



The Fine Art of Sitting on Two Stools: Multicultural Education Between Postmodernism and Critical Theory

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Abstract. The paper examines two philosophical origins of multicultural education – postmodern philosophy and critical theory. Critical theory is closely connected to grand narrative of liberation, while postmodern tradition rejects such narrative. The ambivalence of fundamental assumptions makes multicultural theory vulnerable to criticism. However, author maintains, this ambivalence can be a strength rather than a weakness of the multicultural theory. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, author attempts to show that incompatible theoretical perspectives may productively coexist within framework of dialogical engagement. The result of such dialogical relations is reciprocal change and not an eventual merge.

Key words: multicultural education, critical theory, postmodern philosophy, Bakhtin

Multicultural education theory sits uneasily between two philosophical stools, one of postmodernism and one of critical theory. This uncomfortable position makes multiculturalism quite vulnerable to criticism. In this paper, I show that such a foundational gap between the two stools does indeed exist. Next, I argue that this gap cannot be bridged unless both of the philosophical components are revised. And finally, I outline how these components can be reworked with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and polyphony. In other words, I am not interested in shifting multicultural education onto one stool or the other; rather, I am searching for a way for it to sit comfortably in both stools and not to go between them. The ambivalence of multicultural theory about its own foundations is not a fault, but unawareness of it, is.

Some may object from the start that portraying postmodern philosophy and critical theory as two separate philosophical traditions is unjustified. After all, theorists like Peter McLaren consider themselves to be critical postmodernists or postmodern critical theorists. Moreover, for the purpose of this paper I am lumping all the postmodernists together, which is a gross oversimplification. Nevertheless, from the point of view of multicultural theory, one can assume the existence of two distinctive theoretical trends, or two general directions of thought that could be called "postmodernism" and "critical theory" for the sake of convenience. My focus is not on properly defined theoretical concepts but on what one may call

philosophical traditions. The intention is to comment on certain trends in philosophy of education. If the words “postmodernism” and “critical theory” mean anything at all, this is fair game.

The fact that multicultural education includes some heterogeneous elements of postmodernism and critical theory is neither new nor especially controversial. For instance, Sonia Nieto writes that multicultural education both affirms pluralism and promotes the democratic principles of social justice.¹ However, she does not perceive it as a problem. Numerous other examples of the same attitude might be given. In the minds of many theorists, adherence to pluralism and critique of the Western canon, peacefully coexist with adherence to critical theory with its liberatory metanarratives and claims of universal justice. I am not saying that coexistence of mutually exclusive foundational claims, or sitting on two stools at once is impossible, impractical, or somehow wrong. The only comment I want to make is that it cannot be viewed as unproblematic, for the following reasons.

The evidence of the theoretical ambivalence of multicultural theory is easily obtainable from external critics. In *The Diversity Myth*, David Sacks and Peter Thiel presented their charge against multicultural education as it has been and is being carried out at Stanford.² The book is not only a good example of conservative critique of multicultural education practice, but it also raises certain related foundational issues that are of interest to this paper. It is not my intention to judge whether such a critique is valid, or whether it is sufficiently informed about what is really going on in the field of multicultural education. One can easily see a definite political agenda looming behind this critique, which I neither share nor consider being reasonable. One useful feature of such a critique is that because it misses some important nuances of multicultural theory, it accentuates basic questions that are not adequately answered by multiculturalists.

One of the main charges against multiculturalism is an accusation of relativism. This is certainly a common theme in critical literature on multiculturalism. Sacks and Thiel ask three basic questions:

- *First, which groups (or cultures) count in the multicultural world?* If it is said if it is said that they all do, then it may be asked: what are relevant criteria for distinguishing groups? Are Americans of Irish or Italian backgrounds multicultural groups worthy of ‘proportional representation?’ [...] More abstractly, since there seems to be no limiting principle, why are chess players not a group? ...³
- *Second, how are differences between groups to be resolved?* [...] What] does one do when the desires of these groups conflict? If two groups are acting in a manner consistent with each one’s own standards, what set of external standards exists to arbitrate disputes? Even if multiculturalists concede that this might be a theoretical problem, but claim that it is one that can be worked out in practice through compromise, they still cannot explain what to do with groups that reject compromise altogether. Who is to say uncompromising groups are wrong?⁴

- *Third, how are differences within groups to be resolved?* If Chicanos, for instance, have a special ‘perspective’ to share, and if indeed most Chicanos can be found to agree on a particular issue, [...] what does not one do with dissenters in the group who hold contrary opinions? [...] Which individuals within groups count?⁵

Finally, unable to find answers to these and other questions, the authors conclude that multiculturalism is not what it claims to be, but, rather, a disguised form of radical political ideology of the Left. The conservatives’ anxiety demonstrates that multiculturalism surely appears to be an ideology, a certain movement with a more or less defined political agenda. At the same time, its theoretical arguments often come from the criticism of the universals, of the Western canon, and of classical liberal thought.

From the critics’ point of view, no one provides reasonable criteria for distinguishing groups “in the multicultural world.” I must notice that this last charge is not entirely without merit. Despite a large number of works on multiculturalism there is still no widely shared understanding of the criteria for distinguishing groups with respect to the multicultural agenda. These groups are rather empirically defined for each individual country. This is a pragmatic thing to do, but makes it difficult to evaluate the claims of each new group that wants to be considered in multicultural education. In general, multicultural theorists are understandably reluctant to engage in discussions about their definitions of justice, democracy, and good life. Rejection of the Western European imposed “universals” makes it a very difficult task to arrive plausibly at some new positive universals. This difficulty reflects the same tension between the liberatory narratives of justice and the postmodern avoidance of universals. Restating the question – how is it possible to appeal to such notions as social progress and justice, and at the same time doubt the possibility of universal criteria equally applicable to different cultures?

Further evidence of philosophical trouble comes from disagreements between the different branches of multiculturalism. For instance, Peter McLaren distinguishes conservative, liberal, left-liberal and critical multiculturalism, while clearly showing his preference for the last of the four to the exclusion of all others.⁶ He solves the problem by decidedly shifting the gravity center to critical theory, at the expense of the postmodern argument. Frank Margonis offers a similar vision of critical theory in the age of the postmodern theorizing,⁷ although he does not specifically focus his argument on multicultural education. He would probably object my casual grouping of all critical theorists with Marxists. However, for the sake of the argument, I will consider all those who appeal to the universalistic metanarratives of liberation and social justice, to be under one big umbrella of critical theory. Margonis accepts charges of universalism and explanatory reductivism of the Marxist tradition as inevitable features of any “language of conviction”, capable of generating real social change. Furthermore, he acknowledges the power of the postmodern argument, but thinks it goes too far:

The postmodern prohibition of metanarratives is simply neglectful of the conditions of existence. . . We must act daily, and our acts will serve good or ill. Our understandings and action will inevitably rely, to some degree, on oversimple generalizations about experience, humans, and society. Poststructural and postmodern critiques of totalizing theory serve as powerful checks on the arrogance of general theory, but that does not mean we can do without oversimple claims.⁸

Here I must say that European postmodernists like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault draw their verdict against metanarratives not only from purely theoretical considerations. Their home continent has abundantly demonstrated in the past century that any “general theory” will always, without exceptions and regardless of the degree of its initial arrogance, become dangerous to human existence. They believe that it’s not the interpretations of nationalism or Marxism that lead to Auschwitz, but the very theories being interpreted. My own Russian sensibility tells me to be especially attentive to such an argument. I disagree with the suggestion that any Russian, Eastern European, Chinese, Cuban or other Marxist experiments were either simple historical aberrations, or products of some immature interpretation of Marxism. Such a suggestion is rarely being made explicitly, but continues to be held implicitly. In fact, Russia alone attempted several different models of socialism, internally remaining a very complex society. Some serious theoretical attempts to revise Marxism by Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Stalin, Tito, Mao Tse-tung, Dubchek, Khrushchev, Gorbachev and others were undertaken. In other words, these very serious, attentive to reality, and creative attempts to implement Marxist theory all lead to some sort of massive violence. There exist a significant body of historical and philosophical work in the post-Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe that argues this very point. It is not as if Russians, Yugoslavs and Chinese “just didn’t get” the Socialist ideal.

The United States’ recent history can prove the same connection between the “language of conviction” and various repressive practices. This, so enthusiastic about freedom, progress, and Westward expansion country systematically massacred the native inhabitants of the continent. This nation, convinced in its civilizing mission, placed those Native Americans who survived into boarding schools and tried to remake them into Whites. United around the idea of fighting for democracy, American people sent its compatriots of Japanese descent to internment camps. Radicalized by Senator McCarthy’s activism, Americans engaged in a banal witch-hunt. One should be able to see the instances of the “languages of conviction” behind these historical facts. What makes one think that America is somehow immune or can be made immune to such side effects of a “general theory,” be it Marxism or anticommunism? Rephrasing Margolis’ assertion, I would reply that unreserved Marxist endorsement of the metanarratives is also neglectful of the conditions of existence. This, of course, applies not only to Marxism and neo-Marxism, but also to all critical theories that allow for metanarratives by making universalistic and reductionist claims.

Having said all this, I am not suggesting that multicultural theory should shift completely from its critical theory stool onto the postmodernist one. Although I could not find such a suggestion explicitly defined in the literature, it is plausible to imagine a tendency to go completely postmodern at the expense of the critical component. Here, both Margonis and McLaren would easily pinpoint the postmodernists' vulnerable point. The postmodern writers do not give us a good reason to act, nor do they give us a reason to resist oppression. They are just not useful in dealing with our real problems of injustice and human suffering. They do very little to address racial or gender discrimination, or to redeem inherent economic injustices of capitalism.

The positive program of such a postmodern writer as Lyotard, for instance, boils down to the concept of local determinism, which means that the present players of any game must agree upon the rules of the game.⁹ I have two objections about the local determinism idea. First of all, the local consensus situation never really arises, even in the smallest of games. And unless someone takes measures to silence it, there always exists a minority or a voice of dissent. This seems to be a fundamental fact of human existence, brilliantly highlighted by Lyotard and other postmodernists. The suggestion that this somehow does not apply for smaller groups of people seems highly implausible. Secondly, even the local players of a language game may not share the desire to come to a mutual understanding about its rules, especially if they are disassociated by their race, class, or gender situations. For example, going into different, newly re-segregated schools, African-Americans and European Americans students may never actually come face to face, to reach a local consensus. And as we all could observe, direct contact by itself does not ensure meaningful conversation, let alone a local consensus. But most importantly, Lyotard's solution makes significant social change all but impossible. Margonis is right, only large-scale organizing, which is impossible without the "language of conviction," can bring about tangible progress towards justice.

Moral arguments against the postmodern position can amply complement the political ones. Most of multiculturalists set certain limits to pluralism on moral grounds, excluding what they consider to be oppressive, or reactionary points of view. All multiculturalists, especially those of critical orientation, make implicit or explicit truth claims, thus setting certain limits to cultural pluralism. For instance, Sonia Nieto writes:

A multiplicity of perspectives approach can indeed be an important strategy to use in multicultural education but, when used uncritically, it can result in accepting all perspectives as equally valid, no matter how outrageous. People and events can, in the process, lose their moral center. For example, some might call for "equal time" for the Nazi point of view during World War II or for the plight of White segregationists during the civil rights movement, claiming that all viewpoints have equal validity, including contentions that Holocaust never happened or that the impact of slavery in U.S. history has been given too much play in newer curricula.¹⁰

What is the criterion that allows us to include curriculum on the impact of slavery and exclude the White segregationist viewpoint? The appeal to the moral center is exactly the same on the Right as it is on the Left, although neither can plausibly justify its preferences for what is considered moral. Yet this does not diminish the validity of Nieto's question.

This question, of course, is a part of a larger philosophical problem raised by the postmodern debate on how one can be both a liberal and an ironist, as Richard Rorty puts it.¹¹ How contingency of language, of selfhood and of community can be comprehended along with the need for human solidarity? How can we both value diversity and have moral grounds to stand on? Rorty himself does not see a point in attempts to synthesize the two polarities. From his point of view, one should be a liberal in one's public life and an ironist in one's private life. His may be an elegant compromise that does not do much for the burning issues of multicultural education. Education does not know a clear delineation between the private and the public. A teacher cannot be a liberal first period and an ironist second period, when she or he constantly moves between the private and the public. Otherwise, we endorse the education that reinforces the dichotomy of private and public. And this dichotomy can be considered one of the cornerstones of classical liberal model. In fact, recognition of plurality in the private realm is nothing new; it is the extension of plurality to the public life that constitutes the postmodern claim. The contingencies of the postmodern in the context of education leave little use for Rorty's solution.

It is clear that both the critical and the postmodern stools offer much. It may be less clear that both have serious faults of their own, which I already demonstrated. I see no way to bridge them in any meaningful way without first revising both of them. The two philosophical stools that multicultural education sits on need to be fixed first, before they can carry the weight. Critical theory remains a grand narrative, which does include certain claims of universal truth. Multiculturalism will remain suspect as long as it shies away from becoming a political ideology, like postmodernism, and trying to bring about justice, like critical theory.

One way to think about such a reworking is to draw on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, who was neither a postmodernist, nor critical theorist. Moreover, he used an entirely different set a references to talk about difference, culture, and justice. Bakhtin places his peculiar concept of dialogue in the center of his world and arranges everything around the monological-dialogical continuum. I have tried to imagine what Bakhtin would have to say to a postmodern philosopher and to a critical theorist, based mostly on *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. This is, of course, a pure speculation, because Bakhtin has openly commented on neither Postmodernism nor Marxism. He noted, however, in the second edition of his Dostoevsky book,

We see no special need to point out that the polyphonic approach has nothing in common with relativism (or with dogmatism). But it should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all

authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). Polyphony as an *artistic* method lies in an entirely different plane.¹²

This brief remark contains the seeds of his criticism towards postmodernism (or relativism) and the critical theory (dogmatism). The two variations of the same monological approach, despite their apparent dissimilarities, nevertheless share monological assumptions. Indeed, postmodernists are pessimistic about a possibility of a true dialogue because, from their point of view, true understanding is impossible across various discourses, or across language games. In the context of multicultural education, this means that there cannot be a dialogue across various cultures, because each culture has its own set of values and meanings that are not communicable across cultural boundaries without violating their authenticity. Critical theorists, however, tend to argue from a position of absolute justice that either needs no dialogue, or views dialogue only as a vehicle towards general consensus (Habermass). This last interpretation of dialogue is unacceptable for Bakhtin, who saw it as always an end, never a means.

Bakhtin would agree with the Postmodernists, who are asserting the irreducible multiplicity of human worlds, cultures word games, languages and discourses. Difference demands respect, and will not tolerate being reduced or diminished. Difference resists being brought to a unity, to a synthesis. Indeed, there exists certain incommensurability of discourses; Lyotard's *differend* is a real and fundamental condition of human existence. More strongly, we cannot be human unless we differ. The postmodern suspicion towards the grand narratives of modernity is fully justified. Here is how Bakhtin characterized the idealist philosophy, the most prominent but not the only modern tradition of his time:

From the point of view of 'consciousness in general' this plurality of consciousness is accidental, and so to speak, superfluous. Everything in them that is essential and true is incorporated in the unified context of 'consciousness in general' and deprived of its individuality. That which is individual, that which distinguishes one consciousness from another and from others, is cognitively not essential, and belongs to the realm of an individual human being's physical organization and limitations. From the point of view of truth, there are no individual consciousnesses. Idealism recognizes only one principle of cognitive individualization: *error*. True judgments are not attached to a personality, but correspond to some unified systematically monological context. Only error individualizes. . . In the ideal, a single consciousness and a single mouth are absolutely sufficient for maximally full cognition; there is no need for a multitude of consciousnesses and no basis for it.¹³

The postmodern theorists undertook a similar critique of modernity's universalistic failures. Such a critique is also fully applicable to critical theorists, who are not idealists in their philosophical orientation. However, the postmodern vision of human diversity in turn remains within the monological realm. For instance,

postmodernists assert that defining truths across discourses is impossible. Such an assertion implies that finding the truth is possible in principle, or at least *within* one particular discourse. The postmodern writers substitute the impossibility of universal truths for an impossibility of any shared truths among different discourses, cultures, or language groups. For Bakhtin, truth is not a statement, a sentence or a phrase. Instead, truth is a number of mutually addressed albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent statements. Truth needs multitude of bearing voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed with “a single mouth.” The polyphonic truth requires many simultaneous voices. Bakhtin does not mean to say that many voices carry partial truths that can simply complement each other. A number of different voices do not make the truth if simply “averaged”, or “synthesized.” It is the fact of mutual addressivity, of engagement, and of commitments to the context of a real-life event, that distinguishes truth from untruth. Thus Bakhtin’s view of human diversity implies radical connection among various discourses, or various cultures.

A culture discovers itself deeper and fuller only through the eyes of another culture (but it does so not in all fullness, because other cultures will come along, hey will see and understand even more). Meaning unveils its depths while meeting and touching another alien meaning: as if a *dialogue* began between them, a dialogue that overcomes isolation and lobsidedness of these meanings, these cultures.¹⁴

Postmodernism could be changed towards greater dialogicality without abandoning its suspicion of metanarratives. Viewing different cultures, groups, and discourses as interconnected, perpetually redefining and co-authoring each other, does not cancel the general stance against metanarratives. The difference itself may be perceived as a form of connection. The postmodern suspicion towards metanarratives can still allow for one universal, the dialogue. Human actions, social systems, laws and cultural practices can still be evaluated and judged from the point of view of how dialogical, how inclusive and how engaged they are. Dialogue in its Bakhtinian sense is a universal, but it is not a project. It does not imply any particular goal, which would be characteristic to a grand narrative. It would be hard to argue that a non-teleological ideal such as dialogue could lead to Auschwitz.

For Bakhtin, meanings are born at the point of meeting of different consciousnesses. He does not share the postmodernist assumption that if only one leaves the marginalized cultural groups alone, they will somehow define themselves from within, and develop authentic identities. He thinks that the lack of relations between people is as great an evil as the presence of domineering relations between them. He argues for the multiplicity of connection, which may go beyond the current postmodern thought, but does not in any way negate the general thrust of the postmodern argument.

The philosophical component of critical theory can also be reworked. In Bakhtin’s world, again, dialogue is the end and everything else is the means. It is possible to rework from this position one’s understanding of oppression and

justice. I cannot lay out a dialogical theory of justice in any detail here. My aim is simply to show that the notions of dialogue and polyphony are not hostile to the agenda of liberatory theories, and to the contrary, can even enrich them.

At this point, Frank Margonis would comment: "I feel this is an idealistic stance: you and your friends could be doing pluralistic dialogue and Auschwitz could still happen in your society. The historical reality is that we are thrown into a world with conflicting social and political movements, each armed with its own metanarratives."¹⁵ It is true, attempts at dialogue do not by themselves redeem evil. However, most of the violent tragedies of this century happened as attempts to avoid bigger imagined or real disasters. The Nazis were sure that by starting the European war they could save the decaying Western civilization and hence prevent the suffering of the German people. Russian Communists murdered millions of people out of conviction that this would eliminate the suffering of the greater masses of people. In short, the biggest evils of the modern epoch were brought about in a struggle against evil. Thus, if dialogue does not necessarily prevent Auschwitz, political action guided by a monological ideological construction is likely to lead to Auschwitz.

The choice we have is not between dialogue and action. The choice is between action with or without dialogue. Further, the choice is between dialogue for action or action for dialogue. And dialogue is not antithetical to action. It is a category that gives one's action a meaning. Dialogue is not a warm and fuzzy, tree hugging exercise. It does not require us to compromise. It does, however, require us to change. One's belief in justice should be changed after every specific encounter with the evil of oppression. Rigid and absolutely unchanged convictions, no matter how progressive, inevitably lead to violence. We all have a duty to act, but we all have an even higher duty to engage in human relations that make our actions meaningful.

The primacy of dialogue does not negate the value of justice. However, justice becomes a very important, but not an exclusive means towards dialogue. The dialogical definition of a good life is *not* based on social justice. I propose not dialogue for justice, but justice for dialogue. In short, justice is a social condition that makes dialogical relations among people most likely. Justice requires removal of all means of silencing. Therefore, inequality, oppression, violation of human rights, etc. are enemies of justice because they prevent people from speaking and being heard, and not out of abstract principles of goodness.

The history of the revolutionary movements of this century makes it obvious that the revolutionaries never quite knew what to do with justice once they had the power to establish it (regardless of how questionable their understanding of justice was in the first place). Their definitions of a good life were sorely lacking in content. For me, the rhetoric of justice loses any credibility without reference to what is to come after justice is achieved. For instance, the prejudice reduction, one of the main aims of multicultural education, will greatly benefit from a discussion of what is to replace prejudice. Is it going to be intergroup engagement

and productive dialogue, or mutual distancing, or detached, formalized, and legally defined relations? Prejudice reduction is a very important precondition to human flourishing, but it does not constitute this human flourishing, just like absence of illness does not yet define health. The notion of dialogue is constitutive to the flourishing of humans (and to the concept of a good life). A similar argument could be made with respect to the other agenda items in multicultural education.

The last thing I want to do is to buy into a conservative argument that any struggle for social justice leads to radical extremism and ultimately, to bloodshed. And yet every struggle for social justice that was governed by a *single-voiced* theory did. One can, however, offer historical examples of strong liberatory movements that did not bring about mass violence, and generally, avoided the pitfalls of modernity. “Was Ghandi’s movement to move England out of India a single voice movement? Was the Civil Rights movement in the US a single voice movement?”¹⁶ We must acknowledge, however, that the history of postcolonialism is abounding with exactly the stories of great narratives of national liberation turned corrupt, like the Postmodernists describe and predict. Ghandi’s story does not end on the day Great Britain left the subcontinent. It goes on and includes the nuclear tests of 1998 as well.

As for the Civil Rights movement, it gained important concessions from the white power structure, but it never fully entered that structure. We simply do not know what could have become of the Civil Rights movement if it prevailed. The worst fate for any social ideal or movement is to become victorious. The old fable suggests why it is impossible to kill the dragon – because every knight who kills the dragon eventually turns into one. This is the problem I have with killings, even with killing of a dragon.

My problem is not in the narratives of liberation, but in metanarratives of all sorts. As long as the polyphony is preserved in the discourse of justice, we are safe from “progress” that is uncontroversial and thus totalizing. In this respect, I should agree with Margonis when he states: “As a directive to government policy, the socialist conception of work is a limited ideal articulating the basics that governments should ensure; one need not take this conception of freedom to be an all-encompassing portrait of the good life.”¹⁷ However, it is far from clear why and how is the ideal limited? I believe that just remembering the postmodern warnings about the dangers of metanarratives does not make the metanarratives safe to handle.

Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony provides just such a theory of mutual limitations. A socialist concept of work must be addressed to an opposing theory, such as the ideology of economic liberalization. When two or more theories contradict each other, and yet truly address to each other, they can constitute what Bakhtin calls the polyphonic truth. Unfortunately, it is out of the question for Margonis to include people who strongly disagree with the socialist concept of work in the dialogue about justice. In another example, he provides examples of truths that are “not difficult to discern. One such truth is that capitalism in the United

States requires, as Marx, argued, millions of unemployment workers to keep wages from going to high; thus capitalism ensures poverty.”¹⁸ I have no problem with such a truth in itself; in fact, I tend to agree with it. It is what is not being said that bothers me. Such a truth lacks a core dynamic component, which is tension between different voices. From the dialogical point of view, such a truth cannot be stated while ignoring the free market proponents who argue a very different point about the relations between capitalism and human well being. Polyphony allows for disagreement, but it forbids ignoring the opponent:

For a word (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response*. Even a word that is known to be false is not absolutely false, and always presupposes an instance that will understand and justify it, even if the form “anyone *in my position* would have lied, too.”¹⁹

The two philosophical stools of multicultural education should and will remain separate and distinctive. Even if the revision I proposed actually do take place, the two philosophical traditions will not agree with each other. Even a “dialogized” version of postmodernism will not satisfy critical theorists for the lack of the ultimate goal – removal of oppression. A critical theory, even if it is more open to doubt and more attentive to the means of attaining its goals, will never become a truly postmodern type of thinking. The difference between the two traditions will and must remain.

The purpose of theorizing in the Bakhtinian world is changing. The theory-making no longer implies replacing multiple old theories with a new, and a more accurate single theory. To the contrary, a theorist must preserve and enhance the multiplicity of theoretical approaches, so that each of them can continue to exist. He or she must develop the old theories in a way that the differences among them are preserved rather than eliminated. At the same time old distinctive theories must be turned to face each other, to address each other, and to answer to each other’s claims. I do not think our identification with just one theoretical tradition is productive. As long as there is a dialogue among these various mutating theories, their existence is justified. Only the theories, the points of view and the ideologies that absolutely exclude each other, proclaim themselves to be invalid. I would not like it at all, despite all my personal and cultural reservations, if the Marxist, or some larger critical discourse disappears, or becomes weakened. It would sadden me, however, if critical theory consolidates, solidifies, and clarifies itself to death. The same could be said about postmodern theorizing. The aim of dialogical critique is rarely to show a particular theory’s inadequacy. It is, rather, to show the new possibilities of meaning discovered in the particular theory, and how these possibilities may be addressed to other, competing/engaged theories.

“So we need to maintain and strengthen skin-heads, because they have some truth to them, and we will learn more about ourselves and gain greater meaning, by dialoging with skin heads, then by showing them false?” – my friend asks. My answer is that even when there is no truth *in* a theory or a viewpoint, there

is always a truth *about* it, which can only be extracted from (with?) attempts of dialogical understanding. The polyphonic truth is a simultaneous presentation of many voices, some of which are most disagreeable. Evil voices surely play a role in the great polyphonic chorus of the world. There are two different ways of showing someone to be wrong. One is by arguing with the weakest possible version of the opponent's theory, and catching its internal inconsistencies. The other way is to find, and if necessary, to create the strongest possible version of such a theory, to see how a person might have become a racist, and to understand the human logic behind becoming one. Dostoevsky has shown with great skill how this is possible, himself never abandoning his own moral standing.

The problem of dialogue with evil deserves a special and detailed analysis, which goes beyond this paper's scope. And yet I cannot help noticing that the use of such words as racism, Nazism, or totalitarianism as mere clichés, without attempts to hear the real human voices behind them, is not productive. What prevents us from looking into the eyes of evil? It is the fear to find some parts of our selves reflected in those eyes. A person who refuses to talk to a racist does that out of the weakness of his or her own antiracist convictions. It is also a fear of contracting the disease of evil, from looking too deep into it. It is a fear to lose the luxury of being on the right side. We do not want to negotiate with evil partly because we think it is contagious, and partly because we are afraid to discover an evil person's humanity, just as we do not want to discover the depths of our own psyche, as Freud so brilliantly discovered.

In this paper, we dealt with two philosophical traditions that never considered each other mutually exclusive. All we need is a more engaging mode of disagreement. At the heart of multicultural education is the dialogue about justice and the dangers of metanarratives. We must replace the weak ambivalence of doubt and hesitation with a strong ambivalence of polyphony. One can imagine a multicultural education that conveys to the students the fundamental contradiction of multiculturalism between the struggle for justice and an impossibility of a universal notion of justice. The message can be simplified, as Margonis rightly argues, but the simplification should only go as far as this last double-voiced contradiction. "A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is minimum for life, the minimum for existence," – Bakhtin contends.²⁰ The multicultural theory should never be reduced to a single-voiced statement. Margonis is concerned that such a message may turn paralyzing rather than encouraging. I do not see why this must be so.

First, the differences between actions and words are exaggerated. As Bakhtin suggested, "A human act is a potential text and can be understood (as a human act and not a physical action) only in the dialogic context of its time (as a rejoinder, as a semantic position, as a system of motives)."²¹ If an action can also be understood as a text, there are different degrees of dialogicality to such action/text. The point is not to move people to act, but to increase the dialogicality of their actions.

Secondly, I believe that people are hesitant to act, when they are uncomfortable with the simple messages of both the Right and the Left. When I am told that a certain political program is just, fair to all, and will not bring about any negative consequences, I get nervous and feel like I am talking to a salesman, who promises to give something for nothing. Strong ambivalence requires courage and honesty. If you tell your audience that justice may come at a heavy cost, people will be more inclined to act than if you tell them that the journey you urge them to undertake has no cost. We can reduce the cost, but we neither can have it for free, nor can we afford to forgo the journey.

Notes

¹ Nieto, Sonia: 1996, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Longman, New York.

² Sacks, D. and Thiel, P.: 1995, *The Diversity Myth: "Multiculturalism" and the Politics of Intolerance at Stanford*, The Independent Institute, Oakland, CA.

³ Sacks and Thiel, 30.

⁴ Sacks and Thiel, 31.

⁵ Sacks and Thiel, 32.

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¹⁵ Margonis, Frank: June 1998, private letter to the author.

¹⁶ Margonis, Frank: June 1998, private letter to the author.

¹⁷ Margonis, p. 98.

¹⁸ Margonis, p. 101.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail: 1986, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, p. 127.

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 252.

²¹ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and other Late Essays*, p. 107.

