



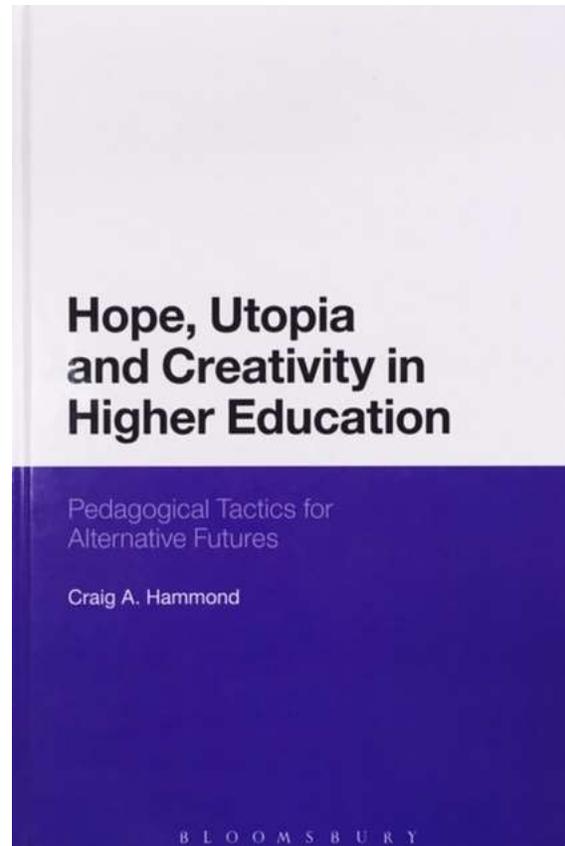
Hammond, C. A. (2017). *Hope, utopia and creativity in higher education: Pedagogical tactics for alternative futures*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

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The continuing transformation of higher education has been the subject of ongoing debates for centuries (see, for example, Scott, 1996). These debates interweave contested premises related not only to the aims of education and the purposes of educational institutions, but specifically to the role of institutions of higher education as unique purveyors of knowledge, culture, and power in societies. Thus, such debates are implicitly linked to questions of cultural and social (re)production, as well as attendant disputes related to the roles of agency and structure in influencing human behavior and social outcomes. Craig A. Hammond enters into these discussions with his work, *Hope, Utopia and Creativity in Higher Education: Pedagogical Tactics for Alternative Futures*. In this book, Hammond attempts to make the case for and demonstrate the use of a “utopian pedagogy,” which he originally developed as an amalgamation of the works of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, Roland Barthes, Ernst Bloch, Gaston Bachelard, and the International Situationists.



Throughout this book, Hammond makes reasoned and convincing arguments about the necessity and possibility of enacting transformative education in institutions of higher education, as well as the particular pedagogical methods he believes can achieve this end.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I sets out to conceptualize the ideas of *hope*, *utopia*, and *creativity*. Hammond does this through a deep analysis of philosophical works and associated key concepts produced by Ernst Bloch (e.g., utopia and hope), Roland Barthes (e.g., *The Death of the Author* and punctum), and Gaston Bachelard (e.g., reverie and the “house” of imagination). In Part II, Hammond’s admitted motive is to demonstrate how the ideas presented in Part I can be practiced in the classroom. However, in order to do this he first extends his philosophical explorations into the works of Guy Debord and the International Situationists (e.g. *dérive* and *détournement*) and certain theorists and practitioners of critical pedagogy, such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks (e.g. democratic and liberatory pedagogies). The common thread between them is their commitment to hope, possibility, and real social transformation through counter-strategies to resist material and ideological domination. Citing the work of these individuals, Hammond explains how these strategies can be performed in classroom practice through activities such as creative autobiography and collaborative peer assessment. Eventually, Part II ends with a Module Handbook detailing how Hammond enacts these concepts in his own courses, complete with a week-by-week syllabus, course objectives, presentation guidelines, rubrics and grade sheets for peer assessment of the course’s two main assignments (presentations focused on making theoretical connections between course content concepts). Lastly, in Part III, Hammond offers a variety of accounts from students who participated in his

“utopian pedagogy” course. This includes learner stories and reflections on their course experiences, as well as their projections of relevance to their lives beyond the course. However, as with previous parts of the book, Hammond begins with an elaborate philosophical and theoretical justification.

Hammond attempts to bridge theory and practice, thereby enacting his “utopian pedagogy” in a way that demonstrates both its intellectual validity and practicability. For me, he seems to have achieved the former much more effectively than the latter. Hammond’s depth of understanding of the core philosophical concepts applied in this book, his creative synthesis of them, and his expression of them through elegant prose are all very impressive. A reader with deep interest and or familiarity in educational philosophy will likely find this book to be original, eloquent, and intellectually significant. Also, although the book is sometimes quite heavily theoretical, a patient reader with the objective of applying actual educational practice will certainly find nuggets of inspiration as well as useful insights and teaching techniques. Thus, for a practitioner from a discipline outside of education or one with limited interest in or knowledge of educational philosophy, there is still enough substance for practice to say that this book is useful. All considered, Hammond’s motivation for writing this book and his ability to produce a work of value for these distinct audiences is a major success worthy of both respect and praise. Nonetheless, it is important for readers to recognize some possible weaknesses of this book.

One such weakness pertains to the accessibility of the text. This is partly related to content. Hammond spends much more time explicating the core philosophical concepts than their application. The latter is treated more as an afterthought, which is sure to be somewhat anticlimactic for a practice-focused reader who has journeyed through

approximately 100 pages of theoretical analysis only to arrive at limited explanations of singular application. Thus, while Hammond's book is an interesting and worthwhile read for educational practitioners, it seems much more geared towards the interests and needs of educational philosophers. This relates to the second accessibility-related shortcoming of the book: the style of writing. Hammond's complex rhetorical prose, involving sophisticated lexical density and range, can have the effect of further obfuscating philosophical concepts that are already highly abstract and esoteric. In other words, the relative inaccessibility of Hammond's work poses a problem for the practitioner-focused reader's quest to discover an answer to that all-important question for educators: "What am I going to do on Monday morning?" Furthermore, this inaccessibility, or "distance" created between the author and the practice-focused reader, might invoke images of an "unattached intelligentsia" operating on "the balcony" (Apple, 2013), which is somewhat contradictory considering the ostensible aims of Hammond for writing this book in the first place.

Another critique arises from this reader's expectations about its scope of implications. Specifically citing the hegemony of neoliberal values in society and higher education today, Hammond proclaims his intentions for this book:

I hope this book fulfills a necessary and timely need of encouraging HE practitioners and students within and across social science and education-related subjects – but certainly *not* restricted to them – to actively engage with new ways of thinking, new ways of learning and new possibilities of educating. Whether intent on formulating pedagogical alternatives within a politically localized context or with aspirations to target and proactively challenge wider political and economic torrents, the utopian

tactics and counter strategies that emerge as part of this study present a pedagogical model that is ripe for wider and fluid adaptations (p.6).

By his own account, Hammond intends to present the case for a "mainstream" pedagogical practice in higher education. Hammond is, rightly so, concerned with the ways that neoliberal ideology and policies frame the realm of possibility, what Bourdieu (1993) called "space of possibility," which constrains agency in a way that prevents an individual or institution from imagining themselves or the world differently and acting differently in accordance with these alternative imaginations. Thus, his intention is to resist this circumstance, to subvert hegemony by opening up spaces of possibility through his "utopian pedagogy," which is a challenge to "official knowledge" (Apple, 2014). Towards these ends, he aims at stimulating cognitive dissonance that can awaken latent cultural forms and lead to hope for personal and social transformation, yearning for utopia, and creative action in their service. Or in the words of Hammond himself, the "trans-human impulse" of *hope* "drives a shifting human hunger for ideas and transformatory change." This hunger can arise through his pedagogy since "culture-threads register and lie dormant as creative seeds, which can appear when catalyzed and emerge as utopian, meaningful visions or daydreams of possibility" (p.6). Specifically citing the central influence of the International Situationists in inspiring and guiding his work, Hammond asserts that "micro scale changes in relation to thought and behaviour harbour a potential influence, and reach, that can extend well beyond the relative scale of the *subject*" (p. 8).

Yet for some, Hammond's ambitions may not go far enough. There is some merit to his assumption that teachers can assist in the disruption of hegemony when they re-contextualize "official knowledge" towards progressive ends. Moreover, there is validity to

Hammond's assumption that university professors have a crucial role in affecting a society's culture, thereby connecting them directly to material transformations in society. This is because, as Gramsci (1971) reminds us, culture is critical to the maintenance and resistance of hegemony, and the role of intellectuals (be they "organic" or "traditional") in constructing and legitimating culture is vital. However, for certain readers the brand of critical scholarship promoted by Hammond may feel unsatisfying due to its lack of grounded connection to the political economy, a sort of characteristic that has in the past invited the uncomplimentary label of "romantic possibilitarianism" (Whitty, 1974). It is true that we can speculate about how the pedagogy proposed by Hammond might contribute to progressive change in society over the long term, but these outcomes are by and large hypothetical. While Hammond earns my sympathies and respect for his irreverent optimism, there is reason for rational skepticism here. Realistically, it is an underestimation of the powers of hegemony to believe that they can be so easily resisted by an individual acting alone. While such individual action may be possible and necessary for inciting social transformation, it is almost assuredly not sufficient. From a historical perspective, it is clear that even powerful organized collective attempts at transformational social change are usually disrupted or subverted. For example, Fraser (1989) reminded us that it is all too common for successful progressive movements eventually to be co-opted by dominant groups. Therefore, this prospect of potential progressive change over a long timeline is unlikely to come to fruition if we do not target concrete action today that is collective, politically connected, and explicitly elaborated.

Those familiar with the field of critical studies in education are well aware of how much recent work in this field has divorced itself from its structural Marxist roots concerned chiefly with collective action and political economy in lieu of a more postmodern theoretical approach that devotes more attention to individuality, identity, and culture (Gottesman, 2016). We should be cautious of leaning even slightly too far in the direction of the latter, as it seems Hammond has done in his book. Of course, without attention to individuality, identity and culture, work on political economy remains insufficient since it tends to rely on cultural essentialism and structural determinism. However, without attention to collectivism and political economy, the focus on individuality, identity, and culture remains inadequate since such fracturing tends to result in ineffectuality in challenging the structural power relations which are so solidly enshrined in the current arrangement of economic and political spheres.

None of my criticisms should dissuade one from reading this book. I do have worries about its accessibility, efficacy, and connection to larger politics; however, there is undeniable value to the work that Hammond has produced. While better connection to serious and lasting transformations could have been made, he does provide intellectual resources to help in envisioning and justifying those transformations. One place that the reader could look for a better sense of how these connections might be made is Erik Olin Wright's (2010) crucial volume, *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Applied toward these ends, Hammond's work can provide an important contribution to the field of critical pedagogy.

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