

Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 4 Number 18

December 3, 1996

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal.

Editor: Gene V Glass, Glass@ASU.EDU. College of Education,
Arizona State University, Tempe AZ 85287-2411

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Review of Michael W. Apple *Cultural Politics and Education*

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Abstract: A review of Michael W. Apple's *Cultural Politics and Education*. New York, 1996. Teachers College Press. Columbia University.

Apple's book was begun as a text, an "outline" as he says, for the John Dewey Lecture in 1992. It continues themes taken up in previous publications and once again profiles a tendency very characteristic of this outstanding educational theorist: to find ways to connect theory with the practice of (progressive) educators and with the community, to connect (as he says at the end of the book) the "global with the local" (p. 115), and to generally introduce a perspective on education and the schools which links them very clearly with the larger society, especially the economy, but never loses sight of what is specific to the educational effort itself.

Thus students, young people, teachers, neighbourhoods and parents become and remain very real in the pages of this book. This is quite an achievement for a book which otherwise also deals with weighty theoretical matters and includes quite a range of empirical materials as well. Given this range, it is important to mention that two chapters out of five have coauthors: Anita Oliver for Chapter Three and Christopher Zenk for Chapter Four. The book critically investigates conservative tendencies in education with specific reference to the most recent and very determined attempts, on the part of neoconservative and neoliberal Movements of the Political "Right" in the United States, to restructure education (as well as other areas of culture) and to remove all those themes and concerns from the educational agenda which have been introduced by the movements of the "Cultural Left" in the U.S., by feminism and antiracism, the gay movement, etc.

Apple shows, however, that the fundamental force of the (neo) conservative/neoliberal push for restructuring education derives from an old and deep-seated conviction that the hierarchy of social class in existence in the U.S. needs to be defended, indeed to be made invincible, that class-hierarchy rests upon merit, educational and otherwise, and that competitive market orientations are the decisive factors propelling society onward. These, say the conservatives, deserve to be recognized as representing the sounder side of society. This is why Apple makes a critical discussion of proposals for national curricula, national testing, and marketized "choice" plans a centrepiece of his argument (Chapter Two).

In Chapter Four, he and Zenk give a systematic review of the "moral" crisis of the U.S. economy and of its implications for schooling and the schools. The "moral" crisis--if I may call it thus--consists in an increasing gap between rich and poor, between "people of colour" (apart, perhaps, from those of East-Asian descent) and Euro- Americans. It consists in a growing level of child poverty ("one out of every four children under the age of six" lives in poverty, p. 74), which puts the U.S. behind other major industrialized countries, including Great Britain. It includes other dimensions as well, such as the growing rate of incarceration for Black and Latino men, or the growth of low-paying, repetitive work.

The authors argue in this chapter that the Political "Right" wants to ignore these problems by concentrating on "dropouts" from the school-system and youth at risk (p. 90), and even by launching an all-out assault on public schooling, in favour of substituting for it a system which functions like a market open to consumer choices through voucher plans and tax- credits (p. 98), and by a continuous monitoring of teacher and student competencies and learning outcomes, "thereby centralizing even more the control over teaching and curricula" (p. 99). Apple and Zenk complete this picture by drawing attention to the efforts to reform the curriculum in a strongly neo- conservative/neoliberal direction stressing family, free enterprise, patriotism, Christianity, etc., and by "making the needs of business and industry into the goals of education" (p. 99). Overall, public schools will be seen (in this picture from the "Right") as responsible for the economic crisis, but also, the authors point out, as the solution, assuming they can be redesigned (p. 68).

The authors argue convincingly that this is an implausible view. Neither are most economic and social problems due to what does or may go wrong in or with the schools, nor is it the case that the schools can make up for the failure of society to provide meaningful jobs, decent health-care and housing, etc. The arguments given here are direct and well-founded, even if they will not convince those committed to the programme of the "Right." Their strength rather lies in the ability of the authors, to draw the attention of those critical of the programme of the "Right" to the complexity of the situation and to show that questions of larger social and political movements cannot be screened out from educational theory nor should educational theory and reflection on practice simply be reduced to political economy. In addition, Apple in particular notes (in this and in other chapters) that the conservative movement is one of the strongest and most transformative of the century and therefore needs to be examined with care and diligence, by one's taking seriously its motives and reasons rather than replying by invoking highly theoretical jargon. (Here an occasional critical aside against postmodernist/poststructuralist theorizing in education may be noted.)

The theme of the strength of the conservative movement and the investigation of its constitution preoccupy Apple in other chapters as well, such as in Chapters Three and Five (conclusion). Chapter Three actually is the most compelling and startling one, while Chapter Five has a forthright directness rarely found in academic writing.

Chapter Three examines the emergence of a cohesive neoconservative orientation in a particular school-district. Anita Oliver and Apple want to answer one question: "How does the Right get formed?" (p. 45). They take the position that the new conservative consensus often is built in response to a variety of accidental factors, and does not simply amount to the execution

of a master-plan, down to the particulars of educational practice in local settings.

The authors thus move away from any conspirational theory of the New Conservatism so common among members of the "Cultural Left" and attempt to show that this movement gives shape to common and popular conceptions of what is going wrong in and with American society. It does not simply exploit these conceptions and sentiments either.

They show that the building of "Right-Wing" consensus is a political process, as would be the building of a "Left-Wing" one. Thus there is no escape from a reflection on particular actions and policies, arguments and initiatives. Oliver and Apple develop their argument by focusing on a controversy regarding the adoption of a text book, treating it as an instance of what counts as official knowledge in the schools (here Apple also alludes to a previous book of his). They show that a parental challenge to a particular textbook to be adopted was met by a bureaucratically/managerially preprepared response, meant to hold grass-roots or parental criticism at bay and implying, on the part of the school administration and of board-officials, that any such "grass-roots" criticism could only be unenlightened and "Right-wing" anyway.

Here the authors have identified a most important step in the emergence of many Right-Wing movements, from European Fascism (Nazism) to the Anglo-American "New Right": These movements avail themselves of the protest-potential to be found among people disappointed by bureaucracy, technocracy, and expert rule. A political position (and condemnation) is quickly achieved, when these structures are associated with the "State" and interpreted to reflect a loss and erosion of community, as happens in the U.S. (more than elsewhere at present). Thus the fear that social solidarity might be disintegrating, is mobilized and directed toward the constitution of an educational and moral code which is to reestablish social cohesion. It is at this point that "Rightist" tendencies may become dangerous and one should not hesitate to once again reflect on Fascism (and the racism and anti-intellectualism built into it), in order to be forewarned. Apple and Oliver succeed in showing how a series of errors and a lack of understanding on the part of an insensitive and powerful administrative apparatus may mobilize and crystallize popular sentiment such that a populist interpretation of state action arises and a well-designed or educationally promising text becomes seen as an undemocratic imposition and misleads people to believe that neoconservative and (possibly) Christian fundamentalist values are actually democratic and perhaps more democratic than those represented by well-meaning educational specialists and academics regularly involved in the examination of curricular materials, etc.

Apple and Oliver show, in essence, that at bottom the conflict is about democracy and the place of education in democratic development. The question is how an educational project can be defended which helps people accept and learn to be at home in open situations such that they are not afraid of conflict.

In the conclusion (Chapter Five), Apple addresses this issue. For him problems of learning in contemporary schools in the U.S. are really "about competing social visions" (p. 97). He mentions as the greatest failing of the neoliberal/neoconservative reform-movement that it refuses to situate its curricular and other reform proposals in the larger context of "democratic education and a more democratic society" (p. 97). Quite appropriately Apple discusses how John Dewey still had a conception of such a context and redesigned vocational education on this basis.

Apple then proceeds to praise a proposal made by the Ontario Federation of Labour in Canada which echoes the Deweyan tradition. He thus prepares the reader for his concluding argument that "nonreformist reforms" (p. 107) are the best course to follow. They are a combination of political and educational approaches taken toward schooling. In the pursuit of "nonreformist reforms" matters of social justice and of social equality continue to be addressed, often by acting critically upon the daily practical details of classroom situations. But in this approach steps toward reform also remain linked to "a larger social vision and to a larger social movement" (p. 109). It almost goes without saying that this argument implies a defense of the

public school in the U.S.

I believe that Apple's book (together with his previous ones) is very important under present conditions and helps one maintain a perspective on educational as well as human and social development which was first articulated by John Dewey and has since then become an American tradition. Those living in other countries, such as myself, have been greatly impressed by it. Apple helps us reidentify its contours. This holds true even if he introduces a more strongly political element than was typical of the progressivist tradition. But this is a requirement of the times, as much as a feature of Apple as an educational theorist.

Apple's lectures collected in this book also help one see through the pretentious radicalism of much postmodernist and poststructuralist educational criticism which frequently remains unburdened by a concern for the daily detail of life in schools. Overall the most important lesson of the book is not to underestimate the force and coherence of the new conservative attack on the liberal and progressivist educational agenda. At present it matters more to come to terms with this movement as a whole and its power of attraction than to receive detailed practical instruction on how to respond to it. It is this understanding which Apple helps the reader achieve, and in quite a compelling, concrete and comprehensible way.

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