
Democracy & Education

Interrogating the Relationship Between Schools and Society A Book Review of *Can Education Change Society?*

By Michael Apple, Review by Wayne Au

IN 2003 I went to the University of Wisconsin–Madison to work on my PhD under the advisement of Michael W. Apple. As an activist public high school teacher doing social justice work both inside and outside of my classroom, I decided to work with Apple because I knew he would support the kinds of critical analyses I wanted to undertake in my doctoral work. In the years since, he and I have become dear friends and colleagues.

But when I arrived at Madison and began working with Apple, I quickly became confused. While I was rooted in Marxist analyses from a grassroots and classroom-based subject position, I immediately had to ask the question, “Just what the hell is a neo-Marxist?” Color me naïve, but at the time I did not know that my advisor was considered one of the leading, indeed foundational, neo-Marxist critical theorists within education. As a public school teacher heading into a doctoral program, I had no clue about academia generally, and I certainly had no clue about academic distinctions between Marxism and neo-Marxism.

I begin with this tidbit of personal history for two reasons. It is important for me to disclose my ongoing personal, intellectual, and political relationship with Apple for this review; I am not a disconnected, neutral reviewer. And it is important to situate this review and *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2012) within the ongoing debates of critical education theory and practice, particularly those associated with neo-Marxism (Apple & Au, 2015a; Au & Apple, 2009).

One of the fundamental debates within critical education revolves around how we understand and characterize the relationship between schools and socioeconomic relations. The mechanical, linear, or deterministic argument suggests that schools simply reproduce the class relations that exist outside of them. This view was perhaps epitomized within the critical education theory of Bowles and Gintis (1976). Their book,

Schooling in Capitalist America, became a punching bag for those who argued against Marxist analyses of schooling. While I have not defended Bowles and Gintis per se, I have vehemently argued elsewhere that those criticisms are based on deep mischaracterizations and misunderstandings of Marxist dialectical materialism (Au, 2006). The neo-Marxist turn in critical education grew as a reaction against this perceived economic determinism of Marxism, and some critical scholars were drawn to more culturalist analyses (e.g., Willis, 1981) and those highlighting subjective interpretation and agency (e.g., Giroux, 1983). Other neo-Marxist analyses, including Apple’s (1979/2004, 1982/2012), also turned to Althusser (1971), Gramsci (1971), Williams (1977), Bourdieu (1984), Hall (1980), and Lukacs (1971), among others, in search of fluid and dynamic explanations of politics, power, and culture relative to schools and capitalist inequality (see, Apple & Au, 2015a, 2015b, for a broad discussion of this conversation within critical education theory).

In personal conversation and public talks, Apple has at times eschewed being labeled either a Marxist or a neo-Marxist, and at other times he’s ambiguously embraced both. Mostly I think he doesn’t care about any particular label and is instead more

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concerned with continuing to offer critical analyses of education that rely on historical materialism, economics, and political economy (typically labeled Marxist) as well as analyses that make use of concepts of culture and hegemony (typically labeled neo-Marxist). Regardless of his particular framing, Apple has been firmly committed to interrogating the relationship between schools and society and the politics of education in all of his work. In essence, Apple has always been trying to answer the question, “Can education change society?”

Truth be told, when I first started working with Apple, I immediately distrusted his analysis. While I found myself aligned with his earlier texts, especially *Ideology and Curriculum* (Apple, 1979/2004) and *Education and Power* (Apple, 1982/2012), I found myself critical of his middle-period texts that embraced postmodern subjectivities associated either with neo-Marxism or other strands of critical education theory (e.g., Apple, 1986, 1996). This worried me, even if his more recent work (e.g., Apple, 2006) tacked from postmodern subjectivities and back into the waters of political economy.

Suffice it to say, early on in our relationship, Apple and I disagreed and engaged the issue of just how much independent power schools have in relation to society and the economy. In the process I deepened my own understanding of Marxist dialectical materialism and subjectivity (e.g., Au, 2006, 2007, 2011) and came around to embracing the explanatory power of several concepts typically associated with neo-Marxism (e.g., Au, 2008) as well as forms of subjectivity stemming from more materialist, feminist perspectives (Au, 2011; Hartsock, 1983). However, I do not really know if I, or any of my peers who also pushed him on these issues over the years, had an effect on him. I do distinctly remember him one day in seminar wondering out loud to his advisees if he had drifted too far into subjective analyses and too far away from “gritty materialities,” as he always puts it, and I think he and I articulate our consensus on neo-Marxism in one of our coauthored chapters (Au & Apple, 2009). Mostly I don’t think it matters, though, because, to reiterate, Apple mainly cares about continuing to do powerful work critically analyzing the politics of education and working through, in his words, his commitment to a “radical democratic egalitarianism” (Apple, 2012, p. 151).

Apple’s (2012) most recent solo-authored book, needs to be understood within the above contexts. I know for a fact that Apple wanted to write this book for years and had officially been working on it, off and on, for something close to at least 10 years. I would argue that Apple has been working on *Can Education Change Society?* for more like 45 years, because in posing that simple question in his title, he is recalling the original conversations at the beginnings of critical education as a field (Apple & Au, 2015b). But really, *Can Education Change Society?* reaches back even over 80 years ago because in it Apple is actually contending with Counts’s (1932) question of, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?*

Can Education Change Society? is to me a book that is typical of Apple. It is far-ranging in terms of scope and example as he moves across time (discussing Counts, DuBois, Woodson, and Freire) and space (from Brazil to South Korea to Argentina to the

U.S. South). I find *Can Education Change Society?* also a typical Apple text in that it is theoretically and conceptually ambitious. Apple is always committed to complexity and nuance in his analyses, and in *Can Education Change Society?* he sought to understand what we can learn about just how powerful education can be from historical and contemporary examples of educational resistance and action that seek to change the world—all the while wielding his usual conceptual cast of Gramsci, Williams, and Bourdieu, among so many others, to powerfully illuminate the dynamic cultural and political relations embodied by educational attempts to transform hegemonic social relations.

Indeed, this last point does raise the issue of audience for *Can Education Change Society?* I assigned it to a class of future and current K–12 teachers, all of whom were pursuing their MEd degrees at my university. While I expected them to struggle with the academic discourse, I did not expect them to struggle so mightily with conceptual ecology of the book. My experience not only highlighted my personal misassessment of what my students were ready for, it also highlighted an audience issue: *Can Education Change Society?* is not your “beginner’s” Apple text. Here, Apple just jumps into deep conceptual waters that could be confusing unless one is familiar with previous texts, like *Educating the “Right” Way* (Apple, 2006), *Education and Power* (Apple, 1982/2012), or *Official Knowledge* (Apple, 2000).

Audience considerations aside, regular readers of Apple’s work will mainly find only chapter 4 of *Can Education Change Society?*, “Keeping Transformation Alive: Learning from the ‘South,’” coauthored with Apple’s friend and colleague Gandin, to be familiar since it focuses on Brazil and Porto Alegre—territory Apple has covered, individually and with Gandin, in other texts. But even here there is newness: the political landscape of Porto Alegre has changed over the years, so there are new insights to be learned about what has worked and what could be improved upon for future popular movements. Beyond this we see attention to Freire’s work in chapter 2, the importance of progressive educational movements in years past vis-à-vis Counts in chapter 3, explicit attention to the politics of Black education through Woodson and Dubois in chapter 4, neoliberalism and the Walmarting of the United States in chapter 5, and considerations on educational resistance and social transformation in the remaining chapters.

All that remains is to consider how Apple (2012) answered his own question. He certainly provided no simple answer, and as he has done before (e.g., Apple, 2003, 2006), Apple suggested continued mobilizations of coalitions built around “decentered unities” that bring communities together around specific issues, even if those communities functionally hold very different politics and viewpoints. In the process of considering such mobilizations, Apple also discussed the role of schools as sites of critical work, the shifts in how teachers-as-labor are viewed and treated (making things much riskier for their mobilization), and the difficulties of sustaining success, particularly in the current context of corporate education reform and neoliberalism. So by my estimation, Apple’s short answer is yes, education can change society, because education plays a central role in building movements for social,

economic, and environmental justice. I could worry that sharing this might spoil the ending of *Can Education Change Society?* for potential readers, but I don't. It is the process and analysis that is important here, not the end point. Besides, anyone remotely familiar with Apple's work and his attention not just to critique but also to the power of resistance already knew his answer anyway.

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