

In Retro Glide

Glenn Rikowski

School of Education, University of Northampton, UK

Abstract

Under the cover of writing a Review Essay, Michael Apple (2006) has embarked on a wide-ranging critique of certain perceived trends within contemporary Marxist educational theory and research. He argues that emerging now within this field are 'Bowles and Gintis look-alikes' (after Bowles and Gintis, 1976), but who are less knowledgeable in economics than were Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis. These newcomers to Marxism in education have ditched certain gains for educational analysis arising from the work of Marxists such as Louis Althusser and Roger Dale, argues Apple. Furthermore, these latter-day Marxist writers in education tend to frame theories suspended above the realities of life in education, to pose and posture, indulge in rhetoric and to use Marx's texts as an 'iconic talisman' floating above contemporary educational struggles, notes Apple. This article challenges these claims by Apple. It argues that Apple misreads and misrepresents what has happened in Marxist educational theory and research over the last thirty years or so. Furthermore, in conjuring up the 'Mid-Atlantic Small Group' as the focus of his attacks, it is argued that Apple seeks to marginalise the exciting new work in Marxist educational theory and critique whilst also ignoring the global nature of advances in this field, which are not confined to the US and the UK. Finally, in refusing to name those he castigates, or to reference their work, Apple's critique of the trends he pinpoints is unconvincing, and the 'enemies within' Marxism he brings forth have no identities: they are 'persons unknown'.

Introduction: Michael Apple's Critique of Persons Unknown

In a recent academic production posing as a Review Essay, Michael Apple (2006) casts his eye on critical educational studies in the United States and perceives this field to be in a state of disarray. Furthermore, for Apple, certain people are undermining what he takes to be Marxist analysis in the education field. He does not name these apparently shady folk: instead, he refers to a 'small group of people', operating on 'both sides of the Atlantic' who have 'mounted attacks' on certain (what he takes to be) 'gains' in Marxist work in education made previously by people such as Louis Althusser and Roger Dale.

Apple's refusal to name the targets of his critique set me thinking: am I in this 'small group' of Mid-Atlantic demons undermining Marxist *traditions* (Apple, 2006, p.680) in educational work? Am I one of these 'Persons Unknown'? I believe I am. I also believe that Apple is trying to deter people like me from developing Marxist educational theory. He attempts to do this by appealing, in magnificently retro fashion, to some past great health of Marxist educational theory, a mythical Golden Age that people like me should revere and preserve – for no really good reason.

This article is my own personal reply to Michael Apple's personal (certainly not intellectual or scholarly) and jittery attempt to attenuate debate in Marxist educational theory and to send it back, not to some Golden Age, but to some primordial state, where Marx plays a bit part in a low-key script.

1. The Clones of Bowles and Gintis

First of all, it might be useful to try to pin down who Apple has in mind in his critique of perceived regrettable trends within Marxist educational theory. Attempting this reveals both what might be seen as his utter confusion and his glaring lack of intellectual honesty and openness. Apple pontificates, thus:

One of the things I predicted was a return to more traditional Marxist approaches, but with the loss of subtlety. Bowles and Gintis (1976) look-alikes, but without their knowledge of economics, would return. Unfortunately, part of this is now coming true (p.680).

Apple does not say when or where he predicted this trend. But who are these ‘Bowles and Gintis look-alikes’ with their dodgy economics? Apple gives no examples. I have indicated that David Livingstone (1995) attempted to plug some of the gaps in Bowles and Gintis (1976), in an effort to find the ‘missing links’ in their analyses and hence develop them further (in Rikowski, 1997, pp.565-568). In addition, I have noted (in Rikowski, 1997) how Linda Bailey (1995) used Bowles and Gintis to examine the National Curriculum in England. But these articles were written over ten years ago, and Apple is claiming that his prediction of the emergence of Bowles and Gintis look-alikes is ‘now coming true’. Thus, these second comings are more recent phenomena. I see no evidence of this: who are these people?

Perhaps Apple is being too subtle for his own good here and trying to intimate that I am one of these Bowles and Gintis clones, though a defective one – given my apparent inferior knowledge of economics. Yet I have criticised Bowles and Gintis in my published work (e.g. Rikowski, 1997) and distanced myself from their bowdlerised and underdeveloped Marxist theory, including their restrained use of Marxist ‘economics’. Good bourgeois economists they no doubt are, but from the evidence in *Schooling in Capitalist America* I would say that Bowles and Gintis are both sparing in their use of Marx and reluctant to use Marxian ideas in their analyses therein. To compound the confusion, Apple seems to forget that Marx did not set out to produce a superior economics; rather, Marx produced a *critique* of political economy and the value form of labour.

2. Was the Baby Really There?

Secondly, Apple argues that these unnamed Bowles and Gintis clones not only have a rubbish understanding of economics but have also been foolhardy enough to have ditched prior intellectual gains forged in the field of Marxist educational theory. Thus speaks Apple:

... there seems to be a loss of many of the gains that had been made in our understanding of the complexities of class relations within the state and between the state and civil society – as if Althusser, Poulantzas, Jessop, Dale and others had never written anything of importance (Apple, 2006, p.680).

There are a number of points here. First, Apple does not say what these gains are. Secondly, it is not clear whether these gains are so for Marxist theory in general or for Marxist educational theory in particular. This makes a difference: whilst Poulantzas's theory of the state is clearly significant, what does Apple believe are the gains to be made when this theory is employed to analyse capitalist schooling? Hence, it is possible these writers might have had important things to say, but in terms of the relevance of their ideas for education the value of their outputs might not be so obvious. There's a difference between Dale and Althusser and the other two. The works of Dale and Althusser have clearly had a significant impact on Marxist educational theory (witness articles in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* where their influence has been clear and direct: e.g. Fritzell, 1987; and Bailey, 1995); but the work of Poulantzas and Jessop has not been widely used, to my knowledge, in the context of Marxist educational theory. Perhaps this might be because the apparent "gains" that Apple holds on to, amongst these two writers at least, have not been obvious to Marxist educational theorists, or indeed anyone else much in terms of educational theory and critique. There was no baby in the bathwater.

My own position on all this is clear: from the 1970s up to the mid-1990s there did not appear to be any sound starting point on which to ground Marxist educational theory within extant texts. Thus, in my *Scorched Earth* article (Rikowski 1997) I advocated the rebuilding of Marxist educational theory from the works of *Marx* – not from Althusser, Dale or anyone else. The groundwork had not been done, and neither of these writers, either singularly, or as a team, or in conjunction with others that were then on offer, provided an adequate starting point. So I set out to rebuild Marxist educational theory from *Marx*. Others, such as Paula Allman (1999), Richard Brosio (1994) and John Freeman-Moir (1992) had also reached the same conclusion during the 1990s.

3. There is No-one at Home in the Cave

Thirdly, Apple seeks to re-cast these invisible clones of Bowles and Gintis as some kind of Neanderthal fundamentalists incapable of complex thought; especially when it comes to exploring issues of identity, culture, class and political economy and their inter-relationships. Says the Acolyte of Complexity:

The immensely productive material on the relationship between ideology and identity, on the relationship among culture, identity and political economy, on the crucial impact of politics and on power of social movements that cut across class lines, as well as a number of other issues, is now seen by some to be either a rejection of key tenets of the Marxist *traditions* (the plural is absolutely crucial at home). Or these advances are said to deal with epiphenomenal concerns (Apple, 2006, p.680).

This follows on from the statement about the gains resulting from Althusser and the rest noted in the previous section. The implication is that Althusser and Co addressed these complex issues, but that *some* others view exploring these as being at odds with key tenets of Marxist traditions. At least Apple acknowledges that Marxism has *traditions*, and is not some monolithic bloc; some small mercy.

Once again, precisely who is Apple getting at in this contrast? Who is ditching the exploration of ideology, culture, identity, and social movements that cut across class lines on the basis of their adherence to key Marxist tenets? Writers that I know who place themselves in one Marxist tradition or another all address these issues. In the writings of Peter McLaren (2005, and Farahmandpur, 2005), Paula Allman (1999 and 2001), David Harvie (2006), Dave Hill (2005), Mike Cole (2007) and many others – we can see this. So who is in Apple’s cave of Neanderthal fundamentalists? There is nobody at home as far as I can see.

Apple does not say what these ‘key tenets’ are either. What does he have in mind: the labour theory of value, the dual nature of labour in capitalist society, the law of value, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall? Does he know? Has he bothered to think about it? Will he ever tell us? These tenets may be legion: as there are different Marxist *traditions* there could be corresponding variations in the key tenets. But are there some really, really crucial tenets that cut across all Marxist traditions? Over to you, Apple!

Also Apple implies that those who have not worked through education via Althusser to Dale, and have included explorations of ideology and culture etc., sometimes hold that the (unspecified) advances that might have been made had they done so, to be ‘epiphenomenal concerns’. Again: no names, no examples and no references. This is just sloppy scholarship, unbefitting of my *Volumizer* web blog, let alone the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

This aside, it appears that Apple is saying that those Marxist fundamentalists he has in sights, and who also work with the base/superstructure model (B/SM) (see Rikowski, 1997, pp.553-556), treat ideology, culture etc. as epiphenomena. He has a point here, but that is part of my critique of the B/SM (in Rikowski, 1997); these so-called epiphenomena are not separable from the ‘economic’ in capitalist society. At this point, I felt that I was not one of those Apple was attacking. But this changes in the next paragraph (on p.680).

4. The Mid-Atlantic Small Group

Fourthly, it seems that I am a paid up member of the Mid-Atlantic Small Group. Indeed, I am most pleased to be such, though this group is perhaps not as teeny-tiny as Apple suggests. Apple points the finger thus:

On both sides of the Atlantic, a small group of people have mounted attacks on these advances in the name of purifying ‘the’ Marxist tradition of the taint of culturalism and the sin of worrying too much about, say, gender and race at the expense of class (Apple, 2006, p.680).

Again, it would be helpful to know what these ‘advances’ are, if only to know whether I am attacking them or not! Apple’s tone here makes these hapless Mid-Atlantic Small Group characters sound exceedingly shady and disreputable. Now, I suspect I am included in Apple’s demonology within this Mid-Atlantic Small Group. This will become apparent as we proceed.

As to the British connection, I suspect that as well my tainted soul, Paula Allman, Dave Hill and Mike Cole are also condemned. Maybe others in the UK might feel excluded here! They might ‘want in’ on Apple’s group from Marxist intellectual hell. I apologise if I’ve not included you; but Apple has set the parameters. The concept of a “small group” can only be stretched so far. Furthermore, it is not exactly clear if Apple means that there is a *single* small group with members in the US and UK, or two small groups: one in the US and one in the UK.

I can see why he would want to be opaque and obscure here. Were he to suggest clearly that there is a *single* group coming together across the Atlantic then that would put his point about its smallness (and hence insignificance) in some doubt (though the power and significance of an intellectual group cannot always best be measured by its

size). Yet having two small groups does not hold up empirically. The connections between the British Marxists in education and people I believe are in Apple's American group (or sub-group) (e.g., Peter McLaren, Deb Kelsh, Richard Brosio, Ramin Farahmandpur, Sheila Macrine, Rich Gibson and others) are becoming increasingly close. We write stuff together! We email each other! Through the AERA Marx SIG we sometimes meet up, though I am pretty much a non-foreign traveller. Indeed, one exciting US/UK project within the Mid-Atlantic 'small group' was the article by Deb Kelsh and Dave Hill (2006), where, interestingly, Apple's theoretical shortcomings, his Weberian-based understanding of the social and his neo-Weberian class analysis were set out for all to view. Perhaps Apple wishfully thinks that two groups – one on each side of the Atlantic – might be better for him. Two, relatively isolated and micro groups of Marxist (as opposed to his presumably *large* group of Weberian) educational theorists might be more palatable for him.

I take his point about the 'purification' of 'the' Marxist tradition to be *specifically* aimed at me. After all, I was the one that announced I would be pursuing a 'scorched earth' policy and starting over again with Marxist educational theory from Marx, and not producing some derivative, second-hand concoction based on Althusser, Dale and the rest. Again, if I am mistaken, then he should say whom the dart is being thrown at. Basically, Apple fails to see, or acknowledge, the point of starting Marxist educational theory out from *Marx* – and for me, specifically, from Marx's concept of labour power. I explain my choices and commitments, and the reasons behind them, at great length in Rikowski (2000).

The point about members of the Mid-Atlantic Small Group not 'worrying too much about, say, gender and race at the expense of class' contains a double error. Firstly, members of the 'small group' have written extensively about gender and race (especially race, and the writings of Mike Cole and Peter McLaren in particular). However, I have not, but there are good reasons for this. It's not that I don't think race and gender are not important; rather, I have not developed my work on Marxist educational theory sufficiently to address issues of gender and race. Until now: at the next Marxism and Education: Renewing Dialogues seminar in London (2nd May 2007), Ruth Rikowski and I hope to present a paper called *Against What We Are*

Worth which does address gender inequalities and education through Marx's concept of *value*. No doubt this will be too hardcore for the sensitive Apple: but, so what.

Secondly, social class is at the core of the social relations of production in capitalist society in a way that race and gender are not. Of course, as Apple operates with a neo-Weberian concept of class (as Kelsh and Hill, 2006, and Hill, 2007 indicate) his theoretical and ontological predilections obscure this point. Basically: class equality in capitalist society is impossible, and the eradication of class means the abolition of capitalist society, as *the labour-capital relation is the class relation*. Technically and logically, there could be gender and race equality but capitalism could still exist.

It is Apple, however, that seems to want to set those exploring race and gender in general, and within Marxism and the Left specifically, *against* those holding to a Marxist concept of class as outlined briefly above. We don't have to accept his divisive intellectual strategy or the neo-Weberianism on which his attacks are based.

5. Of those who Purify, Pose and Posture

*Here at the glass – all the usual problems,
all the habitual farce.
You ask, in uncertain voice, what you would do
as if there were a choice
but to carry on miming the song
and hope that it all works out right*

(Van Der Graaf Generator, 1975, *The Undercover Man*)

The fifth point is that Apple just carries on, hoping that things will turn out all right, for him, by situating the Mid-Atlantic Small Group as self-preening posers obsessed with their own radicality. This is personal abuse of 'persons unknown'; but Apple has dropped enough hints for these persons to uncover themselves. Yet it is Apple who is really the undercover man: his linguistic stratagems camouflaging the people he is gunning for in his discursive onslaughts, so that he himself may remain mysterious and unknowable. For Apple:

Like Britain, in the United States there are indeed crucial reasons to deal absolutely seriously with class and the materialities of capitalist relations. Yet at times, this aim of purification [as referred to in the previous point: GR] also feels

a bit like posturing, almost as an attempt to situate oneself in a space that says ‘look at how radical I seem’. Yet such radicalism at times also seems to treat the realities of schools and other cultural and educational sites and the struggles over them simply rhetorically. It is as if this particular version of Marxism floats in the air above the material and ideological realities of the object of its analysis – education (p.680).

Hence, the Mid-Atlantic Small Group members are accused of producing a form of Marxist educational theory that is disconnected from ‘material and ideological realities’. For Apple, members of the Small Group are more concerned with appearing to be daring and radical rather than with generating Marxist theory that has validity and relevance to these realities. In the event, we end up as posturing rhetoricians, imbibing our analytically pure, yet practically useless, form of Marxism. Such majestic abuse!

Of course, what I have characterised as ‘Academic Marxism’ (in Rikowski, 1996, pp.426-427) is prone to the tendencies Apple describes. Again, he gives no names, no examples, no references to support his accusations and judgements. If Apple bothered to look at my academic output he would see the considerable efforts I have made to bring Marxian analyses to bear on the critique of actual education policies and practices. My AOL web log, *Volumizer*, was set up to generate this kind of analysis in a readily accessible way. Furthermore, all other members of the Mid-Atlantic Small Group have indicated, in many ways and contexts, and many, many times how Marxian analysis can inform concrete educational policies and practices.

So what is Apple getting at here? His charges are ludicrous. My guess is that, not being into Marxian analysis himself, he is eager to belittle and to stop those that *are* into it: he fears the depth and power of such analyses and the challenges they pose to his own neo-Weberian positions. Hence he ridicules and vilifies these Marxian analyses and the ‘persons unknown’ that have developed them.

On one point I, personally, would actually agree with Apple’s caricature of the Mid-Atlantic Small Group, which some others within the Group might not agree with: that’s for them to say. The ‘object of analysis’ is not, for me, ‘education’; but the *social production of labour power in capitalism*. I am interested in education and training insofar as they figure in this variegated process. I start out from a problem *within* Marxism; not from within mainstream sociology of education. That is: how

and in what ways and forms is labour power socially produced in capitalist society, and what are the contradictions inherent in this process – taking into account the many *empirical* (as well as abstract, elementary and general) forms of labour power production?

6. Page 680: The Worst Page!

By now, readers might be wondering why I have spent so much time on critique of a *single page* of Apple's Review Essay. Well, quite simply, this is the worst and yet most dangerous single page of anti-Marxist educational theory, manipulation and obfuscation I have encountered in over 25 years of reading in the field. It is thoroughly regressive, divisive – and has no redeeming features. Having asserted that the 'particular version of Marxism' that he is attacking 'floats in the air above the material and ideological realities of the object of its analysis – education', Apple appeals to Marx! Regarding his 'floating Marxism', Apple opines that:

This is puzzling to me, since one would have thought that a truly radical epistemological and political position would be fully grounded in a fundamentally reflexive relationship with the institutions it is supposedly about. Certainly this was Marx's position (p.680).

First, as usual, the suspects are not identified: who are these 'floating Marxists'? Secondly, from what I have read, since the mid-1990s what I have called the Renaissance in Marxist educational theory (in Rikowski, 1996) has been framed in a 'reflexive relationship' with the 'institutions it is supposedly about'. Examples are Richard Brosio's (1994) wonderful book, and Peter McLaren's recent work (e.g., 2005, and McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2005). Both of these bring together, in multifarious and complex ways, ideology, culture and all the other factors noted in point 3 by Apple and much more besides, though the focus of the two books is different – in terms of Brosio's historical analysis of US education and McLaren's infusion of contemporary imperialism, wars and ecological considerations into the picture. Many other examples could be provided, but I would be keen to see Apple's counter-examples of his 'floating Marxism' in educational analysis and critique.

However, and this is where I would disagree with Apple on reflexivity: is being in a 'fundamentally reflexive relationship' with the institutions that are the objects of

study really ‘Marx’s position’? This makes Marx sound nothing more than a radical sociologist, indulging in the kind of ‘reflexivity’ that mainstream sociology of education would celebrate. If Apple turns to the opening chapters of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx there is clearly not focused on economic institutions. Rather, he is focused on the economic cell form, the commodity, and unfolding its structuring features. Perhaps Marx, then, is a ‘floating Marxist’ according to Apple?

Furthermore, Apple’s proposed reflexive thinking is not identical to the kind of dialectical thinking that Marx held to be central to understanding social processes in capitalist society. Capital develops dialectically; which is why dialectical thinking is crucial. Apple, however, seeks to impose his own view of mainstream sociology onto Marx! For a clearer grip on Marx’s mode of thinking in general the work of Bertell Ollman (1993) is instructive, and regarding how this mode of dialectical thinking relates to capitalist education in particular then Paula Allman is central (1999 and 2001).

7. Floating Marxism, Ptolemy and Me

The seventh point is that Apple attempts to frame a rift between empirical and theoretical moments within the ‘floating Marxism’ he is attacking; shadowy, unnamed Marxists partake in theorising without reference to the real world of schools, teachers and so on. This is set in contrast to his practice: with its supposed close relationship between theory and the objects of analysis, between data and theory.

First, Apple sets out the basis for a Ptolemaic version of educational research by listing a range of topics and issues that Left researchers in education should address. This is an entirely mishy-mushy procedure. Marx realised that the critique of political economy and the form of labour in capitalist society required a *starting point*: a point that allowed him to unfold the categories and phenomena of capital in a dialectical, systematic and relational fashion. It was only after several hundred pages in the *Grundrisse* that he concluded that the commodity was the starting point for his critique. For Marx, however, it was the general class of commodities that was the starting point. Whereas, for me, it was the unique commodity, the class of one: labour power – that became the starting point of my adventures in Marxist educational theory (see Rikowski, 2000). However, in more recent work this project ultimately linked

with the exploration of educational services as instances of the *general* class of commodities – through the business takeover of schools (see Rikowski, 2004).

Apple, on the other hand seems to me engaged in a vast mapping exercise similar to that pursued by Claudius Ptolemaeus, or Ptolemy, the Greek/Egyptian astronomer who mapped the heavens (see ISU, 2001). For him, the Left educational researcher gets immersed in a vast range of topics *without* a strategic starting point for analysis and critique. Theory is just ‘about such things’, just as theory, for Ptolemy, was about the movement of the planets and stars. As Apple notes below:

Theory is best done when it is about such things, not when it is waving one reading of not very carefully selected texts from Marx’s vast writings like an iconic talisman floating above the actual struggles both inside and connected to education (Apple, 2006, p.681).

Ptolemy’s system, including his theory on the movement of the stars, lasted for over a thousand years. Perhaps we shall have to endure Apple’s approach for another 1000 years too, if we are unlucky!

The above Apple quote, more than any other so far produced, is clearly getting at me. Of all the Marxist educational theorists I have read over the last 25 years, it is Paula Allman and I who have been the heaviest users of quotations from Marx. This is unsurprising: we seek to build our work on and within the work of Marx – not Althusser, or Roger Dale. This must be us Apple is referring to; it makes the most sense. I object strongly to his assertion that I have selected my quotations from Marx in a haphazard way. I take a great deal of care over how I use Marx’s work, and which Marx quotations I insert, and why I use them.

But Apple’s claim that I use these quotations like an ‘iconic talisman floating above the actual struggles’ is pure bluff. Now, as readers of my work may know, I have developed Marx’s concept of labour power by extending it (sometimes getting criticisms from traditional Marxists for doing this). Marx is not a God to me, to be revered and preserved in aspic. Neither should any of his texts be used to merely lend legitimacy to what we have to say, or to stifle debate or to block the development of communist science. Marx is there to be used and developed, for a living Marxism.

I would suggest the opposite is the case with Apple: he appears to want to undermine and deter developments in Marxist educational theory that the Mid-Atlantic Small Group are engaged in. Apple appears to be concerned about the exciting ways that Marx has been used and developed in the last 10 years or so in educational analysis and critique, not just by Paula and I, but by many, many others – and not just in the US and UK, but throughout the world. This trend is passing him by, and threatens his own neo-Weberian, mainstream sociology of education, with its radical veneer (in which Marx plays an inhibited role) and its dalliances with postmodernism. Apple targets the Mid-Atlantic Small Group in the hope that it will not grow, whilst surely really knowing that it already has grown significantly since the mid-1990s. If he does not know this, i.e. about the developments of Marxist educational theory and critique in Central and South America, in Africa, in Asia, and in Australia – as well as in Europe and North America – then he bases his ‘arguments’ on a knowledge deficit of monumental and tragic proportions.

He wants to give the impression that he is on history’s ‘winning side’, and that the Mid-Atlantic Small Group is composed of hardcore Marxist theorists (whose theories are dislocated from educational realities), political headbangers and shady conspirators, using Marx in quasi-religious and fundamentalist ways. If such a group existed outside of Apple’s imagination, and I was a member of it, I would deserve his opprobrium. His fantasies are there to warn, wound and debilitate, to silence, block and terminate trends he finds inconvenient to his own project.

Conclusion: Living in the Past

Apple seems very stuck in the past; in the 1980s, to be precise, when he still had some credibility in Marxist educational research, theory and critique. The period when Marxist educational theory was in its pomp, for him, was probably in the mid-1980s, when his *Education and Power* was published (Apple 1985). This was not a period of great health for Marxist educational theory: it was a period of crisis and stagnation (see Rikowski, 1996 and 1997) – and *Education and Power* was part of this condition, as opposed to pointing a way beyond it. Since then, Apple has put most of his intellectual efforts elsewhere, and he seems to resent the progress made by those who stuck with Marxism in education – all through the rotten 1980s, the fall of the Stalinist Eastern Bloc and the onslaughts of postmodernism.

This Review Essay is a desperate hatchet job by Apple; yet the axe is wielded smoothly over the heads of the Mid-Atlantic Small Group, with ‘silence’ embossed in shining gold on its handle, and its action is best viewed in slow motion – in retro glide.

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Author's Details

Glenn Rikowski is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies in the School of Education at the University of Northampton. His publications include: *The Battle in Seattle: Its Significance for Education* (2001, Tufnell Press) and *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory* (2002, Lexington Books) – a collection co-edited with Dave Hill, Peter McLaren and Mike Cole. This book won an American Educational Studies Association Critics' Choice Award in 2004. With Tony Green (Institute of Education, University of London), Glenn runs the twice-yearly Marxism and Education: Renewing Dialogues seminars. More of his online articles can be found at *The Flow of Ideas* web site, <http://www.flowideas.co.uk> and at his web log, the *Volumizer*: <http://journals.aol.co.uk/rikowskigr/Volumizer>

Correspondence

Rikowskigr@aol.com