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Understanding and Interrupting Dominance A Comradely Response to Wayne Au

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Abstract

This is a response to a book review of *Can Education Change Society?* by the book's author.

This article is a response to:

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THERE IS NO one I respect more as a scholar, teacher, and activist in education than Wayne Au. As his review indicated, he studied with me for his PhD.

To tell the truth, there were times when it was very hard to determine who was the teacher and who was the PhD candidate. Our discussions were and continue to be forthright and substantive, a rich combination of politically and theoretically informed arguments and an ethic of caring based on close friendship. This is exactly how it should be. Au's review of *Can Education Change Society?* (2015) combines all of these characteristics—it's honest, very thoughtful, and engaging. And given how much time we have spent discussing the issues surrounding my and his arguments about the role of schooling in society, Au is exactly the right person to provide such a review. We may have had some differences of emphasis at times, and I hope that such serious discussions continue. But what we agree on is so much more extensive and important than those limited areas where these differences may surface.

I mean this as a significant political and intellectual point. Like Au, I come from a deeply political family. This often meant that

small differences got magnified into chasms so wide as to be unbridgeable. One of my objectives in this and other books was to argue against such chasms. In this regard, the Right has demonstrated something of considerable importance in its formation of a hegemonic bloc that includes neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and a particular fraction of the professional and managerial new middle-class that believes so strongly in measuring anything that moves in classrooms. It has often been willing to compromise among its varied tendencies in order to push education in particular directions and to use education as part of its larger strategy to radically transform the larger society. As I say elsewhere (Apple, 2006), if the Right can do this, why can't the Left? But this means that there must be more

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openness, more willingness to form alliance across our differences than has often been the case.

For me, too much of what counts as the Left in education is either overly economic and formulaic or simply rhetorical. I fear that, unlike Wayne's extremely strong background, too many leftist arguments do not have a substantive epistemological, political, theoretical, or very practical understanding of the foundational material that are supposedly being drawn upon. Crucial issues involving cultural struggles, the state, the need for much more nuanced understandings of class formation and mobilization, the very real complexity of the economy, the relative autonomy of gender and race, the structuring of commonsense, and the list goes on and on—all of these are treated as epiphenomenal or simply ignored. Perhaps even more problematic is the loss of memory of the crucial importance of the school as an arena of and for cultural and social mobilizations. This marginalizes a good deal of practical work in schools and communities and substitutes a search for purity for the messy stuff of actually collectively and individually building curricula, literacy practices, critically democratic modes of teaching, and working with communities on issues of class, gender, race, sexuality, ability, and more. This, of course, is another reason I have so much respect for Au, since he is able to work at just about every level one can think of, from powerful critical research, to issues of policy, to the daily struggles to do good things in classrooms.

Let me say a few things to extend Au's analysis of where *Can Education Change Society?* fits into the corpus of my work. Much of my analysis in various books over the past 20 of the more than 40 years that I've been writing critically on education has been grounded in a question that also guided the crucial work of the Italian political theorist and activist Gramsci. Simply stated, at the most general level the question was, "Why no revolution?" With this question came an entire series of other issues: What was it about the ways common sense functioned in capitalist societies that made it so hard to mobilize successfully against oppressive structures and institutions? What was the role of cultural institutions in the production of common sense? For me, of course, the school took center stage in answering these questions.

In asking and answering these questions, I was rejecting what might be called automaticity theories, critical theories that all too easily assumed that as conditions under which people lived got significantly worse, people would automatically and overtly challenge the relations of dominance and subordination that played such a large part in structuring their lives. To better understand this in education and elsewhere meant that I had to take very seriously the ways in which subjectivity was formed, how it had contradictory elements (what I called good and bad sense), and how dominant groups worked on these contradictions to secure consent. This was the focus of many of the books that preceded *Can Education Change Society?*, such as *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996), *Official Knowledge* (2014), and *Educating the "Right" Way* (2006), all of which interrogated what the Right has successfully done and then also asked what we could do about this.

Thus, I was also deeply interested not only in how dominant groups convinced people to come under their ideological umbrella but in how we might interrupt this process inside and outside of schools. At the same time, I published books such as *Democratic Schools* (Apple & Beane, 2007), *The Subaltern Speak* (Apple & Buras, 2006), and *Global Crises, Social Justice, and Education* (Apple, 2010). The task here was to point to counter-hegemonic realities and possibilities. But the fact that such possibilities existed did not answer the other question that Au so correctly pointed out as the *fundamental* issue guiding so much of my—and his—work. Given these possibilities, when they are put together, does this mean that education has a primary or powerful role to play in the transformation of society and in the common sense that makes it acceptable? Hence, the struggle (and it was a struggle) to try to answer the question in *Can Education Change Society?*

Au was exactly correct when he said that my answer was complicated. I sincerely wish that it were easy. But as Au also noted, I am wedded to nuance and honesty. This is not simply because I think that complex theories are always better, but because reality *is* complicated, and changing it requires more than formulaic answers. I also take this position for another reason. I spent too many years as a teacher in slums and rural schools and have worked with teachers, community activists, dissidents, and social movements in too many nations to think that formulaic, reductive, and too often rhetorical approaches provide the answers. (Thus, my consistent focus on tactics of interruption that have real effects both *now* and in the future.) Furthermore, I think that such formulaic, reductive, and rhetorical approaches are often more than a little disrespectful of the immense amount of dedicated and creative labor that educators, community workers, and activists in multiple social movements do in their varied efforts to act back on the relations of dominance and subordination in society.

It is important that I not be misunderstood. I come from and hope to have helped develop Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions in education and still ground much of my work within them. My aim has always been a fraternal one. As I noted, I approached the task of writing books such as *Can Education Change Society?* after spending much of my time over the past two decades trying to better understand the ideological project of the Right and why it has been so successful and to learn how to interrupt it. This is one of the major reasons why I have urged the Left to spend less time fighting among its various factions and searching for purity and to learn some important lessons from the Right about forming alliances ("decentered unities") that cut across differences.

My arguments are grounded in the hope that the "we" that is created can be broader and that it also can be based on a more historically grounded understanding of the ways in which struggles over schooling actually can make a difference—but only when schools are seen not simply as places that are known by their role in reproducing economic inequalities. Marxist and neo-Marxist arguments play a central role in such understandings. But no set of traditions can remain static. There is so much more to learn (and to relearn) and to do.

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