May, S. & Sleeter, C. (Eds.) (2010). *Critical multiculturalism: Theory and praxis.* **Routledge**

Pp. v +225   **ISBN 978-0-415-80285-7**

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Before delving into my review *of Critical Multiculturalism: Theory and Praxis* let's look at two different quotes:

> **Quote 1:** …the recognition of our cultural and historical situatedness should not set the limits of ethnicity and culture, nor act to undermine the legitimacy of other, equally valid forms of identity.

> **Quote 2:** …the obligation of democratic government is to respect the liberty of all individuals to live their own lives as they see fit consistent with the equal liberty of others.

What do these quotes have in common? More specifically, what common value(s) do these quotes uphold? The common values within these quotes are as follows: both acknowledge the importance of equality and recognize that individuals ought to have the capacity to form and reform their identities within reason.

So why does this comparison matter for the review of Critical Multiculturalism? This comparison illustrates the lack of normative analysis done by critical multiculturalism, and why a failure to engage normative theory limits the scope of the critical multiculturalist
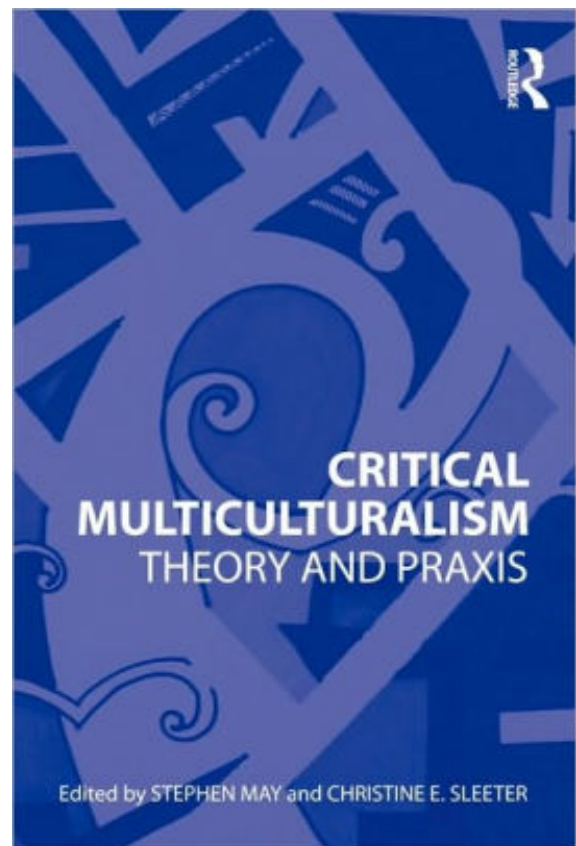
framework. For instance, **quote 1** comes from May and Sleeter's introduction to this book, and is considered to be a defining feature of a critical multicultural education (May and Sleeter 2010:11). **Quote 2** comes from Amy Guttmann, who considers herself a liberal multiculturalist (she uses the term democratic with a small 'd') (Gutmann 2004). However, Sleeter and May claim that critical multiculturalism is an improvement over liberal multiculturalism, because it does not frame individuals as equal. As they state "framing everyone as "equal citizens" directs attention away from material inequalities, and framing people as individuals first and foremost directs attention away from power relationships among groups" (2010:6). Sleeter and May then go on to claim that "critical multiculturalism provides the best means by which to integrate and advance these various critical theoretical threads." However, this statement is premised upon a logical fallacy insofar as they are confusing '*ought*' with '*is*'.

Gutmann is explaining what equality '*ought*' to look like. Thus her task as a normative philosopher is to develop a robust framework which describes 'why we should value equality' and 'what society ought to look like if equality was valued'. However, describing what equality ought to be does not mean that an individual neglects what *is* the case. Gutmann and other liberals fully acknowledge that our society *is* unequal (Barry 2005; Gutmann 1980, 1999), hence they do not 'direct attention away from material inequalities'. Let me state this differently. Guttmann's task as a normative philosopher is to explain what it means for democratic societies to value equality, but such an explanation doesn't preclude one from acknowledging the existence of inequalities (Ivison 2002).

This seemly mundane fallacy has bearing upon this book review because Gutmann's work (**quote 2**) is grounded within a long philosophical tradition called *normative theory*. And as Habermas and others have explained, no critical theory (critical multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, etc.) is *critical* without normative theory (Fraser 1989; Habermas 1987). Thus, the work done by Gutmann and political liberals is actually the type of theoretical work that critical multiculturalism lacks, but needs. So when the authors bypass normative theory by confusing '*ought*' with '*is*,' they are actually undermining the critical aspects of their framework as critical multiculturalists. They are doing so because without normative theory one is unable to theoretically justify one's claims for equality. In order to justify the claims made within critical multiculturalism (**quote 1**) one needs to use the tools found within Gutmann's work (**quote 2**), and without these tools claims for equality and mutual recognition are limited. To state this point more forcefully, without fairly engaging normative theory, critical multiculturalism is actually weakening its own framework because its claims for equality and mutual recognition are not well-grounded (Kymlicka 2009; Macedo 2003; Rawls 1971).[1]

Thus, the weakness of this book is that most of the authors within this edited volume uphold the notion that critical multiculturalism "provides the best means by which to integrate and advance these various critical theoretical threads". Nonetheless, without engaging normative theory this claim is baseless (Green 1999). As Graph 1.1 illustrates, a sound critical theory, of any sort, must have three features: *descriptive analysis*, *normative analysis*, and *a theory of social transformation*.

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[1] This is not to say that liberalism would not be better off engaging more 'critical' works, but that is another topic.

Graph 1.1 Three Features of a Critical Theory			
	Descriptive Analysis	Normative Analysis	Theory of Social Transformation
Critical Theory	Strong	Strong	Strong
Normative Theory (Political Liberalism)	Good	Strong	Weak
Critical Multiculturalism	Strong	Weak	Weak

The problem with his book is that it is only a descriptive analysis, which is insufficient to encompass a critical project. This insufficiency stems from the fact that describing how power relationship function is to explain 'what *is* the case', while explaining 'what *ought to* be the case' is a different task (Swift 2000). For example, *knowing that* a car is broken does not mean one *knows how to* fix it. Logically, then, *knowing that* society is unjust and unequal does mean one *knows how to* make society just and equal. This is because knowing how to create a more just and equal society requires different skills than simply identifying injustice; and some of these theoretical skills are only found in normative theory (Wright 2010).

Beyond this point, there are some interesting chapters within this book, especially for individuals that already see eye-to-eye with critical multiculturalism. First of all, Jill Ewing Flynn essay entitled 'Discussing Race and Culture in the Middle School Classroom' provides an insightful ethnographic case study of a middle school teacher named Mr. Evans, who struggles to implement an anti-racist education. This chapter is especially usefully for teachers who are attempting to implement an anti-racist education within their schools or classrooms.

Katie Fitzpatrick's essay entitled 'A Critical Approach to Physical Education' is an interesting ethnographic case study of a physical education teacher in New Zealand who attempts to implement a physical education centered on challenging the ways in which gender and racial norms are reproduced through physical education. In addition, this chapter has an insightful, but brief, discussion on how curriculum policies in New Zealand are being developed to be more inclusive towards indigenous.

Eric Gutstein has a chapter in this book, which summarizes his previous work on critical mathematics. For those familiar with his other works this chapter is nothing new, but for those unfamiliar with his work this is definitely worth reading (Gutstein 2006).

Russell Bishop's essay entitled 'Discursive Positioning and Educational Reform', explains how the Maori students, which are indigenous students in New Zealand, are positioned within educational reform. In particular, he explains how Maori students are framed in 'deficit terms' and why such framing has a negative effect upon indigenous students. At times, this chapter is vague but is worth reading.

James C. McShay develops a Freirian approach to digital media and education. McShay explains how "Freire's dialogic method of inquiry can be embedded in the design structure of digital stories creates new possibilities for helping teachers to acquire a critical literacy of education" (2010:144). For instance, digital stories provide a new arena for students to examine their own positionality and the ways in which social process affects one's position. This chapter is definitely worth reading.

Overall, some of the articles are well-worth reading, especially if one already considers him/herself to be a critical multiculturalist. However, because this book fails to rigorously develop its own normative foundation, much of the book really does not add anything new to the discussion. As explained above, while there are chapters that are quite practical and clear, the book as a whole tends to be more rhetorical than practical. A robust critical theory should be grounded in the notion of human emancipation via human flourishing, which requires more than descriptive work (Horkheimer 1982). It requires three aspects: *descriptive analysis*, *normative theory*, and *a theory of social transformation*. Without these three pieces developed together, critical scholars will not be able to provide viable alternatives to the status quo. In addition, without normative theory they cannot explain how and why particular educational processes can eliminate oppression (Cudd 2006). The rhetorical nature of this book, and critical scholarship in general, could be greatly reduced if critical educators developed a normative conception of multicultural education grounded in sound empirical evidence (Feinberg 2000; Reich 2002).

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About the Reviewer

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