Much education has traditionally conceived of itself as a corrective or even a leading edge in the criticism of oppressive mechanisms in society and much has been said about the role of education in facilitating emancipation from unnecessary coercive measures, whether they refer to societal mechanisms of repression or inner self-repression. The need for education to reflect upon itself, its role in society, and its history seems evident in the light of late modernity or for instance the thorough modernization of the public sector. In correspondence with this line of thought in this special issue of Nordisk Pedagogik the Danish educational researchers Karen Borgnakke and Henning Salling Olesen and the philosopher Anne-Marie Eggert Olsen reflect on the theme of the 31st congress of the Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA), March 6-9, 2003 in Copenhagen «Education as a Critical Force – Myth or Reality?»

- Has critical pedagogy contributed to emancipation from unnecessary repression?
- Or; has critical pedagogy first and foremost been used as the instrument to intensify the dominating tendencies in the development of society?
- Has critical pedagogy performed other roles that need to be analysed and understood?

Karen Borgnakke considers critical pedagogy as a living myth and part of reality. She gives a comment to the theoretical dimension of the congress theme and analyses the tendencies in the present learning discourse and experiences from former critical educational practice.
Henning Salling Olesen looks at critical theory, both as a research strategy and as a research perspective. He puts the focus on the dynamic and contradictory aspects of socialisation and subjectivity, and opens up a dynamic concept of learning with an utopian dimension. The implications for research are mainly the need to bridge the gulf between individual subjectivity on the one hand and social objectivity on the other.

Anne-Marie Eggert Olsen uses the opportunity to celebrate the one hundred year anniversary of the birth of Theodor Adorno, September 11, 2003. She presents one of the central elements in Adorno’s oeuvre, the constitution of the self, of the national ego, as a product of historical society. His idea was «that Auschwitz must no longer be possible». This is phrased as a moral demand, «nicht mitmachen», and a radical resistance against every kind of camp following, especially when at no cost to one self. Therefore the ideals of education cannot be thought through without thorough reflection on the odds against their realization, and to propagate educational theories that promise the compatibility of norm and practice is in his view – at best naïve.

The three researchers will together with Gert Biesta, University of Exeter, England; keynote speaker at the congress, comment and elaborate the congress theme and the three papers in a panel discussion Sunday 9th of March. It is our hope that the contributions in this special issue will highlight the congress theme and inspire the congress delegates to take part in the ongoing discussion about some of the core elements of philosophy of education.