

Book Reviews

Rethinking Social Justice Scholarship in Media and Communication

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Social Justice and Communication Scholarship. By Omar Swartz (Ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2006 \$32.95 (soft), pp. 263

Communication Activism. Volume 1: Communication for Social Change. By Lawrence R. Frey and Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.). Hampton Press, Cresskill, New Jersey, 2007 \$39.95 (soft), pp. 440

Communication Activism. Volume 2: Media and Performance Activism. By Lawrence R. Frey and Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.). Hampton Press, Cresskill, New Jersey, 2007 \$36.50 (soft), pp. 376

These three books seek to rationalize, legitimize, and model social justice research and to place this approach to scholarship firmly on the agenda of media and communication studies. Social justice is an old but illusive ideal. All the major world religions treat it as an obligation of the faithful. Plato saw it as essential to social harmony, and it was one of the motivating forces behind Enlightenment-based social contract theories, which provided the foundations of liberal democracy.

Rawls (1971, p. 3) maintained that “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.” Yet, in advanced, heterogeneous societies, there is little consensus about what justice is or how institutions should be structured to realize it; consequently, many good faith attempts to deploy policies and programs to achieve social justice fracture and dissolve in acrimony.

The editors and contributors to these books define social justice contextually and almost exclusively from U.S. perspectives. Lawrence R. Frey, who is coeditor of two of the books and a contributor to the third,

draws upon his experience as one of the architects of the social justice concentration in the Department of Communication at Loyola University in Chicago in the early 1990s to offer a two-pronged definition of social justice communication scholarship. First, it entails “engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally under-resourced.” Second, and more specifically, it “identifies and foregrounds the grammars that oppress or underwrite relationships of domination and then reconstructs those grammars.” Virtually, all the contributors to these volumes agree that it is not enough to merely study social justice or even to function in an advisory capacity to organizations seeking social justice; in their view, social justice scholars must be actively engaged in collaborative interventions to improve the lot of the disadvantaged.

Imputing a common vision to more than 50 authors is a fool’s errand. Yet, as the second prong of Frey’s definition affirms, constructivist assumptions do animate many of the contributions. That is, the social justice scholarship profiled in these books tends to assume, with occasional nods to Dewey’s pragmatism (via James W. Carey), that communication constitutes community and that changing “grammars”—foundation metaphors, performances of voice and practices of “othering,” hegemonic structures of language, pedagogies, and rules of discourse—as well as creating alternative media, deploying liberating rhetoric, and expanding opportunities for public engagement in democratic dialogues are useful strategies for communicative interventions. In short, they tend to support the view that changing communication structures and processes can change the world.

The communication contexts examined by these works range from interpersonal relations (families, classrooms, and peer

relations) to the planet itself (world peace and environmentalism). The Swartz book includes reflections on communication theory, scholarship, and partisanship in applied research (Swartz; A. Rodriguez; and Frey); interrogations of charity versus social justice in efforts to abolish homelessness (Tompkins); use of interactive theater (IT) to promote participation in diversity initiatives on a college campus (Simpson and Brown Adelman); examination of the marginal positions of international women of color in the United States generally and in the National Communication Association specifically (Shome); deconstructing foreign policy discourse and replacing it with life-affirming alternatives to advance peace activism and environmental survival (Wander); media activism to expand the range of discourse in a conservative city (Palmeri); a programmatic statement for incorporating social justice norms in interpersonal communication scholarship as well as within social justice scholars' pedagogies and relationships (Crumley); teaching social justice (Lee); a project to promote social justice in community education and research (Pearce); and a penetrating critical challenge to the logocentric assumptions of social justice scholarship in communication, including the scholarship between the cover of this book (Artz).

The Frey and Carragee collections, which run to nearly 900 pages, consist of case studies of communication activism dedicated to advancing social justice. They include the Greensboro, North Carolina Truth and Reconciliation Project, which tried to heal long silenced racial wounds (Jovanovic, Steger, Symonds, and Nelson); the Springfield, Missouri Good Community Committee, which attempted to address issues of community violence and create a citywide forum to discuss civic virtues (Adams, Berquist, Dillon, and Galanes); a Michigan initiative to assess racial and ethnic relations and other equity issues (Orbe); an intervention in a disadvantaged, inner-city high school in St. Louis designed to amplify faculty and student skills

in argumentation and debate and to encourage participation in debating tournaments (Shields and Preston); an initiative to keep hope alive among antiwar activists (Harnett); an examination of the dialectics of the intertwined roles of the social justice scholar acting as consultant, volunteer, and activist within the context of a local community rape crisis center (Crabtree and Arden Ford); developing communication strategies to facilitate "death talk" in capital case courtrooms (Sunwolf); deploying metacommunication tools, including discussion about discussion processes and decision making, to facilitate consensus within a democratically organized antiglobalization affinity group (Palmer); participatory research to promote better health care to the underserved or "invisible" population of women who partner with women (Campo and Somjean Frazer); anti-smoking efforts in the tobacco growing state of Kentucky (Esrock, Hart, and Leichty); a Habermasian effort to expose disenfranchised workers to a quasi-ideal speech situation (Ritchie); a feminist intervention in a woman's prison that entails creation of an inmate newspaper as part of a journalism course, which is intended to encourage the silenced to claim their voices without inviting repercussions from authorities (Novek and Sanford); a collaborative effort in which college journalism students work with the staff of a high school newspaper to produce an annual diversity issue that is relevant to the local community (Christian); a college service learning project that uses media literacy training as a strategy in violence prevention (Cooks and Scharrer); formation of a think tank to promote media research that provides the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation with an accurate, independent knowledge base to support its activism (Cagle); producing and exhibiting a video documentary to stop the execution of a Missouri man (McHale); using the Internet to mediate differences and build an effective microradio advocacy group (Coopman); confronting the digital divide through the Neighborhood

Communication Project by sharing the social and intellectual capital of Northwestern University faculty and students with low-income neighborhood groups in Chicago (Herman and Ettema); using participatory theater workshops in the Indian state of Bihar to assess the effectiveness of an entertainment-education radio soap opera (Harter, D. Sharma, Pant, Singhal, and Y. Sharma); developing and assessing interactive performance models for peer education in sexual assault interventions on college campuses (Rich and J. Rodriguez); and finally, a project to combat domestic abuse that uses narrative to transform the role of academics from experts to engaged partners in community activism (Cunningham Walker and Curry).

Swartz's Introduction and his contribution to *Social Justice and Communication Scholarship* as well as Frey and Carragee's Introduction to their two volumes offer passionate defenses of social justice scholarship and activism. Identifying himself as a rhetorical scholar, Swartz describes social justice scholarship in communication as a metamethodology. That is, he contends that rhetoricians in particular and communication scholars in general can identify abusive uses of language, offer alternatives, dilute the power of elites to manipulate the public, and intervene by articulating different courses of action as well as by providing empathetic support to the disadvantaged. Swartz reaches beyond communication to find support in the work of C. Wright Mills, Noam Chomsky, and Edward Said and others for what he describes as his "partisan scholarship." Frey and Carragee, by contrast, draw deeply and narrowly on communication sources—citing nearly 500 bibliographic precedents from U.S. communication scholarship—with the clear intent of furthering the legitimization of activist scholarship within the National Communication Association. As a result, Frey and Carragee's advocacy strikes this reader as more coherent, rigorous, and collaborative than Swartz's but also more intellectually parochial.

An insular tone does, however, pervade all three volumes with many references to "our discipline," "our society," and "our nation." The discipline refers almost exclusively to U.S. scholarship that has grown out of speech, rhetoric, and theater, and the references to society and nation are similarly U.S.-centric. Social justice research has had currency across the disciplines since the early 1970s, especially in sociology, economics, philosophy, political science, and policy studies. Yet, with the exception of Ritchie's attempt to apply Habermas' ideal speech norms, there is little evidence that the authors or editors of these books are in conversation with this research. There are no entries in any of the indexes to Rawls, who is generally credited with renewing contemporary interest in liberal social justice studies.

Familiarity with the findings of this broader research stream could add considerable weight to social justice scholarship in communication because, by definition, social justice scholarship is and should be interdisciplinary. Communication has much to contribute to this work, but it is just one planet, not the universe as some of the contributors to these three volumes seem to imply. The insularity is so extreme that it even imposes internal paradigmatic blinders, which permit the editors and most of the contributors to ignore the long tradition of critical media scholarship, which has always had emancipatory social agendas. Indeed, Herbert Marcuse's "political linguistics" and "linguistic therapy" bear directly on the mission Swartz ascribes to social justice scholarship in communication; moreover, Marcuse's approach is informed by a politico-economic analysis, which gives it the leverage to incisively challenge grammars of global domination (Marcuse, 1964, p. 217, 1969, p. 73).

Interdisciplinary and media critical social justice scholarship can illuminate a number of challenges that Artz poses in the concluding chapter of the Swartz book. It can also provide economic and sociological data that are required to ground and amplify the power

of this scholarship as well as restrain its temptation to assume where it is necessary to prove. Perhaps even more importantly, it can help communication scholars avoid becoming new Columbuses lost in treacherous seas that others have already successfully navigated. For example, critical responses to Rawls' distributive justice and to Dewey, Habermas, and Ackerman's concepts of deliberative justice within interdisciplinary social justice studies maintain that the free market (capitalism) is a fundamental constituent principle of Western liberalism and that encourages development of forms of personality and rationality—and therefore communication—that systematically resists communal calls to social justice. That is, social injustice is a systemic outcome of liberalism and neoliberalism, which cannot be eliminated without deep structural changes in the material foundations of the global social order (Cohen, 1986; Sunstein, 1997).

This does not mean that structural change is impossible or that social justice scholarship is futile. To the contrary, it suggests that the kind of "moral outrage" (Moore, 1978, p. 5), expertise, and activist commitments displayed by social justice scholars are needed now more than ever because neoliberalism is expanding the chasms separating "haves" and "have nots" in many parts of the world including the United States. Multidisciplinary, globally informed social justice scholarship and activism are urgently required to help relieve, even if only relatively, the oppression of the underrepresented and to advocate for the creation of more humane social institutions. Paradoxically, however, social justice initiatives may also be necessary to keep the existing world system of capitalism from imploding into violence and anarchy. In sum, a dose of critical realism makes clear that social justice scholarship and activism are high-stake global endeavors.

Yet, some of the contributors to these books express surprise—even shock (Pearce)—at the intensity of resistance to social justice scholarship by university administrators,

funding agencies, local and national elites, and even some of the populations it is designed to serve. Social justice initiatives are often soft targets in higher education cultural wars, although to be sure the targeting is always highly selective. The undesired (in my view) resonance of Fish's (2004) admonition against crossing the boundary that separates academic work from advocacy has a chilling effect on social justice scholarship, including the work of some of the scholars in these volumes—unlike Rawls, there are multiple entries for Fish in the indexes of all three volumes.¹ Palmeri also warns scholars, without secure positions, that social justice scholarship poses serious occupational risks. The work of the Loyola group even came under heavy critical fire from communication scholars who they assumed would be receptive to their efforts (for accounts, see Pearce and Frey).

Social justice scholarship should be held to the same critical standards as other scholarship. No doubt, some social justice scholarship is ill conceived, self-serving, politically naïve, methodologically weak, and poorly executed. Some of the work collected in these volumes would benefit from more methodological specificity and accountability and from systematic, rigorous evaluation of outcomes. This is especially true of contributions that offer accounts of pedagogical initiatives. Experienced teachers (and communication researchers) know that there are often significant gaps between what is taught and what is learned. Self-reports of pedagogical success warrant skepticism unless corroborated by independent pre- and post-tests.

The IT projects in these volumes, which are based upon Boal's revolutionary theater, also would benefit from independent vetting. The goals are admirable, but, in my judgment, merging art and science (theater, psychology, and counseling) moves IT initiatives onto perilous terrain that bears a close family resemblance to the techniques of psychological warfare. Of course, all great art is transformative. But theater going is a voluntary act. Even revolutionary street theater, which

forces itself upon public attention, retains a voluntary aspect: People can leave without penalty. Students are not usually in that position. What are the ethical implications of using IT with captive audiences: students in classrooms or participants in university sanctioned orientations or workshops? Does IT “transform” students through emotional appeals, manipulation, and group pressure or in response to the power, prestige, or personalities of facilitators? Are IT role players prescreened for mental stability? Do IT techniques violate the norms of deliberative communication, which are lauded elsewhere in these volumes? Scholarship in the arts and humanities is not covered by U.S. federal guidelines for research on human subjects, but IT frequently crosses disciplinary boundaries, addresses sensitive topics, and encourages risky forms of self-disclosure. This leads me to ask, should IT initiatives be placed under the same institutional review board guidelines as other forms of psychological experiments involving human subjects?²

This may seem like a quaint question in an era when 10-year-olds surf the Internet unsupervised and play video games designed to train warfighters, but presumably, social justice research should hold itself to higher standards than the military entertainment complex, which deploys grammars of oppression we seek to dismantle.

The good news is that many of the contributors to these volumes are deeply cognizant of the ethical implications of their social justice interventions. They are self-reflexive and responsive to the power disparities that accompany social justice projects that serve underresourced populations; some scholars make systematic and sustained efforts to reduce these differences by establishing collaborative relationships with the people they are serving (Tompkins, Cunningham Walker, and Curry and others).

Changing the grammars may not be sufficient, but it is necessary, and there are many insightful attempts to do so in these volumes. Perhaps the single most powerful example

simply involves replacing the word “charity” with “social justice” because, in this instance, changing the words does seem to transform social relationships, expectations, and practices (Tompkins).

If some of my criticism is sharp, it is not because I oppose social justice scholarship in communication. To the contrary, I think it is indispensable and that self-criticism by committed advocates is essential to clarifying its mission, ethics, methods, and limits. I applaud the courage and humane commitments of these author-activists. They are on the frontlines of epic struggles to break through the socially structured silences that cultivate, sustain, reproduce, and exacerbate social injustice.

Notes

- 1 Fish ignores the history of American higher education. Civic education, character formation, religious instruction, and even, in a few instances, social justice were significant motivating forces in the founding of many colleges and universities, and these goals are still included in the mission statements of many institutions.
- 2 These guidelines were put in place, in part, as responses to ethical concerns about the harmful effects of simulation and role-playing experiments in psychology, for example, Stanley Milgram’s studies of obedience to authority and Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment. As a matter of principle, I am, in fact, strongly opposed to bringing the arts and humanities under federal guidelines. Doing so would raise First Amendment and censorship questions. However, when IT enters into the terrain of psychology, sociology, or counseling, it seems reasonable to expect IT facilitators to assume the responsibilities that are incumbent upon practitioners in those fields.

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