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Rightist gains and critical scholarship

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ABSTRACT
In this essay, I first discuss where the article “Doing Things the ‘Right’ Way” that was published in this journal in 2005 fits into my corpus of work. In many ways, it represents a coming together of the various influences that have continued to form me over the nearly five decades I have been engaged in critically examining the relationship between educational theories, policies and practices, and differential power. Like many others, my work has been guided by two major goals: understanding and interrupting dominance. This has required that we become more nuanced in our critical analyses of the dynamics of power and the agents who wield it and that we not be satisfied with simplistic slogans that may be effective for rallying opposition but are much less effective at determining tactics and spaces of possibility. Thus, my aim is not only to both grasp and counter dominant policies and practices, but also to engage in fraternal criticism of what I take to be overly simplistic work by some parts of the Left as well. Given the increasing power of neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist and new managerial policies in education and the larger society, I next critically examine how and why the Right is ascendant. Finally, I detail a range of crucial tasks in which the critical scholar/activist in education should engage if we are to respond to these conditions in politically and ethically robust ways.

Understanding the “Right”

To begin these reflections, let me say something about where the article “Doing Things the ‘Right’ Way” that was published in this journal (Apple 2005) fits into my corpus of work. In many ways, it represents a coming together of the various influences that have continued to form me over the nearly five decades I have been engaged in critically examining the relationship between educational theories, policies and practices, and differential power. These influences have led me from: largely neo-Marxist analyses of social and cultural reproduction that were influenced by Gramsci, Williams and Althusser and by concepts such as hegemony and over-determination; to an (unromantic) emphasis on agency and on the politics and economics of cultural production; to treatments of teachers’ work and lives; to an enlargement of political and cultural struggles to complement (but definitely not abandon) my original focus on class; and more recently to sustained critical analyses of how powerful movements and alliances can radically shift the relationship between educational...
policies and practices and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society, but not in a direction that any of us would find ethically or politically justifiable. All of these efforts over the years have been grounded in a sense of the significance of cultural as well as political/economic struggles and of the crucial place that schools, curricula, teachers and communities play in these struggles (see, for example, Apple 2013b).

Like many others, my work has been guided by two major goals: understanding and interrupting dominance. This has required that we become more nuanced in our critical analyses of the dynamics of power and the agents who wield it and that we not be satisfied with simplistic slogans that may be effective for rallying opposition but are much less effective at determining tactics and spaces of possibility. Thus, my aim is not only to both grasp and counter dominant policies and practices, but also to engage in fraternal criticism of what I take to be overly simplistic work by some parts of the Left as well.

For example, all too much of the existing literature in critical education and “critical pedagogy” has been overly rhetorical. It is almost as if the realities of actual schools and actual policies might serve as a threat to theoretical purity. Powerful theory is important of course. But it is most influential when it is organically connected to the “stuff” of schools, political and pedagogical actions, and the lives of individuals and groups trying to deal with the ways in which a socially critical democracy is contested, and connected as well to the victories and sometime painful losses that accompany these actions.

One of the most important things we must face, however, is the fact that while we need to be optimistic about the possibility of creating lasting transformations (see, for example, Williams 1961, 1989), we should not be romantic. It is very evident all around us that critically democratic educators and progressive movements and community members are not the only individuals and groups who are acting on this terrain. Indeed, as I demonstrate in “Doing Things the ‘Right’ Way” and at much greater length in Educating the “Right” Way (2006), a complex alliance of forces including neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populist religious movements and new managerial regimes of authority is also working hard to change education so that it meets their own needs, often with considerable success. Thus, it has become ever clearer that the rightist alliance has been radically transforming the means and ends of education and how education plays a significant role in larger social and ideological transformations. Education has been a key component in its strategy.

In essence, there is an ongoing contest over different versions of “democracy”.”Thick” understandings of democracy that seek to provide full collective participation in the search for the common good and the creation of critical citizens are up against “thin” market-oriented versions of consumer choice, possessive individualism and an education that is valued largely as a tool for meeting a set of limited economic needs. This has important implications for those of us who are committed to more robust forms of democracy and for an education that is richer in its visions of what education is for. It demonstrates how important it is to understand how and why the Right is winning in so many places and sectors and how it has become increasingly influential in the struggle over common sense. In more fully understanding this process, it is crucial that our work is informed by Antonio Gramsci’s (and later Stuart Hall’s) insights that social consciousness should not be seen as “false” but as contradictory, as having elements of both good and bad sense. Dominant groups work assiduously to attach themselves to the elements of good sense that people possess to bring them under the leadership of dominant groups and their understandings of the world. As I sought to show, the success of this ideological project is in essence the result of a large social/
pedagogic project, a project we have much to learn from if we are to counter it. Brexit in Britain, Macri in Argentina, Trump in the USA, Duterte in the Philippines, Le Pen in France, Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary and the list could go further – all of these document how significant it is to listen carefully to the ways in which hegemonic and populist and quasi-populist movements take centre stage.

In many ways, these movements have had effects that have gone beyond what I detailed in the original article. Some of the policies that are currently being proposed at many levels of education in the United States even test the boundaries of our imagination. Perhaps the most notable is embodied in the legislation that the conservative state legislature in Texas has passed allowing people to carry concealed weapons into buildings and classrooms on the campuses of public universities. Similar legislation has been passed or proposed in other states. In another important conservative intervention, this time at the level of what counts as “official knowledge” in elementary and secondary schools, the state of Arizona has established and enforced policies that have prohibited curricula and teaching that are organised around “ethnic studies”. Even though such ethnic studies programmes have been demonstrated to be successful for minoritised students along a wide array of goals, for the Right such programmes “promote racial animosity”. This reminds us that the Right, and especially its populist elements, are almost always anti-pluralist. They ground their actions in a claim that “they and they alone represent the people” and that those who do not support them, and/or are seen as the “other”, are “not part of the people at all” (Muller 2016, 3). When anti-immigrant and racist nativist movements are added to the mix here, this gives these tendencies increased importance. In this way, what was unsayable and undoable before has increasingly become both sayable and doable.

Focusing on such instances and tendencies is crucial, since they represent parts of the successful strategies employed by rightist groups. Thus, let us remember that these are often part of a more or less coherent set of tactics. They should remind us that in our efforts to understand what the Right does and why it has been successful, we cannot only focus on larger arenas. Often the Right acts at the local as well as the national level. In essence, the Right has understood Gramsci’s claim that exercising leadership depends not only on what he called a war of manoeuvre, but also a war of position (see, for example, Gramsci 2011; Sassoon 1988). That is, rather than a frontal assault focusing only on, say, national and international economic institutions and policies, dominant groups employ tactics based on a recognition that everything counts at all levels. Simultaneous struggles within cultural institutions, the media, health care, education and so much more, all are crucial. The task is to coordinate these struggles so that they push the common sense of a society in the desired directions.

This is one of the major reasons that in more recent analyses, I and my colleagues have gone further in our focus on the local dynamics of rightist interventions and the resistances to them. We argue that there is a growing need to not only pay close attention to large-scale conflicts over educational policy such as privatisation and marketisation at state and national levels, but just as importantly to think carefully about seemingly “small-scale” radically neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist and new managerial changes that are occurring at the local level as well (Gunter, Hall, and Apple 2017; Schirmer and Apple 2016). These seemingly small-scale conflicts can teach us a good deal about the ways in which the various elements of the rightist alliance work to gain consent and control. Just as importantly, they also provide a laboratory to explore how to develop appropriate strategies to interrupt them,
since it is often at the local level that there are continuing successes in such interruptions (Schirmer and Apple, forthcoming).

I could go on at much greater length detailing the latest gains that the Right has made – the curriculum conflicts, the delegitimising of teacher unions, the recent appointment of a Secretary of Education in the United States who is a billionaire who supports radical privatisation of schools and wants to use education to hasten the creation of the “Kingdom of God”, and so much more. The list is depressingly extensive both nationally and internationally.1 But I want to use the rest of this brief article to urge critical scholars to not limit themselves to describing the Right’s gains. We must do more. Let me say more about this.

**What is to be done**

With the Right now increasingly ascendant in so many nations of the world, how this was done and learning from it is indeed crucial – but it is not sufficient. “Doing Things the ‘Right’ Way” and the larger book on which it was based (Apple 2006) left largely unanswered an issue that is increasingly central to our work. Given the growth of the Right in so many places, what can we do? And just as importantly, who is the “we”? This is what has taken up much of my attention in the decade since the publication of “Doing Things the ‘Right’ Way”.

Perhaps this is best represented in Can Education Change Society? (Apple 2013a), a book that acts as a logical extension of the article and Educating the “Right” Way (Apple 2006). In the more recent book and in articles that extend it, I give detailed examples of interruptive work both in the past and now and examine a number of the conditions and movements that generated them. In the process, I argue for an even more activist role on the part of educators. I enumerate a range of tasks in which critically democratic educators should engage as “public intellectuals” in supporting and participating in these movements.

In the process, I argue for a policy of what I call decentred unity – a substantive and much more inclusive expansion of the “we” – and for an expansion of the groups who can act as our teachers of tactics of interruption (see, for example, Fraser 1997). Such expansion is even more crucial today if we are to more fully participate in building answers to the question of “what is to be done?” In suggesting the roles that we need to play in this, in the remaining part of these reflections here I want to restate some of the arguments about the work of the scholar/activist that I have made in the work that came after “Doing Things the ‘Right’ Way” (Apple 2010, 2013a).

The more recent material draws upon what Michael Burawoy has called “organic public sociology”, arguing that this model provides key elements of how we might think about ways of dealing with a politics of interruption. In his words, but partly echoing Gramsci as well, the critical sociologist (and in my mind, the critical education scholar/activist):

works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counter-public. [She or he works] with a labor movement, neighborhood association, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations. Between the public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education … The project of such [organic] public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life. (Burawoy 2005, 265)

In general, there are nine tasks in which critical analysis (and the critical analyst) in education must engage.
(1) It must “bear witness to negativity”. That is, one of its primary functions is to illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination – and to struggles against such relations – in the larger society.

(2) In engaging in such critical analyses, it also must point to contradictions and to *spaces of possible action*. Thus, its aim is to critically examine current realities with a conceptual/political framework that emphasises the spaces in which more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions can, or do, go on. This is an absolutely crucial step, since otherwise our research can simply lead to cynicism or despair.

(3) At times, this also requires a broadening of what counts as “research”. Here I mean acting as critical “secretaries” to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power (Apple 2012; see also Apple and Beane 2007; Apple, Au, and Gandin 2009). Some examples of this kind of work are worth noting. The first is “Community of Research on Excellence for All” (CREA), an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Barcelona. It is a model of how to build a research agenda and then create policies and programmes that empower those who are economically and culturally marginalised in our societies. The second is the deeply committed work carried out by Kathleen Lynch and her colleagues and students at the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice at University College, Dublin. Although some of its counter-hegemonic programmes have recently been under attack, it too has been at the centre of research and action that stresses not only poverty and inequality, but movements towards equality. There are of course many other programmes that can give us hope. For example, in the process of illuminating the role of the arts in promoting community and social justice in Finland, the ArtsEqual research project and a number of the researchers affiliated with it have documented important examples of on-the-ground counter-hegemonic successes, while extensively broadening our understanding of who the “we” are (see, for example, Kallio 2016; Laes 2017).

Yet again, documenting these gains still requires that we continue to be unromantic, to be fully cognisant that we are not the only actors on this terrain and that it is not necessarily the case that “thick” visions of democracy will prevail. Given this, we need to better understand what actually happens when these distinctly different ideas about democracy confront each other in schools and communities. Thus, it is important to again be deeply honest that this is a time when rightist ideological visions, assumptions and commitments are powerfully present, are well-funded and increasingly have become core parts of the prevailing common sense in so many nations of the world. In a social context such as this, certain questions become even more essential. When victories are indeed won, can these thicker forms of critically democratic education remain true to their values and principles? Can they last? What does the reality of this “democracy” look like? What forces are at work to challenge it? What compromises have been made? And what can we learn from these conflicts and compromises? These questions are complicated, but documenting answers to them are of great significance right now, something I and my colleagues are continuing to do (see, for example, Meshulam and Apple 2014; Gandin and Apple 2012; Liu and Apple 2016; Schirmer and Apple 2016; see especially Apple et al. forthcoming).
(4) When Gramsci (2011) argued that one of the tasks of a truly counter-hegemonic education was not to throw out “elite knowledge” but to reconstruct its form and content so that it served genuinely progressive social needs, he provided a key to another role “organic” and “public” intellectuals might play. Thus, we should not be engaged in a process of what might be called “intellectual suicide.” That is, there are serious intellectual (and pedagogic) skills in dealing with the histories and debates surrounding the epistemological, political and educational issues involved in justifying what counts as important knowledge and what counts as an effective and socially just education. These are not simple and inconsequential issues and the practical and intellectual/political skills of dealing with them have been well developed. However, they can atrophy if they are not used. We can give back these skills by employing them to assist communities in thinking about this, learning from them and engaging in the mutually pedagogic dialogues that enable decisions to be made in terms of both the short-term and long-term interests of the dispossessed.

(5) In the process, critical work has the task of keeping traditions of radical and progressive work alive. In the face of organised attacks on the “collective memories” of difference and critical social movements, attacks that make it increasingly difficult to retain academic and social legitimacy for multiple critical approaches that have proven so valuable in countering dominant narratives and relations, it is absolutely crucial that these traditions be kept alive, renewed and when necessary criticised for their conceptual, empirical, historical and political silences or limitations. This includes not only keeping theoretical, empirical, historical and political traditions alive but, very importantly, extending and (supportively) criticising them. And it also involves keeping alive the dreams, utopian visions and “non-reformist reforms” that are so much a part of these radical traditions (Apple, Au, and Gandin 2009; Apple, Ball, and Gandin 2010).

(6) Keeping such traditions alive and also supportively criticising them when they are not adequate to deal with current realities cannot be done unless we ask “for whom are we keeping them alive?” and “how and in what form are they to be made available?” All of the things I have mentioned above in this taxonomy of tasks require the relearning or development and use of varied or new skills of working at many levels with multiple groups. Thus, journalistic and media skills, academic and popular skills, and the ability to speak to very different audiences are increasingly crucial (Apple 2006; Boler 2008). This requires us to learn how to speak in different registers and to say important things in ways that do not require that the audience or reader do all of the work.

(7) Critical educators must also act in concert with the progressive social movements their work supports or in movements against the rightist assumptions and policies they critically analyse. This is another reason that scholarship in critical education implies becoming an “organic” or “public” intellectual. One must participate in and give one’s expertise to movements surrounding movements to transform both a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition. It also implies learning from these social movements (Anyon 2014; see also Bourdieu 2000; Eagleton 2011).

(8) Building on the points made in the previous paragraph, the critical scholar/activist has another role to play. She or he needs to act as a deeply committed mentor, as someone who demonstrates through her or his life what it means to be both an
excellent researcher and a committed member of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities. She or he needs to show how one can blend these two roles together in ways that may be tense, but still embody the dual commitments to exceptional and socially committed research and participating in movements whose aim is interrupting dominance. It should be obvious that this must be fully integrated into one’s teaching as well.

(9) Finally, participation also means using the privilege one has as a scholar/activist. That is, each of us needs to make use of one’s privilege to open the spaces at universities and elsewhere for those who are not there, for those who do not now have a voice in that space and in the “professional” sites to which, being in a privileged position, you have access. This can be seen, for example, in the history of the “activist-in-residence” programme at the University of Wisconsin Havens Center for Social Justice, where committed activists in various areas (the environment, indigenous rights, housing, labour, racial disparities, education and so on) were brought in to teach and to connect our academic work with organised action against dominant relations. Or it can be seen in a number of Women’s Studies programmes and Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nation Studies programmes that historically have involved activists in these communities as active participants in the governance and educational programmes of these areas at universities.

This list is of course only a beginning and needs to be constantly expanded. And none of the activities will be easy. All will involve personal and academic risks as the “we” gets larger and more inclusive and as the struggles for alternative forms of sociality and the building of the institutional conditions that support them continue and the spaces of interruption widen.

Having said this, however, in the end this makes one more analytic and political issue even more critical. We need nuanced and substantive ways of judging the potential of the emerging alternatives to neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist and new managerial policies and practices. Are we going in the right (not the Right) direction? There will be – and must be – disagreements on this. Such debates are the engine of further democratisation. Yet, thoughtful criteria to judge the potential and effects of more radical plans in education, in the state, in the economy and in civil society have been articulated. As I have said elsewhere (Apple 2016), perhaps one of the best places to start is in Eric Olin Wright’s very detailed treatment of such criteria in his book *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Wright 2010). While Wright’s analysis is not as powerful on issues of race and gender as it might be, it is still a major contribution to the development of a more responsive set of critically democratic alternatives. His discussion of how to judge the value, processes and effects of more substantive and radical economic, political and cultural projects and assemblages is a welcome addition to the debates about whether our answers to the question of “what is to be done?” do indeed provide lasting interruptions of dominant forms.

There is so much more I would like to say. But perhaps we should give the final word in these reflections to someone who was so very important to my own development, Raymond Williams. On the last page of one of his final books, Williams concludes with the following: “We must speak for hope, as long as it doesn’t mean suppressing the nature of the danger” (Williams 1989, 322). To which I can only add “Yes”.
Note

1. We need to be cautious of assuming that these rightist movements are all the same. For example, neoliberalism needs to be seen as plural. It is not one thing, nor does it have the exact same effects in every site. Much depends on the nature of the state, on the history of social movements, on the balance of social forces over time and similar things. On the issue of the state and neoliberal educational policies, see, for example, Lim and Apple (2016).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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