

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Teaching About Hegemony:

Race, Class and Democracy in the 21st Century

by Paul Orlowski

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Reviewed by

Bonnie L. Stelmach,

College of Education, University of Saskatchewan.

“The slumber of the population is not innocent by any means, nor is it rootless . . .”
(Rosa & Rosa, 2011, p. 65)

Orlowski's *Teaching About Hegemony* is insightful, demonstrative, and necessary. Unapologetically critical of corporatized media, Orlowski offers a polemic for teachers to become knowledgeable about and attentive to the hegemonic effects of neoliberal discourses channeled through media and to see curriculum as a political document with omission of and overture toward a notion of democracy distilled of race and class consciousness. Orlowski presents an impassioned and prescriptive argument for critical literacy as a response to the media and what he sees as the sterilization of school curriculum, but his generic call for teachers to be politically postured is equally emphatic. With reference to Rosa and Rosa's (2011) project, Orlowski's book may be an unknowing companion because it makes explicit the grammar and mechanics of ideological hegemony and disrupts multiculturalism, globalization, and other concepts that have become comfortable and uncontested terms in a de-politicized lexicon. In this way, *Teaching About Hegemony* is a squall to the somnambulism among new and veteran social studies teachers who have adopted an apolitical stance toward ideas. Although the discipline-specific audience provides a firm ground for the argument, I believe this book also

belongs in the hands of principals and superintendents—both Canadian and American—because as instructional leaders, they frame and can champion intellectual mavericity. Further, this book is an example of how social science research—in this case, the sociology of education—can and should inform what goes on in the social studies classroom.

Orlowski describes *Teaching About Hegemony* as a textbook. Signposting, definition, and re-articulation of central themes and arguments unequivocally lend to the utility of this book. Yet, it is academically inspirational beyond its content. Specifically, indexing autobiographical reflections of growing up in the east end of Toronto, Orlowski expresses vulnerability regarding his own naivety about racism, which gives permission for readers to cleave their own entrenched and perhaps uncomfortable truths. In this way, Orlowski shows learning is not always fun, thus challenging a hackneyed notion of what produces learning and setting a pedagogical example. Also refreshing is the invitation to the reader to engage with the ideas; rhetorical questions are scattered throughout the text. End-of-chapter question prompts remind the reader that despite the force of his argument, Orlowski is enticing dialogue. Further, Orlowski's strength in this book is his attention to distinction and nuance in explaining difficult concepts such as neoliberalism. Above all, a meta-reading of this book makes plain that he is practicing and arguing for epistemic responsibility (Code, 1987), the ethical expectation that to know is not enough, but that we must know with clarity and correctness. I believe this is the nucleus of his thesis and what makes this writing masterful.

The point of *Teaching About Hegemony* is reified through its organizational logic. Part I of the book serves as a conceptual foundation; as Rosa and Rosa (2011) imply, one must untangle behaviours and beliefs to their conceptual roots. Orlowski is unpretentious about readers' understanding of commonly employed terms such as *critical left*, *right wing*, *neoliberalism*, or *critical theory*. In fact, as someone who has acquaintance with scholarship around the corporatization of educational agendas, neoliberal educational policy, and critical theories, I appreciated and learned from Orlowski's clarifications. He illuminates the architecture and tools of neoliberalism by anticipating points of confusion, and the explanations are plumb with current and historical examples. I wondered whether some of the examples might be dated and therefore out of reach for some teachers of the current generation. Despite this minor critique, I would argue one does not need to be a scholar of neoliberalism or political philosophy to digest the message. Orlowski displays his acumen in social theory with references to Durkheim, Gramsci, Foucault, Friere, and others, which

makes his book academically rigorous. He also, however, links this work to popular writers such as Naomi Klein and Linda McQuaig, which may widen its appeal. Orlowski's diligence and commitment to clarity makes this book comprehensive and accessible.

Part II marries the philosophical with the empirical and shows a way through the problem. In the second half of the book, Orlowski references more closely his own experiences teaching high school social studies in British Columbia, as well as his qualitative research with other social studies teachers in that province. Speckled with teacher voice and referencing curriculum documents, these chapters demonstrate the urgency of the issues about which he writes. Again, he uses theory to adumbrate his argument; Frankenberg's typology is useful for understanding the complexity of race and ethnicity, for example. While Orlowski's research may have exposed some teachers' lack of awareness of how "economic power is located in the curriculum" (p. 104), he is at the same time a compassionate advocate who understands the demands made upon and the constraints experienced by teachers. Clearly, he does not lay blame. As he aptly explains, teachers can be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic agents. Indeed, by sharing his own pedagogical strategies and ideas for countering and resisting hegemony, it is clear that he means to be supportive and helpful.

Teaching About Hegemony can be respected for its diligence towards evidence and analysis, clarity in argumentation, and self-disclosure regarding limitations and bias. Orlowski's ability to dissect the discourses brings rather esoteric ideas to the lay public and makes this book a good read for educators regardless of their level of formalized education. Hard-hitting and perhaps alarmist at times, one may view this book as having an apocalyptic complexion; Orlowski shows that language reveals and conceals and this in itself may not be palatable for some readers. But this, I think, is exactly his point. The fact that this book might make someone uncomfortable in the manner in which the civil rights or feminist movements made certain sectors of society uncomfortable is indeed "where hope resides" (p. 44).

References

- Code, L. (1987). *Epistemic responsibility*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Brown University Press.
- Rosa, J. J., & Rosa, R. D. (2011). *Pedagogy in the age of media control: Language deception and digital democracy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.