The Radical Pedagogue
and the Conservative
Restoration

Satu Repo

Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of
Class and Gender Relations in Education
by Michael Apple

These are not easy times for those who
make a living by thinking critically about
schools and society. In Teachers and Texts
Michael Apple, using Raymond Williams's
words, describes his own frame of mind in
Reagan's America as "a cluttered room in
which someone is trying to think, while
there is a fan-dance going on in one cor-
nor and a military band is blasting away
in the other." In these circumstances, he
maintains, just thinking seriously can be
a form of resistance in itself.

"Teachers and Texts is a collection of es-
says on teachers and the circumstances in
which they work, on textbook publishing,
and on Blue Ribbon reports on American
educational policy. It is far too thin and
schematic to fulfill its promise to be a "po-
litical economy of class and gender rela-
tions in education." What it does offer is
a rather complex model for thinking about
the subject and some commentary on cur-
rent topics which show how the discourse
of "critical pedagogy" can be applied.

Developing a Marxist "critical peda-
gogy" has been a collective process; many
have contributed to it since the pioneering
work by Bawole and Gittis in the 1960s:
among others, Bourdieu, Connell, Giroux,
Willis and, to a very substantial extent,
Michael Apple. This is his fourth book on
the subject, and his own thinking has
gradually become less economistic and re-
ductive, more able to deal with the com-
plexities of economic and cultural factors,
with forces of resistance as well as forces of
domination. In a sense this present work,
for me at least, sums up where the disci-
pline itself is at the present time. It shows
both what has been achieved and some of
the weaknesses of contemporary Marxist
thought about education.

The paradigm in critical pedagogy
draws on both "structural" and "cultural"
Marxism. Apple and others rely on a great
extent on the synthesis of these created by
such British Marxists as Stuart Hall and the
work done in recent decades at the Centre
for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Bir-
mingham, England.

Critical pedagogues insist that educa-
tion has to be seen relationally. It is not
an isolated domain but is created out of
the economic, political and cultural conflicts
that have emerged historically in a given
country. Our schools are a product of capi-
talism, which has to be understood to be
not only an economic system but, as a
form of life, "a structured totality." A capi-
talist society is built out of "constantly
changing and contradictory sets of inter-
connections among the economic, politi-
cal and cultural spheres." Education is part
of the "cultural sphere" but it is also deeply
influenced by the overall power relations in
society; by class, gender and race relations.
It tends to reproduce these relations through curri-
culum and pedagogic styles, which them-
selves are influenced by economic and
political considerations. However, this is
not a simple, mechanical process. Schools
are sites where the status quo is both re-
produced and struggled against. As teach-
ers, students and parents, "classed, gen-
ered and raced" subjects also play a role
in trying to shape the educational process,
trying to get it to reflect their needs and
priorities. Teachers struggle for more au-
tonomy from the state in matters of cur-
rriculum and pedagogy; students show
both active and passive resistance, creating
"discipline" problems and "dropout prob-
lems." Culturally diverse communities de-
mand more to say about what is being
taught and how the specific needs of their
children should be met. Thus schools, like
the rest of society, are fraught with strife,
both actively and passively, the dominant
order and its agenda.

Critical pedagogy stresses, then, that
schools have their own specific politics.
While these may be tied to and restricted
by class relations and the economy, they
also have their "relative autonomy." It is
therefore both possible and worthwhile to
examine specific issues that are of con-
cern to schools today. This is what Apple
does in Teachers and Texts, which focuses
on the effect that Reagan's economic and
social policies have had on American
schools. He argues that eight years of con-
servative rule have created proletarianized
teachers, a cautious curriculum, and a dis-
piloted school system with a narrow trade-
school mentality.

Teachers have become proletarianized,
because their work has been restructured
similarly to industrial and clerical work in
earlier periods. Increasingly, the control
over curriculum and teaching methods
has been taken out of the hands of teach-
ers and imposed from above, by school
administrators and state officials. As edu-
cation budgets are cut, the teachers' work
also becomes more intense, which adds
to the erosion of their status as "profes-
sionals." They have larger classes and less
time for either self-improvement or for
developing programmes which stir creative
activity and imagination. Both proletarianization
and intensification have had important
effects on the curriculum as well. The text-
book publishers have rushed in to provide
material that satisfies both the administra-
tors' desire for tighter control and the
teachers' need to simplify their programs,
because of intolerable workloads. Text-
books have evolved into "curriculum sys-
tems" in which "goals, strategies, tests,
textbooks, workbooks, appropriate student
response" are all integrated. As a conse-
quence, "little is left to the teacher's dis-
cretion as the state becomes even more in-
trusive into the kind of knowledge that
must be taught, the end products and
goals of the teaching, and the way in
which it is carried on." Apple stresses that
gender is also a factor in the growing regen-
eration of schools. The long tradition of
sexual division of labour in schools — female teachers, male
administrators — means that patriarchy
as well as class offer mechanisms of social
control. Many school boards have been
able to maintain more effective bureau-
cratic control over curriculum and teach-
ing practices by structuring jobs to take
advantage of sex role stereotypes or
women's supposed responsiveness to rules of
male authority and men's presumed
ability to manage women. Even when
teachers resist the top-down hierarchy and
regeneration, it often becomes "gendered resis-
tance," which may have "contadicto-
ry" results. Apple found in interviewing
female elementary school teachers that
they often expressed their reservations
about highly structured and tested
reading programs by insisting that it was
more important for them to make chil-
dren "feel good" than to teach them skills,
thus falling back on the traditional notion
that it is women's role to provide emo-
tional security: "while these teachers
rightly fight on a cultural level against

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what they perceive to be the ill-effects of their loss of control...they do so at the expense of rethinking categories that partly reproduce other divisions which have so historically grown out of patriarchical relations.

The political economy of publishing further contributes towards a cautious, status quo-oriented curriculum. In the United States the production costs of school texts are such that, for every $500,000 invested in publishing a text, 100,000 copies have to be sold just to break even. As textbooks need government approval before they can be purchased by individual schools, the publishers have to be tuned into the increasingly conservative sensibilities of state bureaucrats to survive.

In discussing the long-term trends in education, Apple stresses that they are influenced by what is happening in other spheres, particularly in the economy. The forces of capital are restructuring the American economy. An international division of labour is being created, in which unskilled jobs and low-wage areas on the globe and the home economy turning into a "service" economy. Broadly speaking, this means skilled jobs for the minority who are producing information and information processing devices and unskilled jobs for the majority who have a choice between very simply clerical work or selling goods and services.

This restructuring has also generated a debate among the American ruling elites about the role of the schools. The 1980s have produced two major education reports by blue ribbon task forces, the liberal The Paideia Proposal and the conservative A Nation at Risk, and a great deal of hand-wringing in the media about the "problems" of the American school system. Both reports are part of the renewed emphasis on "getting back to the basics" and the stress on "excellence" and "discipline" in the classrooms. The Paideia Proposal, which represents the views of the academic and intellectual establishment, has actually made one startling and potentially progressive recommendation: the elimination of all tracking or streaming from American schools. However, Apple judges, probably correctly, that in the ongoing debate on education the liberal humanists have lost power to the business elite and the extreme right: The Paideia Proposal will make a small ripple in a big pond where the waves are now being made by capital and the state. A Nation at Risk, which represents a broader constituency of business and government, is more concerned with bringing the educational system more closely in line with the needs of the corporate sector.

Apple makes some somber predictions about the future of American public schools. He believes that inequalities will increase. At the same time, schools will be scapegoated: teachers and curriculum will be blamed for social and economic problems over which they have no control. Schools will become dangerously narrow in their scope, stunning liberal arts and education for citizenship and concentrating on disembodied technical skills and workplace dispositions. And teachers will gradually become as tightly controlled as workers in stores, factories and offices. Teachers and Texts succeeds in situating the current malaise of the American school system in the context of larger shifts in the economy and body politic. It is somewhat less successful in showing how the schools might also have their "relative autonomy": what is mostly being discussed are the "effects" of these larger forces. Like many radical pedagogues, Apple is also more effective in developing a "language of critique" than a "language of possibility." While he devotes a few obligatory pages in the last chapter to an "alternative" proposal for organizing schools, his heart is not in it. If anything, he tends to worry about left utopianism in relation to possible "resistance" in schools, be it by teachers, parents or students. He warns us that "possibilities must be grounded in an utromantic appraisal of the circumstances in which we find ourselves" and quotes with approval a stern admonition by Stuart Hall: "The task of critical theory is to produce as accurate a knowledge of complex social processes as the complexity of their functioning requires. It is not its task to console the left by producing simple but satisfying myths, distinguished only by their super-left wing credentials."

Nobody should encourage foolishly optimism about turning the schools around in Republican America (or Conservative Canada, for that matter). Still, a radical critique without a utopian vision at its centre remains politically inert. This is the main problem I have with the bulk of "critical pedagogy." It is ironic that it has borrowed much of its theoretical equipment - terms such as "hegemony" and "resistance" - from a thinker-activist who, under much bleaker circumstances, was able to keep the task of social transformation at the centre of his thought: Antonio Gramsci. Every page of his Prison Notebooks is dedicated by one concern: how do we build a counter-hegemonic culture which is popular and broadly-based? Critical pedagogy, while often referring to Gramsci, seems to have retreated from this concern, or perhaps given it up as hopeless. And yet "transformative" educational practices can be found both inside and outside the school system both in the United States and Canada: In "alternative" schools, in the classrooms of individual "inner-city" teachers, in the curriculum initiatives by progressive publishers. Radical pedagogues like Apple, who are explicitly committed to "understanding the world in order to change it," need to write more out of these counter-hegemonic practices, reminding their readers forcefully that more liberating forms of education and social practice are not only possible but practised in these-and-then some. Otherwise, this often brilliant and incisive critique will continue to resonate only in the Halls of Academe.

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