

Interrupting the right:

On doing critical educational work in conservative times

MICHAEL W. APPLE, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

*The right has worked in every sphere--the economic, the political, and the cultural--to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives. There has been a very creative articulation of themes that resonate deeply with the experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams of people as they go about their daily lives. The right has been much more successful in changing the very meaning of the key concepts and their accompanying structures of feeling that provide the centers of gravity for our hopes, fears, and dreams about this society. It has done this because it has been able to craft--through hard and lengthy economic, political, and cultural efforts--an alliance that has shifted the major debates over education and economic and social policy onto its own terrain. The accomplishment of such a vast educational project has many implications. It shows how important cultural struggles are. And, oddly enough, it gives reason for hope. It forces us to ask a significant question. **If the right can do this, why can't we?** How to do so is the focus of this article.*

CULTURE COUNTS

Over the past decade, I have been engaged in a concerted effort to analyze the reasons behind the rightist resurgence--what I call "conservative modernization"--in education and to try to find spaces for interrupting it (See Apple, 2001; 2000). My aim has not simply been to castigate the right, although there is a bit of fun in doing so. Rather, I have also sought to illuminate the dangers, and the elements of good sense, not only bad sense, that are found within what is an identifiable and powerful new hegemonic bloc--the various factions of the rightist alliance of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and some members of the managerial new middle class. I have a number of reasons for doing so. First, people who find certain elements of conservative modernization relevant to their lives are not puppets. They are not dupes who have little understanding of the "real" relations of this society. This smacks of earlier reductive analyses that were based in ideas of "false consciousness." My position is very different. I maintain that the reason that some of the arguments coming from the various factions of this new hegemonic bloc are listened to is because they are connected to aspects of the

realities that people experience. The tense alliance of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious activists, and the professional and managerial new middle class only works because there has been a very creative articulation of themes that resonate deeply with the experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams of people as they go about their daily lives. The right has often been more than a little manipulative in its articulation of these themes. It has integrated them within racist nativist discourses, within economically dominant forms of understanding, and within a problematic sense of “tradition.” But, this integration could only occur if they were organized around people’s understanding of their real material and cultural lives.

The second reason I have stressed the tension between good and bad sense—aside from my profound respect for Antonio Gramsci’s writings about this—has to do with my belief that we have witnessed a major educational accomplishment over the past three decades in many countries. All too often, we assume that educational and cultural struggles are epiphenomenal. The real battles occur in the paid workplace—the “economy.” Not only is this a strikingly reductive sense of what the economy is (its focus on paid, not unpaid, work; its neglect of the fact that, say, cultural institutions such as schools are also places where paid work goes on, etc.) (Apple, 1986), it also ignores what the right has actually done. Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the common-sense of society. It has worked in every sphere—the economic, the political, and the cultural—to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives. It has established new identities. It has recognized that to win in the state, you must win in civil society. The accomplishment of such a vast educational project has many implications. It shows how important cultural struggles are. And, oddly enough, it gives reason for hope. It forces us to ask a significant question. *If the right can do this, why can’t we?*

I do not mean this as a rhetorical question. As I have argued repeatedly in my own work, the right has shown how powerful the struggle over meaning and identity can be. While we should not want to emulate their often cynical and manipulative processes, the fact that they have had such success in pulling people under their ideological umbrella has much to teach us. Granted there are real differences in money and power between the forces of conservative modernization and those whose lives are being tragically altered by the policies and practices coming from the alliance. But, the right wasn’t as powerful thirty years ago as it is now. It collectively organized. It created a decentered unity, one where each element sacrificed some of its particular agenda to push forward on those areas that bound them together. Can’t we do the same?

I believe that we can, but only if we face up to the realities and dynamics of power in unromantic ways. As I argued in *Educating the “Right” Way*, the romantic possibilitarian rhetoric of some of the writers on critical pedagogy is not sufficiently based on a tactical or strategic analysis of the current situation nor is it sufficiently grounded in its understanding of the reconstructions of discourse and movements that are occurring in all too many places. Here I follow Cameron McCarthy, who wisely reminds us, “We must think possibility within constraint; that is the condition of our time” (McCarthy, 2000).

We need to remember that cultural struggles are not epiphenomenal. They count, and they *count* in institutions throughout society. In order for dominant groups to exercise leadership, large numbers of people must be convinced that the maps of reality circulated by those with the most economic, political, and cultural power are indeed wiser than other alternatives. Dominant groups do this by attaching these maps to the elements of good sense that people have and by changing the very meaning of the key concepts and their accompanying structures of feeling that provide the centers of gravity for our hopes, fears, and dreams about this society. The right has been much more successful in doing this than the left, in part because it has been able to craft—through hard and lengthy economic, political, and cultural efforts—a tense but still successful alliance that has shifted the major debates over education and economic and social policy onto its own terrain.

Evidence of this is all around us in the terms we use, in the arguments in which we engage, indeed even in many of the cultural resources we employ to imagine alternative futures. For example, as I completed the writing of my latest book, one of the top selling books on The New York Times fiction list was Tim LaHaye (yes, the Tim LaHaye of extremely conservative evangelical leadership) and Jerry Jenkins’s *The Indwelling* (Jenkins and LaHaye, 2000), the seventh of a series of books about “true believers” who confront the “Antichrist.” The imagined future is a time of “rapture” where the good are taken up to heaven and the bad are condemned to eternal damnation. Who each of these groups are is predictable. In a number of ways, then, the authoritarian populist “outside” has moved to become the inside. It has creatively learned how to use the codes of popular adventure and science fiction novels to build an imaginative space of possibility, and a “muscular” yet sensitive Christianity, that gives meaning to people’s daily lives and hopes.¹

Just as these spaces create imagined futures, so too do they help create identities. Neo-liberalism creates policies and practices that embody the enterprising and constantly strategizing entrepreneur out of the possessive individualism it establishes as the ideal citizen. Neo-conservatism creates imagined pasts as the framework for imagined and stable futures, futures in which identities are based on people knowing the knowledge and values that neo-conservatives themselves have decided “have stood the test of time.” Authoritarian populist religious conservatives also have an imagined past where a society, based on God’s knowledge and values, has pre-given identities that enable women and men to rearticulate the neo-liberal ideology of “choice” and to act in what are seen as godly ways toward bringing society to God. And managerialism establishes new identities for the professional and managerial middle class, identities that give new meaning to their lives and enable them to recapture their feelings of worthiness and efficacy. Out of all of these multiple spaces and identities, and the conflicts, tensions, and compromises that their interactions generate, policies evolve. These policies are almost never purely from only one of these elements within this bloc. Rather they often embody a rich mix that somehow must accommodate as many themes

as possible from within the multiple forces of conservative modernization—without at the same time alienating those groups believed to be significant who are not yet integrated under the hegemonic umbrella of the right but who the right would like to bring under its leadership in the future.

This is a truly difficult task and it is filled with contradictory impulses. Yet, even with its contradictions and tensions, it has moved the balance of forces significantly to the right. Educational policies have been part of that move. In fact, education has not only been drawn along by the pressure of these rightist waves, it has actually played a major role in building these waves. The conservative alliance has paid attention to education—both formal and informal—and it has paid off for them. Indeed, in most of the critical discussions in the academic and popular literature of the effects of neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and managerial policies and practices in education in a number of countries, it is *their* policies that have provided the outlines of the debates in which we engage—vouchers, markets, national standards, high stakes testing, and so on.

CONTRADICTIONARY REFORMS

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, policies often have strikingly unforeseen consequences. Reforms that are instituted with good intentions may have hidden effects that are more than a little problematic. I have shown that the effects of some of the favorite reforms of neo-liberals and neo-conservatives, for instance—voucher plans, national or state-wide curricula, and national or state-wide testing can serve as examples—quite often reproduce or even worsen inequalities (Apple, 2001). Thus, we should be very cautious about accepting what may seem to be meritorious intentions at face value. Intentions are too often contradicted by how reforms may function in practice. This is true not only for large scale transformations of educational policies and governance, but also about moves to change the ways curriculum and teaching go on in schools.

The framework I have employed to understand this is grounded in what in cultural theory is called the act of repositioning. It in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power (See Harding, 1991; Lukacs, 1971). That is, every institution, policy, and practice—and especially those that now dominate education and the larger society—establish relations of power in which some voices are heard and some are not. While it is not preordained that those voices that will be heard most clearly are also those who have the most economic, cultural, and social capital, it is most likely that this will be the case. After all, we do not exist on a level playing field. Many economic, social, and educational policies when actually put in place tend to benefit those who already have advantages.

These points may seem overly rhetorical and too abstract, but unfortunately there is no small amount of truth in them. For example, in a time when all too much of the discourse around educational reform is focused on vouchers and choice plans on the one hand and on proposals for national or state curricula, standards, and testing on the

other, there is a good deal of international evidence now that such policies may actually reproduce or even worsen class, gender, and race inequalities. Thus, existing structures of economic and cultural power often lead to a situation in which what may have started out in some educators' or legislators' minds as an attempt to make things better, in the end is all too usually transformed into another set of mechanisms for social stratification. While much of this is due to the ways in which race, gender, class, and "ability" act as structural realities in this society, some of it is related to the hesitancy of policy makers to take seriously enough the complicated ways in which education is itself a political act.

Near the end of the introductory section of a recent volume on the politics of educational policies and practices, *Learning as a Political Act*, the editors state that as progressives they are committed to an "intellectual solidarity that seeks to lay bare the ideas and histories of groups that have been silenced in mainstream educational arenas" (Segarra and Dobles, 1999, p. xiii). There are a number of key concepts in this quote—intellectual solidarity, laying bare, silencing. Each speaks to a complicated history, and each phrase again says something about our understanding of democracy. They are "keywords." They come from a very different tradition than that provided by the linguistic mapping of markets. They also speak to a different politics of official knowledge.

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that the school curriculum has become a battleground. Stimulated in large part by neo-liberal complaints about "economically useless" knowledge, neo-conservative laments about the supposed loss of discipline and lack of "real knowledge," and by religious authoritarian populists' relentless attacks on schools for their supposed loss of God-given "traditional" values, discussions of what should be taught in schools and how it should be taught are now as contentious as at any time in our history.

Evidence of this is not hard to find. In his repeated call for a return to a curriculum of "facts," E. D. Hirsch, Jr. argues that schools have been taken over by progressive educators from Rousseau to Dewey (Hirsch, 1996), a claim that has almost no empirical warrant at all and largely demonstrates how disconnected he is from the daily life of schools (Buras, 1999). Most schooling in the United States is already fact-driven. In addition, school districts throughout the country are constantly looking over their shoulders, worried that their reading, social studies, or mathematics programs will be challenged by the forces of the authoritarian religious right—although as I demonstrate in *Cultural Politics and Education*, sometimes schools systems themselves create the conditions for the growth of rightist anti-school movements in their own communities by being less than democratic in their involvement of the community (Apple, 1996). Other evidence of such contentiousness is visible in the fact that the contents of the mathematics curriculum was even recently debated in the editorial pages of *The New York Times*, where spokespersons for constructivist and traditional curricula went head to head. Many more instances might be cited. But it is clear that the debate over "What knowledge is of most worth" has taken on more than a few political overtones.²

Much of the debate over this goes on with little empirical substance. For example, the argument that we must “return” to teaching, say, mathematics in “traditional” ways is obviously partly an ideological one. (We need to restore discipline; students have too much freedom; “bad” knowledge has pushed “good” knowledge to the sidelines.) Yet it is also based on a claim that such a return will lead to higher achievement and ultimately to a more competitive economy. Here, neo-liberal and neo-conservative emphases are joined with authoritarian populist mistrust of child-centeredness. This is where Jo Boaler’s recent richly detailed qualitative and quantitative comparison of mathematics curricula and teaching enters (Boaler, 1998).

Boaler engages in a fine-grained analysis of two secondary schools with decidedly different emphases. While her book is based on data from England, its implications are again profound for debates over curriculum and teaching in the U.S. and elsewhere as well. Both schools are largely working class, with some minority and middle class populations as well. Both sets of students had attended our equivalent of middle schools that were dominated by more traditional academic methods. And both had similar achievement profiles. One school overtly focused on preparing its students for national tests. Its program was almost totally teacher directed, organized around textbooks that were geared to the national tests, ability grouped, and run in such a way that speed and accuracy of computations and the learning of procedural rules for dealing with mathematical problems were highly valued—all those things that traditionalists here say are currently missing in mathematics instruction. Furthermore, the boundary between mathematics and both the real world and other subjects was strong (See also Bernstein, 1977). The other school did not group by ability. It was decidedly more “progressive” both in its attitude toward students (there was a more relaxed communication style between teachers and students; student input was sought on the curriculum) and in its mathematics program. In this second school, the instruction was project-based, with a minimum of textbook-based teaching and a maximum of cooperative work among the students. The boundary between mathematics and “real world” problems was weak.

The first school was quiet, on-task, well organized—the very embodiment of the dream of nearly all elements of conservative modernization.. The second was more noisy, students were not always fully on-task, and had very flexible time schedules. Both schools had dedicated and hard working teachers. Yet the differences in the results were striking, both in terms of overall achievement and in terms of the differential effects of each orientation on the students themselves.

The more traditional school, with its driving concern for “covering material” that would be on the test, stressed textbook knowledge and moved relatively rapidly from topic to topic. The more student-centered approach of the second school sacrificed some coverage, but it also enabled students to more fully understand the material. By and large, students in the first school actually did less well on the standardized tests than the second, especially but not only on those parts of the tests that

needed them to actually think mathematically, in large part because they could not generalize to new contexts as well as did those students who had used their mathematics in more varied (though more time-consuming) projects. Further—and of great importance for equity—young women in the second school did consistently better in a more cooperative atmosphere that stressed understanding and use rather than coverage. The same held true for social class. Working class students were consistently disadvantaged in the more pressured and text- and test-based agenda of traditional mathematics instruction.

This is a complex situation and Boaler is talking about general tendencies here. But her overall conclusions are clear and are supported by a very nice combination of data. In sum, the claim that a return to (actually, given the fact that most mathematics instruction is still chalk and talk and textbook based, it would be much more honest to say the *continuation of*) the traditional mathematics programs that the critics are demanding neither increases students’ mathematical competence nor their ability to use their mathematical knowledge in productive ways. While it may keep classrooms quiet and students under control, it may also systematically disadvantage young women—including as Boaler shows the brightest young women—and economically disadvantaged students.³ Finally, it may have one other effect, a strengthening of students’ dislike of mathematics and their feelings that it is simply irrelevant for their future. If this is true for mathematics, it is worth considering the hidden negative effects of the more general policies being proposed by neo-conservative reformers who wish to return to what they have constructed, rather romantically, as “the tradition” in all subjects.

If Boaler’s conclusions are even partly generalizable, as I think they may very well be, the hidden effects of certain reform movements may not be what we had in mind. Tighter control over the curriculum, the tail of the test wagging the dog of the teacher and the curriculum, more pressure, more reductive accountability plans—all of this may lead to less equitable results, not more. Boredom, alienation, and increased inequalities are not the ideal results of schooling. Once again, looking outside of our usual all-too-limited and parochial boundaries can be more than a little beneficial. The careful research underpinning Boaler’s volume needs to be taken seriously by anyone who assumes that in our unequal society there is a direct relationship between policy intentions and policy results. There isn’t.

One of the most important tasks of critical education, therefore, is an empirical one. Just as Boaler did, we need to make research public not only on the negative effects of the policies of conservative modernization, but just as importantly on the positive effects of more socially and educationally critical alternatives. A good example of this is the SAGE program in Wisconsin where significantly reducing class size within schools that historically have served a larger portion of dispossessed people has had much more robust results than, say, marketization and voucher plans (Molnar, Smith, Zahorik, Palmer, Halbach, and Ehrle, 1999). This is one form of interrupting dominant discourses and policies and much more of it needs to be done. However, in doing this we cannot

simply rely on the dominant forms of what counts as evidence. In Linda Tuhiwai Smith's words, we need "decolonizing methodologies" (L. Smith, 1999; see also Gitlin, 1994).

MAKING CHALLENGES PUBLIC

My arguments in the previous section of this paper have been at a relatively general level because I did not want us to lose sight of the larger picture. How else can these retrogressive movements be interrupted? Let me now get more specific and tactical, since I am convinced that it is important to interrupt rightist claims immediately, within the media, in academic and professional publications, and in daily life.

One crucial example of such interruption is found in the Educational Policy Project formed under the auspices of the Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation. This involves the ongoing construction of an organized group of people who are committed to responding very rapidly to material published by the right. This group includes a number of well-known educators and activists who are deeply concerned that the right has successfully used the media to foster its own ideological agenda, just as it has devoted a considerable amount of resources to getting its message to the public. For example, a number of conservative foundations have full-time staff members whose responsibility it is, for example, to fax synopses of reports to national media, to newspapers, and to widely read journals of opinion and to keep conservative positions in the public eye. Progressives have been much less successful in comparison, in part because they have not devoted themselves to the task as rigorously or because they have not learned to work at many levels, from the academic to the popular simultaneously. In recognition of this, a group of socially and educational critical educators met first in Milwaukee and has been continuously meeting to generate an organized response to conservative reports, articles, research, and media presentations.

A full-time staff member was hired by the Center to focus on conservative material, to identify what needs to be responded to, and to help edit responses written by individual members of the group. A website has been developed that publishes these responses and/or original publications of more progressive research and arguments. The project also focuses on writing "op.ed." pieces, letters to the editor, and other similar material and on making all of this available to the media. This requires establishing contacts with journals, newspapers, radio, and television, and so on. This is exactly what the right did. We can and must do similar things. It requires hard work, but the Educational Policy Project is the beginning of what we hope will be a larger effort involving many more people. The reader can see the kinds of things that have been done by going to the following website for the Educational Policy Project now housed at Arizona State University: <<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/>>

This is just one example of one strategy for bringing what we know to parts of the public in more popular forms. There are many other examples posted on the website and published as reports, responses in journals, letters to the editor, and op.ed. pieces. While this project is relatively new, it shows considerable promise. In combination with

the use of talk radio, call-in shows, and similar media strategies in multiple languages, these kinds of activities are part of a larger strategy to bring both more public attention to what the dangers are in the "solutions" proposed by the right and to what the workable alternatives to them might be. Integrating the educational interventions within a larger focus on the media is absolutely crucial (Ratner, 1997; Bourdieu, 1998; McChesney, Wood, and Foster, 1998; Kellner, 1995).

LEARNING FROM OTHER NATIONS

During one of the times I was working in Brazil with Paulo Freire, I remember him repeatedly saying to me that education must begin in critical dialogue. Both of these last two words were crucial to him. Education both must hold our dominant institutions in education and the larger society up to rigorous questioning and at the same time this questioning must deeply involve those who benefit least from the ways these institutions now function. Both conditions were necessary, since the first without the second was simply insufficient to the task of democratizing education.

Of course, many committed educators already know that the transformation of educational policies and practices—or the defense of democratic gains in our schools and local communities—is inherently political. Indeed, this is constantly registered in the fact that rightist movements have made teaching and curricula the targets of concerted attacks for years. One of the claims of these rightist forces is that schools are "out of touch" with parents and communities. While there are elements of insight in such criticisms, we need to find ways of connecting our educational efforts to local communities, especially those members of these communities with less power, that are more truly democratic than those envisioned by the right.

There is a good deal of efficacy in turning to the experiences of other nations to learn about what the effects of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies and practices actually are. Yet there are many more things that we can learn from other nation's struggles. For example, currently in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the policies of participatory budgeting are helping to build support for more progressive and democratic policies there in the face of the growing power of neo-liberal movements at a national level. The Workers Party ("PT" as it is known there) has been able to increase its majority even among people who had previously voted in favor of parties with much more conservative educational and social programs because it has been committed to enabling even the poorest of its citizens to participate in deliberations over the policies themselves and over where and how money should be spent. By paying attention to more substantive forms of collective participation and, just as importantly, by devoting resources to encourage such participation, Porto Alegre has demonstrated that it is possible to have a "thicker" democracy, even in times of both economic crisis and ideological attacks from neo-liberal parties and from the conservative press. Programs such as the "Citizen School" and the sharing of real power with those who live in "favelas" (slums) provide ample evidence that thick democracy offers

realistic alternatives to the eviscerated version of thin democracy found under neo-liberalism (Apple, et al., 2003). Just as important is the pedagogic function of these programs. They develop the collective capacities among people to enable them to continue to engage in the democratic administration and control of their lives (Elson, 1999). This is time-consuming; but time spent in such things now has proven to pay off dramatically later on.

A similar story can be told about another part of Brazil. In Belem, a “Youth Participatory Budget” process was instituted. It provided resources and space for the participation of many thousands of youth in the deliberations over what programs for youth needed to be developed, how money should be spent, and over creating a set of political forums that could be used by youth to make public their needs and desires. This is very different than most of the ways youth are dealt with in all too many countries, where youth are seen as a “problem” not as a resource (Lesko, 2001). A similar instance is found in New Zealand, where under the original leadership of the International Research Institute on Maori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland, multi-racial groups of youth are formed in communities to publicly discuss the ways in which youth see their realities and advance proposals for dealing with these realities. In this way, alliances that begin to cut across race, class, and age are being built. There are models, then, of real participation that we can learn from and that challenge the eviscerated vision of democracy advanced by neo-liberals by putting in place more substantive and active models of actually “living our freedoms.” The issue is not the existence of such models; it is insuring that they are made widely visible.

THINKING HERETICALLY

In order to build counter-hegemonic alliances, we may have to think more creatively than before—and, in fact, may have to engage in some nearly heretical rethinking. Let me give an example. I would like us to engage in a thought-experiment. I believe that the right has been able to take certain elements that many people hold dear and connect them to other issues in ways that might not often occur “naturally” if these issues were less politicized. Thus, for instance, one of the reasons populist religious groups are pulled into an alliance with the right is because such groups believe that the state is totally against the values that give meaning to their lives. They are sutured into an alliance in which other elements of rightist discourse are then able to slowly connect with their own. Thus, they believe that the state is anti-religious. Others also say that the state seeks to impose its will on white working class parents by giving “special treatment” to people of color and ignoring poor white people. These two elements do not necessarily have to combine. But they slowly begin to be seen as homologous.

Is it possible that by taking, say, religion out of the mix that some parts of the religious community that currently find collective identities on the right would be less susceptible to such a call if more religious content was found in school? If religious studies had a more central place within the curriculum, is it less likely that people

who find in religion the ultimate answers to why they are here would be less mistrustful of the state, less apt to be attracted to a position that public is bad and private is good? I am uncertain that this would be the case. But I strongly believe that we need to entertain this possibility.

Do not misunderstand me. I am decidedly not taking the position that we should use vouchers to fund private religious schools; nor am I saying that the authoritarian populist religious right should be pandered to. Rather, I am taking a position similar to that espoused by Warren Nord. Our failure to provide a clear place for the study of religion in the curriculum makes us “illiberal” (Nord, 1995). Yet, I do not want to end with Nord’s position. Rather, I see it as a starting point. In earlier books, I have argued that at times people “become right” because of the lack of responsiveness of public institutions to meanings and concerns that are central to their lives. Teaching more *about*, not *for*, religion doesn’t just make us more “liberal” in Nord’s words. It may also help interrupt the formation of anti-public identities. This has important implications for it can point to strategic moves that can be made to counter the integration of large numbers of people under the umbrella of conservative modernization.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, people often become right at a local level, not through plots by rightist groups but because of local issues and sentiments (Apple, 1996). Making schools more responsive to religious sentiments may seem like a simple step, but it can have echoes that are profound since it may undercut one of the major reasons some populist groups who are also religious find their way under the umbrella of rightist attacks on schools and on the public sphere.

I am not a romantic about this. I do think that it could be dangerous and could be exploited by the religious right. After all, some of them do have little interest in “teaching about” and may hold positions on Christianity and other religions that both construct and leave little room for the “Other.” Yet the centrality of religious sentiments need not get pushed toward neo-liberalism. It need not be connected to a belief that public schools and teachers are so totally against them that marketization and privatization are the only answers. Thus, I’d like us to think seriously—and very cautiously—about the possible ways members of some of the groups currently found under the umbrella of the conservative alliance might actually be pried loose from it and might work off the elements of good sense they possess. In saying this, I am guided by a serious question. In what ways can religious commitments be mobilized for socially progressive ends? Our (often justifiable) worries about religious influences in the public sphere may have the latent effect of preventing such a mobilization by alienating many people who have deep religious commitments and who might otherwise be involved in such struggles. If many evangelicals do commit themselves to helping the poor (C. Smith, 1998), for example, in what ways can these sentiments be disarticulated from seeing capitalism as “God’s economy” and from only helping the “deserving poor” and rearticulated toward greater social and economic transformation. It would seem well worth studying the recent histories of religious involvement in, say, the anti-WTO

struggles to understand this better. At the very least, we cannot act as if religious beliefs about social and educational justice are outside the pale of progressive action, as too many critical educators do. A combination of caution, openness, and creativity is required here.

Yet another example is to take advantage of the shared elements of good sense among groups who usually have very different agendas in order to work against specific policies and programs that are being instituted by other elements within the new hegemonic alliance. That is, there are real tensions within conservative modernization that provide important spaces for joint action.

This possibility is already being recognized. Because of this, for example, there are some truly odd political couplings emerging today. Both the populist right and the populist left are occasionally joining forces to make strategic alliances against some neo-liberal incursions into the school. For instance, Ralph Nader's group Commercial Alert and Phyllis Schlafly's organization the Eagle Forum are building an alliance against Channel One (Coniff, 2000). Both are deeply committed to fight the selling of children in schools as a captive audience for commercials. They are not alone. The Southern Baptist Convention has passed a resolution opposing Channel One. Groups such as Donald Wildmon's American Family Association, and even more importantly, James Dobson's powerful conservative organization Focus on the Family, have been working with Nader's groups to remove Channel One from schools and to keep it out of schools where it is not already established. This tactical alliance has also joined together to support anti-gambling initiatives in a number of states and to oppose one of the fastest growing commercial technology initiatives in education—ZapMe! Corp. Though now financially troubled because of over-expansion, ZapMe! provided free computers to schools at the cost of collecting demographic data on students which it then uses to target advertising specifically at these children.

The tactical agreement is often based on different ideological positions. While the progressive positions are strongly anti-corporate, the conservative positions are grounded in a distaste for the subversion of traditional values, "the exploiting of children for profit," and a growing rightist populist tension over the decisions that corporations make that do not take into consideration the "real folks" in America. This latter sentiment is what the rightist populist and nativist Pat Buchanan has worked off of for years. In the words of Ron Reno, a researcher at Focus on the Family, we need to fight "a handful of individuals exploiting the populace of America to make a buck" (Coniff, 2000, p. 13).

This teaming up on specific causes is approached more than a little cautiously on both sides, as you would imagine. As Ralph Nader says, "You have to be very careful because you can start tempering your positions. You can be too solicitous. You have to enter and leave on your own terms. You tell them, 'Here's what we're doing, if you want to join us fine. If not, fine.'" Phyllis Schlafly portrays her own reasons this way. "[Nader and I] agree that the public schools should not be used for commercial purposes. A

captive audience of students should not be sold for profit. I agree with that. I don't recall his objection to the content of the news, which is what stirs up a lot of conservatives" (Coniff, 2000, p. 13).

Schlafly's comments show the differences as well as similarities in the right-left division here. While for many people across the divide, there is a strong distaste for selling our children as commodities, divisions reappear in other areas. For one group, the problem is a "handful of individuals" who lack proper moral values. For the other, the structural forces driving our economy create pressures to buy and sell children as a captive audience. For conservatives, the content of the news on Channel One is too "liberal;" it deals with issues such as drugs, sexuality, and similar topics. Yet, as I have shown in my own analysis of what counts as news in the major media and in Channel One, even though there is some cautious treatment of controversial issues, the content and coding of what counts as news is more than a little conservative and predominantly reinforces dominant interpretations (Apple, 2000).

These differences should not detract from my basic point. Tactical alliances are still possible, especially where populist impulses and anti-corporate sentiments overlap. These must be approached extremely carefully, however, since the grounding of much of the populism of the right is also in a racist nativism, a very dangerous tendency that has had murderous consequences. A recognition, though, of the anti-corporate tendencies that do exist here is significant, since it also points to cracks in the alliance supporting some aspects of conservative modernization in general and to similar fissures within the ranks of authoritarian populism itself. For example, the fact that Ralph Reed was hired as a consultant to burnish Channel One's image has also created a number of tensions within the authoritarian populist ranks (Coniff, 2000, p. 13).

Another area that is ripe for such coalitions is that of national and state curricula and testing. Neither the populist right nor the populist left believe that such policies leave room for the cultures, histories, or visions of legitimate knowledge that they are so deeply committed to. While the specific content of such knowledge is decidedly dissimilar for each of these groups, the fact that there is agreement both on a generally anti-elitist position and on the fact that the very processes involved are anti-democratic provides room for tactical alliances not only against these processes but as a block against even further incursions of managerialism into schools. In addition, given the ideological segregation that currently exists in this society, working (carefully) with such groups has the advantage of reducing stereotypes that they may hold (and perhaps that we might also hold?). It increases the possibility that the populist right will see that progressives may in fact be able to provide solutions to serious issues that are so distressing in populist movements of multiple orientations. This benefit should not be minimized.

My position here, hence, embodies a dual strategy. We can and must build tactical alliances where this is possible and where there is mutual benefit—and where such an alliance does not jeopardize the core of progressive beliefs and values. At the same time, we need to continue to build on more progressive alliances between our core

constituencies around issues such as class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, globalization and economic exploitation, and the environment. That such a dual strategy can be used to organize both within already existing alliances and to work across differences is made clear in the anti-WTO mobilizations in Seattle, in Washington, in Philadelphia, in Genoa, and in a number of other cities throughout the world.

Once the issue of tactical alliances is raised, however, it is nearly impossible to ignore charter schools. For a number of people on both the left and the right, charter schools have been seen as a compromise that can satisfy some of the demands of each group. Here, though, I would urge even more caution. Much of the discussion of these schools has been more than a little romantic. It has accepted the rhetoric of "de-bureaucratization," experimentation, and diversity as the reality. Yet, as Amy Stuart Wells and her colleagues have demonstrated, charter schools can and do often serve less meritorious ends. They can be manipulated to provide public funding for ideologically and educationally problematic programs, with little public accountability. Beneath the statistics of racial equality they supposedly produce, they can exacerbate white flight and can be captured by groups who actually have little interest in the culture and futures of those whom they assume are the "Other." They are used as the "constitutive outside" in attacks on public schooling for the majority of children in schools throughout the United States, by deflecting attention to what must be done there. Thus, they often can and do act to deflect attention from our lack of commitment to provide sufficient resources and support for schools in urban and rural areas. And in a number of ways they threaten to become an opening wedge for voucher plans (Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme, 1999).

Having said this, however, I do not believe that charter schools will go away. Indeed, during the many periods of time when I have lectured and engaged in educational and political work in countries in, say, Latin America and Asia, it has become ever more clear to me that there is considerable interest in the charter school movement. This is especially the case in those nations that have a history of strong states and strong central control over the curriculum, teaching, and evaluation and where the state has been inflexible, highly bureaucratic, and unresponsive. Given this situation, it is absolutely crucial that the terrain of charter schools not be occupied by the forces within the conservative alliance. If charter schools become, as they threaten to, primarily a site where their function is to deflect attention from schools where the vast majority of students go, if they are allowed to be used as vouchers "in cognito," if they serve to legitimate concerted attacks on teachers and other educators, then the effects will not be limited to the United States. This will be a world-wide tragedy. For these very reasons, it is crucial that some of our empirical, educational, and political energy goes into guaranteeing that charter schools are a much more progressively inclined set of possibilities than they are today. We need to work so that the elements of good sense in the movement are not lost by it being integrated under the umbrella of conservative modernization.

MAKING CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES PRACTICAL

You will notice that I said "some" of our energy in the previous paragraph. Once again we need to be extremely cautious that by focusing our energies on "alternatives" such as charter schools we are not tacitly enhancing the very real possibility that progressives will spend so much of their attention on them that action in the vast majority of schools will take a back seat. While all of the tactical and strategic foci I have mentioned are important, there is one area that I believe should be at the center of our concerns as educators—providing real answers to real practical problems in education. By showing successful struggles to build a critical and democratic education in real schools and real communities with real teachers and students today, attention is refocused on action not only in charter schools but on local elementary, middle, and secondary schools in communities much like those in which most of us spend our lives. Thus, publicizing such "stories" makes critical education seem actually "doable," not merely a utopian vision dreamed up by "critical theorists" in education. For this very reason, political/educational interventions such as the popular and widely translated book *Democratic Schools* (Apple and Beane, 1995) and the increasingly influential journal *Rethinking Schools* become even more important. This is crucial if we are indeed to interrupt the right. Since the right does have an advantage of speaking in "common-sense" and in "plain-folks Americanism" (Watson, 1997; Kintz, 1997)—and peoples' common-sense does have elements of good and bad sense within itself—we can also use these progressively inclined elements to show that it is not only the right that has answers to what are real and important issues of educational practice.

For example, the specific vocational and academic programs in which curricula and teaching are linked to paid work and to the economy in socially progressive ways in the Rindge School of Technical Arts in the Boston area powerfully demonstrate that those students and parents who are (justifiably) deeply concerned about their economic futures do not have to turn to neo-liberal policies to find practical answers to their questions (Rosenstock and Steinberg, 1995). I can think of little that is more important than this. The forces of conservative modernization have colonized the space of practice and of providing answers to the question of "What do I do on Monday?" in part not because the right has all the answers, but in part due to the fact that the left has too often evacuated that space.

Here again, we have much to learn from the right. While we do not need progressive imitators of, say, E. D. Hirsch, we do need to be much more active in actually attempting to provide answers to teachers, community members, and an increasingly skeptical public that questions such as *what* will I teach, *how* will I teach it, *how* will I evaluate its success—in essence, all those practical questions that people have a right to ask and to which they are entitled to get sensible answers—are taken very seriously. In the absence of this, we are left standing on the sidelines while the right reconstructs not only common-sense but the schools that help produce it.

This is where the work engaged in by a number of critically inclined practicing educators has proven to be so important. Debbie Meier and her colleagues at Central Park East School in New York and at Mission Hill School in Boston, Bob Peterson, Rita Tenorio, and their colleagues at Fratney Street School in Milwaukee, the staff at Rindge School, and many other educators in similar schools throughout the country provide critical models of answering the day-to-day questions that I noted above. They also directly respond to the arguments that are made by neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, and authoritarian populists. They do this not only by defending the very idea of a truly public school--although they are very good at marshaling such a defense (Meier, et al, 2000; Lowe and Miner, 1996; 1992)--but also by demonstrating workable alternatives that are based both on high expectations for their diverse students and on a deep-seated respect for the cultures, histories, and experiences of these students and their parents and local communities (Apple, et al, 2003; Apple and Beane, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Dance, 2002). Only in this way can the neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and managerial factions of the new alliance be undercut at the level of the school.

HOPE AS A RESOURCE

Much more could be said about interrupting the right and about building workable alternatives. I have written this paper and the book on which it is based--*Educating the "Right" Way*--to contribute to an ongoing set of crucial debates about the means and ends of our educational institutions and about their connections to larger institutions and power relations. Keeping such debates alive and vibrant is one of the best ways of challenging "the curriculum of the dead." Building and defending a truly democratic and critical education is a collective project (Apple, et al, 2003). We have much to learn from each other.

Let me end with something that I always want to keep in the forefront of my own consciousness when times are difficult. Sustained political and cultural transformations are impossible "without the hope of a better society that we can, in principle and in outline, imagine" (Panich and Leys, 1999, p. vii). All of us hope that our work will contribute to the larger movement that is struggling to loosen the grip of the narrow concepts of "reality" and "democracy" that have been circulated by neo-liberals and neo-conservatives in education and so much else over the past decades. There historically have been alternatives to the limited and increasingly hypocritical conception of democracy that unfortunately even social democratic parties (under the label of the "third way") in many nations have come to accept. In the words of Panitch and Leys, we need "to insist on a far fuller and richer democracy than anything now available. It is time to reject the prevailing disparagement of anything collective as 'unrealistic' and to insist on the moral and practical rightness, as well as the necessity, of egalitarian social and economic arrangements" (Panitch and Leys, 1999, p. viii). As they go on to say, this requires "the development of popular democratic capacities and the structures that nurture rather than stifle or trivialize them" (p. viii). The movements surrounding

conservative modernization may be "wrong," not "right." They may in fact "stifle or trivialize" a vision of democracy that is based on the common good. But they certainly don't have trivial effects on millions of people all over the world. Our children, our teachers, and our communities deserve something better.

NOTES

- ¹ Of course, people read all kinds of fiction and are not compelled to follow its precepts. Thus, people can read hard-boiled detective novels in which women and men detectives often engage in violent acts of retribution. This does not necessarily mean that the readers are in favor of such acts. The politics of pleasure follows its own relatively autonomous logic. Most people engage in what have been called "guilty pleasures" and reading books like *The Indwelling* may fall under that category for many readers. However, the fact that it is a national best seller still has considerable importance.
- ² Of course, in actuality the content and form of curricula and teaching have always been political issues. See Apple (1990). On some of the recent curriculum struggles in England and Wales, see Hatcher and Jones (1996).
- ³ The focus on keeping youth "under control" is connected to a long history of the fear of youth and of seeing them as constantly in need of regulation. For an insightful discussion of this history, see Lesko (2001).
- ⁴ For example, in one of the "teach ins" in which I participated in preparation for the anti-WTO mobilizations in Seattle and Washington, DC, very few people had thought about the integration of Spanish language newspapers, television, radio, and websites in building support for the movement. Yet, these are among the fastest growing media in the United States and they reach an audience that is suffering deeply from the effects of globalization and economic exploitation.

REFERENCES

- Apple, Michael W. (1988) *Teachers and Texts*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, Michael W. (1990) *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, Michael W. (1996) *Cultural Politics and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Apple, Michael W. (2000) *Official Knowledge*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, Michael W. (2001) *Educating the "Right" Way*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, Michael W., et al. (2003) *The State and the Politics of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, M.W. and Beane, J.A. (Eds.) (1995) *Democratic Schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Bernstein, Basil (1977) *Class, Codes, and Control Volume III*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Boaler, Jo (1998) *Experiencing School Mathematics*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1998) *Acts of Resistance*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Buras, Kristen (1999) "Questioning Core Assumptions," *Harvard Educational Review* 69: 67-93.
- Coniff, Ruth (2000) "Left-Right Romance," *The Progressive*, May 2000, 12-15.
- Dance, L. Janelle (2002) *Tough Fronts*. New York: Routledge.

- Elson, Diane (1999) "Socializing Markets, Not Market Socialism," in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (Eds.) *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias*. New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 67-85.
- Gandin, Luis Armando and Apple, Michael W. (in press) "Challenging Neoliberalism, Building Democracy," *Journal of Education Policy*.
- Gitlin, Andrew (Ed.) (1994) *Power and Method*. New York: Routledge.
- Hirsch, E.D., Jr. (1996) *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. New York: Doubleday.
- Harding, Sandra (1991) *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hatcher, Richard and Jones, Ken (Eds.) (1996) *Education After the Conservatives*. Stoke-on-Trent, England: Trentham Books.
- Kellner, Douglas (1995) *Media Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Kintz, Linda (1997) *Between Jesus and the Market*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria (1994) *The Dreamkeepers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- LaHaye, Tim and Jenkins, Jerry (2000) *The Indwelling*. New York: Tyndale.
- Lesko, Nancy (2001) *Act Your Age!* New York: Routledge.
- Lowe, Robert and Miner, Barbara (Eds.) (1992) *False Choices*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools.
- Lowe, Robert and Miner, Barbara (Eds.) (1996) *Selling Out Our Schools*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools.
- Lucacs, Gyorgy (1971) *History and Class Consciousness*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- McCarthy, Cameron (2000) Unpublished lecture, International Sociology of Education Conference, University of Sheffield, England, January 2000.
- McChesney, Robert, Wood, Ellen Meiksins, and Foster, John (Eds.) (1998) *Capitalism and the Information Age*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Meier, Deborah, Sizer, Theodore, Nathan, Linda, and Thernstrm, Abigail (2000) *Will Standards Save Public Education?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Molnar, Alex, Smith, Philip, Zahorik, John, Palmer, Amanda, Halbach, Anke, and Ehrle, Karen (1999) "Evaluating the SAGE Program," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 21: 165-177.
- Nord, Warren (1995) *Religion and American Education*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Panitch, Leo and Leys, Colin (Eds.) (1999) *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Ratner, Ellen (1997) *101 Ways to Get Your Progressive Issues on Talk Radio*. (Washington, DC: National Press Books.
- Rosenstock, Larry and Steinberg, Adria (1995) "Beyond the Shop," in Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane (Eds.) *Democratic Schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, pp. 41-57.
- Segarra, Jose and Dobles, Ricardo (Eds.) (1999) *Learning as a Political Act*. Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review Reprint Series No. 33, 1999.
- Smith Linda Tuhiwai (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies*. New York: Zed Books.
- Watson, Justin (1997) *The Christian Coalition*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Wells, Amy, Lopez, Alejandra, Scott, Janelle, and Holme, Jennifer (1999) "Charter Schools as Postmodern Paradox," *Harvard Educational Review* 69: 172-204.