

Democracy's College, Episode 53

Critiquing the 'Critiques for Transformation' Book with Lorenzo Baber and Isaac Gottesman

Host Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, OCCRL Director Lorenzo Baber talks with Isaac Gottesman about the chapter that Dr. Gottesman contributed to the volume titled *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*, which was co-edited by Dr. Baber and Dr. Heather McCambly.

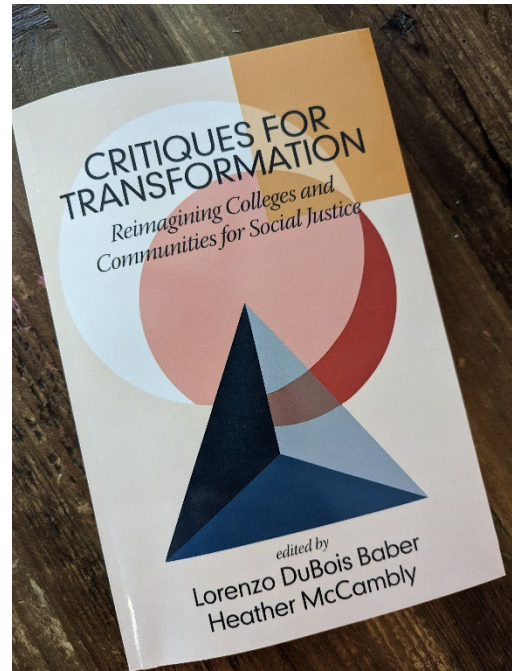
Lorenzo Baber: Hello. Thank you for joining us today on Democracy's College. My name is Lorenzo Baber, director of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. This is the second podcast episode for the volume *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*; volume edited by myself and Dr. Heather McCambly, assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Today, I am joined by one of our chapter authors, Dr. Isaac Gottesman, chair and associate professor in the Department of Education at Connecticut College. Dr. Gottesman is also the author of *The Critical Turn in Education*, which traces the historical emergence and development of critical theories in the field of education for the introduction of Marxists and other radical social theories in the 1960s to the contemporary critical landscape.

I should also note that the *Critical Turn in Education* is an *award-winning* book, and Dr. Gottesman and I were colleagues at Iowa State together, actually travel partners in our commutes from Des Moines to Ames. So, shout out to our friends at Iowa State, and Isaac, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you on.

Isaac Gottesman: Excellent to be here. Thank you for having me and thank you to Heather as well.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah. So, today we wanted to talk about your chapter, "Why History Matters: Critical Approaches in Higher Education Scholarship," where you discussed the nuanced similarities and differences for producing theoretical frames and informed concrete social activism on campus.



So, I will start, Isaac, with the most obvious question: Why is it important to understand history when deconstructing oppressive norms of theory and practices in higher education?

Isaac Gottesman: Well, asking any historian why history is important can end up with a *really* long answer, but I think I'll try to keep it a little bit brief, which is, you know, something that I argue at the beginning of this chapter is about the significance of controlling the historical narrative in terms of maintaining power in the social order. And so, there's a *really* big need for scholars in higher education, scholars in education generally, and people in social movements to have a strong understanding of history so that they can engage in what is really a struggle to control the historical narrative that gets kind of put out there for the public at large. And I think we've definitely seen that over the past few years, you know, fight against LGBTQIA rights, the fight against critical race theory in schools where there's a *very* strong push to *change* the way history is even being taught in schools, which is *exactly* because of that struggle to maintain that historical narrative, which ultimately legitimizes the politics. The historical narrative is used to legitimize the politics. And central to that is an understanding of the history of ideas.

Lorenzo Baber: What would you say are kind of the challenges for historians in *this* time when, you know, things are kind of seen through an ahistorical, particularly ahistorical, a political lens in terms of, as you say, making sure that history is part of the conversation?

Isaac Gottesman: I think one of the biggest challenges we have right now is just the media technology, social media. I mean, historians are always going to do the work of *doing* the history. But how you *engage* publicly to kind of frame a narrative means you have to be really adept at navigating all these different kind of media out there. So you see lots of different conversations on Twitter, for instance, or you see a lot more public scholarship right now, which I think is terrific.

So, the challenge is really to, like, get your voice out there, but also to think about all the different spaces where these conversations about historical narratives are taking place; trying to understand what arguments people are making, the claims they're using, the evidence they're supporting to make their claims. And then trying to kind of get *your* historical narrative out there, you know, the historian's historical narrative out there as a counternarrative to what's being pushed as a dominant narrative by a lot of people who don't either *know* history or are *very intentionally* telling a counter history to what happened, such as like trying to whitewash the history of white supremacy in the United States.

Lorenzo Baber: One thing I appreciate about your work is that you're definitely a public face, right? You're a public intellectual. You're out there in those spaces. But I also know that, you know, you've had some traumatizing, if that's a correct word, experiences. So, I'm wondering what advice you would give, particularly for emerging historians who want to be public in their engagement to hit all the narratives that you're talking about, but also subject to kind of targets of hostility, hate, discrimination; like, how do you approach that and that balance of going to be public, but also, you know, making sure that you're taking care of yourself and your personhood in terms of some of these threats?

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah. I think the answer is very carefully. Every scholar has to kind of figure out what they feel like they can do and not do. I don't think it's a right answer of, like, everybody needs to run out there and be public. I think you really have to be kind of true to yourself and get a sense about what your own limits are, what your boundaries are, what you can take and what you can't take. It's pretty vicious out there.

You know, James Lindsay has been a fan of my work for now, three years or something, like, you know, there's that YouTube video of him reading the first chapter of my book, *The Critical Turn in Education*. It's like two hours. He gives a little commentary here and there, and it's been viewed thousands of times. I think most of my book sales are probably from Moms for Liberty, which is kind of strange. But I also haven't directly engaged them, like in debates on things like Twitter because I have gotten some anti-Semitic comments here and there. And that happened when the book first came out in 2016 before that, and it's just, you've got to figure out what you want to do. Like, there's some people out there, historians like Kevin Kruse, who's out there on Twitter *all* the time, and he can take the hits and he's fantastic at it. I'm not going to be like that. I just can't do that.

But I think scholars have to figure out what their boundaries and limits are. And I think you have to take care of yourself. And everybody's got different needs, especially people who are coming from marginalized communities. The stakes are much higher in terms of how much you put yourself out there. It's pretty brutal landscape for communities of color, for LGBTQIA+ communities. It's dangerous. And so you've got to be careful.

Lorenzo Baber: Yeah. Well, thank you for that. I think that's very important advice, so I appreciate you.

Getting back to your chapter: So, talk a little bit about how, just a little bit of summary of your chapter, how you developed the outline and how did it kind of extend your scholarly focus and expertise?

Isaac Gottesman: When you initially approached me about writing a chapter, one thing I immediately thought about is what *didn't* I do in the book that I wrote that was thinking about higher education specifically or how I might extend some of those arguments. So, the book that I got published in 2016, as you mentioned earlier, is a history of the move to critical theory in the field of education. And that move pretty much happened within the scholarship around K-12 education. This turn towards critical theory en masse in higher ed has really only been around for about 15 years. There have been scholars who've been doing it for much longer than that, but, you know, if you go back and you look at the main higher ed journals in the field, and even the higher ed work that's published in some of the more broad education-specific journals like Teachers College Record or AERJ, there's just *not* a lot of critical scholarship coming out of the higher ed world prior to then.

And one thing that I did at the end of my last chapter, the conclusion of my other book, is I came down with kind of four strategies or things that I really wanted people to start doing in the field. And I should say that I wrote the book initially because I was frustrated with the conversation around what constituted critical that was happening in the field, and I wanted people to be more specific about what their claims were so that our *political* projects became more specific and that would allow us to get involved in more kind of nuanced conversations. It's just that ability to have really strong conversations about how to build social movement and how to push scholarship in the field of education. We needed to get really down to the nitty gritty and be open about that so we could have those types of conversations.

So, at the end of my book, I mentioned four different practices. I talk about reading broadly, which means, like, reading outside of the field of education itself as opposed to just internally to the field. So, reading a range of different kinds of disciplines and theories to different disciplines. I talk about reading closely, which means, like, *really* trying to dig into what are the particular authors saying, what the claims they're making and, you know, the authors are citing and all that other kind of stuff.

To publish broadly, which, you know, you talked about a little bit earlier, which could mean publishing in public scholarship, but it could also mean education scholars publishing in non-education journals. And I think that's actually something that you see happening a lot in higher education now – people who are not higher education scholars publishing in higher education journals. I've been looking at the journal *Sociology of Education* a lot recently for my own teaching, and there's *tons* of great higher ed scholarship going on in there, which is terrific, and that's seeping into the broader sociology community because it's not just coming through the higher education community.

And then the last thing I noted was focusing on teaching and learning. So beyond those four things, I thought it might be good to pick about three *other* things in addition to those that might be specific to thinking about critical theory in higher education. So, the first one was thinking about these in terms of questions, which is how are the critical ideas that I'm working with connected to a tradition of critical ideas, right? So, if I'm a scholar, and I identify as a critical scholar, how is my work engaging in conversation with this *broader* history of critical ideas, and really getting a sense of what that is. This goes back to the question you asked earlier about why history is important. [It] is not just understanding the ideas as they currently exist in journals, but trying to understand them historically because that better enables us to engage in those deeper historical conversations about where the ideas are emerging from. And that stage of debating about ideas is really important. I mean, Christopher Rufo's newest book is talking about Paulo Freire, Derrick Bell. These are the people that are problematic; like, he's engaging at the level of the history of ideas. That's where the right-wing intellectual discourse is and we need to be right there understanding alongside of that.

The second question that I raise and focus on in the chapter was how are these ideas that I'm using, you know, *me* or whoever else, connected to a history of academic movement. So, this is another era of history. It's not just about the intellectual traditions, but it's a specific intellectual movement. So in this section I talked about CRT. How it's emerging out of a conversation within legal studies that actually has picked up more in the field of education than any other field, but it's kind of seeped into a range of different academic disciplines. But these are academic movements, and the same is true in terms of the emergence of various ethnic studies, women's and gender studies. Like, a lot of these ideas started to percolate in the late 1960s and 1970s as you began to see shifts in the academy as radicals started to move into them, and you started to see the development of ethnic studies and women's and gender studies programs. And there are long histories and traditions of discussion about ideas that are really informing what the ideas look like today.

The third thing was kind of the counter to the academic movements, which is remembering that even though a lot of these ideas are coming out of academic movements in terms of the way we write about them, they're also, all these ideas, are connected to history of social struggle and social movements. And so in this chapter I talked about intersectionality and, you know, the conversation that I think has finally begun to *move* more, which is that it's not just that Kimberlé Crenshaw came up with this *term* and we all use it now, but that *term* is really reflective of social movements that were especially kind of strong in women of color movements, especially with black women in the Combahee River Collective and other places. We're talking about the ways our identities *intersect* and the complexity of that intersection, and how that frames the way we look and make meaning out of the world.

So, that was really the way I started to think about it. Those three ideas in addition to the four ideas that I put at the end of the book. And then under each of these three ideas, focusing on a different area of

critical scholarship in the field. I mentioned CRT and intersectionality for the second and third. For the first one, I focused on critical quantitative work, which is really something that has taken off in the past ten years, but also is something that I think the field is starting to discuss. There was a lit review I just read – I can't remember who published the lit review. It's a really nice lit review on the history of critical quantitative work published in a journal recently. I think it was in AERJ, where *really* talking about that there are different *strains* of critical quantitative work, right? So there's crit quant, which is really focused on kind of critical race frames. There are people who are really using frames that are grounded in the work of Foucault and Judith Butler who focus on gender and sexuality. There's also kind of some of the original critical quantitative work. Focusing on these three things helps us dig down to that diversity.

Lorenzo Baber: One of the things as you were talking is that your chapter reminds me, you know, [is the] 'past is prologue' phrase because, you know, this project and your chapter, actually, you know, we started this project in 2019. So this was like pre-CRT, you know, the attacks on CRT; pre-summer 2020 related to the murders of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. Even pre-COVID. Actually, Heather and I talked about, in the last podcast episode, how we started this. Coffee shops when, you know, there was no COVID. Now there's the SCOTUS decision with affirmative action. I think the listeners have already begun to answer this question for themselves, but I just want to offer the opportunity: What insights do you think, as you think about when you wrote this chapter in 2019, or at least wrote a draft, to, you know, now almost 2024, what insights do you feel like are most prevalent as we continue to experience these shifts and this kind of momentum away from equity even, like, less than three years after the whole, you know, everything ...

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: ... [inaudible] writing a statement about racial equity and now, you know, moving away from that, you know, outside the SCOTUS decision particularly.

Isaac Gottesman: I think history just matters even more, quite honestly. And I mean, I think history has always mattered, but I don't think it could be more clear how important that is as kind of a battleground right now. I mean, what's going on in Florida is terrifying. What's going on in Texas is terrifying. What's going on in our former state of Iowa is terrifying, right?

There's a lot of scary stuff, even in states where legislation hasn't passed, legislation has been brought forward. I mean, this is something that's going on nationally and there's even legislation – it didn't pass but went forward – you know, somebody brought it to the table in Connecticut, which is a state that a lot of people think is, like, how could that even happen here in terms of critiquing history or denying rights that are granted to LGBTQI+ students in the K-12 world. Those are very real challenges, and if we don't know the history that we're fighting to *keep* in schools, we don't know, like, about the history of reconstruction, for instance, then it's going to be harder for us to win the battle to keep it in the curriculum when the state of Florida has pretty much taken it out.

I just think it's more urgent. Like, I don't think there is anything more urgent in terms of kind of moving forward. That's the battleground. That's where our kids go and learn about schools. Like, that's part of the significance of public school in the United States and why there's *so much* pushback against public schools – trying to privatize your voucher systems and other kinds of mechanisms – is to really eliminate the idea of a public. It's scary.

Lorenzo Baber: It is.

Isaac Gottesman: It's very scary.

Lorenzo Baber: And it's real, right? Like this is not a, 'Oh, wow, you're talking crazy,' right? Like, this is like, a legit goal of this kind of movement.

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah. Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: Thank you for offering that insight. I appreciate it. So in thinking about your chapter, you know, one of the things we wanted to highlight in our book was the policy-to-practice, theory-to-practice dialogue, right? So thinking about graduate education programs. I know I've used your *Critical Turn* book in my courses on curriculum, thinking about policy makers both at the state and federal level. Thinking about just institutional leaders both at the early career, mid-level, senior level, what kind of recommendations would you give these audiences on ways that your chapter can inform their work?

Isaac Gottesman: I think the most specific group that you named that can benefit from reading this work, and my other work, you know, if I can be so bold as to pitch it, is really graduate students, which you know, we both of us did a lot of work with graduate students at Iowa State together. It's something I really enjoyed, which was also, like, how do we prepare the next generation of scholars and researchers to *do* work and really needing to help them develop really rich, nuanced historical understandings, *even if* they're not doing historical scholarship, so that it kind of underpins the work that they're doing. It makes it that much stronger. And I think not only does that make their work stronger, I think in higher ed, especially where you have a lot of graduates leaving higher ed programs who *don't* go into the academy as professors but may go into the academy in terms of different kinds of administrative roles, or may go out into the policy role as policymakers, it informs their ability to engage with the range of policy makers and stakeholders, institutional leaders.

I think it's pretty important. Like, higher education as a field, it's growing, it's booming in a lot of ways. I think the people who are getting doctorates in higher education are moving into a range of different sectors, and they can have a lot of influence. And the programs can really make a big difference, even at the policy level and state practice. And so, going through those graduate channels and making sure that the curriculum is solid and historically grounded could be really helpful, I think.

Lorenzo Baber: And you know, I might extend that out to current policymakers as well.

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: I think that's very important because it does kind of emphasize this point that, you know, what our work and what we're doing, even at a policy level, is not ahistorical.

Isaac Gottesman: Right.

Lorenzo Baber: Like, a historical context does matter. You know, my role now as director of OCCRL, we work with a lot of great and important partners and both the policy makers at the state and federal level, and one of the things that kind of I'm always taken aback is, you know, we talk about ideas as if they're new as opposed to being a continuation. Do you want to talk a little bit about kind of from a policy perspective? Because I also think, I guess, the counter to that is that sometimes, you know, it's too

theoretical and not very practical in terms of its application. But I feel like that's kind of the role of the policy maker is to kind of understand these theoretical frames and then be the translator.

Isaac Gottesman: Going off of what you're saying about policy makers and theoretical frames, this gets back to the idea of even framing a historical narrative and understanding that there is actually a debate about the historical narrative. If you're a policymaker and you have a strong sense of framing an issue, any kind of legislative issue, around the history of inequities; for instance, in terms of access to higher education in your state. That is something that is going to strengthen your argument when you're in communication with either other people in the state legislature or other kinds of stakeholders who you're engaging with.

I mean, I know from my own experience, before I took this position at Connecticut College a couple of years ago, I was the chair of the Education Department at University of Saint Joseph, which is a small private Catholic school that has strong teacher education programs historically. And the last two years I was there, I was vice president of AACTE-Connecticut, so I was regularly engaging in the legislative process and with the Connecticut State Department of Education in terms of policy making in the state. And this was during the heart of COVID. And it's *very* clear that when you're able to kind of frame a historical narrative in a certain kind of way and *use* the different kinds of critical theory lenses that you have in order to kind of sharpen your discourse about a specific issue, right? It's not like you're going to go sit down with somebody and say, 'Well, let me tell you about what Kimberlé Crenshaw says, right? That's not what you're going to do.

Lorenzo Baber: Right, right, right, right, right.

Isaac Gottesman: But having a sense of, like, that identities are intersectional and power structures are going to involve the way different types of identities and social groups are going to engage as stakeholders in a public education system. Like just *knowing* that allows you to kind of articulate in a certain way an argument that is going to be more persuasive. If you don't have that kind of theoretical understanding, it's not going to be as specific and it's not going to be as clear, and you might not actually get down to supporting the kind of equity-based policies that you want.

So, I think theory is a way of kind of sharpening your thinking and a way of framing. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to walk around with a copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and hand it to your local legislator. Like, that's not very practical. I think every critical theorist knows that.

Lorenzo Baber: The job is the translation ...

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: ... and translation without diluting it, right? Like, that's really the challenge there.

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: And, you know, people can perhaps, you know, as a pushback on the comments or, you know, in another podcast perhaps on that, but I do think it's important to translate that without diluting the frame, that support, especially work around equity.

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: Hard to see that, honestly, with the movement towards transfer and transfer pathways, especially out of the Supreme Court decision and thinking about, okay now, transfer pathways might be a way of maintaining equity, and it's like, okay, yes, but there's also, like, interest conversions that you've got to think about, right? I can't say interest conversions, right?

Isaac Gottesman: No.

Lorenzo Baber: But you can translate what that means and also the lessons, you know.

Isaac Gottesman: Will the white people like it or not?

Lorenzo Baber: Right, right, right. And then there's evidence, right? Like '96, we already have two states, Texas and California, that have gone through this. Race-conscious affirmative action was banned. Hopwood (v. Texas) in '96 with Texas.

Isaac Gottesman: Yeah.

Lorenzo Baber: Position 209. Same year in California. And we saw, what did we see, we saw an interest convergence and we saw the ways in which interest convergence helped particular institutions in terms of developing transfer pathways and also hurt particular institutions and also didn't necessarily center the benefits of marginalized communities, but more centered the benefits of those institutions that needed transfer pathways to maintain diversity in their enrollment, right?

So, we have already seen that, so there's lessons there and there's lessons that you can attach or frame with this theoretical understanding of, like, this is what's going to happen, you know, across the country because we've already seen it in California and Texas, and the way to understand that is through this theoretical frame.

Isaac Gottesman: And I think that's especially important when talking about the Supreme Court decisions. I mean, there's a reason why critical race theory emerged out of legal practice and legal theory, right? And there's a reason why it came to education so strongly, which is because education, historically, in terms of, like, politics of segregation, desegregation is intertwined with the legal practice. And so those critical race theory frames are designed specifically to help us understand these kinds of political and legal entanglements and how to make sense of them and what kind of avenues there are to deal with them. So, I mean, I think the CRT frames are particularly important when thinking about Supreme Court cases, including the affirmative-action case.

Lorenzo Baber: And your chapter has a *great* foundation for laying that and extending that out and having folks read the work, the citations that you have, especially in the ways that you frame kind of the general introduction for further inquiry and further reading. So yeah, final thoughts, like, what's next for you? Are you doing another update of your *Critical Turn* [book]?

Isaac Gottesman: At this point, you know, I have been approached about writing a new edition of the book. As a historian, you're always like, do I want to change what I wrote because it's a primary source, right? Like, that's something you always worry about. that's on hold for right now, but I think some of the ideas that if I do do another edition at some point are in this chapter. I would probably build off of those ideas and really move into a lot of areas I didn't talk about in 2016. I mean, I think when the book was published, the field has really changed a lot in a lot of really good ways, you know, since that book was written. We have, like I've mentioned already, new conversations about critical quantitative work,

intersectionality has really boomed, conversations about decolonizing methodologies have really taken shape. I think some of my work will probably kind of move into those directions of thinking about those things. I'm also trying to get some stuff done about music and youth subculture.

Lorenzo Baber: Yes!

Isaac Gottesman: As you know, like, on our drives up from Des Moines up to Ames, I used to torture you with all sorts of punk-rock songs or whatever.

Lorenzo Baber: Well, you know, some torture, some, 'Oh, I didn't know that music.'

Isaac Gottesman: (laughs) I didn't know that [music]! I don't know if I like it, but I didn't know that.

Lorenzo Baber: No, I liked it. I liked about half of it, I would say.

Isaac Gottesman: About half of it. That's pretty good.

So, you know, I think I want to write more about, like, youth subculture and do a lot of music stuff, but I'm going to keep writing about theory. I'm teaching a class right now for undergraduates in critical educational theory, which is a lot of fun. I'm really enjoying doing that and so I'm really thinking about the ways in which we teach theory in very concrete ways, and so I might want to do some writing about how we actually think about the teaching of theory. In addition to, like, the historical stuff about the theory. So, I think that's one potential avenue.

Lorenzo Baber: Great. Well, we really appreciate your contributions to the book. It's the second chapter. It's right after the introduction chapter. We talk about how it complements our, like, overview of the book by starting with history.

And I'll also say that Isaac, he's one of the deepest thinkers I think I've ever been a colleague with. One of the things I think I always loved was serving on dissertation committees with you because I always, you know, you always learn from the students, but then as a committee member, you were always pushing thoughts in ways, but pushing in ways that were very thoughtful – critical but thoughtful. And I know that I speak for a lot of your current colleagues and former colleagues to say it was a real treat working with you and reading your work. I hope to see another version of your *Critical Turn* [book], some new work, especially around your passion for music and youth culture. And, you know, we wish you the best. But thank you so much for joining us on this podcast, and who knows, maybe we'll do a secondary follow up and talk about that music.

Again, thank you so much. We appreciate it, and we appreciate you, the audience, for joining us on Democracy's College podcast. Please join us for the next edition that will be led by Heather McCambly and another set of chapter authors. So, thank you very much.

Sal Nudo: Tune in for the next OCCRL Democracy's College podcast when Dr. Heather McCambly talks with another author about a book chapter from the volume *Critiques for Transformation: Reimagining Colleges and Communities for Social Justice*.

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