

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
New York: Routledge, 1988, 259 pp.

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 corner 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 essays 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 fulfil its promise to be a "political economy of class and gender relations in education." What it does offer is a rather complex model for thinking about the subject and some commentary on current topics which show how the discourse of "critical pedagogy" can be applied.

Developing a Marxist "critical pedagogy" has been a collective process; many have contributed to it since the pioneering work by Bowles and Gintis 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 economist and reductive, more able to deal with the complexities 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 discipline 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 to 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 Birmingham, England.

Critical pedagogues insist that education 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 capitalism, which has to be understood to be not only an economic system but, as a form of life, "a structured totality." A capitalist society is built out of "constantly changing and contradictory sets of interconnections among the economic, political 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 curriculum and pedagogic styles, which themselves are influenced by economic and political considerations. However, this is not a simple, mechanical process. Schools are sites where the status quo is both reproduced and struggled against. As teachers, students and parents, "classed, gendered 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 autonomy from the state in matters of curriculum and pedagogy; students show both active and passive resistance, creating "discipline" problems and "dropout problems;" culturally diverse communities demand 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, as members of subordinate groups resist, 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 concern to schools today. This is what Apple does in *Teachers and Texts*, which focusses on the effect that Reagan's economic and social policies have had on American schools. He argues that eight years of conservative rule have created proletarianized teachers, a cautious curriculum, and a dispirited 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 teachers and imposed from above, by school administrators and state officials. As education budgets are cut, the teachers' work also becomes more *intensified*, which adds to the erosion of their status as "professionals." They have larger classes and less time for either self-improvement or for developing programmes which stress creativity and imagination. Both *proletarianization* and *intensification* have had important effects on the curriculum as well. The textbook publishers have rushed in to provide material that satisfies both the administrators' desire for tighter control and the teachers' need to simplify their programs, because of intolerable workloads. Textbooks have evolved into "curriculum systems" in which "goals, strategies, tests, textbooks, worksheets, appropriate student response" are all integrated. As a consequence, "little is left to the teacher's discretion as the state becomes even more intrusive into the kind of knowledge that must be taught, the end products and goals of that teaching, and the way in which it is carried on."

Apple stresses that *gender* is also a factor in the growing regimentation 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 bureaucratic control over curriculum and teaching practices by structuring jobs to take advantage of sex role stereotypes of 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 regimentation, it often becomes "gendered resistance," which may have "contradictory" results. Apple found in interviewing female elementary school teachers that they often expressed their reservations about highly structured and test-based reading programs by insisting that it was more important for them to make children "feel good" than to teach them skills, thus falling back on the traditional notion that it is women's role to provide emotional security: "while these teachers rightly fight on a cultural level against

what they perceive to be the ill-effects of their loss of control...they do so at the expense of reinstating categories that partly reproduce other divisions which have historically grown out of patriarchic 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, with industrial jobs moving to 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 vastly simplified 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 classroom. *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, shunning 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 unromantic 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 foolhardy optimism about turning the schools around in Republican Amerika (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 animated 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 hopelessly romantic. 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 the here-and-now. Otherwise, this often brilliant and incisive critique will continue to resonate only in the Halls of Academe.

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