

Michael Apple, Social Theory, Critical Transcendence, and the New Sociology: An Essay

Douglas Brown

University of Regina

Abstract

Michael Apple has changed educational review and study significantly over the past 35 years. He has written numerous books and articles, centering upon education and power, curriculum theory and research, cultural politics, critical pedagogy, as well as advancing the development of the democratic school. Challenging social and political orthodoxy Michael Apple has altered the way scholars and educators approach schooling in North America, situating school life and schooling at the centre of educational theory and practice and, undeniable, social critique. This essay reviews and appraises some of these changes. It follows Michael Apple's scholarship, acknowledging the theorists profound influence over educational theory and the critical process.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy; Michael Apple; Education; Resistance; New Sociology of Education



Michael Apple, Social Theory, Critical Transcendence, and the New Sociology: An Essay

Almost three decades after the publication of *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979) North American schools still face many of the same challenges articulated in Michael Apple's text. Teachers and learners are still confronted with centralized and standardized programs, top-down instruments of administrative control, and extreme economic disparities in terms of wealth and achievement (Luke, 2006). In *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple sought to understand the creation and dispensation of power within a capitalist society, or the relationship between cultural, political, and economic forces and the impact of those forces on the school. He sought to understand how education/schooling was organized and accredited, linking in-school knowledge forms (both implicit and explicit) to the forces of production within the social order. Apple (then and now) challenged the oppressive relations between corporate America and schooling, a construct of relational conditions that would persevere to the present, although arguably under a shifting series of governmental influences.

Arguably, reforms to the educational process have been slow to develop. In the preface of his second edition of *Ideology and Curriculum* (1990), Apple acknowledges this stating that "one of the most fundamental questions we should ask about the school processes is what knowledge is of most worth" (p. vii). Apple here speaks (and not for the first time) to the need for educators and stakeholders to redirect epistemological understandings of knowledge and knowledge production. Apple asks the reader to reconceptualise the relations between politics, knowledge, and change, as theoretically first advanced through the new *sociology of education* in Britain (Gitlin, 2006). He cautions against taken-for-granted assumptions on knowledge and knowledge production, or treating the classroom, like the world, as ahistorical, apolitical, hierarchical, where scientific knowledge is absolute rather than dialectic and contested. This dedication to critiquing the relationship between education and power has earned Michael Apple a corpus of published knowledge, as well as legions of followers. Perhaps the first in North America to develop a coherent and comprehensive appraisal of inequality, power, and privilege as impacting schooling, Apple maintains a vigilance inspiring to advocates for a democratic and egalitarian education. He interpreted and applied the works of Whitty, Bourdieu, Bernstein, Young, and Anyon adding to a literature that would become iconographic in the counter-hegemonic struggle against the intense and extensive weight of social structure.

As Bernstein and Young (among others) have provocatively maintained, the structuring of knowledge and symbol in our educational institutions is intimately related to the principles of social and cultural control in a society... our basic problems as educators and as political beings, then, is to begin to grapple with ways of understanding, how the kinds of cultural resources and symbols schools select and organize are dialectically related to the kinds of normative and conceptual consciousness 'required' by a stratified society. (Apple, 1990, p. 2)

Michael Apple's formula would be amended several times over the years, bridging the economic and cultural apparatuses of a given society; however, with his writing, agents were always encouraged to read society's texts productively and critically. The school process of delivery was to be viewed as political, the curriculum along with its representative courses, texts, and social relations, charged. Schooling was never value-free but part of the world of experience.

Writing out of the new sociology of education, Apple's work demands serious review and reflection on the part of teacher and policy-maker alike. Employing the tools of this new

discipline, he deconstructs school pedagogy and curriculum as part of a broader struggle to democratize learning. Apple then speaks out against the racially gendered, class-specific nature of knowledge as evidenced in the ways it privileges the voices of dominant groups. Oppression is something that moves through particular histories, experiences, and ways of life. Teaching becomes a form of citizenship education that reclaims the notions of struggle, solidarity, and hope around forms of social action. Apple has always investigated public and private life, social groupings, and institutions, unearthing the everyday through a critical lens. Writing out of the new sociology of education, Apple has developed a coherent program and critical following which has changed the course of educational theory. The continued impact of his influence on the new sociology of education will influence the trajectory for years to follow.

The New Sociology of Education

The new sociology of education emerged some 40 years ago in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, the new sociology was hardly a unified corpus of critical inquiry. The school itself constituted a fusion of several conceptual traditions and socio-cultural dynamics, plying new research emphases alongside divisive methodological approaches and theoretical readings of self and society. Nor can the new sociology be credited to one ideological position or ideal. This was not simply a movement inspired by Marxist theory (although neo-Marxism would inform the movement to a significant degree). For the acknowledgement that knowledge is produced and disseminated in arbitrary ways, or that education is an arena of political struggle and contestation can hardly be credited to one school alone. A proposition exercising the reverse is as likely the case; that is, in recognizing that education is an arena for political struggle, researchers (working in that tradition) gravitated towards a politics of education (Karabel & Halsey, 1976).

In North America, the new sociology was not profoundly influenced by Marxist theory until the mid-seventies, for it was not until then that the new sociology assumed its truly critical edge—a combination of American revisionist theory (Katz), British phenomenology, and critical social theory (Wexler, 1987). Arguably, when the time arrived, Michael Apple was one of the first scholars in the United States to import and apply the neo-Marxist theories of education and stands as significant influence here. For as the discussion became richer and more highly textured, educators joined in the skirmish. As Arnot (2006) writes:

Central to this debate was the tension between social phenomenology and Neo-Marxist sociological theory, the former offering a view of the micro-negotiations of meanings and the construction of knowledge through practice, the latter exploring the macro-contextualization of such constructions and the political constraints of such possibilities of meanings making. (p.18)

The early course of the new sociology of Education, then, could hardly be interpreted as homogeneous. Marxists denounce the early phenomenological movement as ahistorical and subjectivist with phenomenologists responding.

However, the new sociology might be better appreciated for its critical insights into the familiar, an appeal circumventing debates concerning etiology or pedigree. Teachers served as one of the key audiences as they remained on the front lines of tactical operations and critique. The new sociology arose in defiance of long standing assumptions on school and society. The study of the school as an egalitarian respite and channel for individual mobility and meritocratic social order, then gave sway to a redefining of school function as a social and cultural

reproduction of regimes of inequality. Ideology, reproduction, and resistance emerged as organizing conceptual themes, the sociologist witnessing ways in which school knowledge and practices construct meaning within the classroom. Ideological critique stood as that which conceptually informed various stages in the movement, a movement of shifting emphasis from ideology,¹ to cultural reproduction, and finally towards internal contradiction and resistance. Ideological critique stood as a practical struggle against the “successful displacement of historically specific social relations into transcendent and naturalized knowledge” (Wexler, 1987, p. 78).

At the heart of this transcendence was the intensely political nature of school knowledge. Theorists like Michael Young (1971), in *Knowledge and Control: New Directions in the Sociology of Education*, identified the processes by which knowledge hierarchies were established and validated. Curriculum was central to this discussion. The structuring power of knowledge was implicated as a force arbitrarily negotiating and sponsoring a cultural authority while underwriting a given social, cultural, and economic order. Young (1971) promotes that knowledge forms which are “pure” “general” and “academic” carry more cultural authority than knowledge which is not or is applied, and/or vocational (Young, 1971).

Teachers at the same time were asked to question the assumptions behind high status knowledge forms, to review the curriculum with a critical eye, and in doing so to develop a sense of critical agency informed through the normative goals of justice and equality. The arbitrary nature of school knowledge (e.g., school curriculum) was to be exposed as a tool serving specific political interests.

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) echoed this sentiment. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* the authors marked that authority derived through school based knowledge was not only highly arbitrary in nature but was representative of a dominant power or cultural authority at work (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this work, the theorists attempted to explain differences in educational outcomes in Western nations (i.e., France) during the 1960s. Bourdieu promoted that capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange, and the term is extended to all the goods material and symbolic, or cultural.² This in effect imposed a “symbolic violence” on already marginalized youth. The focus here was on the ways in which the ruling ideas or ideals of a social system were related to structures of class, production, and power. These ideas moreover were legitimated and perpetuated through the everyday practice of schooling. Apple (1986) contributed to the discourse marking schools as internal mechanisms of sorting and legitimating:

Schools are an important part of a complex structure through which social groups are given legitimacy and through which social and cultural ideologies are re-created, maintained, and continuously built. (p. 9)

The new sociology then examined ways that school knowledge (i.e., the organizational and official functions of school curriculum) sorted students, in the process reproducing existing inequities and class-based disparities within society. Theorists investigated how content and forms of knowledge informed and explained social reproduction as ratified in school practice (Weis, McCarthy, & Dimitriadis, 2006). As researchers reframed the issues and challenges underpinning modern education, intellectuals like Georg Whitty, and Jean Anyon, weighed in, identifying the structures as formidable and at times seemingly unwieldy. Basil Bernstein attempted to show the nature of the division of labour in modern society, and how the character

of the value system affected linguistic codes. For Bernstein (1970), one's position in society, or social class, regulated the occupational function, the intra-familial and the inter-familial relationships and responsiveness to the school discourse (Bernstein, 1977). Working class youth were then disenfranchised through the very processes sent to liberate them. The shift here was significant given the propensity for mainstream sociologists of the time to treat schools as black boxes (a term Michael Apple would rename "empty boxes" given the racial overtones of the term).

The new sociology of education opened up the school to outside appraisal and criticism. Schools could no longer be counted on to countervail, or mitigate, the realities of working-class life. Here there was more to social and material success than getting in the door, for it was the classroom and not the school where learning took place. Schooling did not eliminate division within society it reinforced them through pedagogies, content and the *hidden curriculum*.³ In subtle and sometimes not so subtle forms, overt and implicit forms of knowledge transference buttressed class divisions—all too evident on the outside. Theorists proposed that additional schooling then would not eliminate class disparity, but would only serve to reinforce it. Sorting models based upon academic achievement ignored the effects of political economy. Apple (1979) noted this in *Ideology and Curriculum*:

The academic achievement model, influenced more and more strongly by managerial concerns of technical control and efficiency, has begun to neglect the actual content of the knowledge itself, thus failing to take seriously the possible connection between economics and the structure of school knowledge other than to argue, say, the importance of the 'production' of students with strong disciplinary affiliations if 'democracy is to be kept strong,' and so on. The socialization tradition, while insightful in its own way, focuses on social consensus and on the parallels that exist between the 'given' values of a larger collectivity and educational institutions. It, thus, ignores to a very large extent the political and economic context in which such social values function and by which certain sets of social values become the (by whose definition?) dominant values. (p. 31)

In *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argued that the contribution of schooling to individual economic success could only partly be explained by the cognitive development fostered in schools. They advanced the position that schools prepare people for adult work, by socializing people to function well, and without complaint, in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation. The relationship was then one of "correspondence," as schools structured social interaction and rewards to simulate the environment of the workplace (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Schooling, then, was credited with not only reproducing existing inequities but also replicating them. There existed a direct "correspondence" between classroom life and economic society. For Bowles and Gintis in-school socialization contributed to this process. Correspondence theory identified top-down (or bottom-up, as the case would be here) power formations as carried through school life with given disparities which were not simply the results of school or curriculum choice. The evolution of the modern school system was the product of conflicts as accredited to transformation in the workplace (Bowles and Gintis, 1972). Educational change then was not, as many believed, progressive, something accounted for by the gradual perfection of pedagogical or democratic ideals.

Thus, taken for granted forms of school knowledge and practices were, perhaps for the first time, questioned in terms of ideological messaging, an assumed grammar framing pupil

participation, demonstrative classroom processes and success. Inequities were simply reproduced limiting social mobility and reinforcing or ghettoizing working class kids in the process.⁴ This is not to suggest that there was universal agreement amongst theorists. The given dynamics of social structure, correspondence, or reproduction were debated in an ongoing dialogue that was often noisy and divisive.

The division of cultural reproduction theory further divided into structuralist and cultural camps, distinguishing the process by which oppression occurred. Althusser provided the school of new sociology with a representation of ideology as a material practice, while the Frankfurt theorists in reapplying work by Marx (commodity fetish)⁵ and Lucas (reification) working at socio-psychological levels (culture), demonstrating how the subject, no longer driven by economic and structural contradictions, became integrated by culture into disempowering yet commonplace ways of thinking and doing (Craib, 1992).

Generally, however, cultural reproduction theorists promoted that the class-culture of dominant groups was transferred through curricula and pedagogies to students as universal knowledge systems and claims. The stratification of both knowledge and student then resulted in the perpetuation of existing social relations. The social became a conditioning factor in student success and accommodation, as school knowledge dovetailed with dominant class interests. However, scholars like Apple cautioned against the overtly deterministic nature of *reproduction* and *correspondence*, that research must first be historical in application (Apple, 1979).

What I mean to contest here is a particular assumption—that of passivity—one which tends to overlook the fact that both students and workers are creatively acting in ways which often contradict these expected norms and dispositions which pervade the school and the workplace. (p. 102)

For the new sociology was not to be limited by models isolating actors under the sheer weight of macro-forces. The concept of resistance (a product of the early 1980s) incorporated a new language of contradiction, contestation, and collective identity formation. The study of conflict, political opposition, and change engendered a spirit of culturally autonomous subjects pitted against curricula control and those knowledge institutions that would serve to diminish and oppress the potential for change. Theorists remanufactured and renegotiated knowledge in meaning structures that denied the direct correspondence to the capitalist relations of production underwriting the central tenet of “resistance theory.”

The Willis study *Learning to Labour* (1977) was credited with demonstrating this. The study focused upon the underachievement of 12 non-academics, working class boys, or “Lads,” whom in the process of being denied formulated an oppositional culture to their education (Willis, 1977).⁶

This counter-school culture begged revisions to existing reproduction hypotheses (also correspondence theory) that identified social structures as dominating and deterministic. Students need only be guided in their oppositional acts as structural abuses of the larger social were identifiable and could be resisted. One year later, when McRobbie (1978) produced similar findings with girls, resistance theory became a household word for education sociologists.

However, McRobbie also pointed out the importance of considering gender when reviewing social phenomena, as well as academic discourse (McRobbie, 1978). The new sociology became more complicated with social class only one of the key identity markers that

shaped students' lives (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and race). Furthermore, the movement neglected to look past its own enveloping ecology of social democracy as the new sociology, engaging in the prevailing act of cultural resistance, was usurped by the legions of the *New Right* in an ethic reborn.⁷ Under attack from the "right," the old adversary of liberalism was now in retreat. Both liberal policies and radical criticisms were being overwritten in a text of reaction and restoration as the right had descended upon public institutions, erecting structural and institutional barriers that have proven surprisingly resilient to the language of resistance and change. The boasts of uniformity and praxis so central to the discourse of critical exchange and democracy had faltered in the wake of reactionary transformation.

As it moved into the 80s, critical educational sociology appeared to have developed specific limitations in effectively explaining contemporary social relations. The movement seemed ineffective against growing opposition from the right. Moreover, some argued the movement had adopted many of the ahistorical terminologies and approaches familiar to the classes and social order that it aimed to oppose. At issue here was the kind of knowing advocated by some critical schools, a knowing to which objects, situations and others were perceived to be knowable, understood, and explainable. Identity demarcations were not enough as even these positional markers shifted with the tide. Knowledge of others was at best partial, conflicting, and not reducible to any master narrative or discourse grounded in larger notions of democracy or justice. The 80s and the decades that followed offered new challenges for the theorist as identity supplanted structure in significant ways. Ellsworth (1992) repositioned this ethic exclaiming, "You can't know me/I can't know you":

Identity in this sense becomes a vehicle for multiplying and making more...the subject positions possible, visible, and legitimate at any given historical moment, requiring disruptive changes in the way social technologies of gender, race, ability, and so on define otherness and use it as a vehicle for subordination. (p. 114)

While critical pedagogy and the new sociology played a role in formulating positive leadership, much of the movement was under attack for blocking the re-formulation and adaptation of identity and knowledge. In the unintended hegemonic action of a rather rigid and over defining discourse, oppression was not such an easily definable product Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1992, 1993, 1998):

Each little formulation was so concerned and involved with meeting the reformist needs of its primary constituency that most neglected to raise issues that transcended the narrow boundaries of ethnicity, sexual preference, neighbourhood control, etc. Thus the politics of participation and self-interest in the 1970s inevitably became the politics of chaos in the 1980s. (Marable, 1981, p. 176)

Post-structural theorists attacked the ideal of an emancipatory teacher as it, in the process, invoked an emancipatory authority (Ellsworth, 1992, 1997). There was little point in advocating that a teacher can know more than a student on what it is to be raced, classed, or gendered in contradiction of lived experiences and struggles that an individual confronted from one day to the next. To do so was to draw on that teacher's power of authority within the classroom context. Constituting the focus of this new field of study was a belief that knowledge, and in turn knowledge production, added up to more than the sum of its parts. The school floated a critique of epistemic or propositional knowledge, promoting a one to one correspondence between the thing or idea in the world and its representation. This identified an idea in need of subversion for

there was no one pre-existing meaning (fixed) of people, concepts, things, that was to be represented (Hall, 2000). The challenge debunked the ideal that one thing could stand in for another, or that one could identify one common meaning by virtue of this substitution taking place. For there was no one common truth that we could all derive revealing the same meaning from the same image, word, or concept.

However, the new sociology was not to be deterred as positional transformations only required adjustments. Critical educators skirted oppressive simplifications while introducing the idea of contextuality. Post-Marxist theory was drawn from and developed. The writings of Michel Foucault were pillaged for understandings on power that were lateral and capillary. Dominant and subordinate discourses carried critical implications for how an educator produced and read knowledge. Culture theorists spoke of the “culture turn,” a shift away from more deterministic epistemologies in the direction of peripheral theoretical impulses like post-structuralism and various forms of linguistic analysis. Henri Giroux along with Michael Apple examined the demystification and deconstruction of power, as critical educators were encouraged to avoid a simplistic and politically incorrect notion of audience in favour of a theoretic acknowledging difference in histories, languages, cultures, or everyday experiences.

A radical theory of voice represents neither a unitary subject position unrelated to wider social formations nor the unique expression of the creative and unfettered bourgeois subject. Both positions remove voice from the arena of power, difference, and struggle. A radical theory of voice signifies the social and political formations providing students with the experiences, language, histories, and stories that construct the subject positions they use to give meaning to their lives. (Giroux, 1990, p. 375)

For by couching student empowerment in broad humanistic terms, scholars failed to focus upon identifiable events, situations, or groups. The ability for sociologists and educators to amend both practice and belief, in buoying political value through difference, opened up doors for discovery and action. However, for Apple (1995), embracing the culture of difference was not to be divorced from the material, as relations of dominance and the struggles against them are not theoretical abstractions and must be reviewed in terms of action and consequence (p. xiii).

Although the “linguistic turn,” as it has been called in sociology, education, and cultural studies, has been immensely productive, it is important to remember that the world inside and outside education is not only a text. There are gritty realities out there, realities whose power is often grounded in structural relations that are not simply social constructions created by the meanings given by an observer. (Apple, 1995, p. xiii)

In accepting a counter hegemonic role that rejects finality and certainty in favour of voice and dialogue, the new sociology came of age. That Michael Apple has accompanied this movement (often leading the charge) in all its convolutions and transformations speaks to the theorist’s tenacity as a harbinger of critical reflection and praxis in education.

Michael Apple, the Art of Critical Transcendence

For Michael Apple and the new sociology, much has changed in the decades of critical reflection, critique, and social change. Certainly Apple’s scholarship has had a profound influence over this process, situating school life and schooling at the centre of educational theory and practice and, undeniable, social critique. Central to this is Apple’s unwavering commitment to challenging social and political orthodoxy, or the getting in touch with the “gritty realities” of

his own and other's experiences. This has proven the case even when the process itself demanded a reappraisal of personally held and defended tenets.

Michael Apple writings have been an important influence on issues affecting curriculum, knowledge, and schooling in North America and beyond. Although perhaps best known for his text *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979), Apple has published prolifically, generating a list of critical texts such as *Education and Power* (1982); *Teachers and Texts* (1986); *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (1993); *Educating the Right Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (2001); and *The State and the Politics of Knowledge* (2004). Apple's attention to what he labels "official knowledge" has profoundly influenced how we see the process of curriculum selection and organization. He denounces the "common sensical" notion that schools are neutral institutions, or that school procedure and rituals evolve out of a best practices model. "Indeed much of educational research serves and justifies already existing technical, cultural, and economic control systems" (Apple in Weis, McCarthy, & Dimitriadis, 2006, p. 6). In *Ideology and Curriculum* (1990) Apple illustrates how the illusion of "neutrality" serves to disempower those in most need of support. He notes how schools are often held to be "above politics," that they are believed meritocratic and impartial in practice employing a level playing field for all (Apple, 1979, p. 5).

Michael Apple has been an influential force in examining social regulation in school-based environments. Early on, he recognized that schooling shapes students both through standardized learning situations and agendas including rules of conduct, classroom organization, and the informal pedagogical procedures used by teachers with specific groups of students. Apple encouraged scholars, practitioners, and students to explore relationships between education and power as embedded in the day-to-day rituals and activities of the school. Examining the secret intricacies of the hidden curriculum Michael Apple's scholarship has made a profound contribution to the analysis and description of hegemonic formations in classroom procedures.

In more recent times, and fighting back, Apple (1993) has identified and critiqued the assumptions and mechanisms associated with New Right protocols. Recognizing the need to explain and codify neo-liberal stratagem and penetration in contemporary schooling (and society in general), Apple has awakened us to the potential liabilities underpinning governance forms like the new prudentialism, privatization, and user choice. Apple has articulated and reviewed the broad set of social, political and economic processes that have come to be known as globalization, forewarning a (at times apathetic) public of the potential deleterious fallouts. In these areas and a host of others Apple has had a defining impact on the field of sociology, education, and public policy. Continuing to write and publish he has provided needed insight to generations of learners, teachers, and scholars. As a formative member of the new sociology of Education, he stands as one of the most influential educators/scholars of the last fifty years. Notwithstanding the often-serious tenor of his message (or perhaps in acceptance of the same) we can take solace in the realization that Michael Apple's vigilance endures.

Endnotes

¹ Ideology, according to McLaren (2003), can be defined as "the production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups" (p 205).

² Despite the significant conceptual development of the Bourdieu term “cultural reproduction,” the focus maintains a strong focus upon ideology, how the powerful control the powerless through the denial of their natures and opportunities, as well as the inevitable cover-up cast in the misrecognition of the neutrality and timelessness of knowledge.

³ Critical educators recognize that schools shape students both through standardized learning situations, and through other agendas including rules of conduct, classroom organization, and the informal pedagogical procedures used by teachers with specific groups of students (Darder, 1991).

⁴ Some of the major mechanisms of social reproduction include the allocation of students into private versus public schools, the socio-economic composition of school communities, and the placement of students into curriculum tracks within schools.

⁵ “Though this critique of advanced capitalism is shared with neo-Marxist research, it is not based on a general theory of modes of production and does not assign to the proletariat a privileged role in dealing with the current forms of crisis. Further, the classic theory of economic crisis is relocated in relation to a series of other levels in which the political rather than the economic is held to be decisive in the ‘last instance’—at least in the contemporary situation of advanced liberal democracies” (Morrow, 1985, p. 16).

⁶ Willis’s group of working-class schoolboys, known as “the lads,” resisted the class-based oppression of the school by rejecting mental labour in favour of more “masculine” manual labour (which reflected the shop floor culture of their family members). In so doing, they ironically displaced the school’s potential to help them escape the shop floor once they graduated.

⁷ Some project that the New Right reinvents itself as revolutionary from the histories of others. The movement marries this imagination with a monetarist policy while reworking the state into a smaller less egalitarian object of control and discipline. The brilliance is in the movement’s ability to incorporate a cultural imagination—with Thatcher this involved the construction of an imaginary nationalism and Englishness. Instrumental however is the promotion of neo-liberal economics as a central operating principle.