periodizing concept following modernism. Indeed, scholars have not agreed if this epochal break with the "modern" era even constitutes a discrete period. In the midst of such confusion it seems somehow appropriate that scholars are fighting over the application of the term *postmodernism* to the contemporary condition. Accepting postmodernism as an apt moniker for the end of the twentieth century, a major feature of critical academic work has involved the exploration of what happens when critical theory encounters the postmodern condition, or hyperreality. *Hyperreality* is a term used to describe an information society socially saturated with ever-increasing forms of representation: filmic, photographic, electronic, and so on. These have had a profound effect on constructing the cultural narratives that shape our identities. The drama of living has been portrayed so often on television that individuals, for the most part, are increasingly able to predict the outcomes and consider such outcomes to be the "natural" and "normal" course of social life (Gergen, 1991).

As many postmodern analysts have put it, we become pastiches, imitative conglomerations of one another. In such a condition we approach life with low affect, with a sense of postmodern ennui and irremissible anxiety. Our emotional bonds are diffused as television, computers, VCRs, and stereo headphones assault us with representations that have shaped our cognitive and affective facilities in ways that still remain insufficiently understood. In the political arena, traditionalists circle their cultural wagons and fight off imagined bogeymen such as secular humanists, "extreme liberals," and utopianists, not realizing the impact that postmodern hyperreality exerts on their hallowed institutions. The nuclear family, for example, has declined in importance not because of the assault of "radical feminists" but because the home has been redefined through the familiar presence of electronic communication systems. Particular modes of information put individual family members in constant contact with specific subcultures. While they are physically in the home, they exist emotionally outside of it

land: Hyperreality

arked by the delegiti-
es of Western civili-
power of reason, and
ligious orthodoxies,
what the term *post-*
positing it as a peri-
mism. Indeed,
this epochal break
constitutes a discrete
confusion it seems
scholars are fighting
m *postmodernism* to
A pting postmod-
the end of the twen-
of critical academic
oration of what hap-
ncounters the post-
reality. *Hyperreality*
information society
-increasing forms of
ographic, electronic,
a profound effect on
atives that shape our
g has been portrayed
individuals, for the
able to predict the
outcomes to be the
se of social life (Ger-

lysts have put it, we
conglomerations of
ion we approach life
o stmodern ennui
emotional bonds are
eters, VCRs, and ste-
with representations
ive and affective fa-
emain insufficiently
a , traditionalists
and fight off imag-
ular humanists, "ex-
ists, not realizing the
perreality exerts on
The nuclear family,
n importance not be-
dical feminists" but
redefined through the
onic communication
of information put in-
constant contact with
they are physically in-
ionally outside of it

through the mediating effects of various forms of communication (Gergen, 1991; McLaren, in press; Poster, 1989). We increasingly make sense of the social world and judge other cultures through conventional and culture-bound television genres. Hyperreality has presented us with new forms of literacy that do not simply refer to discrete skills but rather constitute social skills and relations of symbolic power. These new technologies cannot be seen apart from the social and institutional contexts in which they are used and the roles they play in the family, the community, and the workplace. They also need to be seen in terms of how "viewing competencies" are socially distributed and the diverse social and discursive practices in which these new media literacies are produced (Buckingham, 1989).

Electronic transmissions generate new formations of cultural space and restructure experiences of time. We often are motivated to trade community membership for a sense of pseudobelonging to the mediascape. Residents of hyperreality are temporarily comforted by proclamations of community offered by "media personalities" on the 6 o'clock *Eyewitness News*. "Bringing news of your neighbors in the Tri-State community home to you," media marketers attempt to soften the edges of hyperreality, to soften the emotional effects of the social vertigo. The world is not brought into our homes by television as much as television brings its viewers to a quasi-fictional place—hyperreality (Luke, 1991).

Postmodern Social Theory

We believe that it is misleading to identify postmodernism with poststructuralism. Although there are certainly similarities involved, they cannot be considered discrete homologies. We also believe that it is a mistake to equate *postmodernism* with *postmodernity* or that these terms can be contrasted in some simple equivalent way with *modernism* and *modernity*. As Michael Peters (1993) notes, "To do so is to frame up the debate in strictly (and naively) modernist terminology which employs exhaustive binary oppositions privileging one set of terms against the other" (p. 14). We are using the term *postmodernity* to refer to the postmodern condition that we have described as *hyperreality* and the term *postmodern theory* as an umbrella term that includes antifoundationalist writing in philosophy and the social sciences. Again, we are using the term in a very general sense that includes poststructuralist currents.

Postmodern theoretical trajectories take as their entry point a rejection of the deeply ingrained assumptions of Enlightenment rationality, traditional Western epistemology, or any supposedly "secure" representation of reality that exists out-

side of discourse itself. Doubt is cast on the myth of the autonomous, transcendental subject, and the concept of praxis is marginalized in favor of rhetorical undecidability and textual analysis of social practices. As a species of criticism, intended, in part, as a central questioning of the humanism and anthropologism of the early 1970s, postmodernist social theory rejects Hegel's ahistorical state of absolute knowledge and resigns itself to the impossibility of an ahistorical, transcendental, or self-authenticating version of truth. The reigning conviction that knowledge is knowledge only if it reflects the world as it "really" exists has been annihilated in favor of a view in which reality is socially constructed or semiotically posited. Furthermore, normative agreement on what should constitute and guide scientific practice and argumentative consistency has become an intellectual target for epistemological uncertainty.

Postmodern criticism takes as its starting point the notion that meaning is constituted by the continual playfulness of the signifier, and the thrust of its critique is aimed at deconstructing Western metanarratives of truth and the ethnocentrism implicit in the European view of history as the unilinear progress of universal reason. Postmodern theory is a site of both hope and fear, where there exists a strange convergence between critical theorists and political conservatives, a cynical complicity with status quo social and institutional relations and a fierce criticism of ideological manipulation and the reigning practices of subjectivity in which knowledge takes place.

Ludic and Resistance Postmodernism

Postmodernist criticism is not monolithic, and for the purposes of this essay we would like to distinguish between two theoretical strands. The first has been astutely described by Teresa Ebert (1991) as "ludic postmodernism" (p. 115)—an approach to social theory that is decidedly limited in its ability to transform oppressive social and political regimes of power. Ludic postmodernism generally occupies itself with a reality that is constituted by the continual playfulness of the signifier and the heterogeneity of differences. As such, ludic postmodernism (see, e.g., Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard) constitutes a moment of self-reflexivity in deconstructing Western metanarratives, asserting that "meaning itself is self-divided and undecidable" (Ebert, in press).

We want to argue that critical researchers should assume a cautionary stance toward ludic postmodernism critique because, as Ebert (1991, p. 115)

notes, it tends to reinscribe the status quo and reduce history to the supplementarity of signification or the free-floating trace of textuality. As a mode of critique, it rests its case on interrogating specific and local enunciations of oppression, but often fails to analyze such enunciations in relation to larger dominating structures of oppression (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; McLaren, in press).

The kind of postmodern social theory we want to pose as a counterweight to skeptical and spectral postmodernism has been referred to as "oppositional postmodernism" (Foster, 1983), "radical critique-al theory" (Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991), "postmodern education" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991), "resistance postmodernism" (Ebert, 1991, in press), and "critical postmodernism" (Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1992b, in press; McLaren & Hammer, 1989). These forms of critique are not alternatives to ludic postmodernism but appropriations and extensions of this critique. Resistance postmodernism brings to ludic critique a form of materialist intervention, because it is not solely based on a textual theory of difference but rather on one that is also social and historical. In this way, postmodern critique can serve as an interventionist and transformative critique of Western culture. Following Ebert (1991), resistance postmodernism attempts to show that "textualities (significations) are material practices, forms of conflicting social relations" (p. 115). The sign is always an arena of material conflict and competing social relations as well as ideas. From this perspective we can "rewrite the sign as an ideological process formed out of a signifier standing in relation to a matrix of historically possible or suspended signifieds" (Ebert, in press). In other words, difference is politicized by being situated in real social and historical conflicts.

Resistance postmodernism does not abandon the undecidability or contingency of the social altogether; rather, the undecidability of history is understood as related to class struggle, the institutionalization of asymmetrical relations of power and privilege, and the way historical accounts are contested by different groups (Giroux, 1992; McLaren & Hammer, 1989; Zavarzadeh & Morton, 1991). On this matter Ebert (1991) remarks, "We need to articulate a theory of difference in which the differing, deferring slippage of signifiers is not taken as the result of the immanent logic of language but as the effect of the social conflicts traversing signification" (p. 118).

The synergism of the conversation between resistance postmodern and critical theory involves an interplay between the praxis of the critical and the radical uncertainty of the postmodern. As it invokes its strategies for the emancipation of meaning, critical theory provides the postmodern critique with a normative foundation (i.e., a basis for

distinguishing between oppressive and liberatory social relations). Without such a foundation the postmodern critique is ever vulnerable to nihilism and inaction. Indeed, the normatively ungrounded postmodern critique is incapable of providing an ethically challenging and politically transformative program of action. Aronowitz, Giroux, and McLaren argue that if the postmodern critique is to make a valuable contribution to the notion of schooling as an emancipatory form of cultural politics, it must make connections to those egalitarian impulses of modernism that contribute to an emancipatory democracy. In doing this, the project of an emancipatory democracy and the schooling that supports it can be extended by new understandings of how power operates and by incorporating groups who had been excluded by their race, gender, or class (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Codd, 1984; Godzich, 1992; Lash, 1990; McLaren, 1986, in press; Morrow, 1991; Rosenau, 1992; Welch, 1991; Yates, 1990).

A Step Beyond the Empirical: Critical Research

Critical research has never been reluctant to point out the limitations of empirical research, calling attention to the inability of traditional models of inquiry to escape the boundaries of a narrative realism. The rigorous methodological approaches of empirical inquiry often preclude larger interpretations of the forces that shape both the researcher and the researched. Empirical observation cannot supplant theoretical analysis and critical reflection. The project of critical research is not simply the empirical re-presentation of the world but the transgressive task of posing the research itself as a set of ideological practices. Empirical analysis needs to be interrogated in order to uncover the contradictions and negations embodied in any objective description. Critical researchers maintain that the meaning of an experience or an observation is not self-evident. The meaning of any experience will depend on the struggle over the interpretation and definition of that experience (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1986; Weiler, 1988).

Kincheloe (1991) argues that the way we analyze and interpret empirical data is conditioned by the way it is theoretically framed. It is also dependent upon the researcher's own ideological assumptions. The empirical data derived from any study cannot be treated as simple irrefutable facts. They represent hidden assumptions—assumptions the critical researcher must dig out and expose. As Einstein and Heisenberg pointed out long ago, what we see is not what we see but what