

REVIEW ESSAY

Rhetoric and reality in critical educational studies in the United States

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The shame of the nation: the restoration of apartheid schooling in America

Jonathan Kozol, 2005

New York, Crown

Radical possibilities: public policy, urban education, and a new social movement

Jean Anyon, 2005

New York, Routledge

Class reunion: the remaking of the American white working class

Lois Weis, 2005

New York, Routledge

Critical pedagogy and race

Zeus Leonardo, 2005

Malden, MA, Blackwell

Rhetoric and reality

In 1996 in this journal, I wrote an essay analyzing the various tendencies within critical sociology of education in the United States (Apple, 1996). I pointed to the difficulties involved in trying to establish a coherent picture, given the loss of a central narrative that organized 'leftist' work. Rather, there were now a variety of approaches and a larger set of relations of exploitation and domination that had come to the fore in critical sociology of education. I also worried aloud that a situation had been created in which some postmodernisms and poststructuralisms had positioned themselves as total replacements for Marxist and neo-Marxist theories and more structural accounts. This was definitely not something with which I agreed. Instead of such a 'replacement' strategy, I argued instead that both sets of approaches were crucial and

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that the wisest thing one could do was to let these different and partly incommensurable approaches ‘rub against each other’. Where ‘the sparks fly’ in that tense, but productive, relation is where progress will be made. Finally, I pointed to the work of people who were trying to bridge the gap among these traditions, including, for example, Stuart Hall and my own more Gramscian inspired efforts (see, for example, Morley & Chen, 1996; Apple, 2000; Apple *et al.*, 2003; Apple 2006).

One of the things I predicted was a return to more traditional Marxist approaches, but with the loss of subtlety. Bowles and Gintis (1976) look-alikes, but without their knowledge of economics, would return. Unfortunately, part of this is now coming true. For example, there seems to be a loss of many of the gains that had been made in our understanding of the complexities of class relations within the state and between the state and civil society—as if Althusser, Poulantzas, Jessop, Dale and others had never written anything of importance. The immensely productive material on the relationship between ideology and identity, on the relationship among culture, identity and political economy, on the crucial impact of politics and on the power of social movements that cut across class lines, as well as a number of other issues, is now seen by some to be either a rejection of key tenets of the Marxist *traditions* (the plural is absolutely crucial here). Or these advances are said to deal with epiphenomenal concerns.

On both sides of the Atlantic, a small group of people have mounted attacks on these advances in the name of purifying ‘the’ Marxist tradition of the taint of culturalism and of the sin of worrying too much about, say, gender and race at the expense of class. The British version of this simply does not understand the history of the United States and the salience of race as a relatively autonomous and extraordinarily powerful dynamic in the construction and maintenance of its relations of exploitation and domination. Like Britain, in the United States there are indeed crucial reasons to deal absolutely seriously with class and the materialities of capitalist relations. Yet at times, this aim of purification also feels a bit like posturing, almost as an attempt to situate oneself in a space that says ‘look at how radical I seem.’ Yet such radicalism at times also seems to treat the realities of schools and other cultural and educational sites and the struggles over them simply rhetorically. It is as if this particular version of Marxism floats in the air above the material and ideological realities of the object of its analysis—education.

This is puzzling to me, since one would have thought that a truly radical epistemological and political position would be fully grounded in a fundamentally reflexive relationship with the institutions it is supposedly about. Certainly, this was Marx’s position. Schools, teachers, students, parents, community activist groups, curricula, testing, and the list could go on—all of these are shunned as if they were forms of pollution that might dirty the pristine discussion of the social relations of production and class antagonisms. Let me hasten to stress that critical discussions of the social relations of production and of class antagonism are crucial. No critical analysis can be complete without them. But they should be directly connected to something—the *specifics* of such things as the labor process of teachers, the neoliberal and neoconservative restructuring of our institutions of education, the racialization of educational policy and practice,

the politics of official and popular knowledge, the complex and contradictory effects of globalizations (there are different processes, not a single process, at work here) on the ground, and so on. Theory is best done when it is about such things, not when it is waving one reading of not very carefully selected texts from Marx's vast writings like an iconic talisman floating above the actual struggles both inside and connected to education.

Perhaps I am more sensitive than most to these issues. As a former president of a teachers union, as someone who has been deeply involved in anti-capitalist and anti-military struggles over education in a number of nations, as someone who has worked in anti-racist battles much of my life (with arrests that go with all of these things)—and even more significantly personally, as the father of a Black child myself—I have more than a few worries about the reduction of politics and its accompanying organic intellectual work to rhetorical activity.

It has become something of a truism in the literature in analytic philosophy that language does and can do many things, all of them valuable. It can be used to describe, explain, control, critique, legitimate, affiliate and mobilize (Austin, 1962; see also Wittgenstein, 1963). Rhetorical language is associated with legitimation, affiliation and mobilization; but it is often a poor tool for the other tasks that language must perform. And the tasks of critical educational analysis are multiple.

The tasks of critical work

In general, there are four tasks in which critical analysis in education must engage. 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 in the larger society.

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 emphasizes the spaces in which counter-hegemonic actions can be or are now going on.

At times, this also requires a redefinition of what counts as 'research.' Here I mean acting as 'secretaries' to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power or in what elsewhere I have called 'non-reformist reforms' (Apple, 1995).

In the process, critical work has the task of keeping traditions of radical work alive. In the face of organized attacks on the 'collective memories' of difference and struggle, 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, criticized for their conceptual, empirical, historical and political silences or limitations. This includes not only keeping theoretical, empirical, historical and political traditions alive—and very importantly as I just noted, extending and (supportively) criticizing them—but it also involves keeping alive the dreams,

utopian visions and ‘non-reformist reforms’ that are so much a part of them (see, for example, Teitelbaum, 1993; Jacoby, 2005).

Sometimes bearing witness can take the form of story-telling and critical journalism. The narrative tradition of story-telling has played a large role in the development of critical race theory, for example (see, for example, Williams, 1991). Critical journalism has also been powerfully evocative and is often the grounding on which more radical research stands. Jonathan Kozol’s book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, offers a prime example of this genre. I include it in this essay both because of its very power in picturing negativity and because of its influence in helping to set the stage for more disciplined explanatory analyses.

The book’s subtitle speaks eloquently to its topic—how the dynamics of race and class intersect with the political economy of capitalism and its accompanying neo-liberal and neo-conservative educational policies. The United States is not only a classed and gendered state, but it is also structurally a profoundly raced and racializing state. As Mills (1997) has documented, underpinning most ‘liberal’ democratic theories is a racial contract. And this racial contract is made manifest in the social, economic and educational policies that are actually enacted and lived in nations such as, say, the United States, Britain, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, and many other nations (Apple *et al.*, 2003). The fact that the United States is now as racially segregated—and perhaps more so—as it was when segregation (apartheid) was legally enforced provides compelling evidence of Mills’ claim.

Kozol’s volume is written with justifiable indignation. It provides a richly textured picture of what life is like in the schools that are currently experiencing the effects of neoliberal and neoconservative economic and cultural attacks, of the restructuring of a state that has evacuated its social responsibilities, and of economically powerful groups who have refused to provide resources to pay for an education that would actually make a difference in the lives of the dispossessed. By recentering the relationship between race and class, and by getting inside the lives of children and teachers in real schools, Kozol reminds us as well what is at stake here. Formal theory may be absent, but unlike some of our ‘more advanced’ critical scholars and economic purifiers, he remembers what all of this is about—class and race apartheid as it is lived in real schools and real communities.

Critical social movements and education

A recognition of such apartheid conditions, especially in urban schools, is what grounds Jean Anyon’s recent book *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education and a New Social Movement*. The volume goes farther in describing and critiquing—and ultimately offering possibilities for mobilizing—than the powerful treatment found in Kozol, and certainly goes farther than the rhetorical flourishes I noted earlier.¹ A key phrase in this title is ‘a new social movement.’ Anyon recognizes something I too have argued at greater length elsewhere—that it is social movements that are the driving forces behind a good deal of social and educational transformation

(Apple, 2000). In my own case, I have directed much of my critical attention to the forces and movements behind current neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies, which, following Roger Dale (Dale 1989/90), I have called conservative modernization, for two reasons. First, whether we like it or not, these movements have been increasingly powerful in transforming our core ideas about democracy and citizenship. The social, economic and educational effects of the policies that have come from the Right often have been strikingly negative, especially for those who have the least in our own and other societies (Apple *et al.*, 2003; Apple, 2006; Apple & Buras, 2006).

Second, I think that we have much to learn from the forces of the Right. They have shown that it is possible to build an alliance of disparate groups and in the process to engage in a vast social and pedagogic project of changing a society's fundamental way of looking at rights and (in)justice. Radical policies that only a few years ago would have seemed outlandish and downright foolish are now accepted as commonsense. While we should not want to emulate their often cynical and manipulative politics, we still can learn a good deal from the Right about how movements for social change can be built across ideological differences. Capitalism (as well as the historical regimes surrounding race and gender, and the intersections and contradictions of these dynamics) plays a major part of the driving force behind these dynamics and movements, but saying that says very little about *why* people join rightist mobilizations and movements and how they might be convinced to join more progressive ones. This has been my agenda.

Whereas I have focused on critically understanding why the Right is winning and what we can learn from them, Jean Anyon shifts the focus powerfully. She directs our attention to the historical and current progressive mobilizations that have made a difference in society. She sets about examining the specifics of such social movements, documenting why and how they pushed this society, sometimes against great odds, toward a greater commitment to social justice.

While many of the movements examined in *Radical Possibilities* are concerned with economic justice and racial oppressions outside of education, Anyon also includes a number of others within cultural and educational institutions. In this, she understands what Nancy Fraser has taught us. Fraser (1997) reminds us that we can (analytically) distinguish two kinds of political movements: a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition. Neither is a substitute for the other. Both are crucial at this historic moment. Our task is to work on both simultaneously so that gains along one set of dynamics (class and the economy, for example) do not contradict and are not contradicted by the other set of dynamics (struggling for curricula and teaching that respond to oppressed groups' cultures, identities, and histories, for example). Of course, in the real world it is almost impossible to differentiate totally between redistributive movements and those involving recognition. For instance, African Americans and Latino/as suffer economic discrimination and levels of exploitation at a tragic rate. But this can more easily occur because of the history of racism and of being constructed as a category of 'despised others.' Thus, racism and a retrogressive politics of whiteness cohere with exploitative economic relations. As this book

demonstrates, schools can play crucial roles in raising critical questions about, and building movements to challenge, both the ways in which the economy now functions unequally and the ways in which the politics of race operates in every one of our institutions.

In the process of telling the stories of different kinds of movements, Anyon also shows how, by participating in political actions, new activist identities are formed by dispossessed groups at the same time as very real progress is made culturally, educationally, politically and economically (see Apple & Buras, 2006). But activist movements do not just help to transform economic, political, cultural and educational institutions and policies. They also have profound effects on other sympathetic organizations. Movements making what seem at the time to be utopian and radical demands historically have pushed more mainstream organizations along, creating a situation where they too must support fundamental changes in policies that are deeply discriminatory and harmful (Sewell, 2004).

Anyon is very honest about what is actually required to change schools. This is more than a little refreshing, since all too often we seem to be content with critical slogans, rather than examine what actually is possible and how we might bring these possibilities into existence in the real world of schools and communities. It is from this basis of honestly confronting the realities we face that *Radical Possibilities* is able to offer ways of engaging in and with schools and communities that have a much greater chance of making a difference in the long run.

Anyon's book highlights powerful coalitions involving anti-racist movements, class mobilizations and the central place of women activists in these struggles as well (see also Apple & Buras, 2006). She places the politics of race and class at the center. By in essence taking leadership from, say, Black mobilizations, she is able to highlight the ways in which movements against the classed and raced economy, the racial and racializing state, and in the politics of daily life create new collective and more powerful political identities that can challenge hegemonic racisms and class realities.

Racial realities and race and class intersections

In an earlier section, I highlighted the power of the racial structuring of education and so much of our societies, drawing on Mills' (1997) claim about a racial contract underlying many of the theories and practices underpinning 'our' economic, political and cultural policies. As a number of critical analysts have argued, one simply cannot understand the current fascination with neoliberal policies in education without placing racial dynamics and the creation both now and in the past of a series of 'despised others' as a core element in one's approach (see Apple *et al.*, 2003; McCarthy *et al.*, 2005; Apple, 2006). This is clear as well in Lois Weis's *Class Reunion: The Remaking of the American White Working Class*, a very illuminating treatment of the ways in which economic crises and changes in class relations work on and through—and then reconstitute and are reconstituted by—relatively autonomous dynamics of race and class.

Of course, the concept of 'relative autonomy' is simply a place marker for what has to be described more fully, something that Weis attempts to do in a theoretically and

empirically nuanced manner. Her focus is on the white working class in a deindustrializing area. Weis self-consciously directs her attention to the *white* working class. She understands that the white working class gets its self-understanding as well as its structural location from the intersections between the class and race divisions of labor nationally and internationally. By taking us inside the homes of these groups and asking us to see the world through their eyes, she offers us a clear sense of the ideological transformations that have occurred as the economic restructuring of formerly robust working-class communities continues. Her explanatory framework also provides much needed insight and clarity into what are often muddled or again simply rhetorical analyses. Similar work needs to be done elsewhere.

The complex issues surrounding the intersections of class and race are one of the primary foci of Zeus Leonardo's edited collection, *Critical Pedagogy and Race*. This is one of the reasons it is a valuable piece of work. The contributors are largely from the United States, where analyses of race are sometimes more historically, empirically and theoretically advanced than in Britain—although David Gillborn's essay is a powerful statement of the ways in which more politically engaged understandings are now finding their ways into what are largely white-dominated institutions in the United Kingdom. The fact that, unlike some of the other contributors, Gillborn actually talks seriously about schools and actual policies harkens back to some of my earlier criticism of the tendencies toward disconnected analyses in some of this literature.

The volume is meant to be a contribution to the debate over 'critical pedagogy,' a concept whose meaning has been stretched so much that what it actually signifies is nearly impossible to ascertain unless one takes literally Wittgenstein's adage that the meaning of any concept can only be determined by its use. Leonardo's aim is to place questions of race at the heart of the discourse of critical pedagogy. As he says:

The book finds that the question of race has played a secondary role in the development of critical pedagogy and argues for a deeper engagement of it ... As a result, the place of race in critical pedagogy is established, problematized, and in the end enriched. (p. xi)

The individual chapters include such things as: critical race theory and the contributions of perspectives based on theories of Afrocentricity; the limits and possibilities of research on 'whiteness'; the politics of anti-racism in education and the realities of white supremacy; extensions of and debates with the historical legacy of Paulo Freire; arguments over the limits of Marxist understandings of race, on the one hand, and defenses of such understandings on the other; the ways in which academic forums and forms continually marginalize the experiences of people already marginalized by the relations of exploitation and domination in our societies; the implications of postcolonial political and cultural forms in interrupting dominance; and similar kinds of issues.

As with any collection, the contributions vary in strength. But all are certainly worth reading if one wants to get a sense of the kinds of debates that are currently emerging within and among the critical communities.

One of the key fault lines in the book is one I mentioned earlier—the debate over Marxism as a fully adequate account of relations of exploitation and domination. I

have some sympathy with those who claim that Marxisms (note again the plural) are central tools for analysis and for political commitments. But as I also mentioned, those white scholars who think that everything of central importance can be fully understood by somehow merging race as a set of historically determined and determining relations and realities into a relatively economic understanding of Marx—and here I must speak bluntly—risk practicing a form of whiteness themselves, a form that is based on a privileged position of being white in our societies.

Do not misunderstand me. I think that some of the rejections of Marxist understandings and politics among all too many ‘post’ academics are not based on an adequate reading of the vibrant traditions of Marxisms and neo-Marxisms. And certainly in the United States, where these traditions have played much less of a central place academically and politically than, say, Europe, a rebirth of (the best of) Marxist scholarship would be salutary. However, this said, there is a very real danger right now that the rejectionist impulses now being exhibited by some on the Left could deeply inhibit the development of what I have called the ‘decentered unities’ that are so essential to interrupt the coalition of rightist forces now so powerful in so many nations (Apple, 2006).

The fact that Leonardo’s edited book stimulates these kinds of responses says something about the quality of the book itself. That it has called forth from me the positions I have taken here means that it will probably do the same for others. This is the mark of a serious contribution.

Conclusion

There are many more books I could have discussed in this essay, but there is limited space. Critical traditions and critical research are alive and well in the United States. The tensions to which I have pointed signify not negativity, but the fact that the debates over appropriate theories, appropriate methods and appropriate politics are ongoing. In many ways this is to be welcomed. In the United States, the attacks on critical understanding—indeed, on any kind of social analysis that seeks to place education within its larger relations—have become part of official government policy to such an extent that in education increasingly only ‘medical model’ research can get funding from the federal government. This is coupled with a series of vicious attacks in the media on ‘radical academics’ who are ‘polluting’ the minds of our students at universities (Horowitz, 2006) and on progressive educators who are supposedly undermining the discipline and standards we so clearly need to compete internationally (Ravitch, 2005).²

I have pointed to a number of the multiple tasks in which critical work must engage and have warned about certain tendencies that I believe are less than helpful. But, having said this, we need to remind ourselves that critical educators and leftist movements have all too often engaged in such intense internal battles that the right can stand back and simply watch with joy. There is a famous adage that recognizes this history. ‘When the left organizes a firing squad, it lines up in a circle.’ Even with my public worries in this essay, in a time of neoliberal and neoconservative restructuring,

authoritarian populist religious conservative resurgence, and new managerialism's seemingly never-ending search for reductive and entrepreneurial forms of accountability, let us remember what is at stake and what the more important struggles involve. And let us not just deal with all of this rhetorically.

Notes

1. I need to openly state that a few of the books I mention in this essay, particularly the books by Anyon and Weis, are in a series that I edit. But since the task I was asked to take on in this essay was to give a sense of the state of critical work in the United States, and these books are important statements about this, I felt that to exclude them would have led to a major silence in such an account.
2. For example, see the debate between E. D. Hirsch Jr. and myself about exactly these issues in Ravitch (2005).

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