PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONALLY:

A Response to the Post Modern and Multi-Culturalist Critiques

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Considering the potential of Philosophy for Children in both the political and philosophical worlds, I had often naively assumed that the program would have the support of philosophers and/or anyone interested in evolutionary democratic reform. In a time when professional philosophy is self-destructive, on the defensive and often without a sense of purpose, the Philosophy for Children approach seemed to promise a possible resurgence of general interest in philosophy, along with a concrete practical application for philosophical acumen and expertise. Meanwhile, the socio-political aspects of the program appeared to speak to the interests of "progressive" minded democrats around the world, with its goal of empowerment through the practice of inquiry in democratic, non-authoritarian communities.

Yet, in recent years, after many exchanges with philosophers and the politically active concerning Philosophy for Children, I have come to realize that my assumptions were often wrong. Rather than be professionally intrigued with the possibilities of the program, various philosophers have sneeringly rejected it as an antiquated "enlightenment" pursuit in the "Post-enlightenment age." They have frowned over the prospect of improving "thinking skills" in communities of inquiry around the world. They have found the notion of "good" or "better" thinking to be a hopeless throwback to the belief in, or quest for, a universal underlying structure for discourse. To this end, one professor wrote me: "...to the extent that the IAPC has sought to become international, it is a purveyor of a naive American or at least European cultural imperialism."

A similar criticism has been put forth on various occasions by those on the political "left," especially those whose political orientation contains a strong anti-colonialism. Their critique, while not being so philosophically centered, parallels the post modern philosophical position. Basically, the claim goes, a program like Philosophy for Children, regardless of its claims to the contrary, is yet another purveyor of western concepts and values being insidiously imposed on widely differing cultures. As such, it is a form of cultural imperialism, and should, for ***progressive*** political reasons avoid international application, especially in still developing countries where cultural differences are greatest.

These are important arguments and should be addressed. I will attempt here to present the arguments in their strongest sense, touching on the recent philosophical developments which lay behind them, and suggesting ways in which the arguments can be an important part of the ongoing self-critique of those working in Philosophy for Children internationally (eg., outside of the United States and especially in Latin America, Africa and "the East"). I will argue that we can accept the positions of philosophical post modernism and political multi-culturalism without abandoning our work. Finally, I will argue that total resignation to the various implications of the critical positions at issue can lead to undesired consequences, quite the opposite of those intended. My major thesis is this: the Philosophy for Children project, if not making a claim to engage students worldwide in a kind of universal structure for inquiry and discourse, can make a more modest and safe claim. This claim is that we are attempting to engage students worldwide in the "language game" or "discourse paradigm" in which the political world functions at present, thus working towards empowerment. Post modernist/multi-culturalist respect for the autonomy of radically separate cultures and ways of thought, if and when it argues against such an attempt, has the curious result of paralleling old elitist (indeed colonialist, racist, paternalist) justifications, and helps to maintain a condition of marginalization and dominance over such cultures.

The reader should note that specific critiques of the Philosophy for Children materials, which can always be translated and changed into the local cultural context, will not be addressed. We will look rather at critiques of the ***philosophy*** and ***practice*** of Philosophy for Children.

Recent work in philosophy has gone a long way to discredit any remaining notions of foundationalism, wheth-

er in the destruction of the "Mirror of Nature" image in Richard Rorty's work,[1] Kuhn's dismantling of the notion of objective scientific knowledge running along a narrowing track,[2] Gadamer's rejection of universal standards for discourse and adoption of the hermeneutic method,[3] and many more. Thus, it should have come as no surprise when a philosopher friend to whom I had shown some Philosophy for Children literature frowned quizzically when I asked him for his thoughts. What is this notion of improving students' thinking? he asked me. What is superior or inferior thinking? By what criteria do we judge this? When I pointed out the various criteria and qualities of thinking which Prof. Lipman has offered, he scoffed. What are these criteria and qualities but a particular group of rules from a particular tradition? Such a tradition may or may not be appropriate for students within North American culture, let alone children coming of age in radically different cultural settings. We have no right to prescribe criteria for good thinking, any more than we have the right to prescribe criteria for good music or good ways of practicing religion.

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Such a position is common among contemporary philosophers, who are following a general movement in the field against foundationalism, universalism and absolutism which in recent years has accelerated. The movement, well chronicled in works such as Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*,[4] and Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy*,[5] has in recent years tumbled remnants of foundationalist attempts so thoroughly and completely as to resemble a philosophical version of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Of course, such a tendency has its roots in the work of Neitzsche, Weber and Heidegger, as well as the entire pragmatic tradition. But while Peirce, James and Dewey retained a sense of betterment, of progression and hope while rejecting the "quest for certainty,"[6] much post modern work seems to qualify even such notions as "progression" as fanciful. In the contemporary view, we are more and more alone, without any external certainties to ground our existence, without any transcendent underlying structures within which we can commune with others. With no more ground for our judgments and beliefs than that which we can confidently erect on our own, accommodating or overcoming the possible objections of others not through resort to binding independent criteria or paradigms but through personal appeal, we are left with notions of criteria, standards and paradigms which are almost random in their validity. Unlike Peirce, who believed that the true was what the collective efforts of reasonable investigators would move towards in time,[7] post modern thought accepts "true" simply as a relation among statements in a particular language game (to use Wittgenstein's terminology,[8] so popular in these circles), or certain accepted accordances within current paradigms (to use the Kuhnian term).

The rejection of both a determining external reality or internal conceptual structure has been pushed even further to the point of rejecting any kind of framework for discourse whatsoever which lays claim to unite apparently incommensurable points of view. Kuhn showed us the lack of external criteria for choosing between incommensurable scientific paradigms. Philosophers quickly saw the relevance of this insight for all areas of thought, belief and judgment. As Rorty wrote in *Mirror of Nature*, attempts to build, discover or rediscover such a set of criteria or independent grid for deliberating between rival ideas or beliefs is a form of philosophical "bad faith." Such a project is inevitably nothing more than the generalization or universalization of a certain specific set of criteria, rules or standards which apply to a certain practice, community or pursuit, and nothing more. The consensus is that we have no foundation to appeal to; to assume that we do is to reify one of the dynamic qualities of being human, to slough off responsibility, to attempt to become in Sartre's terms an "en soi" instead of a "por soi."[9]

Thus in the philosophical world, employing what appears to be a foundational grid for discourse is simply in bad philosophical taste. It is to be egoistic, to claim much more than is viable. It is to enlarge your own language game to cover those of other individuals, groups or cultures. Of course, the major philosophers of post modernism each attempt to offer alternatives. Gadamer appeals to hermeneutics, which is a way of communication and sharing without a shared neutral framework. It is a way of enlarging the self, of learning though attempted suspension of belief in the understanding of the other. One does not reconcile conflicting beliefs or practices this way, but simply comes to understand them. That is the most we can expect. Rorty calls such discourse "abnormal," perhaps what Kuhn refers to during times before the advent of paradigms, or to some extent during paradigm shifts. For Rorty, contemporary discourse is limited to "continuing the conversation of mankind," to

"keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth."[10] Most seem to agree that not only the belief in final external truths, but the belief in a universal framework for inquiry are not only misguided, but counter-productive. When accepted, they lead to a freeze in inquiry, a stoppage of growth.

Since there is no objective, foundational framework for discourse, no transcendent way of reconciling contrasting paradigms, belief structures or practices, then other factors account for the prevalence of one over the other. Such factors may range from aesthetic qualities, particular (situational) practical needs or even pure randomness, to social factors of power, domination and coercion. Often, when one viewpoint has triumphed over another, this has been due more to the latter forms of force than to reasonable argument and persuasion. What's more, an important point to realize is that when such a thing has happened, it is not as though the triumphant viewpoint or belief or paradigm is any less "true" because arrived at through a kind of non-reasonable force. We simply cannot make this judgment because we lack an overarching criterion or set of criterion for comparing the contrasting beliefs and practices.

What is left, as mentioned, is Rorty's "conversation of mankind" (borrowed from Michael Oakeshott), Gadamer's hermeneutics, or the continuing pragmatic project to overcome problems through inquiry when and where they happen. We are left with the individual responsibility to carve out our own base of knowledge, warranted within our shared community through adherence to the rules of the local language game. More than anything, the notion of the existential, situational aspect of knowledge is stressed. Attempts to transcend this, to generalize across cultures or times is to do violence to the humanness and integrity of the other culture. It is to rob it of its responsibility, of its autonomy.

This philosophical movement has paralleled and affected the political developments of the second half of this century. The end of colonialism has brought on an awareness of the need to respect aspects of other, especially "non-western" cultures which are and have been radically different from our own. This includes not only the right to independence and self-government, but also the right to continue with practices and beliefs which are judged negatively in the "west." Anti-imperialists criticize the imposition of economic standards, legal codes, and most glaringly in history, religious belief. In fact, they reject what is seen as an imposition of the "western" world view on other cultures, from geographic orientation (eg., see the new map of the world offered by Arno Peters) to political systems to technological imperatives to language use and educational approaches. It is now taken for granted that the western world view (including ethical orientation, aesthetics, religion, the social and natural sciences, and even logic-based models of inquiry and communication) is just that and nothing more: the Western world view, one of many possible views. The quest to introduce other cultures to the various "objective" truths "discovered" by Western society, once viewed sincerely as a noble pursuit, is now considered to be the chauvinistic imposition

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of a hyposticized set of contingent beliefs and views.

We can now bring the critique of Philosophy for Children from both these positions into focus. Philosophy for Children is offered as an educational reform, based on reflection on open philosophical ideas in a democratic community of inquiry. We claim two major benefits from this education approach. The pedagogical value lies in the development of what are now called critical thinking skills. Such skills allow the student to engage in thinking, judging, problem solving and the formation of beliefs in a better, more fruitful way than with non-critical thinking. The social value lies in the dispositions nurtured in the community of inquiry approach: confidence in one's own creative thinking and critical capacity, ie., autonomous thinking; readiness to listen openly to others, altering one's views if the argument and/or evidence is compelling; desire to understand and build on others' ideas; respect for community procedures and needs together with an authentic feeling of self-empowerment. All of these dispositions are part of the necessary foundation for an authentically functioning democracy.

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To engage in such a project is to fall into a post modern sin: the construction of a supposedly neutral framework for inquiry that transcends specific practice. Thus Philosophy for Children in, for example Nigeria, Brazil, Ecuador or China is a case of employing a North American (or Western European ... or North Western European) practice, vocabulary and conceptual framework as though it were something which transcends its particular time and place. That is, we are foisting our own educational language game on others. Thus, our criteria for "better" thinking may well be inappropriate in other settings. Our very concept of judging may be radically inapplicable. Inquiry as progressive problem solving may have no relevance. Community discourse emphasizing reasons, consistency and argument may be unusable and possibly destructive. Indeed, our very notion of autonomous thinking, of democracy may be inconceivable in terms of the other vocabulary. To assume that this is not so is to be guilty of a form of hubris, is to be "a purveyor of a naive American or at least European cultural imperialism." The ***most*** we can do, remember, is simply to try to understand the other culture by throwing off our treasured assumptions, and perhaps growing through the result. In such a way we can continue the "conversation of mankind," keeping it free of the shackles of whatever form of foundationalism.

From the more overtly political perspective of multiculturalism, bringing a program conceived and produced in the United States into a radically different culture is questionable practice on its surface. Using materials based on North American experience is to attempt to lead other cultures into that same experience. Training teachers to work with children in a manner derived in large part from the North American pragmatic tradition is akin to training them, for example, in the context of Southern European Catholic tradition. We may claim to be more open and respectful of the other culture, but this is a self-deception. Instead, talking with children about ideas gleaned from Western philosophy, attempting to train them to think as ***we*** would like to think, towards the end of what ***we*** think is the most just society ... all this is just another veiled form of missionary work, secular missionary work. Other cultures have had enough of such well intended or not-so-well intended attempts. It is incumbent on us to leave other cultures to their own devices.

How are we to respond to such arguments, made all the more powerful by the very real fact that North American and Western European hegemony runs rampant in the economic, marketing and cultural areas? It is obvious, I assume, that the motivation and ideals of those working with Philosophy for Children internationally in radically different cultures are quite the opposite of that described above. I will propose some possibilities.

The post modern critique of foundationalism is compelling and may well warrant the rejection of such structures and the abandoning of such pursuits. This will come as no problem to those familiar with the main theoretical influence of the program — pragmatism and Dewey. Dewey argued against foundationism in the early years of this century. The point is that we do not see ourselves as engaged in a quest for certainty, or for a neutral framework for discourse. We accept the challenge put forth by Dewey and post modernism, indeed realizing that education must reflect these insights. The community of inquiry approach is based on the notion of the autonomy of individual ideas, which must conform to criteria as established by that particular community. This is not a universal neutral framework, but rather one which is bendable to the form of discourse of the particular community, with its own interests, experiences and needs. We engage children in dialogue based on the basic problems of Western philosophy because those are what we know, and very possibly are relevant to

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many a radically different culture. But different problems in a different vocabulary can function equally well.

We should, however, be very careful about the language we use when describing the program. We must be careful to avoid the implication that philosophical inquiry with children can help them to arrive at absolute truths, ***the*** truth, or some such formulation. We must avoid the notion that children worldwide, participating in communities of inquiry according to rules of reasonable procedure, will contribute towards some sort of ultimate alignment of views, so that agreement on all sides will be possible.

Towards this end, certain concepts should be emphasized. In the community of inquiry, the notion of "following the inquiry where it leads" is important. This moves us away from the sense that a well functioning philosophical discussion is bound to converge on certain, perhaps preconceived ideas. It leaves the door open for "the conversation" to continue. It allows for creativity and growth, but does not point in any foreseeable direction. It is quite in keeping with the post modern view.

It is imperative that when employing the word "true," we are clear as to how we are using it. 'Truth' now is very ambiguous, and there is a big difference between the philosophical sense and common usage. If it appears as though, with Philosophy for Children, we are trying to equip children to discover 'the truth,' the objective 'truth' which we all see if we only think well enough or clearly enough, then we do indeed seem hypocritical. However, if we are clear that 'true' in a community of inquiry is something along the line of Dewey's "warranted assertability," then we avoid this charge. Something is warrantedly assertable if it is acceptable in the particular community, with its set of experiences, its conceptual structures and its language game. New experiences, new ideas of course may change those structures, that game, this change being acceptable ***as long as each individual feels and is empowered to present and pass judgment on such ideas***. Thus, the democratic aspect of the community of inquiry is vital.

Finally, we must be clear that when we speak of criteria used in the community, such criteria are not universal or external to a particular culture. It is the community itself which must produce, employ, scrutinize and possibly alter these criteria depending on current needs. If certain criteria for inquiry and discourse are put forth as vital by us, it is not because they are transcendent, objectively neutral or universal. Rather, they have been seen to facilitate inquiry well in the Western experience, and could very well do so in radically different cultures. If, however, such cultures find these criteria somehow irrelevant or inapplicable to their experience, we would hope that they reject them in favor of others more conducive to their own inquiry. What is of utmost importance here is that this is done in a democratic, community context. Such flexibility of criteria is valid only when not subject to the unwarranted dominance of one person or small group. The interests and integrity of each participant must be reflected in any reformation of crite-

ria for judgment or justifiability.

The charge that Philosophy for Children seeks to engage different cultures in our own (Western) form of discourse gains force if we do not emphasize the importance of the ideas of the students, expressed from within their own context. We would do well here to heed the work and ideas of Paulo Freire, for whom the beginning must always be the language, experience and ideas of the student and his/her community. Freire's domain is the teaching of literacy, but the same can apply to the facilitation of philosophical inquiry.

There may be a temptation to frame the community of inquiry as a form of hermeneutics. Gadamer's notion is, after all, compelling, and seems to have many parallels. There are, however, important differences between the two approaches to discourse. Hermeneutics would have us leave our conceptual equipment at home when visiting the domain of another culture, or of a radically different set of ideas in our own culture. In such a way, we may come to understand the Other in a manner untainted by our own preconceptions and categories. When we then return to our own conceptual world, we may grow from the experience. We may chose to change our views, but we are not doing this because the other viewpoints are superior according to a neutral criterion.

In the community of inquiry we also seek to grow and possibly change our beliefs or ideas after interaction with others. We do this, however, through direct interaction between our ideas. We put forth our ideas as they are, and listen to others do the same. We may agree or disagree, build on another idea to arrive at a synthesis, or reject yet another. We may appeal to criteria, when such criteria continue to be acceptable. We may arrive at a situation similar to hermeneutics, where various participants remain within incommensurable conceptual schemes, but who at least have come to a better understanding of those others. Or we may arrive at a point where the participants arrive at something close to consensus. All of this is possible in the community of inquiry.

As Rorty says, hermeneutics (as a form of "abnormal discourse") "is parasitic" on normal discourse. Before we can engage in hermeneutics, we must be familiar with traditional norms, with normal claims to objectivity.

> *The search for objectivity and the self conscious awareness of the social practices in which objectivity consists are necessary first steps ... we cannot be educated without finding out a lot about the descriptions of the world offered by our culture ... education needs to begin with acculturation and conformity merely to provide a cautionary compliment to the 'existentialist' claim that normal participation in normal discourse is merely one project, one way of being in the world ... to attempt abnormal discourse de novo, without being able to recognize our own abnormality, is madness in the most literal and terrible sense.*[11]

The community of inquiry is more than such abnormal discourse; it is rather a mix of the two categories that Rorty suggests.

Indeed, the community of inquiry we espouse is more than a post modernist would have it. In comparison to the possibility of dynamic communities of inquiry whose members include people from all walks of life, Rorty's "conversation" appears to be not much more than a resigned exchange, suitable for disillusioned bourgeois intellectuals, which goes on in certain quarters while the usual struggles for life, death and dignity continue in the rest of the world.

This brings us to the political question. We are indeed, or should be, beyond the age when cultures with economic or military power dominate and control cultures with less such power. Although such domination still continues, it no longer carries an acceptable justification in the world community. Respect for the cultural autonomy of any country or community is thus imperative. Yet we can arrive at the point where any contact across cultures can smell of imperialism, simply because any such contact carries with it the possibility of altering one or both of the cultures. If this alteration should be on the side of the less powerful culture, charges of cultural imperialism are raised.

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Are all such unilateral influences a form of cultural imperialism? We should like to believe not. Advances in health care, for example, or in agricultural technology do not seem to carry a negative implication. In the area of culture and politics, however, the issue is more difficult. Surely, there are good influences and bad. When African music enters and affects "Western," music, we call this a positive development. When the opposite happens, the re-

sults have also been positive; electric instruments in Africa have added greatly to the musical cultures of that continent.

Other examples could be found. Thus, it is not cultural influence per se that is imperialistic. Rather, it would seem that where certain cultural or conceptual paradigms have been abandoned in favor of "Western" replacements ***because of some form of compulsion***, that we have a case of cultural imperialism.

The educational approach known as Philosophy for Children would hardly seem to fall under this description. There are no missionaries extolling the virtues of philosophical inquiry, with the power of God behind them. There are no international monetary organizations withholding aid until local governments opt to implement Philosophy for Children in their schools. Indeed, where Philosophy for Children has been used in countries outside of the United States, initial interest usually has internal origin.

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But what of the charge that despite all this, we are subtly persuading other cultures to adopt a foreign conceptual framework, a framework which may owe its prestige to other, unrelated aspects of the originating culture (such as economic, technological or military)? How do we justify the value of philosophical community of inquiry in other cultures?

We cannot resort to foundationalism. We cannot say that, in any conceivable cultural situation, our way is the best way, if people can only get it right. We can say, however, that such a form of open inquiry in education has often proven effective in "western" culture, indeed that open critical inquiry in general is about the best we can offer as a culture. It has proven itself in many aspects of life, although of course not all, to be a good way of alleviating human problems and suffering, of adjudicating disputes, of forging peace, of giving meaning to life, and of potentially spreading out power.

Such a model of inquiry is not bound to any specific content, nor is it absolutely dependent on any particular formal structure. What it does demand is respect for individual integrity, responsibility to community and the lack of coercion and dominance. There are few cultures in the world in which the majority of the people, uncoerced, would reject such necessities. Such cultures would have little use for Philosophy for Children.

I want to end with a critique of the critiques we have been addressing. Pragmatists like to assess beliefs and judgments in terms of their practical consequences. From this perspective, the original motivation for the belief or judgment is more or less irrelevant.

Until recent history, and continuing in some quarters, there existed the notion that only a select type of person is capable of critical inquiry, ie., propertied white European or North American males. In this view, women, the poor, and people of color are, to differing degrees, incapable of such thinking. To be sure, it was (is) assumed that there are exceptions, but in general the important decisions of the day had to remain the the hands of those capable of rational, reasonable thought. This justified the concentration of power and decision making in a few hands, not only within countries and communities but internationally. Europe and North America were (are) the centers of Reason, while the rest of the world (apart from those countries that emulate well the methods and actions of the "west") are "primitive," "uncivilized," "irrational," "tribal," incapable of development without the help of the "west," and in the end, quite incapable of democracy due to the lack of adequate decision making abilities of the people. Such populations are happier without the pressures and responsibilities of decision making. The slaves were more content before they were free. Workers are happier if you just tell them what to do. The noble savage is better left alone to his primitive ways; as Dostoyevsky wrote, what the masses really want is miracle, mystery and authority.

Such views have led, variously, to: slavery, war, oppression, exploitation, sexism, racism, colonialism, paternalism ... the list is a long one. All this has been "objectively" justified on the ground that certain people are simply, perhaps by nature, incapable of the proper exercise of Reason. Indeed, this elitist view seems to be the center of the target for the multi-culturalist critique.

When this multi-culturalist critique is directed at a practice such as Philosophy for Children, with its attempt to engage students of other cultures in open, reasonable inquiry, what is the result? The program is seen as another form of imperialism. This move, I believe, has the same practical result as the Eurocentric, patriarchal view outlined above. To say that different cultures do not and should not engage in critical inquiry because it is not part of their culture leads in the same direction as saying such cultures are incapable of such inquiry or thinking.

For better or worse, the exercise of Reason, of reasonable inquiry or discourse has been and continues to be the language game of politics and empowerment. Certainly,

such discourse may not always seem very reasonable, and the decisions are often quite mad. But whether or not leaders live up to the imperatives of Reason, or fall behind emotionalism and irrational propaganda, justifications continue to be couched in arguments appealing to evidence, logic and good reasons. The United Nations is one example of this.

Marginalized peoples, in any part of the world, have only one avenue towards empowerment, that of participating in the discourse. We know that the overwhelming majority are certainly capable; in fact is is obvious that the world is sorely lacking their input. One look at where a hegemony of predominately wealthy European/ North American males has brought us is evidence enough for this. More important still, the unthinkable sufferings that continue in much of the "underdeveloped" world will not cease until such time that the vast majority of people are given a voice, have a feeling of power over the direction not only of their own lives, but of their communities and country.

The conversation of empowerment is in the language of "reasonable discourse" and critical inquiry. It is not to be found in traditional, authoritarian forms of education. Thus to refrain from engaging children of these cultures in open critical inquiry is, in a way, to damn them to a continued marginalized, powerless position. Paradoxically, in respecting autonomy and differentness to the point of rejecting critical inquiry, one indirectly supports the same kind of regressive conclusions as listed above.

Finally, while we fuss and fight over the viability of introducing a program such as Philosophy for Children in radically different cultures, a quite different, insidious and very powerful form of cultural domination goes on unabated. As these countries open up more and more to "western" marketing and its vision of consumerism, all traces of separate identity within traditional culture evaporate. If only to help in fighting off this egregious phenomenon, philosophical inquiry in education is invaluable.

This paper has not set out to disagree with either the postmodern (anti-foundationalist) or multi-culturalist (anti-imperialist) positions. Indeed, it accepts most of the claims made. It has attempted to show that the critique from these quarters of the work of Philosophy for Children in settings outside of the United States (and especially in radically different, "non-western" cultures) is based on a misunderstanding of what we do. It has suggested how those working in the program might answer such critiques, along with suggesting caution in how we describe our goals and methods. Finally, it has suggested an uncomfortable parallel between the extreme post modern and mulitculturalist position about educational work based on critical, reflective inquiry, and previous, elitist notions which the same people are sure to reject.

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