

Chapter Two

UNPACKING "THE WAY IT IS"

Constructed Consciousness and Hegemony

Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured. "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it."

Toni Morrison

VALUES AS A BASIS FOR ACTION

Critical theory is, above all else, a way to ask questions about power. Who has it? How did they get it? How do they keep it? What are they doing with it? How do their actions affect the less powerful? How might things be otherwise?

We tend to think of the world as a place where things just happen, as a place that somehow arranges itself, one where our own actions make little or no difference in the big picture. But we're wrong. Somewhere, somehow, someone does something, and something else happens as a result. Two cars collide not unavoidably, but because their drivers made choices. Each driver chose to take one route rather than another. Either might have taken a few seconds more or less to get into the car. Either might have stopped for gas. Both might have stayed home. Any change in their actions would very likely have changed the consequences.

The reality that different choices lead to different outcomes, that people actually trigger events (either consciously or unconsciously), is evident on a much larger scale as well. *Someone* writes legislation, someone else votes on it, and still others gain or lose privilege or pay more or less taxes. *Someone* writes policy manuals, someone endorses the policy, and as a result someone else has fewer or more vacation days, or gets more or less notice before being fired. *Someone* writes textbooks, and *someone*

publishes them, and *someone* buys them. And, as a result, teachers teach one curriculum rather than another, and children learn that certain people are important and others are not.

Critical theory looks at how the choices of one group affect the lives of others and asks: Who are these *someones* who make the decisions that yield such important consequences for others? How did these *someones* come to be the decision makers who have so much power? From the perspective of the critical theorist, the key to such questions often lies in cultural values. If one group holds power over another, it is often because the culture has taught members of the less powerful group to accept a value system that bestows privilege on others.

A simple example comes from my daily life. Although it doesn't demonstrate fully the kind of situations that concern critical theorists (and which I will detail momentarily), this example does illustrate how our values lead to deference to others: I have an elderly aunt and uncle who have been good to me all my life and who make somewhat imperious and often inconvenient requests of my family members. Because of our values, each of us shovels snow or runs ten miles to the grocery store for a single item without hesitation. We value my aunt and uncle's past and present kindness and generosity; we value close bonds with family members; we respect the elderly and believe it fair to help those who cared for us when we were young. Holding these values, we agree to let their desires take precedence over our own convenience; we do what they say, however inconvenient, rather than what we want.

This is a conscious decision my husband and I have made; it reflects values that we know we hold and that we have taught explicitly to our children. The fact that we are conscious of our values and the link between them and our actions is what sets this example apart from the concerns of the critical theorist. Rather than instances of conscious choice and action, the critical theorist seeks to uncover situations in which one group *unquestioningly* and/or *unconsciously* accepts a value system that results in privilege for some other group at the cost of its own welfare. That is, group members defer to others without having thought critically about the values influencing their actions.

An obvious example here is the experience of children, who as a group generally have little power. Indeed, their family and culture is likely to teach them from birth that a "good" child respects and obeys adults. So ingrained is this belief in children that a child who wants to be judged "good" may submit to repeated sexual abuse because she believes that what adults want is always more important than her own feelings and physical welfare. Children are explicitly taught *not* to question what adults tell them, and they generally accept unquestioning obedience as a value long before they are capable of thinking critically about consequences. Adults, too, can accept the values of others unquestioningly, in a childlike way. When they do, they give others the right to make decisions and to dictate actions, no matter whom those decisions and actions benefit or hurt.

For example, an employee in the tobacco industry might cooperate with an unethical policy because he believes that he has no right to question his superiors in management. Or, a student might not challenge a professor over an essay that received a poor grade because she believes that professors are always right. Or, a welfare recipient might endure rude treatment from bureaucrats without protest, believing that anyone who can't earn a living can't expect respect. In such situations, there is an acceptance, often unconscious, of values and judgments that result in some people being slotted into superior, and others inferior, roles.

The critical theorist calls this passive acceptance of value judgments that privilege others constructed consciousness, which is said to be operating whenever one group adopts a set of values or ideas that places it at a disadvantage.¹ Constructed consciousness is evident in the following ideas because embedded in each is acceptance of inferior status based on roles: "I agree that good employees don't question their superiors. I agree that all professors are smarter than all students. I agree that poor people are probably lazy and don't deserve respect." Whether we endorse these ideas consciously or not, when we believe we have no right to challenge the supervisor/professor/bureaucrat, our action signals that we are willing to grant superiority based on who has which job, who is on which side of a desk, or who has more money.

In such situations, the critical theorist says that the more powerful group has attained hegemony over the less powerful. When hegemony is

operating, the less powerful do as they're told and accept the inferior roles assigned to them without question. Individual merit and the right of every human being to be treated with respect are ignored; the value of a human being becomes confused with his job and bank account. Constructed consciousness allows inequity to go unexamined and unchecked—in virtually every facet of daily life.

“THAT’S NO LADY, THAT’S MY WIFE”

The experience of women is just one area that demonstrates how one group (women) has accepted a value system that grants another group (men) dominance over them. (For this reason, much writing in the field of critical theory involves feminism.) In American culture, as in many others, men have long held hegemony over women, have long held the position of decision makers who shape events. My own experience overflows with relevant anecdotes; one of the most striking occurred years ago.

As a newly minted professional, I had a conversation with a colleague approaching retirement, and our talk has stayed with me for over a decade. We were sitting over a breakfast of coffee and rolls, and I was asking about her plans when she left teaching. “Well,” she responded. “That would depend on whether Lou decides he wants to marry me.” “Is that what *you* want then?” I asked, “to marry Lou?” “Well I don’t know,” she replied. “If he wants to marry me, then I’ll marry him. If he doesn’t want to marry me, then I won’t be getting married. It’s up to him.”

Up to *him*? I thought. Well, yes, of course, his thoughts on the subject would matter, but shouldn’t *she* also be making some independent decision about what *she* wanted? No matter what tack I took in trying to draw out her own feelings and thoughts, though, she came back repeatedly to a scenario in which decisions about the future lay entirely in Lou’s hands. She never said anything like, “Well, he’s grand and I love him madly. I think he’d be a terrific husband and a great companion for my retirement years.” Not at all. Just “Whatever he wants is what will happen.” (What happened, by the way, is that they became unofficially “engaged.” Then, he strung her along for a few more years, until his funeral, where she met

another woman who was also “engaged” to Lou and who had waited equally long for him to decide he was ready to take a bride.)

I remember the conversation so clearly because I was stunned at the time that anyone could be so passive about a life choice as significant as marriage. I remember being amazed that this woman seemed unable to imagine having a voice that mattered on the issue. She was smart. She was attractive. She had an independent income. How was it that she saw herself in terms of goods on a shelf waiting for a shopper to take notice?

Here again is the critical theorist’s question: how does it happen that some people, like this woman, devalue themselves and elevate others? And again in this case, the answer is that people act against their own interest because of constructed consciousness: they accept a value system that demeans their own worth. In this case, the woman’s culture sent her signals from birth that her opinions, her desires, her thinking, her very life had less value than that of any man, and so she came to accept the idea that men were stronger, smarter—more valuable—than she. Her religion, which (like many others) has a long tradition of wives submitting to their husbands’ will, reinforced the messages in television shows and on billboards. Didn’t Lucy need Desi to get her out of scrapes (which she never would have gotten into in the first place if she’d listened to him)? Didn’t Father know best? Wasn’t her own Father to be obeyed without question? Wasn’t her Department Chair a man, her Dean a man, her Chief Executive Officer a man? Weren’t her advisors for her doctorate men? Everywhere in her experience were men with power, and women without it, to teach her the lesson that men matter and women don’t. Everywhere were lessons to teach her that a “good” woman pleases the men in her life rather than herself.

Schools, in fact, have offered explicit lessons on the supporting role women “ought” to play. Here, for example, is a passage from a 1950s home economics text, taken from a section titled “How To Be a Good Wife.” (Though more than one colleague has given me copies of this passage, none of us has been able to track down the specific source.)

Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal on the table. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are

concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal is part of the warm welcome needed.

Prepare yourself. Take fifteen minutes to rest so that you will be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has been with a lot of work weary people. Be a little gay and a little more interesting. His boring day may need a lift.

Prepare the children. Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces (if they are small), comb their hair, and if necessary change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part.

Make him comfortable. Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or suggest that he lie down in the bedroom. Have a cool or warm drink ready for him. Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soft, soothing and pleasant voice. Allow him to relax and unwind. Listen to him. You may have a dozen things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first.

Make the evening his. Never complain if he does not take you out to dinner or to other pleasant entertainment. Instead, try to understand his world of strain and pressure, his need to unwind and relax.

No wonder that women a short generation or so ahead of me continued to defer to the idea that men have some inalienable right to make decisions for the pretty little ladies.

Sadly, experience has taught me that a willingness to yield to male supremacy is still common among the generations that followed. I've encountered woman after woman my own age and younger who allow men to order their lives, endorsing the idea that men are more important and know more than women. Some drive only the car their husbands select, even if they make their own car payments. Some can't go away without their husband's permission. Some serve what their husbands order for dinner at a time their husbands specify, no matter what else they might have done that day.

One of my friends reports having a mental earthquake when a psychologist asked her *why* she had to do all the things she was complaining about doing. "Oh," she instantly replied, knowing well the catastrophic consequences of doing otherwise: "John will get mad if I don't." "So?" the psychologist queried. "SO??" my friend responded,

incredulous that the tragedy wasn't self-evident. For her, the possibility that the sun would rise and the birds would sing every morning *even if* her husband were angry was so radical that it shook the very foundations of her world view. Another friend, in the middle of a hostile divorce, drove a weekly round trip, taking nearly four hours in an unreliable car that often broke down, so that her estranged husband could visit a few hours with their young daughter. "Why do you do all the driving?" I asked. Her response? "Mark told me to."

Lou, John, Mark: decision makers. And the women attached to them? Insignificant. Their duty was to do as they were told, to please the men. The women themselves agreed that their own wishes were irrelevant when a man stood next to them with demands. Men matter; women don't.

While these examples may seem obvious and extreme to many of us, to the women holding such mindsets, the idea that they did not have to live as others dictated was beyond imagining. However incomprehensible such passivity may seem to others, a similar lack of imagination and lack of self-worth is common among widely varied groups. While women continue to live with men who abuse them, many men accept abuse from women. Many of the elderly accept abuse from their grown children and grandchildren. Many workers live in constant terror of a whimsical and mean-spirited supervisor.

Somewhere, somehow, someone or something has taught large numbers of people to accept powerlessness and discrimination. Many people have learned that they are deficient in some way; that they are unimportant; that they aren't worthy of being treated well; that they deserve no better than they get. Unfortunately, it is much easier to see constructed consciousness and hegemony at work in the lives of others. Most teachers, for example, would be stunned by the idea that they *allow* others to have power over them, just as my friends were stunned by the idea that they *could* say "No!" to the men who were telling them what to do. Still, no matter how hard it may be for teachers to imagine, the reality is that they are one of many groups who frequently cooperate in their own oppression by uncritically accepting ideas that permeate their culture.

THAT'S NO LADY, THAT'S A TEACHER

One sentence that I hear repeatedly from teachers pierces my body like the screech of fingernails on a blackboard. I ask, "What do you teach?" and a teacher invariably responds "Oh, I *only* teach elementary school," or "I'm *only* a first [or second or fourth] grade teacher." Only?

Teachers determine whether children find learning exciting or dull, whether they find it an enjoyable natural activity or a difficult and intimidating one. Teachers introduce children to the magic of the written word, to the wondrous mental adventures books provide, and to the satisfying logic of math. Teachers teach children that adults can be trusted—or not; that everyone ought to treat everyone else with respect—or not; that it's important to keep your word—or not. People who work with children *only* teach elementary school? Not in my book. As a parent, I found nothing unimportant about the work of adults who, by their every word and action, would ultimately teach my children that every child is a precious individual who ought to aim high—or that, as my son sadly learned, in school conformity is the greatest of all goods, that "You have to go along to get along," and that he will never be a "good" (i.e., conforming) student.

How is it that an elementary school teacher will gaze at the floor in response to the question "What do you do?" and denigrate his or her own work with that ugly word *only*? There are many answers to the question, among them several that lie in the realm of constructed consciousness, of a cultural value system teachers have inherited that has taught them that their work is far less important than that of doctors, of lawyers—and even, judging by income comparisons, less important than the work of plumbers.

Part of this devaluing certainly comes from the cultural legacies of teaching as women's work and of women's work as being less valuable than men's work. In a widely used foundations textbook, Joel Spring (1994) incorporates the following quotes to make that point. The first (from Elsbree, *The American Teacher*) comes from an 1841 document composed by the Boston Board of Education that argued for an increasing number of women in teaching:

As a class, they [women] never look forward, as young men almost invariably do, to a period of legal emancipation from parental control, when they are to break away from the domestic circle and go abroad into the world, to build up a fortune for themselves; and hence, the sphere of hope and of effort is narrower, and the whole forces of the mind are more readily concentrated upon present duties. (42)

Spring also includes an assertion made by Horace Mann, "the father of American education," in 1846: "Reason and experience have long since demonstrated that children under 10 or 12 years of age can be more genially taught and more successfully governed by a female than by a male teacher" (42).

Women, then, seem destined by nature and by natural restrictions to remain in roles defined and controlled by others, themselves controlling only still weaker groups like young children. After all, how much is there for young children to learn? Some letters and numbers, some simple information about days and months and years, about national holidays and heroes. How hard can that be? For a very long time, there has been a sort of generic mental confusion about the difference between teaching and babysitting. Although most people might deny it if asked outright, the truth is that culturally, teaching *is* most often confused with babysitting. When teachers strike, for example, parents often protest loudly about having to arrange child care while they work. At hostile meetings, parents demand an answer to the question "What am I supposed to do with these kids while you're home watching tv? I have to work, you know!"

Administrators sympathize. Good teachers feel guilty. But *why*? Why does the problem of what to do with children while teachers strike seem to belong to the teachers? Why is it teachers' responsibility to make sure that children are safe and cared for while parents work? When was parental responsibility for children's daytime welfare between the months of September and June transferred always and forever to teachers? And if it's difficult to make up school days missed because of strikes, is that because teachers refuse to teach after June 30, or because the state has passed a law defining the school year, or because parents don't want family vacation plans interrupted? Why are the schedules and convenience of everyone else more important than reasonable salaries and working conditions for teachers?

The idea that teaching amounts to child care pervades thinking about schooling and is reinforced when teachers refer to themselves as *only* teachers. It is an idea that is reinforced by the fact that so many people believe that teachers have their summers "off." It is reinforced by mothers who tell their daughters, "You know, teaching would be a great job for you. Kids always love you when you babysit, and your schedule will match your kids' when you have a family. You won't have to worry about what to do with them when they're not in school." It is reinforced by self-important school directors who pledge to their nieces and nephews who are earning straight Cs in college, "Don't worry. Just get your degree and I'll make sure you have a job." It is reinforced by arrogant college professors who tell their best students "you're much too smart to teach." It is reinforced by inept teacher educators who neither model nor insist on intellectualism and excellence in their classes.

Sadly, too many teachers do in fact play the role of well-paid babysitters who get the bonus of summers "off." They don't behave as professionals. They aren't knowledgeable, they don't model lifelong learning, they don't model dignity and respect for others, they waste instructional hours talking about their hobbies, they depend on worksheets and ten-year-old tests to do their "teaching" for them. They, too, contribute to the impression that teaching is babysitting, a job (rather than a profession) that takes little or no skill; that you don't need to be very bright to be a teacher; that teachers are often lazy and incompetent.

Truly good and professional teachers (the kind who spend nights and weekends and summers reading, thinking, rethinking, and planning) receive messages about how little their work is valued by the culture at large, especially by taxpayers who protest every salary increase vociferously, by parents who worry more about child care during strikes than the issues that caused them, by administrators who issue commands from on high without consultation, and by other teachers who ridicule dedication and who show movies every Friday because Thursday night is darts night at the town pub.

Men who teach elementary school suffer twice the stigma because not only is their work thought to be cheap and easy, but it's also thought to be beneath a man. Must be a pretty dumb or unambitious guy, the thinking goes, to want to be a *schoolmarm*. Or else, he must have some doubt about

his sexual identity—better keep an eye on him. Despite the social revolution that has finally granted men the ability to change diapers, to cook a grilled cheese sandwich for the kids at lunch, and to read bedtime stories, relatively few men enter elementary education. Generally, in a class of thirty students, I might have three men. And I know my experience is not unusual. More men teach high school, but even there, the stigma lingers. In his classic text *High School*, Ernest Boyer reports a telling incident:

One teacher, who works as a meat cutter during the summer, was told by a fellow butcher who discovered he was a teacher, "Man, that's a dead-end job. You must be a real dummy." (in Spring, 1996, 41)

As a result of teachers' constructed consciousness ("I am *only* a teacher"), administrators (who are nearly universally men) too often treat teachers as if they were themselves children, issuing orders to be executed without question: "You may or may not or will or will not do this and that and this in exactly this way and no other." Rather than launching an adult protest and challenging patronizing manifestos, teachers too often grumble to each other in the faculty lounge like children out of their parents' hearing—and then do as they're told.

Instead of insisting like adults that administrators do something about the incompetent down the hall showing movies every Friday, instead of pressuring unions so that they don't in fact function to protect incompetents, good teachers shrug off others' unprofessional behavior as being out of their control. They allow others to make decisions and policy without question and challenge. The result is often against their own best interests: administrators act like patronizing parents or omniscient dictators; incompetents perpetuate the image of teachers as lazy babysitters; and, the good teacher suffers public scorn along with the bad teacher, like a well-behaved child sent to detention with the whole class for some rowdiness he had no part in. "That's just the way it is," he shrugs on his way down the hall to be punished without just cause. "Life isn't fair."

That's just the way it is.

THAT'S NO LADY, THAT'S A STUDENT

Students, of course, fare even worse than teachers in school hierarchies. An absolute mania for control pervades school thinking and practice, making students little more than animals confined to a maze of restrictions. (Indeed, more often than any educator is likely to admit, "animals" is precisely the word teachers use to describe their students.)

From their earliest days in the classroom, students find blackboards filled with rules formulated by teachers before any class member set foot in the room. They learn they mustn't speak to each other or to the teacher unless the teacher lifts a ban on their talk. (Of course, teacher talk is the only important talk in the room, and so it fills most of the day.) Children are told where to sit, when to stand, what to do, and how to do it, except at recess. Even then, however, someone else decides if it's too cold or wet for them to be comfortable outdoors, whether they *will* go out or stay in (no individual preferences allowed), and what games may be appropriate in the schoolyard. The teacher decides when children should stop reading an interesting book or puzzling out a difficult math problem. The teacher decides which science lesson she thinks is interesting, and when it might be so for the children. The teacher or school decides when the children will eat or drink, sometimes selecting a time less than three hours after they've arrived and some four or five hours before they go home. In what seems to me the most bizarre rule of all, if among the most common, the teacher decides when it might be appropriate for a child to visit the bathroom and relieve him or herself. Even that most personal of all decisions is removed from the child's control.

In these ways, schooling teaches children that students are objects in schools, pegs moved about on someone else's gameboard. They learn not to expect to make decisions for themselves. They learn that their own opinions and views don't matter. They learn not to challenge authority or to experiment with new ways of doing things. "But I got the right answer!" wails the student who had a math problem marked wrong. "Yes, but you didn't do it the way I told you to," answers the all-powerful teacher. Conformity reigns, and creativity is often punished.

Unquestioning obedience and distrust of one's own feelings and

intelligence is, of course, a mindset that many conservative parents would endorse. But most teachers don't perceive themselves as helping to build mental cages for their students. Quite the contrary: the rhetoric of schools and teachers most often talks about every student attaining his or her potential as a unique human being. In an odd sort of paradox, schools insist on uniformity and control as a means of creating conditions in which every student can learn, can achieve his or her own potential. And yet that insistence undermines their professed goals of empowering every student.

Every teacher who has worked with older children experienced in traditional schooling is familiar with the frustration of trying to get them to voice opinions and take stances. After children are silenced for years in elementary schools, junior and senior high school teachers often decide that students should suddenly have their own ideas and hold their own opinions. "Write about anything you want," the liberal English teacher says. "Like what?" students ask. "Design a unique project that shows how much you've learned," the teacher focused on outcomes urges. "I don't know what you want," the student whines. "What do you think of the federal government removing Native American children to boarding schools and forbidding them to use their native language?" I ask college freshmen, and they stare at me blankly, watching my face for a clue as to what I think they should think.

Children grow into the passive lumps high school teachers and college professors and employers complain about because school has taught the vast majority of young people that they are incompetent and that their thinking is neither interesting nor to be trusted. In a state of constructed consciousness, they come to believe that the terms "student" and "intelligent human being having human rights" are mutually exclusive descriptions. They allow teachers to bore them, to treat them with disrespect, to treat them unfairly without protest, because since they first set foot in school they have been taught that their voices are irrelevant.

I know a college student who wanted to change her major to get away from a professor who, in talking about the difficulty of telling what people are thinking from their facial expressions, said in class "Right now, for example, someone here might be thinking about sleeping with me." The fact that it seemed more reasonable to her to change her major than to

complain about the professor's inappropriate example speaks volumes about students' perceptions of authority in the classroom.

I know another student, a single parent, who went to see a professor to explain why she couldn't go on a field trip he scheduled. "I can't afford to pay for that much child care," she said, "but I can get free care another day. I'll drive down to the museum on my own and I'll do any kind of report or activity you want to prove I did it." The professor's response? "I think you need to do some hard thinking and get your priorities in order." The student, believing the professor's take on the issue had to be the only legitimate one, left feeling guilty because she was an impoverished single mother and also feeling inadequate in the face of academic demands. He was a man; he had a degree and title; he sat in the front of the room. She must have been wrong to resist spending her meager grocery money on child care just so that she could do what he wanted at the exact moment he found most convenient.

Speculation on why schools are so insistent on top-down authority, control, and unquestioning obedience can, and has, filled volumes of other books. As TheodoreSizer speculates,

Perhaps Americans don't want question-askers, people who want answers. Perhaps, in sum, the unchallenging mindlessness of so much of the status quo is truly acceptable: it doesn't make waves. (1984, 237)

Maybe accepting the status quo, not rocking the boat, letting well enough alone (for those who have enough to live comfortably on, anyway) is just what we expect our schools to endorse. Do we mean to train workers who will tolerate boredom, who will do as they're told, who will see themselves as disconnected from management decisions and corporate policies? Do we mean for most American citizens to think of themselves as not having voices that matter? Or, are school routines less sinister than that? Do we carry on past routines habitually and thoughtlessly, rather than manipulatively? If the results are the same, are we then blameless for bad outcomes simply because we can say "But I never *meant* for that to happen"?

Whatever the teacher believes is the rationale for schooling's mania for controlling students, it's difficult to dispute that much of what is done in

classrooms teaches students to be seen and not heard. Teachers would do well to ask themselves whether this outcome matches their own intentions in working with students, and which of their practices effectively silence students. They would also do well to ponder why teachers themselves are often as powerless and voiceless in the face of administrators as students are powerless and voiceless in the face of teachers.

It is such hierarchies and privileged voices that the critical theorist calls our attention to and invites us to probe. Why is it, as the common saying has it, that schools are places where "Men rule women, and women rule children"? How did the power come to be distributed as it is? Why aren't there more challenges to the status quo? What is the nature of the constructed consciousness that enables such hegemony? Most of us look up the ladder of our environment and defer to those situated above us, despite a truth that Paulo Freire often notes: "Everybody knows something, and everybody doesn't know something." If that's true—and it is, since each of us knows best how the world looks through our eyes—then what is gained and what is lost when teachers and students are both silenced in the face of authority?

THE (CLOUDY) VIEW FROM THE TOP

In any discussion of hegemony and constructed consciousness, there is a danger of misrepresenting the state and intentions of the more powerful group. In the language of critical theory, the oppressors, or those groups holding power, can be as unaware of constructed consciousness and hegemony as the oppressed, those groups lacking power.

In any discussion of different limitations placed on men and women, for example, descriptions of the situation may make men seem like villains, consciously demeaning and mistreating women. But in fact, many men are not only unconscious of the elevated position they hold, but their intentions may be diametrically opposed to real world results. Men who mean to treat women as equals may dominate them despite their intentions, just as teachers who may intend to nurture students may silence them instead. The road to oppression, like the road to another hell, can be paved with good intentions.

It's relatively easy to see the truth of this in relationships between husbands and wives. Certain gender role expectations have been in place for so long that two partners may live them out automatically, without being consciously aware of unequal power relations. Communications researchers like Deborah Tannen have demonstrated that men and women nearly speak a different language. A man may say, for example, "I'll be home around six. Let's have steak for dinner." When his wife says, "OK," the husband assumes that she means what she says: that his suggestion is agreeable to her. Unless she tells him, which she is unlikely to do if she believes her job is to make her husband happy, he has no way of knowing that she already had chicken thawing, that the chicken won't keep until tomorrow, and that the decision to have steak means she has to cook two dinners instead of one so that the poultry won't spoil. In such cases, women "lose" in silent resentment and men "win" without even knowing that a battle of conflicting interests has occurred. After suffering a number of these voluntary losses, women often explode like shotguns, their violent anger triggered by some trivial event, their stunned husbands asking dumbly "But what did I do to deserve THIS?" Neither is fully aware of what's happened, and both suffer.

This is a mundane illustration, but the point is far from minor. In failing to recognize privilege or power that we may have inherited, we fail to see the consequences of our position and choices for others. We don't check to see the effects of our actions ("Let's have steak") because we're not aware that others perceive us as being more important or powerful ("I was planning on chicken, but if you want steak, we'll have steak").

People of color often, for example, try to call attention to privileges white Americans have that they don't. A six-foot-tall young white man can visit a black neighborhood without being stopped for questioning by the police. A white person in evening clothes can count on hailing a cab and having it stop. White women can walk into any beauty parlor and find appropriate hair care items and someone able to execute any hair style they might choose. Whites don't think of such freedoms as privileges because they've never gone without them. They are just more of the way things are. African Americans in parallel situations can count on none of the above.

Administrators and teachers are equally privileged, of course, though they may not recognize the ways in which they are. Most male administrators would be angry if anyone suggested that they were hired at least in part because they were men—but nothing but gender bias in the hiring process can explain the current levels of male principals and superintendents. More qualified women than ever have been credentialed in these fields, and yet the percentage of men in administrative positions remains well over ninety percent. (If you doubt this claim, do a quick mental count of male and female administrators in your regional districts.) And, by virtue of their job titles, teachers can demand respectful treatment from students, no matter how unprofessional and disrespectful they themselves may be in a classroom. Woe to the student who calls a teacher lazy, but teachers can call students lazy (and worse) with impunity. Woe, too, to the student who has a personal problem and comes in without homework, but the teacher can put off grading tests and papers for days or months with no penalty. As for “right” answers—only the teacher has a voice there, too.

Blind to the privilege of our positions, we exact certain forms of behavior from others, sometimes without recognizing the deference we’ve received, often without questioning by what right we get cooperation from others and what we owe in return. Since power operates in all things, we would do well to remember that a dictator who smiles and speaks courteously is no less a dictator; a “kind” slaveowner is no less a slaveowner. Having inherited all kinds of powers and privileges that have much more to do with the color of our skin or the title of our position than with our individual merit, the least we might owe is some consciousness of the power we have, how we got it, and how we use it. Critical theory asks us to examine our own place in the hierarchical scheme of things, trying to determine patterns of constructed consciousness and hegemony, as well as their cause and effect. Who defers to us? Whom do we defer to? Why? What are the consequences? How might things be otherwise?

THE ROOTS OF SCHOOLING'S CURRENT STRUCTURE

Many of the power relationships cemented in today's schools grow out of a philosophy that has permeated schooling for decades and that is rarely articulated. Today's adults (as well as today's students) have unconsciously absorbed this philosophy from their own experiences. Most teachers act on it without being aware that their actions reflect and sustain a particular philosophical view of the world. Still less are they aware of the many unintended consequences their classroom actions may have.

Because it's impossible to understand why schools are as they are without understanding the role of philosophy in shaping them, relevant philosophies are the subject of the next chapter.

Note

1. Earlier writing often referred to this concept as false consciousness.