

studies in language & capitalism

Contesting the Cynicism of Neoliberal Discourse: Moving towards a language of possibility

Panayota Gounari

University of Massachusetts Boston

I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all.

(Bauman, 1999)

Abstract

This paper argues that we are witnessing a “crisis of critique” and a closure of language meanings that are symptomatic of a deeper generalized crisis in political culture, society, and democracy. As such, it signals the cessation of questioning and the suffocation of critique. This general failure to question is a direct by-product of the neoliberal ideology, which has managed to produce a powerful myth about itself that it does not need to be interrogated. In offering an analysis of neoliberalism’s language and the effects it has in limiting public participation in a democratic society, the paper will argue for the continued need to recognize language as a public good, inextricably connected to human agency, identity, and political existence. Finally, the paper identifies education as a central arena for the contestation of the expanding application of market ideology and the corresponding need for “counter-education”. The project of educators, cultural workers, artists, and activists who would refuse the invocation of closure, counter-education will foster a reinvented humanity in our quest for decommodification and reclamation of the public sphere.

Introduction

In March of 1998, Mike Cameron, a senior at Greenbrier high school in Evans, Georgia was suspended for one day after wearing a Pepsi T-shirt during a Coca Cola promotion at school, according to the Iowa State Daily newspaper (27 March 1998). Mike’s suspension, surreal and anecdotal as it sounds raises, nevertheless, a series of questions about the insidious imposition of market theology in the education arena and about the ways the role and vision of pedagogy are being redefined to meet the exigencies of corporations and the business community. If this incident is in any way indicative of what the future holds, it certainly paints a grim picture for education that is quickly becoming a common reality in many places around the world with the rapid spread of neoliberalism and the market

Studies in Language & Capitalism is a peer-reviewed online journal that seeks to promote and freely distribute interdisciplinary critical inquiries into the language and meaning of contemporary capitalism and the links between economic, social and linguistic change in the world around us.

theology. It points to a reality where school values collapse with market ideology; a reality where students are socialized into the discourse of consumerism, where their developing agency evolves in commodified spaces; a reality where the market imposes values on society and not the opposite. This extreme, but not isolated example cannot be understood outside the ideological framework of neoliberalism and advanced capitalism. I use the term “neoliberalism” to refer to the economic, political, and cultural practices that give primacy to the market order where profit and consumption are the defining factors of reality – a reality where corporate greed is given primacy over collective good. Neoliberalism as such, has dismantled the bridges that link private to public life and it has also marginalized a language of critique and possibility that is necessary to understand its policies and human consequences.

One way that market ideology is naturalized and disseminated, is through the use of a commodified, de-historicized language, where terms such as knowledge, skills, access, freedom, choices, opportunities, and so forth acquire a new content and are aligned with the logic of the market. By denuding the language that is used to legitimize the current social, economic and political (dis)order, we can recognize “the limits and social costs of a neoliberal philosophy that reduces all relationships to the exchange of goods and money” (Giroux 2003:53) where human beings are valued more for what they have rather than who they are. In an era of triumphant neoliberalism, the strictly imposed corporate language works not only to reflect the prevailing market order and its ideologies, but also to produce a positivistic discourse that obliterates public concerns about the social and the political.

Against this neoliberal backdrop, instead of having choices that would multiply conditions for constructive debate, we are witnessing a “crisis of critique” and a closure of language meanings that are symptomatic of a deeper generalized crisis in political culture, society, and democracy. The current “crisis of critique” signals the cessation of questioning and the suffocation of critique. This general failure to question is a direct by-product of the neoliberal ideology, which has managed to produce a powerful myth about itself that it does not need to be interrogated. It has acquired, in a sense, the symbolic power to transcend history in that it has attempted to bring closure to the most pressing questions of our times. Neoliberal politics pretends to provide the answers for concepts and ideas that should remain perpetually open and be constantly questioned and redefined if they are to contribute to a vital political culture and a process of democratization. Nothing is more threatening to a democracy and the political existence of its citizens than the illusion that all questions have been answered, that there are no meanings to struggle over, that there is no need for meaning mediation because words are transparent and speak for themselves. If

neoliberalism has managed in part to achieve that level of “transparence,” “naturalness,” and “inevitability,” it has done that through a powerful discourse of “universality” and “Truth.” As Bauman (1999:127) has observed, “what [...] makes the neoliberal worldview sharply different from other ideologies--indeed, a phenomenon of a separate class--is precisely the absence of questioning, its surrender to what is seen as the implacable and irreversible logic of social reality,” a “reality” created by neoliberal practices and sterilized from its real human consequences.

The closure of meaning points to a gradual extinction of language as a means of making sense of the world, or as a public good, inextricably connected to human agency, identity, and political existence. The obliteration of new possibilities in meanings and the imposition of a dominant norm for both producing and understanding language cannot be understood outside the reigning positivism and rationality in advanced capitalist industrialized societies, where “the market mechanism is the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment” (George, 1999).

The triumph of positivism and rationality in neoliberal discourse is nowhere more obvious than in the appropriation and redefinition by the capitalist market ideology of concepts such as “freedom,” “democracy,” and “community,” among others. What follows is an analysis of neoliberalism’s language and the effects it has in limiting public participation in a democratic society. In particular, I will consider how language works to disconnect effects from corporate policies, how it universalizes the market in ways that make it seem natural and self-evident, and finally, how it creates an illusion that a multiplicity of choices exist that are open to everybody.

At this juncture, the commodified language becomes both the tool and the end of neoliberal ideologies that operate in order to “guarantee” their aggressive practices. Their effects include the erasure of the welfare state, the shrinking of the public sector, the limited participation of citizens to the affairs of the ‘polis,’ the transfer of public wealth to private hands, and the minimalization of the functions of the state, a process that jeopardizes its civilizing and helping functions (Ferge 2000: 182). Neoliberalism imposes a logic whereby the state gives up its social functions to undertake a surveillance and policing role, a logic that according to Beck (2001: 86), suggests “a borderless world not for labor, but for capital.” Against this landscape, I provide a discussion about how it would be possible to reclaim a decommodified language, a language *of* and *for* the social, a political language that would serve as both a means and a requirement of human agency and of individual and collective autonomy.

Neoliberal Discourses and Practices

To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment...would result in the demolition of society. ... Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime and starvation (Polanyi 1944: 73).

In 1944 Karl Polanyi made the above prophetic statement in his book, *The Great Transformation*. Unfortunately, over fifty-five years after Polanyi's insightful remarks, the reality attests to the truth of his statement. We are currently witnessing the domination of a market economy that has, in turn, generated a "market society." Within this new market society, the functions of the state have been largely limited and redefined, the public good has been replaced by consumer goods, the social has no language to be discussed, and the political is increasingly becoming depoliticized. Politics is becoming more and more irrelevant to people's lives, and it has been reduced to the act of voting every four years. We are witnessing in the occidental world what Castoriadis (1998: 22-23) calls "a type of individual that is not anymore that of the democratic society or of a society where we can struggle for more freedom, but rather a type of individual who is privatized, who is closed into his/her small personal milieu and who has become cynical regarding politics." Neoliberal practices have drained politics of its vitality and force, and they have reduced individual subjectivities to ownership and consumption. Henry Giroux's work (2003) is instrumental at this point, especially his claim that what is lost in this individualistic, self-serving perspective are "important questions about the varied sites, practices, and forms of power that give meaning to how politics is shaped, deployed, and played out on a daily basis." He concludes along these lines that "politics imitates the market to the degree that it highlights the importance of struggle but ignores the ethical implications of such struggles" (2003: 118).

Within the confines of a market-driven politics, the market itself becomes tautonymous to democracy, embracing a "convergence dogma" whereby market and democracy converge. This becomes succinctly clear in the dominant discourse of U.S. foreign policy. Generally, freedom is evoked when issues of trade and markets are invoked. We hear terms such as free trade and free market when discussing the "democratization" of a given country, but human rights and social justice, which should be at the core of any democratic proposal, are often relegated to the margins. The discourse around human rights is used only as a cover to penetrate other countries' economies and/or to legitimize military interventions abroad. The United States has made capitalism into an exportable good, a commodity labeled

“democratization,” and it has been trying to export it all around the world. However, democracy cannot be exported. It is both a regime and a process intimately tied to specific cultural, political, historical and geographical conditions, and it should necessarily be instituted by and for the people. The notion of “exporting democracy” becomes just another ideological trick to veil the imposition of the neoliberal order, the quest for new markets, and the expansion of corporate interests around the globe. According to William Tabb (2003), “it is increasingly clear that much of the talk about democracy is really about the imposition of the will of a most dangerous set of policy makers who have usurped power in the United States.” Thus, democracy is usually understood as being synonymous with the opening up of markets and with the removal of government constraints. Absent from this “market democracy” is any discussion that would unveil the deeply political character of the markets. However, as Colin Leys (2001:3) states, “contrary to the impression given by neoliberal ideology and neoclassical economics textbooks, markets are not impersonal or impartial but highly political.” Markets are systems of rules and regulations that are linked in complex ways to other markets, and they are embedded directly or indirectly in a vast range of other social relations that are inherently unstable. Acknowledging the market’s political character would allow us to talk about the effects and consequences that this politics has on real people’s lives on a global and local level.

On a global scale, neoliberalism with its regulatory agents, the IMF and the WTO, creates a world of two speeds, privileging wealthy over so-called “developing” countries. Thanks to deregulation, lower taxes for corporations, openness to foreign investments, minimalization of the government control and absolute power of decision making on the most powerful countries, the neoliberal agenda promotes prosperity for the rich countries and poverty and dependence for the poor. All in all, it has managed to achieve the goals of its hidden agenda, namely, “the dominance of transnational corporations, international financiers, and sectors of local elites” (Tabb 2003). On a local scale, it has succeeded on two levels. It has implemented its policies with detrimental effects in people’s lives (the overwhelming economic growth and production have not been analogous to wage increase) and, at the same time it has created a language to justify these policies. In this language, for instance, the consumer good has a higher exchange value in the politics of public discourse than the quality of human life. By using words such as “interested parties” or “consumers,” instead of “people” or maybe “citizens,” neoliberalism conveniently positions subjectivities in an absolute apathy and inertia regarding any political project. Being a “consumer” already presupposes that you have a range of options and that you have the means to consume. It does not presuppose that you can question your very identity as a consumer, nor that this

very identity really strips you of any form of agency that would call into question this reductionist notion of citizenship.

It is necessary to make the linkages between economic events and the human consequences because there is a clear dichotomy in neoliberal ideologies between economics and policies. In other words, neoliberalism presents itself as an economic doctrine that professes free markets, deregulation, and freedom from government restrictions and trade controls, disguised under a positivistic economist discourse of “naturalness” and “inevitability.” At the same time it neglects to talk about the effects of this economic theory on real people or the social costs of implementing such an economic order. This neglect has given rise to alarming poverty indices, a pandemic of financial crises, and the erasure of the social state. Deriving its social force from the political and economic power of those whose interests it defends, neoliberal politics, according to Bourdieu (1999), tends to favor separation between the economy and social realities. This allows those interests to construct, in reality, an economic system that corresponds to “a kind of logical machine, which presents itself as a chain of constraints impelling the economic agents” (Bourdieu 1999: 96).

The separation between the economic and the social is very much part of a neo-liberal agenda whereby increasing social inequalities, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and human suffering are perceived as individual problems or issues of character, and not as social problems. Discussion centers around transactions, interested parties, and agreements, or around skills, competition, and choices, and these topics are largely presented as if happening in a laboratory vacuum. Absent from this discussion are questions about who is affected by these transactions (certainly the so-called “interested parties” do not include the unemployed, welfare recipients, or people working on minimum wage), or what these transactions or policies are costing in terms of jobs, unemployment, human suffering, sickness, suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, and so forth. The neoliberal “economic challenge,” which supposedly invites everybody to choose from a pool of “equal opportunity,” ignores the lines of class, race, gender, education, age, disabilities, and so forth. It also typecasts people as skilled or unskilled workers, educated or uneducated, successful or not successful, while it leaves unchallenged the already existing inequality inherent in the system that builds skills. It obscures the fact that choice may not be the same for people who do not have the resources to materialize these choices, in a society that largely promotes injustice and inequality of choices, opportunities, and resources. Along these lines, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer argues in a recent Newsweek article -- an uncritical globalization manifesto-- that the costs of globalization, of which job loss is one

of the most important, are worth it. He insists that while we can't stop people from losing the last job, "we can do a great deal to help them be equipped for the next job" (Brown 2006). Maybe what he has in mind is that a 60 year old mother of two, who lost her job will be trained in flipping burgers at McDonalds. Unfortunately, this type of discourse reproduces one of the illusions of neoliberalism--that "individuals with the same talent and abilities would be equally productive, independent of the social resources available to them and, thus, owe little to the society that provides the context for their achievements"(Anton 2000: 11). I feel that what is provocatively missing from this type of discourse is an explanation of the fact that worldwide, "three billion people presently live on \$2 or less per day while 1.3 billion of those get by on \$1 or less," yet "there [are] now roughly \$60 trillion in securitized assets (stocks, bonds, etc.), with an estimated \$90 trillion in additional assets that will become securitizable with the global reach of today's 'emerging markets' development model (Gates 2002). With help from [its] global regulatory agent, the WTO, neoliberalism is evoking a future where a handful of the world's most well-to-do families may pocket more than 50 percent of that \$90 trillion in financial wealth"(Gates 2002).

The "crisis of critique" becomes obvious in the cases, where no questions are asked about the meaning of "options" and "choices," nor about the neoliberal notion of "freedom" that uses language to block important questions from being asked. For instance, what does a call for more economic freedom really mean in societies where the vast majority of people live in dire poverty? How does it affect people who do not own or manage corporations, that is, the vast majority of population? How is the inclusive "we" in neoliberal discourse used as a transparent subject that corresponds to an equal, homogeneous, and unproblematic sociohistorical entity? What are the functions of the state that neoliberalism wants to eliminate, and what is their impact on citizens? Does the elimination of these functions also apply to "corporate welfare"?

These questions need to be connected to a context where the market is expanding uncontrollably in all sectors of human life, where everything is becoming privatized, and where the state is giving up little by little its helping and welfare functions. The neoliberal demand for a minimal state threatens those civilizing and welfare functions of the state that "promote the adjustment of people to rapidly changing conditions and enable them to live together in a relatively peaceful way," or that "directly promote the well-being of people" (Ferge 2000: 182). Instead, within a corporate reality, the state adopts solely a policing and surveillance role where, according to Bourdieu, "the state is splitting into two, with on the one hand a state which provides social guarantees, but only for the privileged, who are

sufficiently well-off to provide themselves with insurance, with guarantees, and a repressive policing state for the populace”(Bourdieu 1999: 32).

It is neither a coincidence nor a natural phenomenon that while neoliberal policies have been directly or indirectly detrimental to the lives of millions of people, neoliberalism still remains in people’s minds an important currency and a viable and “successful” doctrine, even for those who have mostly suffered the consequences of its catastrophic effects. This happens largely because neoliberal ideologies have been legitimized and disseminated through a well-organized network of diffusion that has succeeded in presenting the neoliberal order as the inevitable effect of an economic doctrine. According to Bauman, “the neo-liberal apotheosis of the market confuses *les choses de la logique avec la logique des choses*, while the great ideologies of modern times, with all their controversies, agreed on one point: that the logic of things as they are defies and contradicts what the logic of reason dictates. Ideology used to set reason *against nature*; the neo-liberal discourse disempowers reason through naturalizing it” (Bauman 1999: 127-128).

If we take a closer look at neoliberal discourse, we will realize that it is deeply rooted in a language of universalism and inevitability that “naturalizes” its premises. As Susan George notes, one explanation for the triumph of neoliberalism and the economic, political, social, and ecological disasters that go with it is that neoliberals “have created a huge international network of foundations, institutes, research centers, publications, scholars, writers, and public-relations hacks to develop, package, and push their ideas and doctrine relentlessly”(George 1999). One of the responsibilities of this network is to create a discourse that has the force to justify the unjustifiable, to produce a “strong discourse” that functions as a perfect representation of reality. George insists that millions of dollars spent on think tanks are not a waste, because “they have made neoliberalism seem as if it were the natural and normal condition of humankind. No matter how many disasters of all kinds the neoliberal system has visibly created, no matter what financial crises it may engender, no matter how many losers and outcasts it may create, it is still made to seem inevitable, like an act of God, the only possible economic and social order available to us” (George 1999). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in the collective mind, neoliberalism still has a currency as a doctrine that promotes freedom of choices and options. In the next section I discuss the ill-conceived notion of “freedom” in the neoliberal framework.

“Free to be Poor”: Voting, Buying, and the Discourse of Freedom

[The freedom to vote] is ... very different from the kind of freedom you have when you shop at a supermarket. When you enter the voting booth once a year, you almost

always vote for a package rather than for specific items. If you are in the majority, you will at best get both the items you favored and the ones you opposed but regarded as on balance less important. Generally you end up with something different from what you thought you voted for. If you are in the minority, you must conform to the majority vote and wait for your term to come. When you vote daily in the supermarket, you get precisely what you voted for, and so does everyone else. The ballot box produces conformity without unanimity; the marketplace unanimity without conformity. That is why it is desirable to use the ballot box, so far as possible, only for those decisions where conformity is essential (Friedman 1980: 66).

Neoliberal guru Milton Friedman's notion of democracy speaks volumes about the kind of politics that neoliberalism has put into place. It also speaks volumes about what it means to live in a society where the only form of agency available is to consume. In a society where politics is so disarticulated from public life, Friedman's language gains "naturalness" and becomes unproblematic. In this state of affairs, citizens are turned into consumers or human capital, and civil societies become commercialized malls. In fact, malls, as deeply depoliticized living spaces, have not only outnumbered secondary schools and post offices in the United States, they have acquired such centrality in the new social order that entire families now go to malls instead of parks, which suffer more and more draconian cuts in their maintenance budgets. In some states, while shopping malls are proliferating, public parks are either in disrepair or are being closed down. Unfortunately, in the United States public spheres have been shrinking and becoming more and more depoliticized. As Giroux (1997: 236) argues, "The concept of public sphere reveals the degree to which culture has become a commodity to be consumed and produced as part of the logic of reification rather than in the interest of enlightenment and self-determination." The disappearance of public spheres also points to a redefinition of the concept of "freedom" since freedom in a democratic framework can only exist in open public spaces.

In the culture, ideology, and politics of neoliberalism, the concept of "freedom" has a central role. According to Giroux (2003: 56), "Freedom is negatively reduced to freedom from government restraint, and the rights of citizenship translate into the freedom to consume as one chooses." However, the freedom to demand free education, free housing, and free health care is met with an aggressive assault, since "[t]he state ... becomes a threat to freedom, particularly the freedom of the market, as its role as guardian of the public interests is actively disassembled, though its powers are still invoked by dominant interests to ensure their own privileges, such as free trade agreements, government subsidies for business, and strike 'negotiations.'"

In order to redefine the concept of freedom, neoliberal ideologies produce a powerful discourse whose effects are so pervasive that it becomes almost impossible for anybody to even imagine freedom outside of the market order. Therefore, anybody interested in the process of the production and dissemination of such discourse should necessarily try to address the following questions: What is so powerful about the so-called “freedom to consume” that makes the discourse on neoliberal freedom so appealing and natural? How does neoliberal discourse manage to become so powerful as to appear inevitable? How are choices and opportunities materialized on the basis of available resources? Are the 37 million Americans who go hungry every day (U.S. Census Bureau 2006) really free to choose? How is it that individual and collective freedoms collapse into the freedom of the markets? Does the anthropomorphism of the “Market” (the notion that the Market has a body, character, or human qualities) make it easier for individuals to relate to it on a personal level? How can we redefine the notion of freedom as part of our human agency?

Bourdieu (1999: 29) suggests that the current market discourse gains its strength from the idea that “that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neoliberal view, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is no alternative.” The inevitability and self-evidence of this discourse stem in part from its positivistic and rational character. As noted by Marcuse (1964: 78-88), “The sentence becomes a declaration to be accepted—it repels demonstration, qualification, negation of its codified and declared meaning [...] Analytical predication of words such as freedom, democracy, equality, etc. or transgression of the discourse beyond the closed analytical structure is incorrect or propaganda.” In this process, the way human beings mediate meanings gets lost, and the only intelligible language becomes the language of corporations and the market, the language of advertising, or the cinematic language that becomes both the referent for clarity and the mediator between ourselves and the world of signifiers. This is largely a language stripped of nuances and closed down so that referents and signifieds can only be “observable” and “tangible.” The need to talk about tangible, observable, and measurable sizes, to break down events into material segments, and the total empiricism in the analyses that are seen as ultimately leading to some sort of Truth, dominate the public discourse in an overwhelming way. This “operational” strategy erases any possibility for moving beyond prepackaged meanings, for establishing a public dialogue, or for reaching a thorough understanding that would go beyond the operationalist logic.

Along these lines, freedom acquires some sort of materiality and abandons the transcendent meanings that would necessarily link it to a struggle for something that does not provide instant gratification and pleasure as commodities do. Freedom in capitalism becomes a

thing, a commodity, a product. It is never questioned and, therefore, never struggled over or redefined. It exists as an entity on its own that can be owned, used, and abused. It waits to be materialized in the different manifestations and activities of capitalist life. Freedom as commodity mobilizes our desires. We want the thing, the observable tangible materiality; we dread investing in or struggling for something that is not there for our eyes to see. Within this reductionistic context described above, freedom is understood as a behavior, an attitude disconnected from a broader worldview. It is the “freedom to buy something,” operating in a functionalist logic and largely ignoring the ideological net around it that shapes and sustains it. As a result, it becomes a universal, it denotes a function, its transitive meaning is lost; it does not need to be problematized as it has already become common sense. It cannot go beyond descriptive reference to particular facts. It hides the linkage between the facts and the effects. However, by relegating itself to a mere descriptive reference, it becomes prescriptive.

More dangerously, this type of freedom carries a great many assumptions that almost always are left unproblematized. For instance, it presupposes an illusory variety of opportunities and choices. This was clearly understood by Marcuse (1964) when he argued that in a highly capitalist society the only freedom remaining is the freedom to choose from preconditioned choices that often lead to a choiceless choice. According to him, “Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear--that is if they sustain alienation” (Marcuse 1964: 7-8).

The illusion that there exist choices, but not *equal* choices, as the prerequisite for freedom is one of the basic premises in the work of Milton Friedman. He also embraces neoliberal universalism and inevitability and claims that free markets are integral to human nature. His notion of freedom is reduced to removing tyrannical state controls. Even according to liberals such as Derek Bok (1993), resistance to state control is intrinsic to the American character. Bok suggests that “firmly rooted in our traditions is an instinctive distaste for strong government.” Both Bok and Friedman allude to some type of an all-American character trait to explain deeply social and ideological constructions, and this is what gives to their discourse its natural character. If the desire for free markets is “genetically” determined and if the distaste for big government is instinctive, then who would dare question the authority of these “natural” facts?

Friedman is clear that Americans never had it so good, and that more market freedom and less state restraint are necessary conditions for prosperity and affluence. Any force to the contrary or, as Bauman (1999: 4) points out, “any attempt at self-limitation is taken to be the first step on the road leading straight to the gulag, as if there was nothing but the choice between the market’s and the government’s dictatorship over needs--as if there was no room for citizenship in other form than the consumerist one.” Thus, the theology of freedom to consume becomes, according to Friedman (1980: 65), “[a]n essential part of the economic freedom [that] is freedom to choose how to use our income: how much to spend on ourselves and on what items; how much to save and in what form; how much to give away and to whom.” This logic is echoed by Robert Reich (2001: 217) when he states that “[m]ost of us are more prosperous than ever before. We own more.” If we look closely into these statements we can identify a common underlying assumption that often distorts reality. That “we” is an umbrella for everybody living under the reality described; “our income” is a common denominator, a referent to talk about both the few wealthy and the vast majority of the poor. One cannot help but wonder whether these people live on the same planet where the financial wealth of the top 1 percent of U.S. households exceeds the combined household financial wealth of the bottom 95 percent (Gates 2002). Obviously, the groups situated at the two poles of this economic reality have neither the same choices nor the same resources or opportunities. Consequently, we need to adhere to Bauman’s suggestion (1999: 72-73) that choice involves two sets of constraints. One is the *agenda of choice*--“the range of alternatives which are actually on offer,” which is necessarily linked to material conditions. The second is the *code of choosing*--“the rules that tell the individual on what ground preference should be given to some items rather than others and when to consider the choice as proper and when as inappropriate.” With this framework of reference in mind, next time we talk about choices we should consider the agenda of choice for the 37 million Americans—including 12 million children--who regularly go hungry or can’t afford balanced meals (U.S. Census Bureau). And next time we want to talk about freedom to spend “our income,” we should consider the 10 million Americans who have no bank accounts. These people pay hefty fees to cash checks or pay bills, and more important, “they are not building the credit records needed, for example, to buy a house or to secure a loan to start a business” (Lusardi 2002). In addition, next time researchers are “puzzled why so many low-income families do not save or hold little or no assets” (Lusardi 2002) and blame that situation on “financial illiteracy,” we could point to the 5.4 million Americans who live in substandard housing and spend more than half their income on rent (data retrieved from www.inequality.org). The agency invoked in the discourse around choice is not simply “a matter of the spatial relations of places and spaces and the distribution of people within them. [...]It is a matter of the structured mobility by which people are given access to

particular kinds of places (and resources), and to the paths that allow one to move to and from such places” (Grossman in Giroux 2001: 101).

The poverty figures speak volumes about people who cannot cover their basic vital needs, who have no income, who cannot even give a security deposit to secure an apartment, much less buy commodities, spend on leisure, or save. So, while “the average size of a new home has expanded from 1,500 square feet to 2,190 square feet,” according to a 1997 report of the National Coalition for the Homeless <<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/>> nearly one-fifth of all homeless people (in twenty-nine cities across the nation) are employed in full- or part-time jobs. Barbara Ehrenreich (2001: 25-26) succinctly captured the situation:

Gail is sharing a room in a well-known downtown flophouse for \$250 a week. Her roommate, a male friend, has begun hitting on her, driving her nuts, but the rent would be impossible alone.

Annette, a twenty-year-old server, who is six months pregnant and abandoned by her boyfriend, lives with her mother, a postal clerk

Marianne, who is a breakfast server, and her boyfriend are paying \$170 a week for a one-person trailer.

The other cook, Andy, lives on his dry-docked boat, which, as far as I can tell from his loving descriptions, cannot be more than twenty feet long.

Tina, another server, and her husband are paying \$60 a night for a room in the Days Inn. This is because they have no car and the Days Inn is in walking distance of the Hearthside.

Joan ... lives in a van parked behind a shopping center at night and showers in Tina's motel room.

Ehrenreich's testimony contradicts glaringly those who blindly embrace and promote the “freedom to choose” and the “never-had-it-better” dogma. Obviously, the people in Ehrenreich's account do not exactly have the “freedom to choose,” mainly because given their material conditions, they really have no choice. Along these same lines, while “the number of cars has risen from one car for every two Americans age 16 or older to one car for each driving-age adult,” and while “the number of Americans taking cruises each year has risen from 500,000 to 6.5 million and the production of recreational vehicles has soared from 3,000 to 239,000” the poverty figures are steadily increasing (Street 2000; U.S. Census

Bureau). The same inequities apply to the issues of unemployment, drug abuse, incarceration, human suffering, lack of health insurance, and so forth. Paul Street (2001) argues that in the present capitalist state of affairs people are “free to be poor” without anybody feeling the moral and ethical responsibility to intervene to change this reality. According to him, while leading architects of American policy and opinion claim that people are freer than ever before and that “democracy is literally sweeping the world as the twentieth century comes to a close,” the poverty rates are steadily increasing together with human misery and suffering. Child poverty (one out of four children is born into poverty,) unequal distribution of wealth (the top 1 percent of families have about the same amount of wealth as the bottom 95 percent,) wage rates, affordable housing, and healthcare (in 2005, 46.6 million people had no insurance while 29 million were underinsured) are the indicators that point to a different reality which is rarely taken into account when freedom is discussed in neoliberal analyses (Sklar 2003; US Census Bureau 2006; Mishel, Bernstein & Allegretto 2006).

Neoliberal analyses comfortably leave out “the significant number of people living on the razor’s edge, materially speaking, in the ‘most affluent nation on earth’” and fail to analyze why these people (do not) have access to opportunities and choices. In this case, the discourse around freedom uses language to perpetuate and expand the existing inequalities without challenging the underlying social structures and institutions that construct them and reproduce them. While the contradictions in the neoliberal discourse become more and more obvious, the proponents of neoliberalism still insist that social problems are issues of character and that social concerns are private troubles. Markets promote private rather than public forms of discourse, “allowing us consumers to speak via our currencies of consumption to producers of material goods, but preventing us from speaking as citizens to one another about the social consequences of our private market choices” (Barber 2001: 59). By adopting a language that is stripped of any ethical referent, we remain consumers, largely enclosed by our own little individual worlds. This language of individualism is promoted by the “experts” who come to justify the unjustifiable, or as Marcuse would say, to prove the rationality of the irrational. The language of the “expert” is manifested in Bok’s claim (1993: 258) that “any doctrine emphasizing monetary rewards and tolerating highly unequal incomes can be morally defensible only if it includes a commitment to give all citizens opportunities to compete and to progress to the full measure of their ability.” I do not believe that any doctrine that promotes social inequality can be morally defensible. I do, however, believe in politics rooted in ethics and justice that serves the democratic imperatives of public life. Any politics stripped of the ethics that provide “a way of recognizing a social order’s obligation to future generations” is a politics without a project (Giroux 2003).

By ethics here, I don't allude to a general framework of canons but rather to a project that has a specific cultural, social, geographical and temporal point of departure. A project that embraces the idea that "we know ourselves to be *conditioned* but not *determined*. It means recognizing that History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined – that the future is *problematic* and not already decided, fatalistically" (Freire 1998).

Redefining freedom as a political project within this framework would mean not only unveiling the contradictions discussed above, but also moving towards the decommodification of both public spaces and the very language used within these spaces. For instance, in the educational arena, a public space par excellence, we see a radical turn towards corporatization and privatization both in the language used and the practices at work. Students in colleges and universities are customers, graduate assistants and teaching assistants are cheap labor, and tenure-track positions are becoming extinct. The mission of the university is being re-articulated in terms of the job market/stock market; knowledge is perceived as a commodity, preference is given to knowledge that is directly applicable and marketable, and curriculum is subordinated to specific corporate needs (as a matter of fact, curriculum now pertains to the CEOs' responsibilities). Tuition has become a premium for the university's product. Friedman illustrates this situation when he claims that "the college is selling schooling and the students are buying schooling. As in most private markets, both sides have a strong incentive to serve one another. If the college doesn't provide the kind of schooling its students want, they can go elsewhere. The students want to get full value for their money" (Friedman 1980: 177). Following this line of argument, Friedman proudly quotes an undergraduate student from Dartmouth College claiming that "[w]hen you see each lecture costing \$35 and you think of one of the other things you can be doing with the \$35, you're making very sure that you're going to go to that lecture." Obviously when economics take over the pedagogical, something needs to be said not only about the changing nature of educational institutions--which are now being re-articulated and restructured to function on the model of corporations--but also about the very language that is used to sustain such a model. The corporate privatization model is infiltrating every domain of our society, including prisons. As Anton points out, "The increasing rate of incarceration in the United States in combination with a flat crime rate speaks to prisoners as human commodities for newly emerging private-prison companies. The punishment industry has become a booming addition to the private sector" (Anton 2000: 2).

The gradual collapse of the public into the private has produced a notion of freedom that is very much individualized and privatized. Notions of solidarity, collectivity, and community are losing their content under the pressure of competitiveness and success. The notion of

freedom has been separated from any political project. It is becoming an empty term that not only “reflects ... control but becomes itself an instrument of control even where it does not transmit orders but information; where it demands, not obedience but choice, not submission but freedom” (Street 2000).

Despite the grim picture painted here, a very important step towards change is to avoid falling into cynicism and reject the TINA (There Is No Alternative) doctrine. Against a dystopian neoliberal future we need to articulate a language of possibility that will construct liberatory discourses and will mobilize specific interventive practices.

In Search for a New Language for Resistance

In an era of globalization, liquid borders and fluid identities, there is a crucial need to make neoliberal contradictions bare and expose the way markets, as systems of intertwined rules and regulations, are involved in knowledge production that distorts, dehumanizes and colonizes. According to Benjamin Barber (2001: 59), “Markets give us the goods but not the lives we want; prosperity for some, but despair for many and dignity for none. The consumer has an identity, but it is an identity that satisfies neither the demands of brotherhood nor the imperatives of equality and liberty.”

This knowledge is necessary for humanity as it reinvents a language of critique and possibility, a language that breaks the continuity and consensus of common sense. A language of sociality, agency, solidarity, democracy, and public life can serve as the basis for creating new conceptions of pedagogy, learning, and governance (Giroux 2001; 2003).

The need for vocabularies that “can be appropriated by people in order to give some thought to their experience so that they can transform their relations of subordination and oppression” is also stressed by Chantal Mouffe (1999) when she argues that “we are facing a big deficit of new vocabularies, and we are at a moment in which the hegemony of neoliberal discourse is so strong that it seems as if there is no alternative” (Mouffe 1999: 180). The creation of alternative vocabularies would necessarily have to be linked to specific historical meanings and articulate concrete political projects that link education with the broader society. These alternative discourses should be composed of practices, institutions, and vocabularies should be understood as thinking about “what kind of institutions and what kind of practices could be the ones in which new forms of citizenship could exist and what form of grassroots democracy could be conducive to the establishment of this kind of radical democratic hegemony” (Mouffe 1999: 180). With the help of these new re-invented vocabularies we can articulate a type of critique of the current neo-liberal disorder. A fertile

terrain for the creation or reinvention for such vocabularies is the educational arena. In education, these “vocabularies” can articulate what Bourdieu calls “clinical knowledge,” that is, the knowledge of how the social-historical works to produce histories, significations, and narratives that “may help you and me to fight more effectively what we see as improper, harmful or offending our moral sense” (Bourdieu in Bauman 1999:2).

In this respect, education should be seen as a site of debate, democratic practice, critical thinking, collective work, and social struggle. Within educational sites educators as public intellectuals need to open up pedagogical spaces to discuss and understand how the market works, whose interests it serves and to question practices and policies that produce human suffering, poverty, and injustice. It is of paramount importance to question the naturalness and inevitability of neoliberal practices and policies and to deconstruct the dehistoricized discourses used towards this end. In these open public spaces students will challenge social and cultural texts, take risks, ask dangerous questions, and move beyond their comfort zone to explore their evolving agency as the mediation between constraints and possibilities. In these messy and unpredictable pedagogical spaces students will be able to understand how neoliberalism undermines their evolving agency, they will move beyond the hype of globalization and free trade to explore how power hierarchies are formed on the basis of more and less wealthy countries, economies and societies. They will be able to treat knowledge as a contested field and part of a project of politics and emancipation.

There is more at stake here than the awareness that language needs to be decommodified and that its meanings need to be ruptured. It is not enough to locate and expose the linguistic functions in communication that perpetuate market domination by neutralizing meanings. The existence of a decommodified language does not guarantee a political project in any way. We need a new kind of literacy that moves beyond “communicative action” and “interpretive understanding.” As Homi Bhabha (1999) suggests, we need a type of literacy that acts as “an equalizing force.” A kind of literacy that is not merely about competence but “is about intervention.” We are witnessing the evolution of this new type of literacy as intervention in the current anti-globalization and anti-war movements but the creation and dissemination of such vocabularies should be an ongoing project. This project is fundamentally pedagogical, against the triumph of capitalist imaginary significations--and, therefore, also political. This pedagogical project would necessarily require a language that is open, free from operationalism and functionality, a historical language that is part of a democratic imaginary signification which questions any and all authority. Henry Giroux is worth quoting at length here when he suggests that

[c]hallenging neoliberalism also demands new forms of social citizenship and civic education that have a purchase on people's everyday lives and struggles, expressed through a wide range of institutions. In this instance politics is inextricably connected to pedagogies that effectively mobilize the beliefs, desires and forms of persuasion that organize and give meaning to particular strategies of social engagement and policy transformation. Education as a form of persuasion, power and intervention is constitutive of those ongoing struggles that shape the social. Challenging neo-liberal hegemony as a form of domination is crucial to reclaiming an alternative notion of the political and rearticulating the relationship between political agency and substantive democracy (Giroux 2003: 53).

Education is the central arena in which humanity is going to be reinvented in our quest for decommodification and reclamation of the public sphere, and where a language that guarantees a political project for intervention will be cultivated. And this is where the need for a "counter-education" becomes a project for educators, cultural workers, artists, and activists. This type of counter-education, according to Castoriadis (2000: 129), "call[s] for a new imaginary creation whose signification cannot be compared with anything similar in the past, a creation that would put at the center of human life significations other than the increase of production and consumption, that would set different goals that people would consider worth struggling for." A struggle that, according to Immanuel Wallerstein (2002), "will make another world possible. It is by no means certain that it will come into being. But then it is by no means impossible."

References

- Anton, A (2000) "Public goods as commonstock: notes on the reading commons" in *Not for Sale: In defense of public goods*, A Anton, M Fisk, & N Holmstrom (eds), Boulder: Westview Press
- Barber, B (2001) "Blood Brothers, Consumers, or Citizens? Three models of identity--ethnic, commercial, and civic" in C Gould & P Pasquino (eds), *Cultural Identity and the Nation State*, Rowman & Littlefield
- Bauman, Z (1999) *In Search of Politics*, Stanford University Press, Stanford
- Beck, U (2001) "Redefining power in the global age: eight theses", *Dissent* Fall: 86
- Bhabha, H (1999) "Staging the politics of difference: Homi Bhabha's critical literacy." In G Olson & L Worsham (eds) *Race, Rhetoric and the Postcolonial*, NY: State University of New York Press
- Bok, D (1993) *The Cost of Talent: How executives and professionals are paid and how it affects America*, NY: The Free Press
- Bourdieu, P (1999) *Acts of Resistance: Against the tyranny of the market*, NY: The New Press
- Brown, G (2006) "Don't fear the future" *Newsweek*, 19 June. pp 44-47

- Castoriadis, C (1998) "Contre le Conformisme Generalisé: Stopper la montée de l'insignifiance" *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August. pp 22-23
- Castoriadis, C (2000) *The Rise of Insignificance*, Athens : Ypsilon Books
- "Coke vs. Free Speech" (1998) *Iowa State Daily*, 3/27, <http://media.www.iowastatedaily.com/media/storage/paper818/news/1998/03/27/316713/Coke-Vs.Free.Speech-1084063.shtml?sourcedomain=www.iowastatedaily.com&MIIHost=media.collegepublisher.com>
- Ehrenreich, B (2001) *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) getting by in America*, NY: Henry Holt
- Ferge, Z (2000) "What are the state functions that neoliberalism wants to eliminate?" in A Anton, M Fisk & N Holmstrom (eds), *Not for sale: In defense of public goods*, Boulder: Westview Press
- Freire, P (1998) *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield
- Friedman, M & Friedman R (1980) *Free to Choose: A personal statement*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace
- Gates, J (2002) "Modern Fashion or Global Fascism?" *Tikkun*, 17(1) pp 30-31
- George, S (1999) "A Short History of Neo-liberalism: Twenty years of elite economics and emerging opportunities for structural change" in *Z Magazine*, March <http://www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/Globalism/george.htm>, accessed August 27th.
- Giroux, H (1997) *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, culture and schooling*, Boulder: Westview Press
- Giroux, H (2001) *Impure acts*, NY: Routledge
- Giroux, H (2003) *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the culture of cynicism*, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield
- Leys, C (2001) *Market Driven Politics: Neoliberal democracy and the public interest*, London: Verso
- Lusardi, A (2002) "Increasing saving among the poor: the role of financial literacy", *Joint Center for Poverty Research Newsletter*, 6(1) Jan.-Feb. <http://www.jcpr.org/>
- Marcuse, H (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press
- Mishel, L Bernstein, J & Allegretto, S, (2006) *The State of Working America 2006-2007*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute
- Mouffe, C (1999) "Rethinking political community: Chantal Mouffe's liberal socialism", in G Olson & L Worsham (eds) *Race, Rhetoric and the Postcolonial*, NY: State University of New York Press
- Polanyi, K (1944/1957) *The Great Transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*, Boston: Beacon Press
- Reich, R (2001) *The future of Success*, NY: Alfred A Knopf
- Sklar, H (2003) "Imagine a Country", *ZMagazine*, 16(5)
- Street, P (2000) "The economy is doing fine, it's just the people that aren't," *ZNet Domestic Policy* <http://www.zmag.org/ZMag/articles>
- Street, P (2001) "Free to be poor: the 'devil's gift' at millenium's turn", *Znet*.
- Tabb, W (2003) "After neoliberalism?", *Monthly Review*, June <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0603tabb.htm>

Studies in Language & Capitalism 1, 2006: 77 – 96.

U.S. Census Bureau (2006) Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States

Wallerstein, I (2002) “A left politics for an age of transition”, *Monthly Review* 53(8) Jan 23.

www.inequality.org.

About the Author

Panayota Gounari is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies in Education from Pennsylvania State University. Her primary areas of interest include language policy and linguistic hegemony, critical discourse analysis, the role of language in social change and the construction of human agency/democratic spaces as well as the implications for critical pedagogy. Her most recent publications include *The Hegemony of English* with Donaldo Macedo and Bessie Dendrinos (Paradigm Publishers, 2003) and *The Globalization of Racism* (Paradigm Publishers, 2006).