

## ESSAY REVIEW: A Marxist Critique of Michael Apple's Neo-Marxist Approach to Educational Reform<sup>1</sup>

Ramin Farahmandpur

### Abstract

*This essay review examines Apple's most recent work. It begins by providing a brief historical account of Marxist educational theory since the late 1970s. Next, it offers an analysis and a critique of a number of the theoretical underpinnings of Apple's neo-Marxist approach to educational reform. These include, among others, his interpretation of Gramsci's concept of the 'commonsense;' his employment of the 'decentered unity,' which he identifies as an counter-hegemonic alliance among progressive forces on the left; and finally, his notion of a 'dual strategy' for building alliances between progressive forces on the left and those on the Right. Finally, it provides an alternative Marxist framework to Apple's neo-Marxist approach to educational reform.*

Apple, Michael W. (2001). *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*. New York and London: Routledge/Falmer. Pp. 306 (paperback). ISBN 0-145-92462-6. \$23.95.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Marxist scholars in the field of sociology of education stood at a peculiar historical juncture (Rikowski, 1997). On the one hand, they were forced to withstand the New Right's onslaught—its single-minded, ruthless attacks on the welfare state—orchestrated by the aerosol figure of Ronald Reagan and his army of renegade storm troopers composed of Christian fundamentalists, corporate raiders, and Wall Street moguls. On the other hand, the United States, Japan, and Germany—the leading capitalist economies—vigorously enforced neoliberal social and economic reforms on Third World and developing countries as a short-term remedy to the deepening and widening structural crisis of global capitalism (Brenner, 1998).

Faced with the cynical intellectual mood overshadowing the late 1970s and the early 1980s, scores of Marxist and progressive scholars in the field of sociology of education joined the rank-and-file of the new wave of post-Marxists.<sup>2</sup> A noticeable segment of scholars in the field roundly dismissed Marxism as an 'outmoded' and unfashionable nineteenth and twentieth century meta-narrative, which had failed, for the most part, to account for the latest social and political trends associated with the so-called post-industrial consumer society. Instead, these scholars openly embraced what they claimed to be far more 'open-ended' and far less 'deterministic' radical sociological frameworks, which included, for example, theories associated with neo-Gramscianism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 1980s, and with the 'cultural turn' in full swing, a large number of Marxist scholars working in the field of sociology of education in North American and England joined the rank-and-file of such celebrated academic brigands as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jean-

Fransjos Lyotard, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, who ebulliently pronounced the death of Marxism<sup>4</sup>.

Concomitant with these social and political developments, over the last two decades Marxist and feminist scholars (see Lather, 1991, 1998) in the field of sociology of education, who retreated from a Marxist analysis of capitalist schooling, downplayed and in some cases, overlooked the significant role social class plays in maintaining and reproducing capitalist social relations of production. They did this largely by loosening the ties of social class from the ideological, political, and cultural contradictions of capitalism (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000 ).<sup>5</sup>

Seduced by the avant-garde overtures of postmodern, post-structural and cultural theories, a large segment of the Marxist and radical scholars truncated the political economy of schooling with their terse dismissal of class struggle as a central element of the project of social transformation (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000). At the same time as postmodern and post-structural theories infiltrated the field of sociology of education, other scholars on the left working in the precincts of cultural studies summarily dismissed the working class as the appointed agents of social change.<sup>6</sup> Most of the recent scholarly material produced by Marxist and progressive-minded scholars in education laboring in the field of political economy has been tainted by the work of post-Marxists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), exponents of ‘radical democracy’ and the champions of the new social movements: the new agents of social struggle (Boggs, 1995; Croteau, 1995).

By the mid 1980s, in spite of the best efforts of Marxist and neo-Marxist theorists in the field of sociology of education to provide an analysis of capitalist schooling (Anyon, 1980; Gonzales, 1982; Harris, 1982; Price, 1986; Sarup, 1978, 1983; Sharp, 1980, 1988; Willis, 1977; Youngman, 1986), it had become abundantly clear that a Marxist critique of capitalist schooling had lost much of its appeal among progressive scholars on the Left.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, only Michael Apple (e.g. 1993, 1996, 1999) and Jean Anyon (1980, 1994)—along with less visible yet influential educational scholars such as Richard Brosio (1990, 2000, 2003)—remained among a handful of Marxist educational theorists who continued to stress the significance of social class.

At the center of these heated debates stands the celebrated figure of Michael Apple.<sup>8</sup> Arguably the leading ‘mainstream’ radical educational theorist in North America, Apple has straddled these “paradigm shifts” (Kuhn, 1962) by positioning himself within the neo-Marxist and post-Marxist frameworks. Along with a number of other scholars on the Left, Apple (1993, 1996, 1999, 2001) has dismissed the centrality of class struggle in efforts at educational reform. Although he acknowledges the significance of class as a key variable in the perpetuation of educational inequality, Apple has nevertheless remained a trenchant critic of ‘traditional’ Marxists for their overtly ‘economistic’ and ‘deterministic’ analyses of schooling.<sup>9</sup>

Although by the 1990s class analysis became peripheral in the body of work produced by most educational theorists, Michael Apple remained one of a handful of scholars in the field of sociology of education who consistently worked within a neo-Marxian

framework of class analysis. Yet, despite his criticisms of postmodernism and post-structuralism, Apple's (1993, 1996, 1999) recent work on class has been compromised by post-Marxist assumptions.<sup>10</sup>

To their credit, in the past two decades, radical scholars in the field of sociology of education such as Michael Apple who have been working within the precincts of post-Marxism have enriched the field of educational theory with their scholarly contributions. Most scholars in the field of sociology of education who have been working within fields as diverse as reproduction theory, resistance theory, postmodern theory, feminist theory, and cultural studies have shown how schools 'function' to reproduce existing social relations through cultural domination.<sup>11</sup> Yet, by failing to underscore the centrality of class struggle, they have not been able to overcome the confinements of radical functionalism (Berlowitz, 1977). In fact, a number of educational theorists, including Michael Apple (1993, 1996, 1999), have openly dismissed class struggle and the vanguard role of the working class in the arena of social change.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, in response to the social and political shifts to the Right, a small yet increasingly vocal group of scholars in the field of sociology of education, who identify their work within a Marxist framework, have moved to renew and revamp class analysis (Allman, 1999, 2001; Cole & Hill, 1995, 1996; Cole, Hill, & Rikowski, 1997; Cole, Hill, McLaren, Rikowski, 2001; Hill, McLaren, Cole and Rikowski, 2001) McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000; McLaren, 2000; Raduntz, 1999; Rikowski, 1996, 1997, 2001; Sharp, 1988). These Marxist scholars have found the political implications of post-Marxism (i.e., postmodernism, post-structuralism, cultural politics) woefully problematic. They maintain that the politics associated with radical democracy are, at best, a form of liberal pluralism in disguise and, at worst, a reactionary form of politics afflicted with an extreme form of skepticism (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). Finally, Marxist scholars in the field of sociology of education have forewarned that in the absence of a well developed Marxist theory of class exploitation, it would be difficult--if not impossible--to uncover the underlying causes of educational inequalities that are associated with the structural contradictions of the class system under capitalism.

In this essay review of Apple's (2001) recent work, I provided a brief historical account of Marxist educational theory in the 1970s. Next, I will examine Apple's reaction to Bowles and Gintis's (1976) radical functionalist approach to schooling. I will then offer a chapter by chapter summary of Apple's (2001) book. Finally, I intend to analyze and critique a number of the theoretical underpinnings of Apple's neo-Marxist approach to educational reform.

### **The Decline of Marxist Educational Theory and the Rise of the 'New Left'**

The publication of Schooling in Capitalist America (1976) by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, two prominent Marxist economists, set the stage for a renewed and revived interest in Marxist educational theory. Bowles and Gintis's (1976) radical functionalist approach toward capitalist schooling generated a considerable measure of debate and controversy among educational scholars and teacher education programs both

in the United States and abroad, most notably, in England. And in a relatively short period of time, Schooling in Capitalist America (1976) attracted sharp criticism from various quarters of the educational Left. A case in point is the Marxist educationalist Marvin Berlowitz (1977), who criticized Bowles and Gintis (1976) for their explicit radical functionalist approach to schooling. Other radical educationalists, including Michael Apple (1982), concentrated their criticism on what they considered to be the mechanical and economistic Marxist approach of Bowles and Gintis (1976). For example, in Ideology and Curriculum (1979), Apple maintains that Bowles and Gintis' (1976) Marxist analysis of schooling, which largely focused on its economic function, failed to take into account the importance of "ideological and cultural mediations" in reproducing and securing relations of domination and subordination.<sup>13</sup> As Apple (1979) remarks:

Others, especially Bowles and Gintis, have focused on schools in a way which stresses the economic role of educational institutions. Mobility, selection, the reproduction of the division of labor, and other outcomes, hence, become the prime foci for their analysis. Conscious economic manipulation by those in power is often seen as a determining element. While this is certainly important, to say the least, it gives only one side of the picture. The economistic position provides a less adequate appraisal of the way these outcomes are created by the school. It cannot illuminate fully what the mechanisms of domination are and how they work in the day-day activity of school life. Furthermore, we must complement an economic analysis with an approach that leans more heavily on a cultural and ideological orientation if we are completely to understand the complex ways social, economic, and political tensions and contradictions are 'mediated' in the concrete practices of educators as they go about their business in schools. The focus, then, should also be on the ideological and cultural mediations which exist between the material conditions of an unequal society and the formation of the consciousness of the individuals in that society. Thus, I want here to look at the relationship between economic and cultural domination, at what we take as given, that seems to produce 'naturally' some of the outcomes partly described by those who have focused on the political economy of education. (p. 2)

In his first major book, Ideology and Curriculum (1979), Apple challenged the mainstream liberal approaches to schooling by examining how the 'hidden curriculum' perpetuates social reproduction. He also attempted to show the limitations of the radical functionalist approaches to schooling of Bowles and Gintis's (1976). Reflecting back on his earlier criticism of the mainstream liberal and radical functionalist approaches to educational reform, Apple (1982) writes that:

Much of my analysis of schooling in Ideology and Curriculum concentrated on two issues: (1) a debate with liberal theories of curriculum and education in general, by attempting to show what is actually taught in schools and what its ideological effects might be; and (2) a debate within leftist scholarship on education about what schools do... The first of these issues grew out of my

general agreement with individuals like Bowles and Gintis, Althusser, and others that schools are important agencies for social reproduction. (p. 19)

Although Apple would agree with most of Bowles and Gintis's Marxist analysis of schooling in Schooling in Capitalist America (1976), he none the less remained unconvinced. For one, Bowles and Gintis failed to explain how reproduction occurred. According to Apple, their analysis of the role of capitalist schooling was bent on 'scientific' explanations. In contrast, Apple suggests that in order to understand how reproduction occurs within schools we need to study the ideological and cultural practices that takes place inside classrooms. In other words, there needs to be a focus on how the "hidden curriculum," the "overt curriculum," and teachers' work contribute to social reproduction. As Apple (1982) explains:

All too much of this kind of neo-Marxist scholarship treated the school as something of a black box and I was just as dissatisfied with this as I was with the dominant tradition in education. It did not get inside the school to find out how reproduction went on. In many ways, oddly, it was an analogue of the Tyler rationale in curriculum, in that the focus tended to be scientific and to place its emphasis on input and output, consensus, and efficient production. The interpretations placed upon the school were clearly different from those of Tyler and the efficiency minded curriculum 'experts,' yet schools were still seen as taking an input (students) and efficiency processing them (through a hidden curriculum) and turning them into agents for an unequal and highly stratified labor force (output). Thus, the school's major role was in the teaching of an ideological consciousness that helped reproduce the division of labor in society. This was fine as far as it went, but it still had to problems. How was this accomplished? Was that all schools did?...I spent a good deal of time in Ideology and Curriculum attempting to answer these questions. I interrogated schooling using a variety of techniques—historical, economic, cultural, and ethnographic. In the process, it became clear that at least three basic elements in schooling had to be examined. These included: the day to day interactions and regularities of the hidden curriculum that tacitly taught important norms and values; the formal corpus of school knowledge—that is, the overt curriculum itself—that is planned and found in the various materials and texts and filtered through teachers; and finally, the fundamental perspectives that educators (read here Gramsci's point about the role of intellectuals) use to plan, organize, and evaluate what happens in schools. (pp. 20-21)

### **Apple's Neo-Marxist Approach to Educational Reform**

For the past two decades, one of the major undertakings of critical educational theorist Michael Apple has been to study the causes of the rise of the New Right and its impact on educational policies in the United States. Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality can be described as a sequel to his two previously

published books: Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age (1993) and Education and Cultural Politics (1996), in which Apple explored the resurgence of the conservative restoration in the United States. In his most recent work, Apple examines how the social, political, economic, and cultural movements on the right has succeeded in forming a ‘hegemonic alliance’ in order to influence and shape educational policies in the United States.

In chapters one and two, Apple identifies four major social, political, and ideological movements, which he refers to as the ‘hegemonic alliance of the New Right.’ These four movements include: neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and the new middle class. Apple suggests that although each movement has different and oftentimes conflicting political and ideological interests, they form a ‘hegemonic alliance’ when it comes to opposing progressive and democratic forces on the Left.<sup>14</sup> This hegemonic alliance, or ‘new hegemonic accord,’ Apple (1993) explains,

combines dominant economic and political elites intent on ‘modernizing’ the economy, white working-class and middle-class groups concerned with security, the family, and traditional knowledge and values, and economic and cultural conservatives. It also includes a fraction of the new middle class whose own advancement depends on the expanded use of accountability, efficiency, and management procedures which are their own cultural capital. This coalition has partly succeeded in altering the very meaning of what it means to have a social goal of equality. The citizen as ‘free’ consumer has replaced the previously emerging citizen as situated in structurally generated relations of domination. Thus, the common good is now to be regulated exclusively by the laws of the market, free competition, private ownership, and profitability. In essence, the definitions of freedom and equality are no longer democratic, but commercial. (pp. 30-31)

In a concerted effort to advance its social, economic, political, and ideological agenda, Apple claims that the New Right exercises hegemony primarily through the medium of ideological leadership.<sup>15</sup> He explains that the New Right’s tactics include, for example, the use of key concepts such as markets, standards, God, and inequality. Apple (2001) further elaborates:

The concepts we use to try to understand and act on the world in which we live do not by themselves determine the answers we may find. Answers are not determined by words, but by the power relations that impose their interpretations of these concepts. Yet there are key words that continually surface in the debates over education. These key words have complicated histories, histories that are connected to the social movements out of which they arose and in which they are struggles over today. These words have their own histories, but they are increasingly interrelated. The concepts are simple to list. In fact, they form the subtitle for this book: markets, standards, God, and inequality. Behind each of these topics is an assemblage of other words that have an emotional valence and that provide the support for the way in which differential power works in our

daily lives. These concepts include democracy, freedom, choice, morality, family, culture, and a number of other key concepts. And each of these in turn is intertextual. Each and every one of these is connected to an entire set of assumptions about “appropriate” institutions, values, social relationships, and policies. (p. 10)

Apple explains that each concept constitutes one of the central tenets of the social movements within the New Right. For instance, neoliberals are proponents of the market; neoconservatives are determined to enforce traditional curriculum and national standards across the country; authoritarian populists are motivated by a desire to integrate religion and God within the school curriculum; and finally, the new middle class and the professional managerial class are associated with maintaining social and economic inequality by supporting educational policies that are favorable to their class standing within society.<sup>16</sup> Apple (2001) writes that

...the first group is what I call neoliberals. They are deeply committed to markets and to freedom as ‘individual choice.’ The second group, neoconservatives, have a vision of an Edenic past and wants to return to disciplines and traditional knowledge. The third group is what I call authoritarian populists—religious fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals who want to return to (their) God in all of our institutions. And finally, the mapmakers and experts on whether we got there are members of a particular fraction of the managerial and professional new middle class. (p. 11)

In his analysis on the causes of the rise of the ‘conservative alliance,’ Apple draws upon Gramsci’s concept of the ‘commonsense’. Apple generally limits the ‘commonsense’ to ideological struggles and defines it as the ‘basic categories’ or ‘key words’ such as ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘equality’ that are used by people to make sense of the social world.<sup>17</sup> He attributes the rise of the New Right to its cunning ability to change or ‘alter’ the meaning of the commonly held beliefs and views of people of the social world. As Apple (2001) further explains:

One of the most important objects of the rightist agenda is changing our commonsense, altering the meanings of the most basic categories, the key words, we employ to understand the social and educational world and our place in it. In many ways, a core aspect of these agendas is about what has been called identity politics. The task is to radically alter who we think we are and how our major institutions are to respond to this changed identity. Let me say more about this, especially since who we are and how we think about our institutions are closely connected to who has power to produce and circulate new ways of understanding our identities. Both the politics of education and of the construction of commonsense have played large parts here. (p. 9)

Apple believes that the New Right success in changing people’s commonsense is due to its use of a ‘simple’ language that people can understand. He refers to this strategy as ‘plain speaking.’ In his criticism of conservative educational policymakers Chubb and

Moe (1990), who stand out as the key proponents of market-driven educational reform initiatives, Apple (2001) notes that:

After years of conservative attacks and mobilizations, it has become clear that “ideas that were once deemed fanciful, unworkable—or just plain extreme” are now increasingly being seen as common-sense...Tactically, the reconstruction of common-sense that has been accomplished has proven to be extremely effective. For example, clear discursive strategies are being employed here, ones that are characterized by “plain speaking” and speaking in a language that “everyone can understand.” (I do not wish to be wholly negative about this. The importance of these things is something many “progressive” educators including many writers on critical pedagogy, have yet to understand.) These strategies also involve not only presenting one’s own position as “common-sense,” but also usually tacitly implying that there is something of a conspiracy among one’s opponents to deny the truth or to say only that which is “fashionable.” (pp. 68-69)

Likewise, drawing on Gramsci’s concepts of ‘hegemony’ and the ‘commonsense,’ Apple (2001) comments that:

For dominant groups to exercise leadership, large number of people must be convinced that the map 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 center of gravity for our hopes. (p. 195)

In chapter three, Apple examines the hegemonic alliances among the forces on the Right and the Left. He identified these alliances as a “decentered unity,” a concept whose origin can be traced back to the ‘radical democratic’ approach of post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). Apple explains that the ‘decentered unity’ consists of a constellation of progressive social groups that form a counter-hegemonic alliance against the dominant social groups in society (i.e., the New Right). In contrast to the Leninist strategy of ‘democratic centrism,’ in which the vanguard party operated as the ‘ideological and political compass’ of the proletariat, Apple firmly espouses the notion of a ‘decentered unity’ that consists of an alliance among feminists, multiculturalists, lesbians, gays, anti-racists, environmentalists, peace activists, progressives, and neo-Marxists.<sup>18</sup> Apple describes the ‘decentered unity’ as an alliance that encompasses a broad range of progressive forces and social groups. Hence, he maintains that the ‘decentered unity’ does not succumb to an ‘official’ centralized bureaucratic party line because it is inclusive of multiple voices and subject positions. As Apple (2001) explains:

In using the phrase “collective responses,” however, I need to stress that this phrase does not signify anything like “democratic centrism” in which a small group or a party cadre speaks for the majority and establishes the “appropriate” position. Given that there are diverse emancipatory movements whose voices are



heard in publications like *Rethinking Schools* and in organizations such as the National Coalition of Educational Activists—antiracist and postcolonial positions, radical forms of multiculturalism, gays and lesbians, multiple feminists voices, neo-Marxists and democratic socialists, “greens,” and so on—a more appropriate way of looking at what is happening is to call it a decentered unity. Multiple progressive projects, multiple “critical pedagogies,” are articulated. (p. 96)

In chapters four and five, Apple takes a closer look at the ideology behind the authoritarian populist religious conservative movement. Apple offers both a historical and a political overview of one of the most hotly debated controversies that has erupted over the years in public schools, namely, the teaching of evolutionary science. Apple provides a number of examples including one state school board in Alabama that required all biology textbooks adopted by the state to have a disclaimer noting that evolutionary science is one of the many theories explaining the development of human life. Apple also shows how politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Pat Buchanan have been instrumental in supporting the causes of the religious Right by denouncing Darwinism and evolutionary science. In chapter five, Apple also shows how evangelicals and Christians on the Right of the political spectrum, including Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed, have been major political and ideological forces in influencing the course and the direction of educational policies at the local, state, and national levels. One example involves the controversy over school prayers in public schools.

In chapter six, Apple examines the growing trend of homeschooling in the context of the current social, political, cultural, and economic climate. He notes that while not all parents who homeschool their children hold conservative religious viewpoints, most have a biblical interpretation of the family unit, maintain non-secular views on gender dynamics, and have their own views on what counts as ‘legitimate knowledge.’ Apple is alarmed with the homeschooling movement because he believes it is leading to the ‘suburbanization of everyday life’ and the ‘segmentation of American society.’ Here, he is referring to the increasing race, class, and gender divisions in American society. Apple is equally concerned about the contradictory nature of educational policies that allows public money for creating charter schools be used by homeschoolers to teach religious viewpoints that would otherwise violate the separation of church and state in the constitution. Apple believes that these loopholes in the federal and state educational policies privileges students from religious segments of society over students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Chapter seven includes perhaps the most contentious facet of Apple’s concept of ‘decentered unity.’ In this chapter, Apple puts forth a ‘dual strategy’ approach for building counter-hegemonic alliances. Apple’s dual strategy approach consists of progressive and tactical alliances. Progressive alliances are those that are forged among progressive forces, which include anti-globalization activists, peace organizers, environmentalists, feminists, the working class, and gays and lesbians. Apple (2001) notes:

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, and in a number of other cities throughout the world. (p. 225)

On the other hand, Apple explains that tactical alliances are those that can be developed among progressive forces and factions from within the Right wing. For example, Apple proposes that it is possible to make tactical alliances with the anti-corporatist sentiments of authoritarian populists on the Right. The reasoning behind this type alliance is based entirely on common ideological interests. For example, he notes that both the populist Right and the Left have been strong opponents of Chris Whittle's Channel One. Apple (2001) remarks that:

The tactical agreement is often based on different ideological positions. While the progressive positions are strongly anticorporate, the conservative positions are grounded in a distaste for the subversion of traditional values, 'the exploiting of children for profit,' and a growing rightist tension over the decisions that corporations make that do not consider the 'real folks' in America. (p. 223)

By the same token, Apple is optimistic that tactical alliances can be forged with the populist Right on controversial issues such as state curricula and testing. Of course, this is not to suggest that Apple does not recognize that these alliances need to be approached with extreme caution. As Apple (2001) further explicates:

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. Although the specific content of such knowledge is decidedly dissimilar for each of these groups, the fact that there is agreement on a general antielitist position on the fact that the very processes involved are antidemocratic provides room for tactical alliances not only against these processes but also as a block against further incursions of managerialism in schools. In addition, given the ideologies 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 orientation. This benefit should be maximized. (p. 225)

While I agree with Apple's deep-seated social and political convictions, and concur with his criticism of the New Right's attempt to shape the course of educational policies in the United States, I remain skeptical regarding his theoretical framework, in particular his neo-Marxist approach to educational reform on number of major points. These include, among others, his neo-Marxist interpretation of Gramsci's concept of the 'commonsense;' his employment of the 'decentered unity,' which he identifies as an counter-hegemonic alliance among progressive forces on the left; and finally, his notion of a 'dual strategy' for building alliances between progressive forces on the left and those on the Right.<sup>19</sup>

### **Making Sense out of the 'Commonsense'**

To begin with, there is no doubt that Gramsci's concept of commonsense is enhancement over Marx and Engels' interpretations of ideology as "false consciousness." Yet, to their credit, Marx and Engels were wholly aware that the concept of ideology, which they interpreted as 'false consciousness,' did not simply express a false outlook or a 'simple inversion' of the social world that the ruling classes imposed on the masses.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, Apple's claim that the New Right's success in changing our commonsense is achieved simply by redefining those key ideas (i.e., equality, freedom, democracy) on its own turf is not entirely convincing. Apple's interpretation of the concept of commonsense is inadequate because it is not sufficiently grounded within the material practices and activities of men and women. There are other pressing questions that remain unanswered. Some of these include: What is the relationship between good sense and bad sense? How are truth and misrepresentations related to one another? What is the composition of the commonsense? Are there more elements of bad sense than good sense? In short, Apple's employment of the 'commonsense' fails to explain, in the main, how and why people's misperception of the world occurs the way that it does.

Gramsci applied the term 'commonsense' in "strictly ideological terms with reference to the inherited conceptions of the world" (Mészáros, 1989, p. 401). According to Istvan Mészáros (1989), Gramsci failed, in general terms, to explain how these "distorted conceptualizations" of the social world become part of the commonsense. In other words, Gramsci failed to reveal the underlying causes of "ideological mystifications." In addition, if the causes are themselves simply ideological, then they can easily be challenged by means of "ideological intervention" (Mészáros, 1989). Indeed, this is precisely the limitation of the term 'commonsense' when Apple (2001) applies it to explain how the New Right has succeeded in "altering" the views and beliefs of the people through the medium of "plain speaking." Apple (2001) advises that if the Left wishes to win over the masses in the ideological front, it must then learn from the successes of the Right. However, Apple's main oversight is that he finds a 'symmetrical relation' between the forces on the Right and the Left (Mészáros, 1989).

One of the prevalent misconceptions among Western Marxists is that they frequently identify "hegemony with the...absorption of subordinate classes into ruling class ideology and cultural domination, so that the construction of a counter-hegemonic consciousness and culture and the establishment of a working-class hegemony must

apparently be accomplished by free-spirited intellectuals” (Meiksins Wood, 1995, p. 105). Hegemony cannot be achieved simply by means of discursive practices or by way of a ‘war of position’ alone. Stated differently, in their struggles to build alliances by winning over the masses, the Right and the Left do not merely engage in what Gramsci referred to as the ‘war of position,’ but also in a ‘war of maneuver.’<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, ideological hegemony does not mean the complete resignation of subordinate classes to the dominant classes. Hegemony is always incomplete and never secured by the bourgeois class because it is located within the ‘class struggle’ (Meiksins Wood, 1995). As a result, Apple fails, in the main, to offer a convincing conceptual framework that would allow for ‘partial-class consciousness’ of subordinate classes. In his view, the meaning of concepts such as freedom, democracy, and equality are articulated by those who are in power, which in this case, is the New Right.

Apple believes that the task of the counter-hegemonic alliances among the progressive forces is to develop ‘creative ways’ or measures to win over the masses. In other words, the educational Left should emulate the Right’s success by providing the popular masses an alternative progressive discourse that redefines those key ‘concepts’ (i.e., democracy, freedom, and equality). However, in doing so, Apple lapses into ‘theoretical voluntarism.’ This is because he underestimates the intimate relationship between ideology and the “material structural determinations” (Mészáros, 1989). Given the fact that the anti-capitalist movements must overcome overwhelming “material constraints,” there is no symmetrical distance in the relationship between “critical ideology” and “established ideology” to the commonsense of the people (Mészáros, 1989).

Furthermore, Apple holds that ideological dispositions do not necessarily correspond to economic, political, or cultural positions of individuals or groups of people. He claims that ideology, class, politics, and culture are ‘relatively autonomous’ from one another. However, his explanation offers little, if any, insight into “how ideologies become a part of the popular consciousness of classes and class fractions who are not among the elite” (Meiksins Wood, 1986, p. 16). The reason why Apple attributes the rise of the New Right to its ability to alter the meaning of concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ is because he severs ideological contradictions from class antagonisms. Absent from Apple’s neo-Marxist approach to educational reform is any sustained effort to examine class antagonisms among the subordinate groups and the dominant groups. Subsequently, Apple is stranded in a form of ‘radical idealism.’ This is because people’s commonsense is shaped not only by the alteration of the meaning of key concepts like ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ but also by the class struggles between the capitalist class and the working class.

In my opinion, ideological and discursive struggles must be linked to “material-practical” struggles. Following Voloshinov’s study on language, ideology, and capitalist social relations of production, Marxists such as myself make a distinction between his “multiaccentuality of the sign” and Apple’s poststructuralist readings of ideology (McNally, 2001). By accents, Voloshinov was referring to the fact that signs have more than one meaning or interpretation. However, their meanings are anchored in the concrete social world. As David McNally further elaborates:

Voloshinov's concept of the multiaccentuality of the sign is far removed from post-structuralist notions of difference, contingency, and randomness. True, signs and meanings are not singular; they are sites of multiple accents. But this multiaccentuality is not random. Contending accents grow out of structured life situations. Conflicts over accents and meaning reflect and refract struggles over labor, conditions of life, inequality, hierarchy, and social power. Moreover, each group draws upon on a reservoir of sociolinguistic meanings which derive from the speech genres they have developed in the course of their practical activity. (p. 116)

Thus, Marxists maintain that culture and ideologies arise from practical human activities within capitalist society.

Finally, while I would agree with Apple (2001) that the meaning of such concepts as 'freedom,' 'democracy,' and 'equality' have multiple interpretations for different social classes or groups of people, my position is drastically different from Apple's standpoint that people's views and beliefs of these concepts are primarily shaped through 'altering' their commonsense understandings. In my view, ideological struggles and discursive practices are inseparable from social relations of production. This is because: "The struggle over defining the terrain of concepts such as democracy, freedom, and equality are 'intrinsic' to all social groups"(McNally, 2001, p. 116).

### **Recentering the 'Decentered Unity'**

I find Apple's notion of the 'decentered unity' highly problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, what holds the 'decentered unity' together? In other words, what is the ideological bond that unites these diverse groups of differing social, political, and economic interests? Apple is quick to acknowledge this dilemma. He admits that there are "real differences" among the wide spectrum of social and political groups that include, for example, political, epistemological, and educational differences. If this is the case, then the follow-up question is: What are the ideological or political forces that conjoins these diverse groups? Responding to these criticisms, Apple writes that the 'decentered unity' is "united in [its] opposition to the forces involved in the new conservative hegemonic alliance" (p. 96). However, Apple's reply does not sufficiently justify such a loosely knitted coalition.

For example, Apple derives the identity of the new social movements from their immediate experiences with oppression. Yet, in his polemic against E. P. Thompson, Perry Anderson (1980) reminds us that experiences alone do not guarantee agency. In other words, there is no assurance that experiences arising from a particular form of oppression will generate progressive forms of social action, or motivate a class, for example, to organize itself and rise up against social injustices. Anderson (1980) raises a number of other fundamental questions that are no less important. These include: How

can we distinguish between a valid and invalid experience? And are religious experiences valid?<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Apple's neo-Marxist approach to educational reform can be classified as part of the 'new pluralists' movement on the Left that endorses 'complexity theory' and pluralistic notions of equality, freedom, and democracy (Meiksins Wood, 1995, 1998). Apple's willing acceptance of the myriad forms of social oppression leads him to demote the centrality of the concept of class and class contradictions under capitalist social relations of production.<sup>23</sup> Content with his poststructuralist interpretation of the social relations of production, Apple unapologetically endorses an "unstructured and fragmented plurality of identities and differences" (Meiksins Wood, 1995).

Apple further notes that the New Right's success is largely due to its ability to build a 'decentered unity.' Consequently, he recommends that the Left and progressive forces should learn from the victories of the New Right in their effort to build a progressive 'decentered unity.' On this point, Apple notes: "The right has been much more successful ... 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." (p. 195). However, one of the underlying weaknesses in Apple's strategy is that he juxtaposes the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic alliances among the forces of the Right and the Left. In Apple's view, the Right and the Left are involved in a battle to persuade the masses to join their social and political cause. Hence, Apple leaves us with a political project that reduces social struggles to ideological battles between the Right and the Left that are largely fought in the terrain of discourse and language.

Both Lenin (1918) and Trotsky (1917) recognized that hegemony was intimately linked to concrete "material processes" as well as to class relations and class antagonisms (Joseph, 2002). Lenin (1918), for instance, stressed that proletarian hegemony can only be established by annexing political power or by securing state power. For Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat was not merely a maneuver used to gain political power for its own sake. Rather, Lenin saw the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transitional period in which the working class develops class alliances with the peasants and the petit-bourgeoisie, and laboriously engages in a campaign to 'win over the masses' from the side of the bourgeoisie (Joseph, in press).

The key feature of democratic centralism is the vanguard party, which makes a concerted effort to develop a dialectical relationship with the working class.<sup>24</sup> The purpose of the vanguard party, which is composed of the most advanced sectors of the working class, is to establish and strengthen the social hegemony of the working class by means of 'democratic accountability' (Joseph, 2002).<sup>25</sup> The vanguard party provides the political direction of the working-class struggles.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the success of working-class revolutionary movement does not merely depend on its political strength, but also on the existence of a crisis in bourgeois hegemony.

Regrettably, by failing to address any of the above issues, Apple's (2001) approach is relegated to a form of 'utopian idealism.' As I stated earlier, Apple's endorsement of counter-hegemonic alliances, which are primarily derived from the identities of the marginalized and disenfranchised groups in society, are forged on the basis of ideological interests rather than objective historical circumstances of the working class. As a result: "Instead of community and solidarity we get a plurality based on fractured identity and fragmented discourse" (Joseph, p. 93, 1998).

However, unlike democratic pluralism, the vanguard party does not constitute the sum of all the experiences of the marginalized and disenfranchised social groups. Instead, the vanguard party makes a concerted effort to "collectivize experience on a higher and [deeper] plane" (Joseph, 2002). Neither individual nor collective experiences are sufficient for guiding proletarian struggles because experience alone cannot account for understanding how people relate to one another under capitalist social relations of production. Along with individual and collective experiences, we must examine the roots of social and historical circumstances from which experiences arise.

Too often, as is the case with Apple's (2001) neo-Marxist approach to educational reform, democratic centralism is dismissed as an outdated totalitarianism and bureaucratic form of social organization that is largely attributed to the old-style, one-party rule of the former Soviet Union and its eastern European satellites. Contrary to Apple's objection to democratic centralism, Lenin (1918) clearly understood the complexity and the structured nature of the social world. He recognized that social organizations are multi-faceted and heterogeneous and that the concept of class itself is not "uniform" or "homogenous." This is why he stressed the importance of the political leadership and the organizational experience of the vanguard party. Unlike democratic pluralism, wherein progressive forces are loosely tied to one another under an ideological umbrella, democratic centralism underscores the importance of establishing political power by developing class alliances. Lenin's (1918) initial concern, of course, was not to abolish classes outright, but to establish proletarian hegemony first by gaining control over the state power. It is worth quoting Joseph (2002) at length:

Democratic centralism is today regarded as an outdated product of Russian political conditions, while in a postmodern vein, former Marxists oppose democratic centralism claiming that because today's world is supposedly more complex and heterogeneous, political organization must be founded on some sort of democratic pluralism. But it could be countered that it is precisely because reality is complexly structured and diverse that organizational discipline is necessary if any meaningful social change is to occur. To argue for a loose pluralism as an alternative to centralization is to play the game on capitalism's terms. In fact the ideology of postmodernism could be said to be less of a coherent hegemonic ideology of the ruling class, more a deliberate attempt to de-hegemonise any potential opposition. As effective leadership and direction are removed, any attempt at a hegemonic project descends into incoherence. The pluralism of postmodernism soon passes over into fragmentation and the reinforcing of alienated identities. Lenin's theory, by contrast, attempts to connect

a theory of organization to a hegemonic project. His writings on democratic centralism should not therefore be viewed as mere organizational concerns, they are political matters relating to the organization of the political vanguard and through them the wider social forces. Hence democratic centralism refers to the organization of the party as a *vanguard party*. Recognizing the stratified nature of social groups and classes, the Leninist theory of organization seeks to relate first to the political vanguard and the most advanced workers and through them to the broader masses. (p.50)

One of the major conceptual drawbacks of Apple's cultural Marxist approach to social struggle is that it often overlooks the fact that the working class cannot develop its own culture without having access to the means of production (i.e., schools, media, press, cultural institutions). Achieving this daunting task mandates the proletariat to establish the material conditions and circumstances for exercising and practicing an autonomous proletarian culture. This means that it must first secure political power by taking control over state power. Thus, the task of the working class is not to create a socialist culture in its initial steps towards securing power, but to foster the material circumstances for a socialist culture. This means engaging in class struggle. Jonathan Joseph (2002) remarks that:

The proletariat unlike other classes in history, does not have the same degree of access to property and the means of production. It cannot just make working class culture; it must first make a revolution and hold power. This is different to the pattern of a classical bourgeois revolution where the bourgeoisie already holds a significant degree of economic and cultural hegemony. The weakness of the position of the working class in bourgeois society makes it impossible for it to establish its own hegemony to any great degree until it actually takes political power. (p. 65)

Finally, part of a Marxist approach to proletariat hegemony is underwritten by the view that cultural and ideological counter-hegemony is not possible without the proletariat having secured state power. Apple (2001), on the other hand, wishes to establish proletarian cultural and ideological hegemony in the absence of annexation of state power, and in the absence of material conditions (control over the means of production). In short, Apple's (2001) concept of the 'decentered unity' fails to sufficiently address the importance of leadership and organizational matters that are vital for the success of the working class in the course of its struggle to secure proletarian hegemony.

### **Unifying the 'Dual Strategy'**

Lastly, in response to Apple's proposal for a dual strategy, which consists of progressive and tactical alliances, the question I raise is whether it is feasible to develop alliances with factions of the New Right. Can the Right and the Left articulate mutual interests against corporations purely on common ideological interests? To answer this question we need to take a step back and revisit Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notion of radical democracy and their unconditional endorsement of the new social movements. For



Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the primary contradictions within capitalist social relations of production are not limited to class antagonisms alone, but also extend to ideological and political contradictions. By agreeing with Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who proclaim that political identity is not reducible to class identity, and who also endorse the premise of the irreducibility of ideological and cultural conflicts to class interests, Apple can claim that ideological and cultural struggles enjoy some measure of autonomy from class struggles. And by claiming that ideology and culture are relatively autonomous from class relations, it is clear why Apple believes that the New Right can simply alter the meaning of key concepts such as ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘equality’ to serve its own social, economic, and political interests. Apple (2001) asserts:

All too often, we assume that educational and cultural struggles are epiphenomenal. The real battle 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.), it also ignores what the right has actually done. Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the commonsense 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?...[T]he right has shown how powerful the struggles over meaning and identity can be. While we should not want to emulate rightist groups’ 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 its 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? (pp.194-195)

In short, cloaked in a poststructuralist reading of hegemony, Apple simply reduces socialist struggle to an ideological warfare between the Left and the Right.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of my critical review of his book, there is no question that over the years Michael Apple has made important scholarly contributions to the field of educational theory and practice. For the past three decades, Apple has not only proven to be one of the most vocal critics of the New Right, but he has also been a tireless activist in the North American radical educational scene, not to mention being a prominent scholar within international circles. Nonetheless, I believe that Apple’s neo-Marxist disposition in rebuilding alliances and coalitions remains both theoretically and practically problematic

for organizing and developing a coherent anti-capitalist social and political movement among the educational left.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sections of this essay review have been adopted from my dissertation: Class, Hegemony, and Ideology: A Critique of Neo-Marxist Approaches to Educational Reform, June, 2002, University of California, Los Angeles. A shorter version of this essay review has appeared as a book review in Education Review: A Journal of Book Reviews. [Online]. Available at: <http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev239.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Davies (1995) traces the most recent developments in Marxist pedagogy to the reproduction theories of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Apple (1982), and later to the shift toward resistance theory in the work of Giroux (1981, 1983) and Willis (1977). Davies (1995) argues that educational theorists on the Left who became disillusioned with reproduction theory and resistance theory turned to post-Marxist theory that can be found, most notably, in the work of Aronowitz and Giroux (1991). Davies (1995) writes that one of the major flaws in most radical educational theories is a noticeable lack of “empirical referents.” Indeed, this appears to be the case in the work of resistance theorists, who fail to offer any “authentic” accounts of student resistance. In other words, Davies questions the accuracy of the rebellious behavior of working-class students that has been claimed by resistance theorists as “authentic resistance.” With the rise of the new Right, Davies argues that radical educationalists turned to Gramsci’s work as a way of escaping the limitations of post-Marxism and orthodox Marxism. Finally, Davies argues that critical educationalists are engaged in “leaps of faith” because their theoretical frameworks are determined more by what they anticipate from their observation.

<sup>3</sup> In the United States, Gramsci has become a celebrated figure among critical educationalists, in particular, among those working within the precincts of cultural politics. However, while many critical educationalists place an inordinate degree of emphasis on Gramsci’s focus on culture as a site of social struggle, they have often overlooked the significance he also placed on class struggle. According to Michael Parenti (1997), Gramsci aligned himself within the Marxist-Leninist camp. He was interested in demonstrating how culture was used as an instrument for capitalist hegemony in exploiting workers. Gramsci did not divorce his class politics from his cultural politics because he saw them mutually inclusive. Finally, most educationalists have forgotten that Gramsci was, first and foremost, the leader of the Italian Communist Party. Contrary to popular belief, there are more similarities than differences between Lenin’s and Gramsci’s politics.

<sup>4</sup> I am referring to the works of Marx, Engels, Trotsky, Gramsci, Luxemburg, and most notably Lenin.

<sup>5</sup> A number of postmodern feminists have noted that Marxism is shrouded in claims to universal truth and that it disregards women’s labor at home. They assert that historical materialism is reductive because it truncates all types of oppression to class exploitation and overlooks racist, sexist, and homophobic social practices (i.e., Lather, 1991, 1998). As an example, feminist educational theorist Patti Lather (1991, 1998) identifies Marxism as a ‘patriarchal’ and ‘male-centered ideology,’ which fails to sufficiently address women’s oppression. According to Lather (1991), Marxism is a “heterogeneous and conflictual movement.” She makes a concerted effort to ‘de-center’ Marxism by associating it with a “master discourse.” She also proclaims that Marxism is merely one of numerous discourses that offer an explanatory framework for the causes of social oppression. Yet, Lather is cautious not to refute Marxism altogether. She contends that her endorsement of post-Marxism is not an outright rejection of Marxism per se. Rather, she views post-Marxism as a framework which transcends the boundaries of Marxism’s epistemological and ontological confinements (Lather, 1998).

Furthermore, Lather dismisses the rigid binarism of Marxist theory, which recognizes only those social struggles that are grounded in class struggles and class antagonisms. Lather’s version of post-Marxism is underwritten by a “multi-centered discourse.” Concurring with a large number of post-structural and postmodern educationalists, Lather rejects the notion that the working-class are the appointed agents of

social change. Instead, she proposes a form of political pluralism much like the radical democratic approach of Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

In response, Marxist feminists such as Carol Stabile (1994) have proclaimed that these attacks against Marxism are underwritten by “theoretical essentialism.” For Stabile, an end to sexual exploitation requires an end to class exploitation. She notes:

Without considering class position and its centrality for capitalism, socialist-feminism ceases to exist. Only economic analyses can force academic and similarly privileged feminists to confront the unevenness of gender oppression and undermine its methodological centrality. Only along the frictionless plane—a location where social relations and class antagonisms hold little or no critical purchase—can the category of class be so easily dismissed. (p. 157)

<sup>6</sup> Marxist theory recognizes the importance of the location of the working class within the overall social relations of production; in this case, the working class possesses the capacity to transform itself into a revolutionary class that can overthrow bourgeois hegemony. Yet, to achieve this task, the working class must first become a “class in itself.” In other words, this requires the elevation of working-class consciousness to a point where workers no longer recognize themselves as individual social actors, but as a class of men and women who share common social, economic, and political interests. Finally, Marxism supports the notion that the working class is the class with the ideological, political, and organizational qualifications for challenging the bourgeois class. Thus, I believe that the bifurcation of class struggle and class antagonism is not, in the final analysis, “reductionist,” as Michael Apple opines. Why should the working class be considered for its potential to transform the existing capitalist social relations of production? Ellen Meiksins Wood (1986) offers several reasons that are worth reiterating. First, the working class, more than any other class, has a vested interest in abolishing the existing mode of production. Second, the existence of the working class does not depend on the exploitation of any other class. Class struggle is central to the transformation of society because it fundamentally lies in the antagonistic relationship between the exploited class and the exploiting class.

<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge that the list of Marxist educational scholars I have mentioned in this essay review is not exhaustive.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Apple is the John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Under the tutelage of his mentor, Dwayne Huebner, Apple received his Doctorate in Education from Columbia University in 1970. Today he is considered by many to be one of the leading educational theorists to have emerged from the early 1970s Reconceptualist movement (Morrow & Torres, 1995). It is worth noting that a large number of U.S. educational theorists on the Left have studied under Michael Apple. These include, among others, Daniel Liston, Landon Beyer, Linda McNeil, Lois Weis, Cameron McCarthy, Leslie Roman, Linda Christian-Smith, and Kenneth Teitelbaum.

<sup>9</sup> Dave Hill (2001a) identifies Michael Apple as a cultural neo-Marxist, who fails to “adequately demonstrate the salience of economic determination within ‘the big picture.’” (p. 145). Hill suggests that Apple places much greater emphasis on cultural analysis than on material analysis. Hill criticizes the limitations of over-determination employed by Michael Apple. Hill believes that these concepts overstress relative autonomy and agency. Hill adds that cultural neo-Marxists like Apple have departed from economic determinations and from structural analysis. In contrast to Althusser’s over-determination, which endorses the notion “Economic determination in the last resort,” Hill’s structuralist neo-Marxist approach is informed by Alex Callinicos’s model of ‘hierarchy of determination.

<sup>10</sup> According to James Petras (1997/1998), a major trend among post-Marxist theorists has been to view social class as a subjective phenomenon that is culturally determined. This is certainly true in the case of Michael Apple, who relegates class as an objective force to a subjective phenomenon that is by and large culturally determined. In my view, Apple conflates class with class consciousness. In contrast to class that stands out as an objective force, which is largely determined by an individual’s position within the social

relations of production, class consciousness is socially constructed by an individual's race, gender, and culture.

<sup>11</sup> In his criticism of cultural politics, Terry Eagleton (1999) has argued that the shift from politicizing culture to culturalizing politics illustrates the bankruptcy of the Left and progressives, who have altogether abandoned the Enlightenment project. Eagleton claims that cultural Marxists fail to make a distinction between culture and politics. Not all political conflicts arise from cultural antagonisms, nor can all cultural differences be classified as political in nature. Eagleton remarks that people from different social hierarchies (i.e. race, class, gender) can share the same culture, if by culture we mean particular social practices that are associated with identity. However, under capitalist social relations of production, individuals from different class backgrounds cannot share the same class interests. Eagleton suggests we should emphasize the politics of culture rather than cultural politics because "politics are the conditions which culture is the product" (1999, p. 122). Political struggles cannot altogether be described as cultural. For example, the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis continues to manifest itself in religious and cultural struggles. However, a closer examination reveals political and economic struggles over land, self-determination, and nationhood. Cultural practices become political under certain historical conditions and are the result of antagonisms among social forces. Eagleton makes a compelling argument that cultural practices "are not innately and eternally political; they become so only under specific historical conditions.... They become political only when they are caught up in a process of domination and resistance—when these otherwise innocuous matters are turned for one reason or another into terrains of struggle"(1999, pp. 122-123).

<sup>12</sup> Marxists view the "working class" not as a monolithic and homogenous group, but as a diverse group of people whose national composition is ethnically, culturally, and sexually heterogeneous. The term is an abstract concept referring to those who do not own the means of production and must sell their labor in exchange for wages.

<sup>13</sup> Gregor McLennan (1996) has responded to a number of Marx's critics, who have accused him of reductionism, functionalism, essentialism, and universalism. McLennan notes that post-Marxists have frequently accused Marxism of class reductionism and economic determinism. They maintain that Marxists primarily focus on class relations. McLennan distinguishes between eliminative and weak reductionism. McLennan claims that eliminative reductionism can be detected in behavioral sciences, wherein mental processes can be traced back to activities in the brain. However, McLennan acknowledges that Marx retains a weak sense of reductionism. For instance, while New Right ideology cannot be reduced to ruling class interests, it can be said that it is causally related to the social and economic conditions. In other words, New Right ideology cannot be directly traced to ruling-class interests. Instead, it is causally linked to the economic structures and to ruling-class interests. The mere fact that an ideology is dominant does not imply that it belongs to the ruling class.

The second 'sin' of Marxism is functionalism. Marxism has been accused of technological determinism. It is said that Marxists believe that the development in the forces of production will ultimately lead to changes in the relations of production. McLennan (1996), however, refutes this myth as a distorted caricature of Marxism. Of course, McLennan acknowledges that this is, in fact, true of orthodox Marxists, who have argued for the inevitability of socialism with regard to the development of the forces of production. McLennan notes that the technologism that became a major flaw in orthodox variants of Marxism, is not functionalism per se. For McLennan, all sociological theories are functional in the sense that they offer causal explanations. Functional explanations are inquiries that ask why a particular social phenomenon such as globalization has occurred. Thus, McLennan unapologetically endorses the functional aspects of Marxism because they attempt to 'make sense' of how social phenomena came into existence.

The third sin Marxism has been accused of is essentialism. McLennan (1996) argues that the central question for Marxist social theory is: What is vital for an entity to exist or to function? In respect to the essential nature of capitalist mode of production, it is surplus value. McLennan suggests that essentialism has to do with those features of a system or structure that are vital to its existence. McLennan adds that

there are also non-essential qualities of a system it can do without. McLennan argues that Marxists are essentialists because the essential qualities needed for capitalist mode of production to operate differ from those of feudal mode of production. Furthermore, McLennan makes a distinction between simple and complex essentialism by stressing that, “Marxism theorizes society literally as a complex body, having an essential logic of growth” (p. 66).

Finally, the fourth sin that Marx has been accused of is universalism. McLennan (1996) argues that particularism, which stands opposite to universalism, is vague and meaningless. The question of particularity never specifies how particular is particular. In addition, McLennan argues that Marx’s analysis of capitalism was particular to a specific time and location. Second, post-Marxists claim that the Marxist theory of ideology rests on the assumption that there is a universal notion of truth. In response, McLennan argues that even for the post-Marxist concept of ideological mystification and misrepresentation, there must at least be some quasi-objective thing that is being mystified.

<sup>14</sup> Although in no way offering a Marxist alternative, Michael Apple (1996) identified social policies favoring privatization, centralization, vocationalization, and the differentiation of school curricula as the “conservative restoration.” He distinguished between neoliberal and neoconservative politics by pointing out that the former support economic policies that seek to weaken the role of the state, whereas the latter articulate a morality and an ethics that support a strong state. Apple regarded these contradictory social and economic policies as part of what he has called “conservative modernization.” In short, the combination of privatization and a relatively strong state has increasingly removed access to education from the public domain.

<sup>15</sup> Apple’s overall cultural Marxist approach fails to account for the fundamental “social and material” causes of the rise of the New Right (France, 1997). In spite of the contradictory nature of ruling-class ideology, Apple fails to show how it is linked to the material interests of the ruling classes. Apple fails, for the most part, to identify particular social classes that are the driving force behind the resurgence of the New Right. Finally, while it may be the case that factions within the New Right (in particular neoliberals and neoconservatives) have contradictory ideological and political interests, yet they both serve the same master, namely capital.

<sup>16</sup> Educational policies under the influence of neoliberalism aim at controlling school curricula through national standards (Spring, 1998). These standards are geared toward increasing student knowledge by creating a “common curriculum.” In the new economic order, students are increasingly urged to acquire basic skills in their journey from school to work and as a part of their “lifelong learning.” Many educational policy makers who seek to employ education as a tool for advancing neoliberal economics believe that the barrier between education and work should be removed without a trace (Banfield, 2000). In their opinion, lifelong learning is synonymous with life-long accreditation.

In 1983, the report *A Nation at Risk* famously announced that public schools were to blame for the declining global competitiveness of the United States. Influenced by the report, socioeconomic policies under a burgeoning neoliberalism established control of school curricula by introducing national standards. A common curriculum was believed to be the most effective way of raising overall educational standards (Spring, 1998) and linking educational achievement to increasing the economic competitiveness of the United States (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Although traditional Republicans viewed economic performance as indissolubly connected to the quality of schools, neoconservatives and their procorporate allies asserted that low academic standards were unequivocally responsible for the poor academic performance of both students and teachers. By the 1980s, the goal of educational performance became synonymous with excellence, and a strong emphasis was placed on increasing the number of school days, providing rigorous academic courses along with back-to-basics teaching methods, and placing increased emphasis and importance on teacher evaluation and accountability and standardized tests (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

During the Reagan administration, educational policies plunged teachers and students headlong into the abyss of greed. Education’s relation to capital was far from an innocent dalliance. Policies were underwritten by a confluence of free-market ideology, conservative Christian ideology, and nationalist

sentiments (Spring, 1997). In 1989, the Goals 2000 initiative proposed by President Bush targeted the development of national academic standards and national achievement tests. By 1995, the call for national standards made by the Clinton administration proposed a history curriculum that aimed at concealing issues related to U.S. imperialism, exploitation, and political power (Spring, 1997). A cabal of conservatives (including Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, and Dick Cheney) launched a national curriculum campaign that unreservedly supported U.S. foreign policy and unswervingly put education on the path of for-profit schooling.

The far Right, supported by organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, continues to be represented by powerful conservative political figures such as Jesse Helms, Edwin Meese, and Newt Gingrich, who blame the government for the declining social and economic status of the United States in the global economy. The goal of these pundits and their corporate allies is to decentralize education and privatize public schools. The Religious Right has accused the government of promoting homosexuality, secular humanism, and scientific creationism; banning school prayer; and downplaying the importance of family values. Neoconservatives supported by the American Enterprise Institute have largely positioned themselves as political centrists who in their frenetic drive for academic excellence advocate a strong role for the federal government and support for private schools. Many of these conservative groups call for a return to the heterosexist patriarchy and still-born democracy of Leave it to Beaver and Lassie, pop culture's Elysian fields as dreamt by Norman Rockwell on melatonin. We are living Nickelodeon re-runs of the American Dream, only in reverse.

A national curriculum and strong educational standards are manifestly viewed by mainstream policy pundits as part of the modernization of the curriculum. However, an important latent function of such a curriculum is to impose efficient methods of production through the exploitation of labor-power. Efforts to build a national curriculum and national standards that emphasize accountability, performance, ranking, and the differential placement of students into educational tracks, is also part of a larger agenda of steering public schools toward a free-market model that advocates giving a wide range of "choices" to parents (choices that will ultimately decimate the public sphere, morphing education into the structural unconscious of the billionaire boys' club of Bill Gates, Warren Edward Buffet, Paul Gardner, and Steve Ballmer).

<sup>17</sup> There are, however, a number of inconsistencies in Apple's arguments. For example, there are moments when Apple reduces social struggles to mere ideological struggles, and there are other moments when ideological struggles take precedence over class struggles.

<sup>18</sup> One of the major flaws associated with Michael Apple's distinction between moral and intellectual leadership and political domination is that he rejects the important role the vanguard party plays in seizing political power. To establish 'the dictatorship of the proletariat,' the working-class must seize state power. However, Apple's claims that the ruling classes (in Apple's case, the New Right) establishes domination by means of moral and intellectual leadership alone. For Apple, hegemony connotes moral and intellectual leadership. In addition, moral and intellectual leadership precedes political dominance. Overall, Apple's objective is to deny the importance of the vanguard party.

<sup>19</sup> Due to lack of time and space, in this essay review I have limited my criticism of Apple's book to these three areas: Gramsci's notion of the commonsense, Apple's concept of "decentered unity," and his idea of "dual strategy."

<sup>20</sup> Depending on the social and political context, ideology can be interpreted differently. Broadly speaking, ideology refers to ideas, values, beliefs, and attitudes of a particular social class or group who share a common set of interests. In addition, ideology refers to how social classes perceive and experience the social world depending upon their social, economic, and cultural, and political position in relation to the means of production. Finally, crudely speaking, ideology manifests itself in the media, arts, and institutions in ways similar to schools and the judiciary system.

According to Marx and Engels (1995), ideology refers to the ideas and beliefs of the ruling social classes. Ideology implies that the ruling classes can broadly project their value and belief system as the

representation of the interests of all social classes. Thus, ideology ensures the production and reproduction of capitalist social relations of production. This is achieved, in part, when subordinate social groups identify with the interests of the ruling classes and accept them as their own. As Marx and Engels (1995) remark:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, and at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. (p. 64)

Moreover, Marx and Engels recognized that ideas do not exist independently from class relations. They argued that ideas, values, and beliefs generated from within a particular mode of production (i.e. slavery, feudalism, and capitalism) have a concrete foundation. Second, they believed that the dominant ideas are those of the ruling social classes. Yet, in The German Ideology (1970), Marx and Engels deepened their analysis of ideology further by expressing that:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men appear at this stage as the first efflux of their material behavior. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomena arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (p. 46)

To illustrate how ideology operates, Marx and Engels applied the metaphor "camera obscura." In the way that a camera lens inverts an image, ideology achieves a similar phenomenon. Marx and Engels went on to explain that ideology involves a "double inversion"; that is, reality as it is experienced becomes clouded or distorted because of the exploitative relations that exists between the dominant and subordinate social classes. What follows from an 'inverted' social reality is a 'false consciousness' that prevents people from recognizing objective social relations..

According to Terry Eagleton (1998), Marx and Engels viewed ideology as an "inversion of the relation between consciousness and reality" (p. 233). They rejected Hegelian idealism because ideas lack the power to shape the concrete social world. In other words, Hegelian idealism rests upon the assumption that people have the power to change the world by simply relying on their ideas of the world. In contrast to Hegelian idealism, a Marxist interpretation of ideology ties consciousness to the social relations of production. As Marx and Engels write: "Consciousness... from the very beginning is a social product, and remains so as long as men [sic] exist...." (1970, p. 51). Yet, ideology attempts to depict ideas as separable and non-relational from their concrete material context. On this point, Eagleton writes that "there is an apparent non-correspondence between ideas and reality in class society, but this non-correspondence is structural to that form of life, and fulfills an important function within it" (p. 233). Eagleton (1998) recognizes ideology to be

...a form of thought generated or skewed out of shape by the exigencies of power; but if it is therefore traced through with significant tensions and inconsistencies, it also represents an attempt to mask the very conflicts from which it springs, either by denying that they exist, or by asserting their unimportance or inevitability. Ideologies are sets of discursive strategies for displacing, recasting or spuriously accounting for realities which prove embarrassing to a ruling power; and in doing so, they contribute to that power's self-legitimation. (p. 234)

At the time of the Russian revolution, ideology was no longer associated only with the class interests of the ruling class, who forcefully imposed their class ideology onto the subordinate classes. For example, Lenin extended the meaning of ideology to encompass the interests of the working class as well. He stated that ideology, which constituted the political consciousness of a particular social class, could be described as either positive or negative. Therefore, under capitalist social relations of production, the 'ideology' of the working class is to abolish private property relations. Yet, the debate over ideology did not end with Lenin. The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci extended the meaning of ideology even further. Gramsci departed from the equation of ideology as false or true consciousness. He did this by introducing the concept 'commonsense,' which consisted of both accurate and inaccurate representations of the social world.<sup>20</sup> For Gramsci, ideology was not confined to an assemblage of ideas. Rather, Gramsci believed that ideas had a direct impact on the daily activities and experiences of men and women. Finally, Gramsci believed that a class can exercise hegemony only when it can enforce its ideology onto other classes.

According to David Hawkes (1996), the relationship between ideology and false consciousness "consists [of] an inability to recognize the mediating function of representation, in assuming that it is an autonomous sphere, and thus mistaking the appearance for thing-in-itself" (p. 98). By focusing his analysis on a Gramscian reading of ideology, Hawkes (1996) goes on to dismiss the Marxian interpretation of ideology as false consciousness. This is because ideology cannot only be attributed to false consciousness; but it can also be considered as true consciousness. While Gramsci identified this as "organic ideology," he did not classify ideas as simply reflecting material social relations. If this was in fact the case, then there would be no space for human agency.

Jorge Larrain (1979) remarks that Gramsci's theory eclipsed the negative notion of ideology. Gramsci viewed ideology as part of the superstructure, which reflected the contradictions of the concrete material world. Gramsci insisted that ideology is a necessary characteristic of all class societies. He further discriminated between ideology as 'necessary' and ideology as 'pure appearance.' Consequently, whereas organic ideology is necessary for a given structure, arbitrary ideology is one that is 'willed.'<sup>20</sup>

Following Gramsci, Louis Althusser (1971) stated that the primary objective of all social and economic organizations, including capitalism, is to produce the mechanisms for its own reproduction. This requires reproducing the types of people who will be involved in the process of production. Althusser stated that these mechanisms, which the social institutions of capitalism develop includes, among others, Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Whereas the former includes the police, judicial apparatus, and the army, the latter includes the church, family, media, political parties, and institutions of education. The difference between RSA and ISA is that while RSA is achieved through violence, the ISA is achieved by means of ideology.

Althusser saw ideology as being embedded in the daily activities and social practices of men and women. He considered ideology to be a material force that was interwoven in the institutions (RSA and ISA) responsible for the social reproduction of capitalism. One of the major claims of Althusser was that ideas are not 'ideal' in Hegelian sense, rather that they are material forces lodged in the daily social practices and activities of people. Stated differently, ideas do not exist in our minds. As David Hawkes (1995) comments elsewhere, Althusser saw ideology as an "imaginary way in which people experience their real lives, the ideal representation of a material process" (p. 126).

Moreover, Althusser made a distinction between science and ideology. Science is as close as we can get to Althusserian materialism. Althusser regarded science as the knowledge of ideology. He wrote that the responsibility of science is to explain the origins of ideas, and to reveal how the bourgeoisie uses it to wield power. One other major goal of Althusser was to rescue Marxism from Hegelian idealism. Althusser firmly believed that Marxism is a science of human society. In contrast, he saw Hegel as an ideological thinker. Althusser believed that Marx's early shift toward humanism was influenced by Hegelian idealism, which lead him to differentiate between the young Marx, who wrote the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, and the more mature Marx, who wrote Capital. In short, Althusser discriminated between the humanistic and materialistic philosophies of Marx (for a more in-depth analysis of the concept of ideology see Dave Hill (2001b)).



<sup>21</sup> Here, I am using the term “war of maneuver” to mean class struggle.

<sup>22</sup> Mas’ud Zavarzadeh notes that experience “is not a direct understanding of the world, as all versions of “identity politics” assume. Experience is always made meaningful not by its immediate contact with the real but through the interpretive strategies of the dominant ideology. To posit experience as the site of truth is to allow ideology to represent the class interests of the ruling class as the real itself. Those who put experience at the center are complicit with the ruling ideology since experience is not a given but a socially produced ideology-effect.”

<sup>23</sup> Marxism does not privilege class oppression over race and gender, and other forms of social oppression (Meiksins Wood, 1995). Marxists agree that class is not the only form of oppression in society, yet it is also a fact that class is central to the social relations of production and essential for the producing and reproducing the cultural and economic activities of humans under capitalist mode of production. Whereas the abolition of racism and sexism does not guarantee the abolition of capitalist social relations of production, the abolition of class inequalities, by definition, denotes the abolition of capitalism. This is because capitalism depends on the exploitation of one class by another class.

<sup>24</sup> Following Marx and Engels, Lenin recognized that the vanguard party plays a crucial role in guiding working-class struggles. The role of the vanguard party in revolutionary struggles existed independent of the fact that the working class could not obtain the theoretical and intellectual insights needed to guide its own struggles. Rather, Lenin believed that revolutionary struggles were divided into a number of stages. He argued that the vanguard party was a historical necessity arising from the social division of labor between mental and manual laborers.

Of course, Lenin was aware of Marx’s dictum: “The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class themselves.” Lenin clearly understood that the working class was the only authentic revolutionary vehicle for change. He further recognized that the vanguard party had dangerous inclinations toward disassociating itself from working-class struggles and becoming, as Ernest Mandel (1977) noted, “an end in itself.” But, on the other hand, Lenin also believed that the vanguard party follows the laws of the dialectic that governs revolutionary movements. One of these dialectical principles has to do with the “unity of separation and integration.” In the initial stages of revolutionary struggle, the vanguard party would guide the working class. Later, as the revolution strengthened its roots, the distinction between intellectuals and workers would gradually disappear because workers would self-educate and develop a revolutionary-class consciousness.

<sup>25</sup> Lenin’s defense of the vanguard party stems from the fact that the working class must organize itself. To do so, it must build a proletarian party, which would serve as a ‘weapon’ for its struggle against the bourgeois class. As Cliff Slaughter explained, under the dominant feudal social relations, the bourgeoisie was able to develop its own economy, culture, and philosophy, which represented its social consciousness as well as its class consciousness prior to taking over political power. Not until the bourgeoisie recognized that the political structure of feudal social relation prevented the development of bourgeois economic and cultural institutions did they finally overthrow feudalism. In contrast, the working class has never been in a position to build or gain control over the institutions of capitalism. Capitalism is unique in the sense that the bourgeois class has control over all types of relationships and social institutions. As a result, the vanguard party is a representative of the class consciousness of the working class. It is unreasonable to expect all workers to gain the same degree of class consciousness at the same time. Indeed, the uneven development of class consciousness among the working class is an attribute of capitalism. Lenin believed that capitalist structure must first be absorbed by class consciousness because of its separation both from the “immediate” experiences and the collective consciousness of the working class. This is why theory is important.

<sup>26</sup>It should be noted that the hegemony of the working class is not to be mistaken for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

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### *Author's Details*

Ramin Farahmandpur is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Policy, Foundations and Administrative Studies at Portland State University. He completed his Ph.D. in the field of Curriculum Theory and Teaching Studies from the Graduate School of Education and Informational Studies at UCLA. Farahmandpur has authored and co-authored (with Peter McLaren) a number of essays on a wide range of topics including globalization, Imperialism, neoliberalism, Marxism, and Critical Pedagogy. His

forthcoming book (with Peter McLaren) entitled *Teaching against Globalization and the New Imperialism: Essays on Critical Pedagogy* will be published by Rowman and Littlefield later this year.

*Correspondence*

Ramin Farahmandpur  
Assistant Professor  
Educational Policy, Foundations, and Administrative Studies  
Graduate School of Education  
Portland State University  
Post Office Box 751  
Portland, Oregon 97207  
[rfp@pdx.edu](mailto:rfp@pdx.edu)