

## **Critical Social Theory and Sustainability Education at the College Level Why It's Critical to be Critical**

Tina Lynn Evans  
evans\_t@fortlewis.edu

### **Abstract**

This article addresses the value of critical social theory (CST) to sustainability education in higher education. CST is a particularly challenging form of social critique, especially for those who are middle and upper class members of industrial societies. It is argued that important sustainability education opportunities raised by CST actually derive from the deeply challenging nature of CST critique which indicts all who collude with domination and oppression. This article also addresses a common critique of CST: that it offers no explicit alternatives to the systems of domination and oppression characteristic of modern, global, industrial capitalism. It is argued that CST's focus on critique effectively implies alternatives. It is also argued that CST's refusal to draw an explicit roadmap to an egalitarian and just future implies a critique of authoritarian leadership and therefore opens space for grassroots visioning and for creating more just and sustainable alternatives to current social systems. The author argues that CST critique in the higher education setting, especially when combined with service learning projects, offers an effective means for transformational learning in service to a more just and sustainable world.

**Keywords:** critical theory, sustainability education, higher education, agency.

### **Introduction**

The news rolls in daily: the planet cannot sustain life as we know it. The ideology and practices of the global growth economy threaten on all fronts – the oceans, the land, water, the atmosphere. The earth's systems are breaking down. Species extinction rates now match those of major planetary die-off events, ocean fisheries are in decline from overfishing, rising temperatures, and other forms of human disturbance, and a warming climate threatens planetary scale, permanent dislocations of human and nonhuman life and the radical alteration of the earth's productive cycles. Meanwhile, the global economy attempts to satisfy the appetites and needs of rapidly growing numbers of people globally who have become entirely dependent upon it. The bitter irony is that this dependence creates widespread allegiance to the globalized economic system as well as ample opportunity for the powerful to profit from scarcity.

For many, the modern experience is like riding a runaway horse headed for a cliff. We feel powerless to change direction and fearful of leaping off, even though many of us are well aware of the ultimate peril we are in if we stay the course. The very structures of modern industrial societies and the social power relationships embedded in these structures seem in many ways to preclude the kind of radical shifts in social systems that are necessary for living

sustainably. How and where does a sustainability educator begin to respond to her students and work for change?

I argue that critical social theory (CST) offers us an important foundation for sustainability education at the college level, a foundation that enables us to identify and strategize to change the power relationships in society that produced the house of cards of unsustainable modern life. At the same time, I respond to some important questions raised about CST by some students and colleagues, questions that have made me think very carefully about the efficacy of CST as a basis for understanding the crisis and for working toward a sustainable world. One of the most popular responses to CST is that it's depressing. Another is to question whether CST actually serves sustainability, or whether it just turns people off. Some ask: why immerse ourselves in so much depressing critique? Can't we focus on the positive?

These are difficult but important questions, and they form a framework for inquiry about the efficacy of CST-oriented critique as a means toward sustainable ends. These questions typically arise among students engaged in sustainability oriented classes that I teach -- students who feel overwhelmed by the magnitude, depth, and entrenched state of oppression and injustice manifested in our globalized, capitalist world. These questions can and should be cause for concern on my part as an educator. They imply 1) that there may be something fundamentally wrong with critique and 2) that critique may have no utility in transforming our world toward sustainability. This article addresses these issues and questions and illustrates how CST is an important bridge between comprehension and action within the context of sustainability.

My exploration will clarify the connections between justice and a CST approach to both sustainability education and social transformation. I will highlight CST's utility as a lens both for critiquing injustice and envisioning/creating a more just world. In this exploration, I do not preclude other possible means for engaging in effective sustainability education. I teach college courses that offer me extended periods of time to interact with adult students, where it is possible to develop and probe complex arguments about the nature of our social systems and possibilities for social transformation toward a just and sustainable world. In this context, I find a CST-oriented approach to be both highly useful and highly effective, and I admit that such positionality might be less effective -- or even ineffective -- in quite different contexts.

My discussion addresses the following questions:

1. What is CST?
2. Why is CST perhaps even more personally and institutionally challenging than other modes of social critique?
3. Why is CST particularly important to sustainability education at the college level?
4. What are the social alternatives implied in CST?

This discussion will show both the value and utility of CST contributions to envisioning and realizing sustainability while, at the same time, leaving a door open to alternate means for moving societies toward justice and sustainability. In particular, I hope to illustrate how CST is an especially useful and appropriate lens for comprehending the breadth and depth of the social justice problems that derive from global capitalism and that this comprehension creates fertile ground for world-changing, sustainability-oriented praxis.

## **What is critical social theory?**

What are the central lines of thought and analysis that comprise CST? In the interest of space and time, I will refrain from offering a detailed history of CST, in depth discussion of individual theorists, or comparison/contrast among various strands of this school of thought. Other texts offer more in-depth overviews that are useful in this regard (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, chap. 11; Held, 1980; Morrow & Brown, 1994). Instead, I will only outline the central premises of CST in order to reveal its orientation toward justice and its applicability to sustainability-oriented education and action.

According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998),

[CST] attempt[s] to understand, analyze, criticize, and alter social, economic, cultural, technological, and psychological structures and phenomena that have features of oppression, domination, exploitation, injustice, and misery. They do so with a view to changing or eliminating these structures and phenomena and expanding the scope of freedom, justice, and happiness. The assumption is that this knowledge will be used in the process of social change by people to whom understanding their situation is crucial in changing it (p. 146).

In CST, context is of the utmost importance in understanding and transforming social systems (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 146). CST involves systems thinking. It “asks how the larger social system manifests itself in and reproduces itself through ... individual phenomen[a], while asking what the phenomen[a] add to the social system (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 147). In CST analyses, systems are historically situated and can only be grasped as products of and active agents within particular histories. CST draws upon the concept of dialectic developed by Marx and Hegel in that it calls for analyses of historical phenomena, both small and large scale, in terms of their internal contradictions. CST also engages in immanent critique and ideology critique. In immanent critique, institutions and societies are analyzed according to their ability to keep their word. If a society claims to be “free,” for example, one could use immanent critique as a means to determine the extent to which that society lives up to its own conception of freedom. Immanent critique uses the society’s or institution’s own standards as the measure of success rather than critiquing the institution or society from the outside. For example, the American civil rights movement effectively demonstrated, among many other things, that the nation was not living up to widely supported ideals of equal treatment and protection under the law and equal access for all citizens to participate in democratic governance. Ideology critique is similar to immanent critique in that it deals with rhetorical contradictions. Ideology critique of a society or institution focuses on contradictions between official stories (ideologies) and realities. The widely believed notion that anyone in the United States has real potential to live the “American dream” serves as a good example of an “official story” that could be a focus for ideology critique. In probing this notion, one could ask both how and why the American dream became a widely held notion as well as how and why the story of the American dream differs from the lived experience of many Americans (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, pp. 147-148).

A central premise of CST is that a more just world is an intrinsically valuable goal for human societies, and a more just world would be one in which unequal power relationships that result in domination and oppression were continually reduced, and ultimately eliminated (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 146; Freire, 1970/2000, chap. 1). According to critical social theorists, we

must work to uncover, critique, and engage in praxis to eliminate relationships of domination and oppression. This work is necessary precisely because domination is at the heart of all social injustice (Freire, 1970/2000). It is the powerful who have used their power to entrench and further increase their wealth and control at the expense of others who suffer unjustly. The ultimate goal of CST is widespread praxis, ultimately resulting in liberation of the oppressed and also of the oppressors (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 88; Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 158). The freedom experienced in such a world would be both negative (freedom *from*) and positive (presence of opportunity). CST strives toward freedom *from* the heavy burdens and constraints of oppression and freedom *to* realize one's humanity in healthy, mutual relationship with others. Both of these freedoms are heavily constrained within the globalized, industrial, capitalist paradigm. The collectively violent (Summers & Markusen, 1992/2003, p. 215) principles upon which the paradigm operates systematically concentrate wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands while also extending and deepening dependence upon the system (Miller, 1999).

Early CST, with its roots in Marxist analysis, had a great deal to say about society and economy and very little to say about the human relationship to nature. As sustainability-oriented theorists, educators, and activists are coming to see with increasing clarity that oppression of people and domination and destruction of nature are two sides of one coin representing the same exploitive values and practices, CST-oriented analysis is being extended to include the human relationship with the environment (Gruenewald, 2003; Leonardo, 2004; O'Connor, 1991/2008). This more inclusive analysis of domination and oppression is not entirely new (Marcuse, 1972/2008), but the CST emphasis on socio-*ecological* critique has only recently been gaining strength (Merchant, 1999, 2008). I will discuss below the relevance of this integrated critique to justice and sustainability.

### **Why is CST perhaps even more personally and institutionally challenging than other modes of social critique?**

Dealing as it does with hegemony, CST admits that we have been deceived by powerful vested interests – and that we deceive ourselves and others – about deeply important things, that some important hopes and beliefs about our culture, our nation, and the workings of the world are built upon falsehoods. And some of the deceptions give rise to alluring and comforting fables in the form of official stories of our institutions and societies:

- That we and our dominant Western culture are on a linear and upward path to an ever growing economy and improved knowledge and material wellbeing (and the corollary belief that all pre-modern and non-modern societies were/are lesser, backward, ignorant),
- That we live in the best of all possible worlds,
- That we as free people collectively *chose* our current reality *because* it was the best choice possible,
- That we moderns are freer than any other people has ever been,
- That we live in a meritocracy rather than a class based society,
- That our people and nation behave justly toward our own citizens and toward citizens of other nations,
- That everyone in the world wants to (and should want to) be just like us (and the corollary that those who are not like us are somehow inherently defective) (Bennet, 2007; Clark, 2005; Jarecki, 2006; Spretnak, 1997).

Gramsci (1971/1999) reminds us that hegemony is a system characterized by domination and oppression within which the oppressed assume the values and worldview of their oppressors and, thereby, engage in their own oppression (pp. 57-58; Persaud, 2001, p. 37). Social systems that effectively perpetuate hegemony succeed in creating illusions of freedom and choice along with fables that become so deeply interwoven within the social fabric of a nation, a people, a culture that to unravel the rotten threads would threaten the very integrity of the fabric itself. Successfully hegemonic systems also imperceptibly require their individual constituents to weave threads of deception into their own identities so that a threat to hegemony is perceived as a threat to personal integrity. Therefore, if taken seriously, a CST-based critique calls for a rather painful assessment of what lurks behind the beautiful façade of our culture as well as an assessment of the shadow parts of ourselves that articulate with oppression.

This hegemonic framework, within which we in modern Western societies are daily immersed (Marcuse, 1964; Spretnak, 1997, chap. 2-3 and appendix), serves as a genesis point for questions about the utility of CST as a lens for analysis and a vehicle for praxis toward sustainability. It seems to me quite natural that the kind of deeply probing analysis generated by CST-based inquiry would lead to deeply disquieting emotions: a sense of betrayal, guilt, sadness, rage (Bennet, 2007; Clark, 2005; Jensen, 2004; Jarecki, 2006). Such emotional awakenings can prompt us to ask: isn't CST too depressing, too incapable of inspiring and motivating for change, and just too uncomfortable to be worth it? It also seems quite natural that some students would push back against CST-based analysis in a somewhat kneejerk fashion because it directly challenges the "common sense" of the capitalist system that many of us in industrial societies have absorbed uncritically.

In a hegemonic society, we are also told we must think positively. In fact, the idea that everything is fine in our world if we only choose to see it this way has become axiomatic in our culture (Ehrenreich, 2009). As much as positive thinking can provide an emotional boost and contribute to personal well-being, thereby helping us to create positive change, when divorced from the full complexity of the problems of the world, it can lull us into passivity as we gloss over systemic sources of domination and oppression and misapprehend their depth and tenacity. In no case is positive thinking alone a substitute for an honest analysis of the societal powers and structures that gravely threaten us all, nor is it a substitute for well-informed action.

In my own experience as a sustainability educator, I have noted that many people are particularly uncomfortable with CST-based critiques, even when they may be quite comfortable with other forms of sweeping cultural critique of modernity. Deep ecology and ecopsychology represent two such deeply critical theoretical frameworks. Theorists of these schools critique:

- Modern societies' disconnection from nature (Devall, 1980/2008; Rosak, 1995; Merchant, 2008, chap. 11-12; Næss, 1973/2008);
- Consumerism and modern, capitalist growth economies (Durning, 1995);
- Anthropocentrism (Devall, 1980/2008; Næss, 1973/2008);
- Oppression of both females and nature (Gomes & Kanner, 1995);
- Violence done to the human psyche through the process of rending it away from nature (Shepard, 1995); and
- Grief generated by living within and participating in ecologically destructive societies (Windle, 1995).

Some conservation biologists also critique our modern economies and our ways of living on the land (Callicott & Mumford, 1997). These are deep and useful critiques indeed, but they differ from CST in that most do not employ an integrated and deep critique of *both* the political economy *and* the culture that foster domination and oppression. Such a deep and comprehensive critique is vital to understanding unsustainability, and CST offers us precisely this. It can, therefore, serve as a central framework for drawing upon and integrating other forms of social critique in an effort to comprehend and address unsustainability. The comprehensive nature of CST-based critique, combined with its explicit call to action, lead those who listen to confront the oppression of the status quo and to consider options for social transformation.

Systems theory is another school of thought that has many adherents among sustainability advocates, but the works of some systems theorists offer little direct critique of society. Such works typically emphasize comprehending the organization and dynamics of systems of all kinds -- from ecological systems to social systems (Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005; Laszlo, 2006). Systems theory encompasses systems of all scales and scopes (Laszlo, 2006, pp. 89-109). The theory conveys important insights into how systems of all kinds may embody emergent properties and possibilities that are characteristic of systems as wholes -- offering us a means of understanding why an entire system really is more than the sum of its parts.

But in focusing on the overarching aspects of systems, the theory can gloss over a crucial aspect of human social systems: that they are *historical* and, therefore, products of *both* nature and human agency. Detailed explanations of principles of system functioning can impart an almost autonomous quality to systems, as though emergence and other forms of system change operate outside human history -- only minimally, if at all, influenced by human choice and action. Direct critique of the uses and abuses of social power can slip into the background, as can discussion of human agency. Systems theory-based explanation that does not directly engage critique of social domination and oppression can only superficially inform action in service to socio-ecological justice, especially when the level of social analysis remains general and inconcrete.

A systems theory approach to explaining reality that is not situated within a historical context that emphasizes the role of human agency can also offer everyone a way out of recognizing how their own beliefs and actions contribute to the problems of our world today. Such theory is unlikely to be challenged by the powerful or to make anyone uncomfortable since it does not necessarily call upon us to do anything specific to upset existing power relationships or to otherwise shape our future. By contrast, CST-based analysis recognizes that social change is a *political process* and makes an explicit call to agency.

Those who critique broad social phenomena, but who stop short of implicating anyone or anything in particular as generative of these phenomena, mystify the sources of unsustainable living. Such an approach to critique can broaden the audience willing to listen, but it can also obscure effective paths to action. CST clearly indicts privilege acquired through oppression and domination and, therefore, carries guilt as baggage. All who profit through the suffering of others and the destruction of the environment are implicated. It is for this reason that CST can be a particularly challenging form of critique for those who live in hegemonic cultures where ideology and reality exist in contradiction to one another. It seems natural in a hegemonic culture to feel that there must be something wrong with critique that questions the very foundations and organization of society. Such critique, after all, is -- and explicitly aims to be -- destabilizing in that its ultimate goal is the remaking of society itself. Because of its challenge to hegemony and the self-incrimination implicit in taking CST critiques to heart, I believe CST can serve as a

highly useful lens for critique and a foundation for action in service to sustainability. I will explore the reasons for this belief below.

### **Why is CST particularly important to sustainability education at the college level?**

In sustainability education, critique of domination – whether it is domination of humans by other humans or of humans over nature – is essential to our understanding and acting to remedy unsustainability. Such critique is essential because it opens a window to recognizing and addressing structures and systems of social power that benefit and entrench the powerful at the expense of the oppressed. CST helps us to recognize the driving forces behind human oppression of nature and each other.

The modern Western consciousness abstracts humans from nature. The divide itself is not only a division into two, it is a tiered dualism: humans on top, nature acting in all supporting roles (as tool, as resource, as setting). The subjugated “other,” first conceptualized as nature itself, is born with this divide. And there have been many “others” as systems of hierarchy have proliferated to encompass gender, “races,” non-Western cultures, and more. Cultural systems of hierarchy in Western societies and the projection of a hierarchical worldview upon nature itself surely are among the keystone concepts upholding the house of cards that is the unsustainable, globalized, industrial world.

If hierarchy and domination are among the key sources for unsustainability, then creating more just systems of social power is central to realizing sustainability. A CST-based critique of unequal power and the systems of domination that arise out of concentrated power and wealth can serve important purposes for generating vision and action to (re)create more sustainable societies. It is important that we come to terms with the kind of indictment CST aims at modern, industrial society – and at all of us who (more or less willingly) both empower and benefit from that society while also suffering its dehumanizing effects. For individuals, the indictment hinges upon collusion with power. In exploring how this collusion manifests, it is helpful to consider the concept of collective violence.

According to Summers and Markusen (1992/2003), many institutions of modern industrial society promote and promulgate collective violence. These authors define collective violence as large scale damage or destruction of people and/or the environment perpetrated by large numbers of people (p. 215). According to this definition, the political economy of limitless, global, capitalist growth is most certainly collectively violent, as are many industries, companies, governments, and other institutions. This is not to say that many of these institutions have no beneficent goals or effects – many of them do – but it is important to recognize that the powerful, both at the individual and the institutional level, oppress the less powerful, even when this oppression is not explicitly intentional or precisely targeted.

The very presence of the powerful, living a differential life of comparative privilege to the oppressed and doing the everyday things that seem normal to them, results in oppression (McIntosh, 1988). The oppressed are quite aware of the difference between the lives they live and those lived by people of comparative privilege, while the privilege bestowed upon the comparatively powerful tends to remain invisible to the privileged themselves. For the comparatively powerful, waking up to the existence of this privilege -- and the price paid for it by those who are oppressed -- can be deeply disturbing. For those of us who are middle and upper class, I believe it is an important and humbling source of learning to experience self-incrimination through recognition of our participation in collective violence and though

recognition of the ways we benefit from collectively violent systems. I believe a brief story will illustrate my point.

I recall many years ago when I first saw the film *The Color of Fear* (Lee, 1994) which documents discussions about racism conducted among middle-aged men in the United States. There was one realization that struck me particularly deeply upon listening to what these men had to say about their daily life experiences: the minority men thought of themselves first as members of a particular ethnic group, then as male Americans. A white man thought of himself as just a man, a generic man, not a member of any ethnic group at all. His race was invisible to him because he did not have to consider how it might affect his day to day life, how it might affect his opportunities, or how it might influence the way he would be treated by others. I realized that, as a white woman, I had experienced these same privileges without even knowing that they were anything special, that I had experienced a level of comfort that many others might never be able to take for granted. I felt incredibly indicted and so *stupid!* How could I have been so naïve, so insensitive, so completely oblivious? I had understood quite a bit about how people of other races in my society can be systematically disadvantaged (and how women can be disadvantaged compared to men as well), but I had not clearly recognized my own *advantage* as directly contributing to the oppression of minorities in my society. My life had seemed just “regular,” “normal.”

I believe this rather painful learning experience opened new potential for “cognitive liberation” for me. According to Taylor (2000),

Cognitive liberation occurs when (a) the system people once trusted loses legitimacy, (b) people who are ordinarily fatalistic begin to demand social change, and (c) people find and exercise a new sense of political efficacy (p. 520).

The experience certainly further awakened my sense of agency and deepened my distrust in the dominant ideology with regard to race. I would never have learned the powerful and humbling lesson that I did about white privilege in my society if I had not been willing to engage with the intellectual and emotional discomfort inherent in the indictment of my own oblivion. None among us, privileged or no, can completely understand the lifeworlds of others, but I do believe that being on the receiving end of the incrimination of CST-based critique can lead to moments of powerful cognition and help develop deep humility and empathy among those who are willing to sit with such critique, take it seriously, and weave it into the fabric of their lives. For those of us who live in comparative privilege, the experience of indictment for our own participation in collectively violent systems of domination and oppression is *nothing* compared to the oppression and abuse of those overtly oppressed under modern, globalized capitalism. If we are to develop empathy – a feeling of compassion based on understanding – as opposed to sympathy – feeling sorry but without any clear understanding of the experiences others, or the causes of those experiences – we should be able to endure at least these points of painful growth through critical reflection. I would call this experience a version of Freirian (re)naming the world, a form of “conscientization” (Freire, 1970/2000) that can serve to ignite agency.

In my personal experience, moments of cognition that lead to cognitive liberation often occur in tandem with negative emotions such as revulsion. Revulsion can be generated through the kind of deeply and broadly systemic critique embodied in CST. Many of us need to experience such deep negative emotion in order to move out of well-worn paths and toward deep and challenging change. Revulsion can occur as a result of demystifying the commodity



fetishism that dominates many of our day to day interactions with the world because the demystification itself encompasses the indictment of all participants in the exploitive system that is modern, corporate capitalism and the global growth economy. Revulsion can be generated through critique precisely through pinpointing and magnifying the contradiction between the rhetoric and the actual practices of our culture (Jensen, 2004; Shawn, 1991).

The resulting discordance incites motive to resolve and reintegrate one's worldview and actions. Fragmentation of self through compartmentalization and isolation of negative past experiences or through attempts to wall off parts of our "shadow" selves -- which we might wish were not parts of us at all -- results in neuroses such as anxiety, depression, and inability to grow spiritually, emotionally, and/or intellectually. When we lie to ourselves about or refuse to think about our own participation in the widespread collective violence of our modern society, we may develop these same neuroses. Dissociation, rationalization after the fact, and compartmentalization of different aspects of our lives such as work and home life represent a few of the coping mechanisms that allow us to deal with gaps between what we believe and what we do (Summers & Markusen, 1992/2003). And so, the slave owner may be kind, gentle, and fair to his family; the defense plant worker may refuse to think about how her work contributes to civilian deaths in other nations; and the one who drops the bomb may say that someone else would have done it if he had not.

According to Summers and Markusen (1992/2003), many people engage in self-fragmenting behavior and work in the process of focusing on personal benefit: prestige, financial rewards, the promise of challenging and interesting work, the ability to deliver their loved ones "the good life," or even simple survival. In order to integrate ourselves and experience personal coherence, I believe we must recognize the webs within which we are entangled that limit our options for action (Marcuse, 1964). We must learn to do the best we can in full consciousness of the complexity and undesirability of our current global situation. Since we have become so dependent on unhealthy social systems, it will be difficult to extract ourselves from these systems and create alternatives. Our very dependency upon unhealthy systems to provide us with the necessities of life translates into very real and immediate consequences for those who would resist or dismantle these systems. We are in fact dependent upon the very social, economic, and political systems that CST critiques, and this dependence is impeding the long term survivability of our culture and even our species, not to mention quality of life and survivability for other species.

Becoming aware of our own entrapment is a painful experience but, I believe, a potentially powerful one that can awaken agency. CST is a particularly useful tool for recognizing the fragmenting contradictions in both our social world and our inner life that stem from domination and oppression. Those of us convinced of the truth of CST critique are faced with a choice: we can suppress or compartmentalize what we have learned and live with the self fragmentation that results, or we can begin to integrate what we have learned into our knowledge base and actions and thereby hope to achieve personal coherence.

The learning process that results from engaging with CST-based critique mirrors Mezirow's transformative learning theory that hinges upon the importance of adults working through "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000). It also corresponds well with Brookfield's (1987, 2000) discussion of transformational learning that can result from critical thinking. It is important to note that Brookfield's definition of "critical" derives directly from CST (2000, pp. 126-128). Since sustainability calls for healthy (and therefore integrated) individuals as well as social and ecological systems characterized by healthy relationships, the

call to resolve contradictions, such as that between what we believe and what we do, represents important impetus toward sustainability. This call is embodied in CST, the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (2000), and the critical thinking theory of Brookfield (1987, 2000).

The call for coherence of self is also present in Terry's (1993) theory of leadership. According to Terry, understanding – and wanting to understand -- “what’s really going on” create the foundation for authentic leadership. For Terry (1993), authentic leaders are self-compelled to engage in action that resonates with their conception of the world as it is and as it should be (pp. 110, 128). Such action further deepens the authenticity of one’s presence in the world. It is therefore important for authentic leaders to attain the political clarity of which both Terry (p. xvii) and Freire (1970/2000) speak so that they can act within a framework of understanding “what’s really going on.” Terry (1993) contrasts inauthenticity in action with authentic engagement in the world:

To be involved inauthentically is to feel cheated and manipulated. The alienated feel that they have no power; the inauthentic feel they have pulled a disconnected lever without quite knowing where and how, so that shadows are confused with reality (p. 113).

By contrast, authentic leaders live in response to their own sense of political clarity in service to a vision for a better world. According to Terry, “Authenticity entails action that is both *true* and *real* in *ourselves* and the *world*” (pp. 111-112; emphasis in original); authentic leadership entails living into being a transformed, just world.

Terry’s theory of authentic leadership rests heavily upon a critique of domination that parallels CST, transformative learning theory as developed by Mezirow and others (2000), and the critical thinking theory of Brookfield (1987, 2000). This set of related theories provides us with important lenses for comprehending unsustainability, and the insights we gain from examining our world and ourselves through these lenses can help us to create a framework upon which sustainability might be constructed. Proposing alternatives without an in-depth critique of power relations can lead to simplistic or superficial attempts at change that leave the underlying power structures intact and, therefore, change very little in the long term. Through combining an educational process oriented toward social critique with action based on that critique, we might engage in more well-conceived praxis.

CST and related theories of education and leadership offer important lenses for social critique highly relevant to sustainability. Based as it is on a critique of domination and oppression, CST addresses perhaps the most important sources of unsustainability. Clearly, CST can help us analyze what is wrong in modern societies, but how useful is CST in actually helping to resolve the problems it identifies? I now turn to a discussion of the utility of CST to sustainable social transformation.

### **What are the social alternatives implied in CST?**

Critical theorists do not generally prescribe precisely what a more just world would look like and how it would function. Instead, critical theorists tend to focus on critique. At the end of his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964, pp. 256-257), Marcuse explains what he calls the “great refusal.” He offers no clear answer to domination and oppression, but he claims that refusal to play the game, refusal to fit one’s life to hegemonic realities, may signal the beginning of the end

of the current paradigm. I believe the great refusal still is not happening to the extent necessary for radical social change – even though 46 years have passed since Marcuse wrote this work.

Engaging in the great refusal, I believe, is often misinterpreted as inaction because to *refuse* is seen as *not constructive* -- constructive in the sense of actually *building* something. I would say that engaging in the great refusal *is* constructive. It means living a coherent life by refusing to collude with power in order to benefit personally at the expense of others. Living this refusal implies taking an unusual path in life by building a lifeworld that lives into being an alternative worldview. In living such a life, one is telling a powerful story to others who may be inspired to also engage in the great refusal. Those who refuse to fit themselves to the current paradigm are likely to build relationships among themselves and to *create* ways of living that embody the refusal.

Therefore, alternatives to oppressive hegemony are in part present in the critique. Perhaps many critics of the utility of CST do not recognize this presence because they see the alternatives as unrealistic or because they are used to going with the flow within authoritarian structures of leadership. Individuals acculturated to hierarchy may think they need someone to tell them exactly what to do since they do not recognize their potential to assume responsibility for charting their own course. Since part of the CST critique is a critique of hierarchy, CST-inspired change calls upon people to resist hegemony and, therefore, to work in ways that may seem unnatural to them.

In their ethnography of working class males in the United States titled *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972, chap.1), Sennett and Cobb argue that working class people in modern day America can generate critique but feel unworthy of acting upon their critiques because they do not have “badges of ability” such as academic degrees and titles that convey expertise and authority. Their study highlights the importance of demystifying leadership in order to awaken agency. In the modern world of corporate capitalism, “leaders” who possess badges of ability are also most often the hegemon of the current paradigm – those who have been afforded access to power and education throughout their lives. Studying corrupt leadership in the corporate and political spheres -- especially how the leaders in these two realms of society shuffle back and forth between the two in order to serve their own and their friends’ interests -- demonstrates that leaders often do not merit their elevated status (Achebar & Simpson, 2004; Barlow and Clarke, 2002; Black, 2001; Clark, 2005; Gelbspan, 2004; International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2003). By studying and critiquing leadership themes and patterns of the current paradigm, we can learn that we had best not passively place our futures in the self-interested hands of today’s leaders. Leadership demystified can awaken agency toward justice and sustainability.

Being creatures of our particular history, acculturated within late capitalism, creating vision and embodying action for a sustainable future are very big challenges. Living into being new leadership models for a more just and sustainable future is challenging because we cannot rely upon the leaders and leadership models we know best. These leaders and models are, in many cases, part and parcel of current unjust and unsustainable systems. We have to envision the alternatives ourselves in a world where appropriate individual and community models have been largely obliterated. Still, there are people trying to do just this (Armstrong, 1995; Kemmis, 1990; Kovel, 2002; Martinez, 1997). None of the solutions *within* the current system can be the entire answer because the system itself is unjust. The potential complete meltdown of our global economy (Clark, 2005) may bring the conditions for real social change, but absent a political

analysis of global capitalism, we may act to resurrect, at least to the extent possible, the kind of systems that we have been led to believe comprise the best of all possible worlds.

The struggle implied by CST is rooted in agency. It is always historical. The struggle manifests in history in ways that respond to the circumstances at hand; and, therefore, its particular form is always contingent. I believe we are only now approaching a historical moment when large numbers of people might engage at once in a great refusal. Given our personal histories and the form and function of the world that we have inherited, characterized as it is by entrenched and self-perpetuating systems of domination and oppression that enforce dependency, we may be ill-prepared for the challenge of remaking societies that are just and sustainable. It seems to me unfair in such a world to expect any particular critic to hand us the answers to intractable socio-ecological problems. It seems to me that all of us have to create the answers together, in full recognition that each of us will have only partial insights, visions, and abilities to contribute to this project. Since CST highlights the systemic problems of domination and oppression that are deeply causal to unsustainability, it can serve us well in the process of creating a sustainable future.

## Conclusions

In higher education settings, CST-based pedagogy combined with service learning represents one important means to generate agency and long term commitment to that agency among students. A lengthy immersion into CST -- combined with action projects that begin to create alternatives to the systems critiqued -- offers a good place to begin a process of deep social change. Treating students as though they *can* handle learning about and beginning to address the problems of late capitalism may also contribute to their believing they can have an effect in creating more just and sustainable societies -- and to their acting on this belief.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article represents the theoretical framing for the pedagogical approach I take in a number of my courses, including *End of Oil* ([http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS\\_T/](http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS_T/)), *Culture and Place* (co-developed and co-taught on different occasions with Kate Niles and Dennis Lum), *The Value of Place* (co-developed and co-taught with Kate Niles; [http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS\\_T/place/s2006/](http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS_T/place/s2006/)), and *Environment and Place* ([http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS\\_T/place/s2008/index.html](http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS_T/place/s2008/index.html)). In nearly all sections of these courses that I have taught or co-taught, students have been called upon to engage in sustainability-oriented service learning projects and to reflect upon their actions within the context of course readings, films, and discussions as well as within the context of their own life experiences. Most of these service learning experiences have related to local, sustainable food production and consumption and have been part of a program I initiated called Food for Thought. See online course materials for details. My main web page ([http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS\\_T/](http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/EVANS_T/)) generally provides access to versions of courses taught most recently. I am also working on my dissertation in which I articulate a theory of sustainability education praxis and provide examples of its application and of the perceptions of students who have engaged in it. This work will provide examples of some students who come to see CST critique as an effective motivation and context for sustainability-oriented action.

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