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Against Fragmentation: Critical Education Scholarship in a Time of Crisis

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One of the defining characteristics of critical education scholarship is its focus on critical reflection as a means to inform educational scholarship and pedagogical practice. This article presents findings from a conjunctural analysis of the emergent crisis into which the United States and the global North are entering as a means of critically reflecting on educational scholarship. The analysis demonstrates that the emergent crisis is defined by economic, political, and cultural crises that are connected and animated by the neoliberal political project. The article concludes with a call for critical scholarship and pedagogical practice oriented toward synthetic, recontextualizing analysis.

Crisis is a much abused term, but it is increasingly clear that the United States and Europe are entering a period of crisis with global implications. A growing radical right politics with dangerous parallels to the early 20th century is advancing across the global North by tapping into economic dislocation; deep-seated racial, ethnic, and gender antagonisms; antielite sentiment; and virulent nationalism. In the United States, the emergence of the so-called alt-right and the election of Donald Trump as president has destabilized what was already a polarized and dysfunctional political culture. In Europe, growing nativism and xenophobia have fueled the rise and increasing normalization of radical right parties, such as Alternative for Germany, National Rally,[1] Lega Nord, Fidesz, and the Law and Justice party. The growing power and normalization of a radical right politics across the global North constitutes an urgent problématique[2] for critical education scholars, but not for the reasons one might assume. The election of Donald Trump, for example, is not in itself a crisis. It is the social forces that led to his election that are significant.

Popular political media in the global North frequently frame (Entman, 1993) the rise to prominence of a radical right politics as an expression of "populist" rage from those most hurt by the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 against the impunity of the elites who caused the crisis or, relatedly, against the neoliberal consensus around the inevitably of globalization and

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financialization in the post-1970s formation (Mouffe, 2018; Stevens, 2018; Wolf, 2017). The problem with this economic framing, however, is that it fails to capture the complexity of the phenomenon it seeks to describe. It can't explain why or how these political energies are gravitating toward the radical right. Wouldn't leftist impulses toward redistribution and democratization just as easily speak to the populist rage of increasingly precarious working- and middle-classes? How is it that this populist rage is so easily channeled toward nationalism, racism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia? How is it that this populist rage found its voice through elite political actors, such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson? It is not that this economic framing is necessarily false. In fact, I argue that there is a kernel of truth to this perspective.

The problem is that this economic framing conveys only a partial or one-sided explanation of what is a complex societal phenomenon and is, therefore, a distortion; "[n]ot in the sense that [it is] a lie about the system, but in the sense that a 'half-truth' cannot be the whole truth about anything" (Hall, 1986, p. 37). The problem is that it tells an incomplete and distorted story about this political moment, and the stories that political actors tell matter. How political actors conceptualize the rise to prominence of a radical right politics will inform the political strategies they will employ, and a politics informed by distortions is unlikely to meet the challenges posed by this phenomenon. Put simply, bad stories make bad politics (Grossberg, 2010).

Meeting the challenges of the present crisis requires better stories. What's called for is a critical intellectual project to tell

> a history of the present, to tell a better story about what's going on, and to begin to open new possibilities for imagination and struggle … , and in particular for imagining new possibilities for a future that can be reached from the present—one more humane and just than that promised by the trajectories we find ourselves on. (Grossberg, 2010, p. 67)

Better stories "signifies above all a careful engagement with the intellectual *and* political (or intellectual/political) struggles of the present" (Wood, 2019, p. 23). It requires intellectual projects that "attend, 'violently,' with all the 'pessimism of the intellect' at your command, to the 'discipline of the conjuncture,'" to the discipline of the emergent crisis (Hall, 1987, p. 16).

Crisis is defined here as a turning point or historical break in which the viability of a social formation is brought into question, thereby opening up new potentialities for societal transformation with no guarantee as to the nature of the settlement that follows.[3] A crisis is an historical moment of varying duration in which the relations of force stabilizing a social formation are threatened by the various antagonisms and contradictions they both produce and work to contain. The focus for this article is on the relations of force, antagonisms, and contradictions at work in the post-1970s formation and the conjunctural crisis threatening to destabilize it, what I term the *emergent crisis of the present*. If crises are turning points or historical breaks that bring the viability of a social formation into question, then the task for critical education scholars is to locate an educational politics that can contribute to a transformative path out of the coming crisis. One place to look

is toward what Alvin Gouldner (1985) identifies as the "deep structure" of Marx's critical project. According to Gouldner, this deep structure is oriented toward radical recontextualizing analyses of the social forces at work in a formation and the recovery of reified concepts, ideologies, and discursive practices animating them.

In what follows, I explicate the emergent crisis with three overlapping goals in mind. First, I make the case that the emergent crisis constitutes a problématique for critical scholars and, in so doing, demonstrate that the analysis of the crisis offered here can serve as a model for doing critical scholarship in a time of crisis. Second, I build on Alvin Gouldner's (1985) read of Marxian theory to locate the analytic orientation of critical scholarship as a theoretical commitment to synthetic, recontextualizing analysis. Third, I briefly outline the implications of the preceding analyses for critical education scholarship and pedagogical practice. It will be argued here that the emergent crisis is best conceptualized as a crisis of fragmentation; this problématique requires a critical orientation to scholarship defined by a commitment to radical, recontextualizing analysis; and a critical pedagogical practice should seek to help students develop both a critical orientation to social reality and the tools of inquiry to recontextualize their lived experiences and daily practices. The admittedly long walk I ask the reader to join me on is an attempt to reflect on my own theoretical commitments and research agenda as I struggle with what it means to do critical work in education in this time and in this place.[4]

The outline of the article is as follows: I begin with a discussion of conjunctural crises and conjunctural analysis. The following section attempts to flesh out the emergent crisis of the present as the conjuncture of economic, political, and cultural crises in this historical moment. It is, of course, impossible to give an authoritative account in the space of one article, but it is possible to trace the broad outline of the emergent crisis. The next section recovers the neoliberal political project connecting these economic, political, and cultural crises. Using conjunctural analysis as a model, the following section teases out the analytic orientation of the critical project as a theoretical commitment to holistic analysis and recovery, and the article concludes with a brief discussion on the implications of the preceding analyses with respect to critical scholarship and pedagogy.

CONJUNCTURAL CRISIS AND ANALYSIS

The role of crises as the engine of historical change and the development of capitalist modernity has long been central to the Marxian tradition (Marx, 1972). It was Antonio Gramsci (1989) who first put forth a sophisticated program for critical analyses of the relations of social forces at work in "conjunctural crises," but it was Stuart Hall (2011, 1986) and the collective work of the University of Birmingham's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, 2013/1978) that most creatively employed this method of analysis (Clarke, 2014, 2010; Grossberg,

1986). Characteristically synthesizing the work of Gramsci and Louis Althusser (1969), Hall defines a conjunctural crisis this way:

> Gramsci, who struggled all his life against 'economism,' was very clear about this. What he says is that no crisis is only economic. It is always 'over-determined' from different directions. … Different levels of society, the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc, come together or 'fuse.' Otherwise, you could get an unresolved ideological crisis which doesn't have immediate political connotations, or which you can't see as being directly related to a change in the economy. The definition of a conjunctural crisis is when these 'relatively autonomous' sites—which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities—are nevertheless 'convened' or condensed in the same moment. Then there is crisis, a break, a 'ruptural fusion.' (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 59–60)

A conjunctural perspective rejects the reductive search for singularity and, instead, seeks out the multiplicity of social forces, contradictions, and crises converging in one historical moment in a potential break or rupture. Conjunctural analyses seek out antagonisms and contradictions at work in the relatively autonomous economic, political, and cultural spheres that "conjoin" in the production of a crisis. "It enables us to ask: How many crises are there? How are they connected/articulated?" (Clarke, 2010, p. 343).

Conjunctural analysis speaks to an ontological perspective on the fundamental fragility of a social formation. It seeks to understand how social forces congeal into a relatively stable social order of power relations and how the structures that constitute a formation actively produce/contain underlying antagonisms that threaten its stability. A social formation is neither fixed nor static. It is characterized by the dynamic movement of social forces that can temporarily congeal into a period of relative stability, but is always already contested and subject to centrifugal forces that work to destabilize it. "[Conjunctural] analysis … focuses on crises and breaks, and the distinctive character of the 'historic settlements' that follow" (Hall, 2011, p. 9). The concept of conjuncture is, therefore, "not a Theory, but an orientation—a way of focusing analytic attention on the multiplicity of forces, accumulated antagonisms, and possible lines of emergence from the conjuncture (rather than assuming a singular crisis and one line of development)" (Clarke, 2014, p. 115).

THE EMERGENT CRISIS OF THE PRESENT

The rise of radical right parties in the global North is frequently framed in public debate as a rising tide of populism fueled by recent economic trends brought about by the global financial crisis (Wolf, 2017), so it is with the economic sphere that I begin conjunctural analysis. However, following Gramsci, the analysis that follows demonstrates that although the economic, political, and cultural spheres may develop according to their own logics and temporalities they are nevertheless immanently bound up each with the other. The period of crisis into which the global North is entering is not strictly economic, nor will it be resolved through mere technical fixes to narrowly conceived economic problems. Understanding the period of crisis into which the global North is entering will require a more holistic perspective.

The Economic Origins of the Emergent Crisis

The economic origins of the emergent crisis can be located in the tenuous settlement that emerged from the crisis of the 1970s, a crisis that marked the transition of the world-system from the A-phase to B-phase of a Kondratieff wave[5] (Wallerstein, 1974, 2004, 2010; el-Ojeili, 2015). The United States came out of the Second World War as the global hegemon, and its rise to dominance "coincided with the most expansive Kondratieff A-upturn that the capitalist world-economy had ever known" (Wallerstein, 2010, p. 133). Under the agegis of Pax Americana and the stability of the Bretton Woods system, Western nations and the newly industrializing countries (NIC) in East Asia entered a period of unprecedented economic growth marked by Fordism, widely-shared prosperity, and (to differing degrees) an expanding social safety net. This period marked the golden age of American capitalism and the birth of the cultural mythos of the middle class society.

However, by the 1970s, this period of prosperity and growth descended into economic crisis. Increasing competition from NIC's and a resurgent West Germany put a strain on profit margins and American competitiveness in global markets. Faced with an overvalued dollar and falling growth, Nixon's shock therapy brought an effective end to the Bretton Woods system. The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) challenged a global hegemon clearly weakened by imperial misadventures in Southeast Asia by instituting production cuts and an oil embargo against Western nations that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War. The confluence of these challenges to the world-system pushed the United States and the world-system into a period of secular stagnation marking entry into the B-phase of a Kondratieff wave.

The crisis of the 1970s and the shift to a period of secular stagnation opened the door to a reactionary movement against the Keynesianism of the postwar period, the rise of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States being the most prominent examples, and a move to shore up the crumbling foundation of the world-system. The Bretton Woods framework was repurposed from a focus on maintaining global stability to introducing dynamism into the world-system. The World Bank and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) worked in concert to open the world-system to the free movement of capital and the creation of a global labor market, a process that accelerated with the transformation of GATT into the World Trade Organization (WTO) during the Uruguay Round in 1994 and the ascendance of the "Washington consensus" (Stiglitz, 2002). The subsequent shift in industrial production to the global South led to the loss of relatively high-paying, unionized industrial jobs that were replaced with lower-paying, more tenuous work in the service sectors. The hollowing out of the middle class that followed (Pew Research Center, 2015, 2016a) was masked by the financialization of the American economy, expanding access to credit, and a flood of low-cost consumer goods from the global South.

What emerged from the crisis of the 1970s was a tenuous settlement of globalization and financialization that bolstered capital accumulation as it masked secular decline. As Wallerstein (2010) notes, this tenuous settlement was both "a great success and a great failure:"

> What has sustained the accumulation of capital since the 1970s has been a turn from seeking profits through productive efficiency to seeking them through financial manipulations, more correctly called speculation. The key mechanism has been the fostering of consumption via indebtedness. This has happened in every Kondratieff B-phase; the difference this time has been the scale. After the biggest A-phase expansion in history, there has followed the biggest speculative mania. Bubbles moved through the whole world-system—from the national debts of the Third World and socialist bloc in the 1970s to the junk bonds of large corporations in the 1980s, the consumer indebtedness of the 1990s and the US government indebtedness of the Bush era. The system has gone from bubble to bubble, and is currently trying to inflate yet another. … The downturn into which the world has fallen will continue now for some time, and will be quite deep. … As this happens, the main concern of every government in the world will be to avert uprisings of unemployed workers and the middle strata whose savings and pensions are disappearing. (p. 137)

Despite a dramatic restructuring of the world-system, the collapse of speculative bubbles in 2001 and 2008 and the slow growth that has followed in their wake have laid bare the secular stagnation and growing anatgonisms of this current B-phase. The contemporary economic landscape of the United States is marked by wealth polarization, increasing precarity, and growing economic antagonisms (Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty & Saez, 2017; Congressional Budget Office, 2016; Federal Reserve Bank Board of Governors, 2016; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2016b; Saez & Zucman, 2016; US Census Bureau, n.d.). The emergent crisis of the present, in many ways, can be understood as an *economic crisis*.

The Political Origins of the Emergent Crisis

The political origins of the emergent crisis can be traced to the ascendancy of the modern conservative movement. The clarion call of this movement was sounded in the 1951 publication of *God & Man at Yale* (Buckley, 2002/1951). In this iconic text, William F. Buckley Jr. outlined the foundational themes of the conservative movement and its challenge to the postwar social formation. Buckley railed against what he saw as the collectivist, Keynesian, and secular ideologies propagated by professors at elite universities and argued for a return to the individualism, free markets, and Christianity that he argued were the foundation of American society. Beneath the veneer of this now familiar rhetoric, even then little more than simulacra, one can locate the animating energy that was to propel the movement.

The discursive energy of *God & Man* lay in its positioning of conservatism in opposition to a distant and threatening intellectual class. With no sense of irony, Buckley's conservative was the torchbearer of an antielite, radical politics challenging the dominance of a new elite.

> For where public criticism is vocal and intense, it is because *the minority has offended the majority*. Even discounting the disproportionate addiction of the collectivists to propagandize their doctrines at every opportunity, I am forced to conclude from my experience with the *Yale Daily News* through several years, and from other evidence also, that at least at this college level, the great transformation has actually taken place. The conservatives, as a minority, are the new radicals. The evidence is overwhelming. (Buckley, 2002/1951, p. 95, emphasis original)

Four years later, Buckley used the founding document of the *National Review* to expand the scope of opposition beyond the intellectual elites of the university to the broader society.

> Since ideas rule the world, the ideologues, having won over the intellectual class, simply walked in and started to run things. Run just about everything. There never was an age of conformity quite like this one, or a camaraderie quite like the Liberals. … Conservatives in this country—at least those who have not made their peace with the New Deal, and there is serious question whether there are others—are non-licensed nonconformists; and this is dangerous business in a Liberal world. … Radical conservatives in this country have an interesting time of it, for when they are not being suppressed or mutilated by the Liberals, they are being ignored or humiliated by a great many of those of the well-fed Right, whose ignorance and amorality have never been exaggerated for the same reason that one cannot exaggerate infinity. (Buckley, 1955)

One of the key contributions Buckley made to the conservative movement was to frame (Lakoff, 2014) an elite politics as a radical, antielite movement. He constructed a political narrative of a new intellectual elite in universities, government, media, and the Republican Party establishment threatening the nation and dominating the new oppressed minority. For the new populist conservative:

> the danger in America lay not in great concentrations of wealth, but in the growth of a political and cultural elite—a new class, centered in the Northeast—that was more cosmopolitan than patriotic. … Articulated during a time of rapid expansion of government and higher education, these themes struck a chord, and conservatism was rebranded as a form of populism. (Gross, Medvetz, & Russell, 2011, p. 334–335)

Buckley sounded the call for a new radicalism constituted in opposition to not just "Liberals," but the dominant culture. It was a reactionary call to remake the culture, and it was this call to arms that would provide the kinetic energy for the conservative movement.

Future Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. took up Buckley's project in a 1971 memorandum to the US Chamber of Commerce. Powell argued that American capitalism was under sustained attack by a new intellectual class that had come to dominate universities, popular media, the administrative state, and federal courts. He called for the nation's largest businesses to band together in a concerted political effort to push back against this attack.

> Business must learn the lesson, long ago learned by Labor and other self-interest groups. This is the lesson that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination—without embarrassment and without the reluctance which has been so characteristic of American business. (Powell, 1971, p. 25–26)

Powell called on large corporations to pool their resources to build new institutions for the production and dissemination of knowledge and to use the skills and practices of business to promote conservative politics in the public sphere. It is a task that was taken up with zeal.

The 3 decades following Powell's memorandum witnessed an explosion of conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations funded by corporations and elite philanthropy

(Rich, 2004). The conservative movement built an institutional structure made up of a constellation of think tanks, policy institutes, and advocacy groups that produce ideological research, aggressively market their expertise and research to policy-makers and the general public, and work to influence public opinion. One of the reasons for the success of the conservative movement is that it was able to mobilize resources and build a robust political infrastructure to naturalize conservative ideology in the public sphere and to operationalize Buckley's new populism as the basis for a collective identity. However, the building of this ideological structure, although necessary, was not sufficient. Achieving political power required political strategy.

The political strategy that was to propel the conservative movement to political dominance was first articulated in the 1960s by Republican wunderkind Kevin P. Phillips. Phillips rose to prominence in the New York Republican Party by engineering electoral success in traditionally Democratic districts in the election of 1966. His insight was that shifting racial and ethnic antagonisms in the Bronx and other traditionally Democratic districts created an opening for Republican politicians willing to exploit them (Boyd, 1970).

Considered an expert in the *practical politics* of ethnic prejudices and historical migration patterns, Phillips' early success in New York led him to a prominent position in Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign, where he became one of the architects of the *Southern strategy*. Phillips argued that the racial resentments of the White working-class in the American South against the civil rights movement created an opportunity for the Republican party to flip the traditionally Democratic South and establish a new political majority that could hold for a generation or more. He advised Nixon and fellow conservatives to use the coded language of economics, states' rights, traditional values, and education to exploit these antagonisms. Following the election of 1968, Phillips explained the success of the Southern strategy this way:

> Quite simply, as liberalism metamorphosed from an economic populist stance—supporting farm, highway, health, education and pension expenditures against conservative budget-cutting—into a credo of social engineering, it lost the support of poor Whites. Equally important was conservatism's adoption of some economic populism to augment its opposition to Negro-oriented social innovation. The Negro socioeconomic revolution gave conservatism a degree of access to Southern poor White support which it has not enjoyed since the somewhat comparable Reconstruction era. (Phillips, 1969, p. 206)

It was a strategy to tap into the racial antagonisms of the South for electoral advantage with the added bonus of mobilizing the disproportionate concentration of evangelical Christians in Southern states, what was to become a key demographic in the conservative movement. In an unguarded moment in 1981, Lee Atwater, a member of Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, future campaign manager for President George H. W. Bush and future Republican National Chairman, clearly articulated the way in which Phillips' Southern strategy had become the modus operandi of the conservative movement.

> Atwater: As to the whole Southern strategy that Harry Dent and others put together in 1968, opposition to the Voting Rights Act would have been a central part of keeping the South. Now

> [the new Southern strategy of Ronald Reagan] doesn't have to do that. All you have to do to keep the South is for Reagan to run in place on the issues he's campaigned on since 1964 … and that fiscal conservatism, balancing the budget, cut taxes, you know, the whole cluster …
>
> Questioner: But the fact is, isn't it, that Reagan does get to the Wallace voter and to the racist side of the Wallace voter by doing away with Legal Services, by cutting down on food stamps … ?
>
> Atwater: You start out in 1954 by saying "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is [that] Blacks get hurt worse than Whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger." (Lamis, 1999, p. 7–8)

Using the coded language of the Southern strategy, the conservative movement was able to suture "the interests of hostile working-class Whites who were suspicious of civil rights with economic elites who chaffed under the expanded New Deal and Great Society federal government tax and regulatory burden" (Inwood, 2015, p. 414). Phillips' Southern strategy proved to be one of the key tools for the conservative movement to achieve political power and, more importantly, to overcome its central contradiction: framing an elite politics as an antielite populist movement.

Modern American conservatism is a reactionary movement. "But reaction is not reflex. It begins from a position of principle—that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others—and then recalibrates that principle in light of a democratic challenge from below" (Robin, 2011, p. 18). The postwar social formation was the product of Polanyi's (1944) "double movement" and was marked by the democratic challenges of the civil rights, Chicano, and feminist movements to traditional hierarchies. The conservative response to this social formation and these democratic challenges from below were threefold. First, at the ideological level, early conservatives (such as Buckley) framed an elite politics as antielite populism through the discursive construction of a new elite class of intellectuals, government, media, and the so-called Republican establishment. Second, it mobilized resources to construct a structural apparatus to promote and propagate this contradictory political ideology. And, third, it achieved political power through a cynical strategy of heightening and exploiting racial, ethnic, gendered, and class antagonisms to mobilize specific groupings of non-elite actors in service to an elite politics. It has proven to be an enormously successful response, but the internal logic of the conservative movement has brought the American republic to the precipice of *political crisis*.

The conservative movement has normalized a radical right politics reminiscent of the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. Its ascent to power was founded on an ideological narrative of cultural warfare against a radical other made up of university elites, government, media, labor, social justice groups, and the Republican establishment and for the restoration

of traditional hierarchies via the upward distribution of wealth, an assault on government services and the social safety-net, the rolling back of business and environmental regulations, an assault on minority voting rights and antidiscrimination laws, and the empowerment of religious conservatives to discriminate against women and the LGBTQ community. The conservative countermovement against the postwar formation not only fostered economic polarization and antagonism but also political and racial polarization (Parker, Horowitz, & Mahl, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016c).

Seen in this light, the rise of Donald Trump and the alt right looks less like an aberration and more like the product of a long-term trend. There is a common thread linking Buckley's "new radicalism" and Nixon's "Southern strategy" to Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" and Donald Trump's "make America great again" sloganeering. They are iterations of a White cultural narrative employed by conservative political leaders and propagated by a sophisticated ideological structure to exploit the economic anxieties of a disappearing middle class and growing under class. It is an antagonistic politics driven by white racial, economic, and political resentment (Cramer, 2016; Wilson & Davis, 2011; Hochschild, 2016) and predicated on a deep narrative of loss and restoration (Polletta & Callahan, 2017). It is a cultural politics built around an antidemocratic narrative of cultural loss and restoration and is defined by a generative exercise of power that is both internally contradictory and increasingly dangerous.

The Cultural Origins of the Emergent Crisis

The cultural origins of the emergent crisis can be traced to the explosion of, and blurring of lines between, popular media. The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed an explosion in the number of traditional media outlets, the growing use of Internet technology, and the fragmentation of media audiences across an expanding range of choices. The early 21st century has witnessed the emergence and growing dominance of social media, as well as the blurring of distinctions between it and older forms of media. More importantly, it is not simply the quantitative growth of media that is significant but the qualitative difference between new media and old media forms and the popular discourse surrounding these changes.

The interactivity and user-centric focus of social media has spawned celebratory discourses of individual empowerment and community-building and the heralding of a new age of connectivity, cultural exchange, and civic engagement. For example, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg recently published an open letter laying out his vision for the ubiquitous social network as "developing the social infrastructure for community—for supporting us, for keeping us safe, for informing us, for civic engagement, and for inclusion of all" (Wagner & Swisher, 2017). However, there is reason to question the ability of the new social media environment to, in Zuckerberg's words, "bring humanity together" (Wagner & Swisher, 2017).

Postman (1985/2006) offered a strident warning about the ways in which electronic media structure not simply how a society communicates with itself but how it structures its understanding of social reality and, ultimately, society. Postman adapted Marshall McLuhan's

aphorism "the medium is the message" to argue that "the medium is the metaphor," an argument with decidedly ontological implications.

> A message denotes a specific, concrete statement about the world. But the forms of our media, including the symbols through which they permit conversation, do not make such statements. They are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like. (Postman and Postman, 1985/2006, p. 10)

For Postman, the ways in which a society or culture communicates and understands itself are mediated through whatever "languages" are readily available. "Our languages are our media. Our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture" (p. 15). Media structure our experiences and, therefore, impose themselves "on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms" (p. 18). In other words, media perform an inherently epistemological function in the continual reconstitution of a society or culture.

> The concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression. Truth does not, and never has, come unadorned. It must appear in its proper clothing or it is not acknowledged, which is a way of saying that the 'truth' is a kind of cultural prejudice. Each culture conceives of it as being most authentically expressed in certain symbolic forms that another culture may regard as trivial or irrelevant. … Every philosophy is the philosophy of a stage of life, Nietzsche remarked. To which we might add that every epistemology is the epistemology of a stage of media development. Truth … is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented. (pp. 22–24)

Postman offered what he termed a "Huxleyan" warning that electronic media have brought forth a form of oppression made possible not by totalitarian surveillance but by triviality and entertainment, by media that reduce culture to "burlesque" (p. 155). The quantitative and qualitative changes in media in the 3 decades since Postman and Postman offered their warning raises the question: How does the age of social media structure the ways in which people experience the world, the ways in which they understand social reality, and society itself? Does the current media environment have the potential to, in Zuckerberg's words, "bring humanity together?" (Wagner & Swisher, 2017)

Thorson and Wells (2016) argue that "the fundamental action of our media environment is curation: the production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of content" (p. 310). They identify five sets of curating actors. Journalistic curators perform a gatekeeping function in that they select, highlight, and promote what is worthy of attention in a saturated media environment. Strategic curators employ sophisticated market research to construct and target specific messages and information to increasingly narrow demographic groupings in service to commercial or political interests. Personal curators shape their own access to information based on their interests and media habits. Social curators are networks of friends, family, acquaintances, etc. that shape the information and media individuals access through sharing on social networks, email, and through informal interaction. Algorithmic curators are

mathematical models that determine what information and content is presented to an individual through a search engine or social network.

Conceptualizing media consumption as curation flows moves beyond the simplistic and celebratory language of sharing and sociality common in popular culture and Silicon Valley to understand media preferences and information access as being endogenous, or arising from and being structured by the media environment (Webster, 2017). On the surface, the contemporary media environment would appear to offer an individual numerous opportunities to access and share a wide array of information, build online communities, and become civically engaged. However, the structure of the current media environment offers ample opportunity to avoid news, political information, and civic engagement (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010). Individuals who do engage civically and politically do so by working within and across curated flows. Social curators have a significant influence on the media individuals access (Anspach, 2017), and the media they access is the product of increasingly polarized and partisan journalistic and strategic curation flows (Pew Research Center, 2014b). Further, individual access to information and news media curated by social, journalistic, and strategic curators is frequently curated through algorithms employed by social network platforms and search engines that tailor the content one sees based on previous online behavior (Pariser, 2011).

The structure of the contemporary media environment does not encourage a coming together of humanity as much as a fracturing of society and popular culture. Instead of fostering an informed and civically engaged culture, the media environment encourages a large minority to eschew political information and engagement (Ksiazek et al., 2010) for entertainment and mediated interaction on social networking platforms, a form of social interaction that can come with significant personal costs (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Kross et al., 2013). Those who do seek to become informed and civically engaged do so via a popular culture that does not foster support, safety, and inclusion, but polarization (Pew Research Center, 2014a; Lelkes, Sood, & Iyengar, 2017; Levendusky, 2013), epistemic closure and radicalization (Heikkilä, 2017; Hine et al., 2017), and cultural violence (Carney, 2016; Jane, 2014; Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018). The technological transformation of popular culture structures societal communication in ways that foster closed epistemic communities, political polarization and radicalization, and new arenas in which dominant groups can exercise power over the marginalized.

A popular culture increasingly defined by the quantitative increase in media choice and the qualitative shift toward new social media constitutes not a coming together but a tearing apart. In this light, Postman's warning looks to be prophetic.

> Public consciousness has not yet assimilated the point that technology is ideology. … But it is an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of relations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consensus, no discussion, and no opposition. … To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple. Moreover, we have seen enough by now to know that technological changes in our modes of communication are even more ideology-laden than changes in our modes of transportation. Introduce the alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history, and religion. Introduce

> the printing press with movable type, and you do the same. Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images and you make a cultural revolution. Without a vote. Without polemics. Without guerrilla resistance. Here is ideology, pure if not serene. (Postman & Postman, 2006/1985, p. 157)

Technological shifts in popular culture constituted by the emergence of social media and the blurring of distinctions between old and new media forms foster a set of relations and modes of communication defined by cultural fragmentation, defined by cultural crisis.

Synthesis

Broadening the analytic focus to the emergent crisis of the present, it becomes clear that fragmentation proves to be a robust organizing concept to understand not only this period of cultural crisis but the broader societal trends that emerged in concert with and alongside one another and that define this historical moment. The structural transformation of the world-system in the post-1970s settlement has produced wealth polarization, growing precarity, and class antagonisms that mirror broader divisions in American society along the lines of race, gender, and geography. The ascendancy of the modern conservative movement was predicated on the exploitation and amplification of racial, class, gender, and cultural antagonisms via a cultural politics of loss and restoration that has reactivated a radical right politics reminiscent of the 1920s and '30s. The technological transformation of the public sphere has fostered a fracturing of popular culture and society into closed epistemic communities that encourages radicalization and new modes of cultural violence against the marginalized and vulnerable. It is the conjoining of these crises of fragmentation in this historic moment that defines the emergent crisis of the present. The task now is to tease out how these crises are connected (Clarke, 2010, p. 343).

RECOVERING THE NEOLIBERAL POLITICAL PROJECT

The preceding conjunctural analysis identified crises at work in the relatively autonomous economic, political, and cultural spheres. The analysis traced the emergence of three crises developing according to their own logics and temporalities conjoining in this historic moment as an emergent conjunctural crisis. In so doing, the analysis enables me to take a more holistic perspective on the period of crisis into which the United States is entering. However, developing holistic understandings of the emergent crisis requires that attention be paid to the dynamics of exchange and interplay among the crises. What is missing is analytic focus. There is a common thread weaving across and connecting these domains that requires recovery: the neoliberal political project.

It may sound odd, if not absurd, to speak of a recovery of neoliberalism. Critical scholarship across a wide array of disciplinary fields are replete with analyses of and references to neoliberalism, but it is its seeming ubiquity in critical scholarship that has led to conceptual slippage that is problematic.[6] Neoliberalism is too often employed in critical scholarship as an

economic theory of globalization, financialization, and deregulation that displaces and erodes the state through privatization and that reworks the cultural sphere through the discursive production of homo economici. It is certainly the case that the neoliberal project is animated by an economic imaginary and that neoliberal policies have transformed the world-system. However, "the fallacy of identifying neoliberalism exclusively with economic theory becomes apparent when we notice that the historical record teaches that the neoliberals themselves regarded such narrow exclusivity as a prescription for disaster" (Mirowski, 2009, p. 427).

Neoliberalism began as an intellectual movement that was set into motion at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947. Organized by Friedrich Hayek and attended by conservative and libertarian intellectuals from Europe and the United States, such as Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper, and Milton Friedman, the Mont Pelerin society sought to construct a new liberalism that is distinct from the laissez-faire classical liberalism that dominated prior to the Great Depression and World War Two. What emerged from this first meeting was an elite political project organized around a common set of principles. First, the Keynesian welfare state of the post-World War Two era would inevitably lead to an irrational society of authoritarianism and the erosion of individual liberty, Hayek's (1956) *Road to Serfdom*. Second, the "spontaneous order" of unregulated markets is the primary means for achieving a rational society that ensures human liberty. The neoliberal project envisioned a world defined by the unregulated market (a "market society"), but it was a world that would not emerge spontaneously.

A defining characteristic of neoliberalism is the abandonment of the naturalism of classical liberalism in favor of "permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention" (Foucault, 2008, p. 132). From the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society to contemporary policies informed by nudge theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), neoliberals reject the idea that the good society they envision would naturally emerge from laissez-faire economics; "the conditions for its existence must be **constructed**" (Mirowski, 2009, p. 434 emphasis in original). Neoliberalism is, first and foremost, an example of elite planning and social engineering on a grand scale (Miller, 2010). Neoliberals sought to rework the post-Second World War settlement of Keynesianism and Fordism in the name of liberating the individual, but the spaces into which these liberated individuals were transferred have been reworked by a new politics of performance metrics, observation, and measurement (Clarke, 2004). It is a politics of atomization and surveillance. Neoliberalism is and always has been an elite political project that employs disciplinary techniques in the production not of liberated individuals, but immanently governable subjects (Foucault, 2008). Conceptualizing neoliberalism as economic theory is a reductive mystification of an elite political project that both valorizes its ideological edifice (i.e., the market fetish) and, perhaps more important, that renders invisible the cultural politics through which it achieved hegemonic dominance.

The neoliberal political project is bound up with the cultural politics of the modern conservative movement. It is not simply that there is ideological congruence between the populist rhetoric of the modern conservative movement against the new liberal elite and neoliberal rhetoric against the bureaucratic state. Nor is it simply that neoliberalism and modern American conservatism are both elite political projects informed by a shared commitment that "some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others" (Robin, 2011, p. 218). Although both of these

observations certainly have merit, the discursive power of the neoliberal political project emanates from a suturing of this ideological discourse to a conservative ideology of nationalism, American exceptionalism, Whiteness, and "traditional" values that arose alongside and in concert with the rise of neoliberalism.

> Ideology is always contradictory. There is no single, integrated 'ruling ideology'—a mistake that we repeat again now in failing to distinguish between conservative and neoliberal repertoires. Ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments—finding what Laclau called 'systems of equivalence' between them. Contradiction is its métier. … But, though not logical, few strategies are so successful at winning consent as those which root themselves in the contradictory elements of common sense, popular life and consciousness. Even today, the market/free enterprise/private property discourse persists cheek by jowl with older conservative attachments to nation, racial homogeneity, Empire, tradition. (Hall, 2011, p. 18)

Indeed, it is the discursive tension between these ideologies that is the driving force behind the continuing salience and vitality of both the neoliberal project and the modern conservative movement.

The continuing success of the neoliberal political project rests on its ability to tap into a growing politics of resentment (Cramer, 2016) that is, in large measure, a product of neoliberal policies. The cultural politics of resentment among predominantly White, working and middle-class families can be traced to the growing precarity of workers who have seen their fortunes decline in the face of globalization, public divestment, and a disappearing social safety net. More importantly, the suturing of neoliberal and conservative political discourses channels this resentment toward racial, ethnic, and geographically distant others that "undeservingly" benefit from government largess by calling back to idealized notions of nation and community, a political strategy facilitated by a media culture defined by curation flows and cultural fragmentation.

Indeed, the structural transformation of popular media over the past 3 decades is bound up with the neoliberal political project, as well. The cyber-libertarian ethos of Silicon Valley and the technology industry has taken up neoliberal conceptualizations of atomization as liberty and consumerism as empowerment as it has developed tools and techniques for automation, the casualization of labor, and the naturalization of surveillance and measurement. What is perhaps more important is that the advance of this cyber-libertarian ethos derives energy from politically left impulses in service to a right political project.

> One of cyberlibertarianism's primary social and epistemic functions is to yoke what would have previously been seen as at least liberal if not actually leftist political energies into the service of the political far right, with enough rhetorical padding to obscure at least partly, even to adherents, the entailments of their beliefs. In other words, cyberlibertarianism solicits anticaptialist (or at least antineoliberal) impulses and recruits them for capitalist purposes, to such a degree that many believers often do not notice and even disclaim these foundations. (Golumbia, 2013, p. 3–4)

As with the conservative movement, the neoliberal political project gains vitality, salience, and discursive energy from its contradictory suturing to techno-utopian visions of the future and progressive ideals of empowerment and activism.

The neoliberal political project is the wellspring for the policies, techniques, and ideological discourses of fragmentation at work in the emergent crisis of the present. The neoliberals advanced a policy paradigm to redistribute wealth and income to the top of the economic pyramid, exposed populations to ever more sophisticated technocratic observation and measurement, and then used the subsequent economic dislocation and antagonisms engendered by this elite social engineering as the basis for a cultural politics to further advance the neoliberal project. The fundamental paradox of the neoliberal project is that it feeds on the antagonisms it creates to advance. It is, at its core, a parasitic political project, but it is also clear that it has now given rise to a virulent right politics of hyper-nationalism, economic populism, and xenophobia that ultimately threaten the stability of the post-1970s social formation as it opens up new possibilities for societal transformation.

Recovering the neoliberal political project centers the preceding conjunctural analysis around the ideological dimension of the post-1970s social formation and the social processes working to destabilize it. "Put crudely, neo-liberalism tells stories about the world, the future and how they will develop—and tries to make them come true" (Clarke 2004, 30). As an ideological discourse, neoliberalism performs an epistemological function in that it constructs a distorted, one-sided account of social reality that naturalizes economic logics of atomization, competition, hierarchy, and rationalization as it brackets out competing logics which challenge its politics (Hall, 1986). Neoliberalism, therefore, distorts the collective understanding of social reality as it works, in Gramsican terms, to shape it as a material force, as a political project. It is a force of fragmentation connecting the economic, political, and cultural spheres and animating the crisis of fragmentation defining this historical moment. Thus, returning to the previous synthesis, fragmentation can be understood as a problématique that can be conceptualized, at the sociological-level, as the social ontology of a fractured, contradictory, and dynamic social formation and, at the epistemological level, as a distortion field mystifying and decontextualizing the dynamic social forces and processes at work in this social formation.[7]

AGAINST FRAGMENTATION: HOLISTIC ANALYSIS & RECOVERY

Nancy Fraser (1989) correctly notes that "no one has yet improved on Marx's 1848 definition of Critical Theory" as "self-clarification" (p. 97). In an open letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx (1972) articulated a political project that does not seek to construct utopic visions toward which to strive but a politics that seeks "to find the new world only through criticism of the old" (p. 13). Gramsci (1989) understood that the transformative potential of a crisis is located in purposeful political activity informed by holistic analysis of the relations of force at work in a period of crisis, a perspective drawn from Marx's (1970) observation that a society sets for itself "only such tasks as it is able to solve" (p. 21). The impetus for the preceding analysis is grounded in the observation that the path out of the emergent conjunctural crisis will be

defined, in large measure, by the ideas, concepts, and discursive practices through which political actors come to understand the nature of the crisis. The task for critical scholars is to develop synthetic tools to understand the emergent crisis as a *necessary precondition* for liberatory work.

A rigorous exploration of the problems and potentialities of Marx's critical project of self-clarification is taken up in Alvin Gouldner's (1985) nuanced and often highly critical engagement with Marxian theory. His posthumously published manuscript, *Against Fragmentation*, takes up themes from previous engagements with Marxism (1980) and the sociology of intellectuals (1979) to carry out a sociological analysis of Marxism, a "Marxism of Marxism" (Gouldner, 1985, p. 193). The manuscript is made up of three sections or fragments that, although lacking a unifying structure, present a thought-provoking reflection on the origins of critical theory. The first section examines the social origins of Marx's critical project and "catches Marx and some Marxists in the act of repressing the question of Marxism's own class origins" (Breines, 1986, p. 593). The second section explores the intellectual milieu in which Marx worked and identifies the originality of his critical project as a transgression of the theoretical borders of multiple traditions, a transgression "that is systematically generative of intellectual novelty and creativity … , a multilinguality that facilitates an incongruous perspective and distances the theorist from the paradigms dominant within an intellectual specialization" (Gouldner, 1985, p. 204). These two sections present a rigorous analysis and often strident critique of Marxism and provides an abundance of grist for the intellectual mill, and it should go without saying that the brief summations I've offered here cannot possibly do justice to the intellectual rigor of Gouldner's engagement with Marx. However, my concern is with the final collection of essays in this manuscript which teases out the "deep structure" of Marx's critical project, what I term the analytic orientation of critical inquiry.

The third section of *Against Fragmentation* identifies the rationality of Marx's critical project as a commitment to a politics of holism and recovery via a radical recontextualizing inquiry. In Gouldner's reading, Marx's critical project constitutes a struggle against a social totality fragmented and fractured by unequal power relations and social forces that distort the knowledge and tools of inquiry with which we come to understand the social totality and ourselves.

> Marx's critique here is kin to his central objection to idealism; his insistence that "consciousness" cannot be understood in isolation; his conviction that rationality is part of a larger array of human talents no one of which can be understood in isolation from the others, and that reason is a partner in, not master over, the human enterprise. Most basically, Marx's views of consciousness, rationality, and interpretation are a critique of any tendency to substitute part for whole; they are an affirmation of the whole, of "social being," of sensuous praxis. Marx's project of emancipation, then, is at bottom a critique of and drive to overcome *fragmentation*. The most fundamental character of his project is to make the world whole, to connect the disconnected, to integrate the isolated, to remember the forgotten and the repressed, and to overcome old contradictions. The deep structure of Marx's project moves toward a vision of a new human unity overcoming the divisiveness of competitive, possessive individualism of a civil society where the common interest is no one's business. At this level Marx's macroscopic sociology and his epistemology share a common structure, the sociology seeking to reconstruct

> the class-riven society into a solidary human community, and the epistemology aiming at the reconstruction of discourse, in which meaning is established by the joining of hitherto disconnected fragments, by a *re-contextualizing analysis*. (pp. 265-266, emphasis in original)

The analytic orientation of critical scholarship is toward recontextualizing, holistic analyses that navigate the dialectical tensions of "an effort to encompass the larger whole, to provide a picture of the social whole in its complexity, on the one side, and to rescue fugitive elements of cognitively underprivileged social reality, on the other" (p. 288). Critical work inhabits the dialectical space between holistic analysis and recovery. Holistic analysis situates societal phenomenon/a within the totality of forces and relations that make up and animate it. It seeks to establish connections, map the movement of forces, and unpack the "rich totality of many determinations and relations" at work in an object of analysis (Marx, 1973, p. 100). Recovery captures and brings to the surface a neglected aspect of social reality in service to understanding the larger totality, to make visible reified concepts, ideologies, and discursive practices that animate, structure, and (de)stabilize a social formation. Recovery analytically centers holistic analysis toward naturalized ways of thinking and being and the underlying movement of social forces they animate that work to either stabilize, challenge, or displace a social formation. "The task, here, is thus not to find a solution to this or that partial 'social problem' in different spheres of life but to overcome the sheer disconnectedness of the several spheres" (Gouldner, 1985, p. 273). Critical scholarship is marked by a theoretical commitment to recontextualizing a fragmented social totality. It is, in a word, *synthetic* (Ellison, 2010).

What I find compelling in Gouldner's read of Marx is the theoretical tension in his commitments. He is clearly sympathetic to Marx's critical project and locates within it what I term the analytic orientation of critical inquiry. Gouldner takes up Marx's social ontology of capitalist modernity as a dynamic totality fractured by unequal power relations, ideology, and class divisions and Marx's epistemological concern for the "social forces distorting knowledge [of the social totality] as well as of the distortion in the knowledge itself" (p. 248), and he ends the manuscript with a call "for the development of an effective community of theorists committed to the understanding of the social totality" as "one of the central tasks of social theory" (p. 299). Nevertheless, across all three sections of *Against Fragmentation*, Gouldner offers a careful analysis that brings into focus the internal contradictions inherent in a radical theory that fails to explore and take seriously its own social origins[8] and, more importantly, that clearly articulates the significant barriers to the realization of the task he envisions for social theory as both an intellectual project and as a politics. What Gouldner leaves readers with is theoretical tension in place of utopic resolution. He points toward a critical orientation, a mode of relating to social reality: critical inquiry in search of not restoration of a preexisting whole but struggle against a fragmented social reality, not totalizing claims of a "new truth" (Marx, 1972, pp. 14–15) but radical recontextualization as an intellectual project and as a politics. A critical orientation denotes not the restoration of an imagined whole but a struggle against fragmentation. It is an orientation that I have attempted to model in the preceding analysis.

The conjunctural analysis of the emergent crisis presented here models the recontextualizing, synthetic analysis constituting the *deep structure* of the critical project. Analyzing the

emergent crisis conjuncturally brings a critical perspective to the object of analysis in two ways. First, the conjunctural analysis produced a holistic perspective of the emerging crisis as a convergence of interlocking crises in the economic, political, and cultural domains. There is not one crisis. There are crises conjoining in this historical moment in the form of a potential rupture or break in the post-1970s formation. Second, the conjunctural analysis brought to the surface and recovered an elite political project connecting these interlocking crises and animating this moment of potential rupture. It recovered the political project that, in achieving hegemonic dominance, constructed a relatively stable social formation that simultaneously unleashed economic, political, and cultural forces that now work to destabilize it. The conjunctural analysis presented here speaks to the analytic orientation of critical scholarship. It speaks to critical intellectual projects defined by a commitment to synthetic, recontextualizing analysis.

The task for critical scholars, then, is to struggle against fragmentation. Critical scholars must develop tools of inquiry and synthetic knowledge "to justify a particularly practical activity, an initiative of the will" that identifies spaces, breaks, tactics, and strategies to challenge economic, political, and cultural fragmentation (Gramsci, 1989, p. 209). For critical education scholars, the question becomes: How can our work contribute to these necessary tasks? If critical work is a struggle against fragmentation then what might a pedagogy against fragmentation entail?

AGAINST FRAGMENTATION: CRITICAL EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP AND PEDAGOGY

In the limited space remaining, I conclude with a brief discussion on the implications of the preceding analyses with respect to critical education scholarship and pedagogy. Taking seriously what Gouldner identifies as the "deep structure" of the critical project points toward what I term synthetic analyses of educational phenomena that situate educational practices, curricula, policies, issues, etc. within their broader societal context (Ellison, 2010). I define synthetic analysis as recontextualizing inquiry that is *synthetic*, in that it seeks to establish connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena; *transdisciplinary*, in its willingness to transgress disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological borders; and *praxiological*, in that it can inform purposeful human activity. Synthetic analysis unpacks and recovers ideas, ideologies, and discourses connecting the object of inquiry to broader societal phenomena as it establishes the necessary preconditions for liberatory work in education, examples from my own work include synthetic, recontextualizing analyses of the policy discourse of innovation (Ellison & Allen, 2018) and the "no excuses" charter school model (Ellison, 2012).

However, I point toward the conjunctural analysis offered here as a model for the synthetic analysis I envision. It is synthetic in that it developed from a generalized sense of crisis a robust conceptualization of conjunctural crisis as the conjoining of economic, political, and cultural crises in this historical moment. It is transdisciplinary in that it transgressed theoretical and disciplinary boundaries to develop a new synthesis of this historical moment as a crisis of fragmentation. And, it is praxiological not in the sense that it offers a clear set of

instructions with which to overcome fragmentation, but in establishing the necessary preconditions for liberatory work in the struggle against it. The conjunctural analysis demonstrates that any one of the narrow social problems that emerged during the analysis, such as growing economic inequality or political polarization, defy purely technical fixes that ignore the larger social totality. It is a mode of inquiry that seeks to develop new forms of knowledge that can inform purposeful activity.

This critical orientation toward scholarship informs my pedagogical work with preservice teachers and can serve as an example of the purposeful activity I have in mind. I approach my social foundations of education courses with the goal of helping my students recontextualize the growing body of instrumental knowledge they are developing in their educator preparation coursework and field experiences. I work to connect the daily practice of teaching to its larger societal context and to recover the policies, discourses, and ideologies linking seemingly disconnected phenomena together. So, to give one example, I work with my students to connect the issue of the achievement gap they discuss in their coursework to the history of housing segregation from the New Deal to today's reverse red-lining; to the history of desegregation policies, bussing, and school choice; to economics imperialism, human capital theory, and technocratic leadership; to educational philanthropy and federal education reform; and to structured curricula, assessment, and the increasing ubiquity of "data walls" in schools. As we untangle these connections over the course of a semester, I work to identify and recover a unifying theme with which to synthesize our class inquiry: the neoliberal political project. It is a pedagogy oriented toward a theoretical commitment to holism and recovery. To borrow a turn of phrase from C. Wright Mills (1967), my goal is to help my students grasp the relation between biography and history, to connect the everyday problems they face in the classroom to the larger social totality. My goal is to help students develop a critical orientation to social reality and to develop the tools of inquiry to recontextualize their lived experiences. In short, I endeavor to help my students situate their practice within the emergent crisis and to develop the tools of inquiry to engage in purposeful activity in their daily lives.

To conclude, it is not my intention here to make a totalizing argument about what is or is not critical theory. Here is the critical project; bow down before it! My goal is to work through the problématique around which my scholarship and teaching are oriented (i.e., fragmentation) and to make a case for why this kind of scholarship and pedagogy are important. My analysis of the emergent crisis is an attempt to model a methodology for doing critical scholarship as synthetic, recontextualizing inquiry and to demonstrate the importance of this kind of critical work in this historical moment. A crisis is a period of danger and potentiality. What follows in the wake of a crisis depends, in large measure, on collective understandings of the nature of the crisis and the epistemic tools at our collective disposal, but it is clear that neither the nature of the emergent crisis nor the path ahead are self-evident. A transformative path out of the period of crisis into which we are entering will require critical understandings of the complexity of the crises converging in this historical moment. My goal here has been to flesh out a problématique, to develop a model for critical scholarship appropriate to this problématique, and to think through the implications of this project for my own scholarship and pedagogical practice.

NOTES

1. Formerly Front National.
2. Sociological problematic.
3. Critical scholars and activists may welcome a crisis of the post-1970s neoliberal formation, but it is important to note that such a crisis would not necessarily lead to more just outcomes. A deepening of neoliberal relations or something far darker is equally likely. The settlement that follows a crisis is the result of political work.
4. I approach this work as both a way to reflect on my theoretical commitments and previous body of work and as an exploratory project to chart a course for the future. As such, I necessarily open up a range of topics that cannot be fully explored in the space of one article but will serve as grist for my future work. I ask the reader to approach this article as I do: as the start of a journey, as opposed to a completed work. The unit of analysis for this theoretical work will be the United States, but what follows will hold relevance for other Anglo-sphere and European nations of the global North.
5. Kondratieff waves are graphical representations of long-wave cycles in the global capitalist economy made up of an expansionary A-phase and stagnation B-phase. Kondratieff waves are named after the political economist Nikolai Kondratieff, whose historical analyses identified these cycles.
6. I confess to having contributed to this problem.
7. Dahms (2010) calls for dynamic social theory that conceptualizes modern societies as "force fields that are being maintained (or that maintain themselves) through a nexus of complex, contradictory, and contingent feedback loops which to describe as 'multidimensional' underplays the exceedingly intricate and mutually reinforcing and stabilizing processes and their interplay with types of orders – structures, systems, organization, and institutions—each of which adhere to the kinds of patterns that are endemic to societies as a whole, as 'totalities'" (p. 83).
8. Such as the problematic relations between radical theorists and the working classes for whom they advocate and the ways in which Marx and Engels' own lack of reflexivity precipitated the emergence of a scientific, vulgar Marxism focused on systems as a reductive proxy for social totality.

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