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DISRUPTING CURRICULUM HEGEMONY THROUGH COUNTERSTORIES

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**Critical Peace Theory in the Social Studies:  
A Foundation for Cultivating Critical Consciousness of Oppression**

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As an institution of social reproduction, the school functions to transmit values and ideologies used to support hegemony (Apple, 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977): the social condition in which people unknowingly proliferate, and consent to, oppression (McLaren, 2017). However, schools are not merely machines of output; they are living organisms comprised of actors who may exercise relative autonomy within oppressive society (Au, 2010) and create counter-hegemonic classrooms where oppression is revealed and interrogated (Giroux, 1983/2017; 2016). Shor (1992) establishes the teacher as “the person who mediates the relationship between outside authorities, formal knowledge, and individual students in the classroom” and through daily instruction “links the students’ development to the values, powers, and debates in society” (p. 13). Discerning oppression and crafting curriculum and instruction towards this same purpose is difficult due to the complex nature of hegemony, yet a critical approach to the social studies offers an array of disciplinary and ontological understandings for developing critical consciousness of

hegemony and encouraging anti-oppressive social action (Au, 2010; Ross, 2006; 2017). When we consider the social studies’ unique task of educating citizens (Barton & Levstik, 2007; Engle & Ochoa, 1988) alongside its cognitive aspects, we find the social studies teacher to be an essential figure in the movement for a more just and democratic society.

As a teacher-educator at my state university’s flagship campus located within a growing metropolitan area, I work with students possessing a range of experiences with oppression. Through practice and research, I have found Critical Peace Theory (CPT) to be useful in helping pre-service and in-service social studies teachers grasp the concept of hegemony. I begin this explication of CPT with a succinct review of critical consciousness allowing me to demonstrate how specific tenets of CPT can potentially support teachers’ understanding of hegemonic oppression. After establishing CPT as a foundation for critical consciousness, I then explore how this base knowledge may scaffold understanding of racialized forms of oppression. By

connecting CPT to Critical Race Theory (CRT), I suggest CPT may be used as a tool for helping teachers realize the roles race and racism often play in supporting domination. I conclude with a brief discussion linking teachers' critical consciousness to transformation for social peace.

### **CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF HEGEMONIC OPPRESSION**

In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2003), Freire identifies dehumanization as the crux of hegemony. Dehumanization appears in oppressive social structures and violent personal actions, but it covertly thrives as a social aura in which oppressors can hold the oppressed as objects of manipulation. As objects, the oppressed obviously struggle to be human, but the oppressors also cannot realize their humanity if they rely on domination for their vain existence. Freire writes, "The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for critical discovery that both [the oppressed] and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization" (p. 48) and that "one of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness" (p. 51). In other words, hegemony thrives by ensuring a consciousness that either views oppression as unchangeable or incomprehensible. Hegemony may be dismantled by a mindset that perceives reality as a "a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude" (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 101). Such dialectical thought understands reality as being in flux and alterable, an ongoing process driven by ideas and actors. This *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, is what allows people to act (i.e., teach) for the humanization of society.

A student of Freire, Shor (1992) frames hegemony as socialization for oppression. In describing how schools may serve as counter-socializing spaces for democratization, Shor outlines the transformation from submerged to critical consciousness as a progression from intransitive, to semi-transitive, to critical transitive consciousness. Intransitive consciousness "denies the power of human beings to change their lives or society" (Shor, 1992, p. 126) because it views reality as static: things are the way they have always been, and things will always be this way. This worldview is generally supported by strong adherence to tradition, myth, or supposed natural laws governing existence. Semi-transitive consciousness believes in "cause and effect and in the power of human beings to change things" (p. 126), yet it cannot comprehend the dialectical relationship among reality's constitutive parts. Critical transitivity (critical consciousness) makes the connection between individual experience and the forces of causation at work beyond one's immediate geographical, social, and time-bound context. Critically conscious individuals see reality as a social creation that can be discerned and transformed.

These three forms of consciousness may be understood comparatively according to how they might be embodied in a person's perception of the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis. An individual who possesses intransitive consciousness may see the massive loss of human life as unpreventable, pointing to previous pandemics such as the Spanish Flu of 1918 or the Black Plague as clear examples of how viruses always impact the world. Someone with semi-transitive consciousness may embrace the science of the coronavirus and commit to mask-wearing as a means of social action even though they do not consider the linked ideological, economic, and governmental forces working to proliferate the virus's spread. As critically

conscious people look to these forces they may connect the virus's rampant devastation to a nexus of unbridled capitalist ideology, individual liberty devoid of social responsibility, and related government inaction. This depth of discernment enables them to see the virus as evidence of the greater social sickness that is dehumanization.

### **CRITICAL PEACE THEORY**

Critical Peace Theory (Galtung, 1969; 1990) explains how multifaceted violence dialectically operates to sustain hegemonic oppression. CPT's core concepts of health potential actualization, a multi-layered violence typology, and cultural legitimization combine to create a foundation for critical consciousness by providing indicators of dehumanization, drawing connections between more and less noticeable forms of oppression, and accentuating the role of culture in socialization for oppressive society. CPT represents the ontological root of critical peace educational praxis (Bajaj, 2015; Brantmeier, 2011; Galtung, 2008), which has yet to be incorporated into the mainstream of social studies education.

#### ***Health Potential Actualization Explains the Effect of Violence***

Freire (1970/2003) defines dehumanization as "a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (p. 44, emphasis in original). This *distortion* most often means having one's humanity stolen. Freire's characterization of oppression has rich axiological and spiritual meaning which, though essential to understanding the full extent of oppression, lacks specific criteria for identifying oppressive actions. Such criteria are essential for naming violence, especially in settings where violence has

been normalized.

To indicate the presence of violence, CPT points to its more observable impact: "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung, 1969, p. 68). This is the principle of health potential actualization, and it clearly articulates the effect of any violent incident. Consider America's violent epoch of institutionalized slavery, when a human could be lawfully treated as property and beaten as punishment. We all recognize the pain of a lashing as violence, but what exactly makes this action violent? CPT explains that violence exists in the forcible denial of a body's ability to continually realize its health potential. Prior to receiving a blow, a victim's skin and vital organs work to actualize normal bodily functions. When this health sustaining process is interrupted by an outside force, there is violence. This scenario is an obvious example demonstrating how violence is "*the cause of the difference between the potential and actual*, between what could have been and what is" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168, emphasis in original).

#### ***A Typology of the Causes and Forms of Violence***

The cause of violence in our example is a human actor using a tangible weapon to directly harm a victim. CPT's violence typology (Figure 1) classifies this as personal violence. This cause of violence may certainly be used to reinforce oppression, but it is not enough to sustain a violent system. Hegemony requires violent social structures and ways of thinking to uphold the dominance of a particular group. CPT identifies these causations as structural and cultural violence.

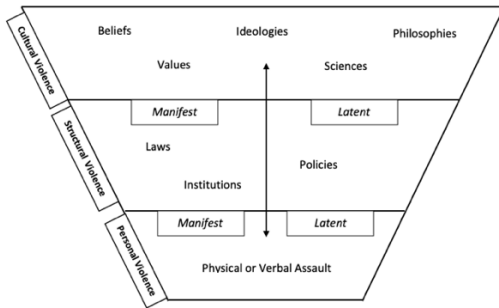


Figure 1. Author's visual representation of CPT violence typology.

Structural violence causes harm indirectly with no clear actor and “shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances” (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). Laws of government, institutional practices, and organizational policies are commonly used to create violent power imbalances. Building upon our case of American slavery, the most apparent examples of structural violence include the creation of a federal constitution, with subsequent legislation and court rulings (e.g., slave codes, Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Dred Scott Decision), positioning Black Americans as less powerful and less able to realize the healthy potentials available to White Americans. When structural elements like these work in concert with one another, they establish an environment that dehumanizes through a combination of *latent* and *manifest* violence.

Latent violence forces people to settle for lower levels of health potential actualization by causing them to fear the ramifications of challenging structural violence; it represents the violence “that is not there, yet might easily come about” (Galtung, 1969, p. 172). Manifest violence is the personal violence one might experience as a consequence of resisting structural violence. It is the predictable outcome of social defiance, and though committed directly by human actors, its primary purpose is to support structural violence. The

latent/manifest dynamic may be observed in the following 1819 Virginia slave code outlawing literacy education:

All meetings or assemblages of slaves [sic], or free negroes [sic] or mulattoes [sic] mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting-houses or houses, in the night, or any SCHOOL OR SCHOOLS, for teaching them READING OR WRITING [...] shall be deemed and considered UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY. and any justice of a county [...] may issue his warrant, directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblages, may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such slaves [sic], and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes (WNET/PBS, 2021).

This state law restricts the health potential of free movement and education presumed to be available at the time (if these potentials were not available, they would not need to be restricted). The law's demands of forced isolation and restrained cognitive growth represent latent structural violence, and these demands are paired with the looming manifest violence of corporal punishment. This pairing may create a relatively tranquil environment where enslaved peoples endure lower

health potential realizations due to the threat of physical violence. Though the situation may be devoid of personal violence, it is not peaceful. Here we see how these two forms of structural violence may combine to inflict mental trauma. Latent violence slowly grinds away one's hope for greater health potential realizations while manifest violence makes the possibility of personal violence ever-present in the mind.

Personal and structural causes of violence are secured by culture, the “symbolic sphere of our existence—exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics)—that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Cultural violence makes dehumanization “look, even feel right—or at least, not wrong” (p. 291), and when comprised of an array of cultural elements, it performs a normalizing function that causes people to gloss over, or go along with, oppression.

When designing learning experiences to foster teachers' critical consciousness, I benefitted from using Finkelman's (2003) *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South*. This primary source collection contains documents from the period in which slaveholding society was under attack and forced to rampantly manufacture cultural ideas to sustain White hegemony. Specific selections, and their corresponding type of cultural violence, include:

- **Dr. Samuel Cartwright's *A Report on the Diseases of and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro [sic] Race (1851)***: an example of scientific cultural violence, this pseudo-medical report explains that the enslaved African “enjoys the greatest

- amount of happiness, and arrives at the greatest degree of perfection” when he or she is “in a state of bondage”.
- **Senator Hammond of South Carolina's *Speech to the United States Senate (March 4, 1858)***: an example of philosophical cultural violence, this response to a bill for the admission of Kansas as a free state justifies institutional slavery by insisting that “in all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill”. This document is also commonly referred to as the “King Cotton” speech due to Hammond's emphasis on the importance of cotton (and so, slavery) to the American and world economy.
- **Rev. A. T. Holmes's *The Duties of Christian Masters (1851)***: an example of religious cultural violence, this essay published by the Alabama Baptist State Convention argues that the social configuration of “master and servant” is a “Divine appointment”.

As teachers engage and discuss the cultural aspects of these texts, they can begin to understand the dialectical nature of hegemony: how violent culture legitimizes violent structures and personal actions, and how the ubiquitous presence of structural and cultural violence normalizes violence in the social consciousness. While synthesizing these sources, we may consider how several forms of cultural violence coalesced to create ideology casting African Americans as *naturally* unfit for intellectual growth, thus

legitimizing anti-education statutes.

### **CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH A CPT FRAMEWORK**

The following workshop conversation excerpt illustrates how I used a CPT analytical framework with primary sources to cultivate teachers' critical consciousness (Author & Endacott, 2020). This insight was shared during debriefing discussion of a lesson demonstration centered on the compelling question "how was the violence of American slaveholding society sustained?" The contributing teacher stated:

It's also easier to understand the direct violence [of American slavery] when, after reading these testimonies and statements, you come to recognize how accepted and a part of everyday life this violent, subservient role... it's just pervasive in society, and so it's not that far of a stretch to think, oh yeah, if [White people] see these groups of people as less than human, culturally speaking, of course they're going to make laws that allow them to be treated in any way that White people see fit. And then, oh, if this is accepted by law and accepted by [their] religion and belief systems, then of course [they're] going to lash out physically when [enslaved Africans] do something that [White people] don't like. And so it's almost like it's easier to understand the mindset of physically violating someone's self when you understand the overarching cultural norms within the passages. Whereas if I had just read about a slave [sic] being beaten, I would have thought, "how could anybody ever do this to another human?" ... but in the context, this is a part of everyday life for them. It's

just so ingrained into society and culture that they probably didn't even think twice about physically lashing out at somebody (p. 31).

Evidence of this teacher's critical consciousness is found in his understanding that, within Southern slaveholding society, personal violence towards African Americans was legitimized by the larger cultural apparatus. The teacher identifies the era's oppressive, dehumanizing ideology as quite literally seeing "these groups of people *as less than human*, culturally speaking." He then links the creation of violent laws to this ideology, articulating the power of culture to shape the rest of society. The teacher's dialectical thinking is further revealed when he discusses how violent ideology "accepted by law" and "accepted by [their] religion and belief systems" formed a social consciousness causing Whites to "lash out physically" whenever this ideology was threatened. Though he does not use the terms manifest or latent violence, his description of a White response to defiance suggests the understanding of how challenging latent structural violence results in manifest structural violence.

As the teacher concludes his answer to the compelling question, we see how CPT allows him to view American slavery from a critically consciousness perspective. The fundamental difference between intransitive and critically transitive consciousness is the ability to see the larger social forces working to produce the violent incidents one experiences (or in the context of a classroom, studies). Focusing on the personal violence of an enslaved person "being beaten", the teacher draws a distinction between how he might have explained this action before being exposed to CPT and how he now views it through the lens of CPT. Without CPT, he would have struggled to rationalize how any human could do this to another human. The

danger here is that he might have classified the behavior as random, or perhaps part of human nature (intransitive consciousness)—thus failing to recognize the constructed oppressive system surrounding it. With CPT, he sees physical violence not as a spontaneous act, but rather, as a component of hegemony. The teacher’s emerging critical consciousness enables him to contextualize the physical violence within its cultural setting; he sees the violent moment as “something related to and conditioned by other dimensions” of society (Shor, 1992, p. 128).

### **ADVANCING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF RACIALIZED OPPRESSION**

Perhaps the greatest strength of CPT is its conditional axiom on violence: *if* the potential for peace exists, and *if* people are prohibited from realizing this potential, *then* there is violence (Galtung, 1969). This statement serves as a heuristic formula for identifying oppression in social contexts where violence has been normalized. Once we see the violence in our midst, we may then access CPT’s violence typology to study its dialectical causes. As demonstrated through the teacher’s example, these understandings can combine to create a foundational critical consciousness.

Though CPT names several areas of cultural violence, it lacks certain conceptual tools for progressing critical consciousness of hegemony fortified by racist ideology. Also, to teach the violence of American slavery without addressing its racist core is to continue longstanding racial silence in the social studies curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2003) and endorse the practice of White Social Studies (e.g., “raceproof” explanations of social phenomenon) that thwarts honest discussion of social problems past and present (Chandler & Branscombe, 2015). To

address these issues, I suggest Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an area of study for furthering teachers’ critical consciousness of racialized oppression.

### **CONNECTING CPT TO CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

Critical Race Theory emerged in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement as a tool for exposing the more subtle ways race is used to oppress (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In its beginnings, CRT focused on structural racism within America’s legal record. It has since been incorporated into other fields, specifically education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and social studies (Chandler, 2009; 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2003). CRT may be used to interrogate racism within school structures, curricula, and practices; it may also be incorporated into curriculum and instruction to support social inquiry of oppression. The CRT concepts of *material determinism* and *race as a social construction* represent vital understandings of racist hegemony that can be accomplished using CPT as a scaffolding structure. To trace this effect, I return to the case of American slavery.

Critical Peace Theory concentrates on qualifying violence and detailing the process by which culturally legitimized violence supports hegemony; it does not, however, delve into the origins of racist ideology and its cultural forms. Most critical race theorists propose racism emerges in response to material determinants within the structural layer of society. Also referred to as economic determinism, this CRT perspective identifies American slavery as an historical example of how an economic system and its beneficiaries activate culture for self-preservation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Revisiting the previously described primary sources, we find Hammond’s Senate speech to be a proof for material determinism as he offers this

response to threats against the South’s slavery-driven cotton economy: “You dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king!”

The emergence of the cotton economy initiated an ongoing dialectical relationship between the structural and cultural layers of Southern society. If cotton was crowned king by White greed, its reign was secured by racist cultural messages positioning Africans as the workforce. Enslaved Africans came to be understood as an economic necessity amid developing liberal democracy, so their dehumanization had to be justified.

Critical Race Theory assumes that dominant groups pursue such justifications through the social construction of race: an intentional process of assigning meanings to generalized physical attributes of “imagined racial groups” (Bridges, 2019, p. 129). The remaining primary sources display the continual process of race construction—transforming African ethnicity into a Black race. Likening the “Negro [sic] Race” to White children, Cartwright’s report assigns traits of docility, dependence, and subservience to the Black race. Holmes’s essay reinforces these traits by describing the Black “servant’s” need for a wise protector to free him from the demands and anxieties of an autonomous life. Together, these scientific and religious cultural products present a less-than-human group to whom America’s Constitutional rights need not apply.

By using the CPT violence typology to study American slavery (see Figure 2), we may scaffold understanding of material determinism and race as a social construction, progressing critical consciousness of racialized oppression. The concepts of structural and cultural violence designate two distinct parts of reality in continual dialectical exchange. Beginning at the structural level and moving upward, the

double-sided vertical line indicates the slave-based cotton economy’s generative relationship to a racist ideology of Black as sub-human. At the cultural level, violent beliefs embedded in scientific and religious documents and political discourse synthesize to fortify this racist ideology. Over time, cohesive cultural violence legitimizes society’s dehumanized construction of the Black race. This socially accepted version of Black may be further solidified at the structural level as a codified law that articulates and cements racialized oppression (Lopez, 2006). From here, “the dialectic between ideas about race and the material environment [will] turn and turn” (Bridges, 2019, p. 130) unless interrupted by peaceful culture and structures, such as those associated with abolitionism.

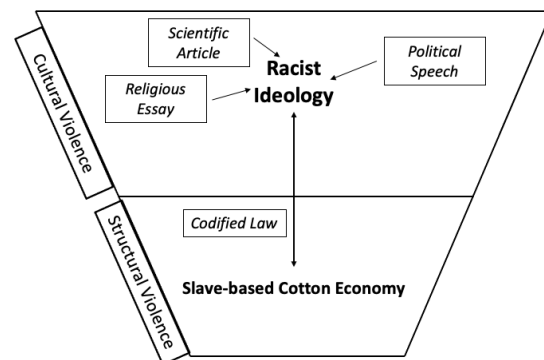


Figure 2: CPT violence typology portraying the dialectical nature of American slavery

### PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION FOR PEACE

*We are products of the culture we live within and have all been subjected to the forms of socialization and acculturation that are deemed normal in our society. Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and*



*different ways that people might come together.*

--bell hooks,  
*Teaching Community*

Critical consciousness sets the stage for informed, peaceful thinking and social actions that can transform an oppressive society. Many pre-service and in-service social studies teachers with whom I work possess an array of social privileges. Like everyone in human history, they had no control over their early socialization. Their privileged conditions and identities kept them from perceiving the systemic human suffering surrounding them and realizing their own contributions to the system. Though they could not see the complexity of oppression, their desire to craft a better social future brought them to teaching.

As teachers cultivate awareness of hegemonic oppression, they may experience personal transformation enabling them to thoughtfully and effectively teach justice and peace. CPT's binary perspective on violence offers a new paradigm for reading social conditions, and its core concepts reveal the constructed nature of reality. These tenets represent an ontological tool kit for building critical consciousness, and once constructed, this consciousness may be further developed using additional thinking tools from a variety of critical social theories including CRT, TribalCrit, ClassCrit, QueerCrit, etc. This ongoing commitment to consciousness development is a requisite for the work of challenging oppressive patterns of human behavior practiced in society and often accomplished through the social studies curriculum, and it is critical to teaching new visions of peace into existence.

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