

Pseudo-Marxism and the Reformist Retreat from Revolution: A Critical Essay
Review of *Marx and Education* by Jean Anyon (2011)

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To argue that Jean Anyon's (2011) *Marx and Education* is an affirmation of the importance and relevance of Marx's work in the twenty-first century would be an accurate statement. Such affirmations are important and welcomed because, unfortunately, they are far and few between. Making a similar point McLaren and Jaramillo (2010) note that:

The use of Marxist theory in the service of radical pedagogy—or what has come to be known over the last several decades as critical pedagogy—is such a rarity in the struggle for educational reform in the United States that the very idea has been received as an amusing cocktail party joke, even among members who self-identify with the radical left. (p. 1)

While *Marxism and Education*, according to Anyon, is a highly condensed summary of her more than thirty years of academic work, which she describes as *neo-Marxist*, I argue in this essay review that her work is as devoid of genuine Marxist critique as those who openly denounce Marxism as highlighted by McLaren and Jaramillo (2010). Consequently, as outlined below, I characterize Anyon's *Marx and Education* as pseudo-Marxist rather than Marxist or even neo-Marxist.

Put another way, even though *Marx and Education* is a much-needed endorsement of Marxism in this age of hyper-neoliberal-capitalism and anti-Marxist postmodernism, Anyon is simply wrong to believe that her work is at all Marxist. Rather, as demonstrated below, her work is really grounded in a Weberian-oriented sociological analysis of social class and therefore advocates for a reformist, and indirectly pro-capitalist approach to change. In other words, just because Anyon takes social class as a central unit of analysis does not make her work Marxist. The fact that many on the educational left seem to accept Anyon's scholarship as Marxist (including the editors of the series in which *Marx and Education* appears) is a good indication of how far the heart of the contemporary critical pedagogy movement actually is from a grounded understanding of Marxism.

Consequently, Anyon's text might be viewed, from the perspective of many of the cutting edge contemporary educational Marxists *not* mentioned in her book, as the liberalization, weakening, and thus, fraudulent distortion of Marxism. In this essay review of Anyon's roughly one hundred page volume I will therefore first outline what I consider to be the very mild strengths of *Marx*

and Education, and then bring attention to aspects of the manuscript that, for me, are far more troubling. However, even most of these so-called *strengths* are qualified and critiqued in the review that follows.

Strengths

In an era when the roots of critical approaches to educational policy and practice tend to be overwhelmingly attributed to the Frankfurt School and Gramsci without ever mentioning *Marx*, it is refreshing that Anyon attributes the critical challenge to the behaviorist and constructivist models of decontextualized, technicist educational psychology to Marxist analysis. Making this point Anyon notes that “the introduction of neo-Marxist ideas and concepts into education in the late 1970s and ‘80s gave us a vocabulary to talk about the social context of education, and the social struggles in and surrounding it” (p. 1). This is credit well due. Anyon then situates the case for the ongoing relevancy of Marxism in the context of growing poverty and human suffering:

In the winter of 2010, during a financial crisis and continuing recession, times are hard. Official unemployment for white workers has doubled from three years ago, and black and Latino unemployment is near 30 percent. Long term unemployment...is at an historic high. (p. 14)

Adding strength to her case for what she calls *neo-Marxism* Anyon argues that even during times of relative prosperity in capitalism workers are still exploited. Pointing here to the mid to late 1990s in the United States Anyon argues that during this time “almost half of full time workers made poverty zone wages” (p. 15). Arguing that these *facts* can be best understood by the explanatory tools of the neo-Marxism in the 1980s Anyon then outlines key concepts such as *ideology*, *cultural capital*, *hegemony*, *counter-hegemony*, *selective tradition*, and *resistance*. The thrust of this neo-Marxist approach is designed to demonstrate how ideas and culture are used by dominant society as tools to reproduce various categories of social class preventing upward social mobility. This is the thrust of Max Weber’s sociological analysis of class, which, at best, is reformist and certainly not a theory *against* class or *against* capitalism (Kelsh and Hill, 2006; Malott, 2006, 2009).

In the early 1980s Anyon first published the results of this Weberian research conducted in the 1970s that “...examined work tasks and interaction in the fifth grade in five elementary schools

in contrasting social class communities—two working-class schools, a middle-class school, and two highly affluent schools” (Anyon, 2011, p. 21). However, while this work has been eye-opening in terms of understanding the vastly different educational experiences students of different class categories are afforded, which helps explain how social class is reproduced, Anyon’s Weberian approach to class is therefore hardly Marxist and thus tells us little about the power of Marx’s work. Focusing on categories of social class is to examine the consequences of capitalism without ever delving into the root causes of capitalism and the labor/capital relationship (Allman, 2001; Hill and Kumar, 2009; Kelsh and Hill, 2006; McLaren, 2005; McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2005). For McLaren and other Marxists the primary or basic antagonism that drives their approach to critical pedagogy is not necessarily labor versus capital, but rather, concrete labor, or useful labor, or conscious life-activity versus capital. I return below to the Weberian strain that runs through Anyon’s work. Anyon’s approach is therefore severely hindered by not engaging Marx’s work directly, especially *Capital*, and again, it can be argued, is not really Marxist.

Returning now to the books’ mild strengths, Anyon offers a broad overview of the history of education policy in the United States focusing on the ongoing relevancy of Marxism from the 1970s to the current neoliberal era. The text is therefore organized into four short chapters with Chapter One focusing on the 1970s and 1980s, Chapter Two covering the time between 1990 and 2005, current issues are addressed in Chapter Three, and Chapter Four reflects on extending Marxism. In this history Anyon demonstrates how the class-centered focus of the most early educational Marxists, Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America* in particular, was extended during the 1980s and 1990s to include rigorous analysis of race, sexuality, language, and gender as highly significant contributors to the social context in which education operates and capitalism reproduces itself culturally through the manufacture of consent through schooling and the media. However, the history she outlines is not the history of Marxism, but rather, the history, for example, of Critical Race Theory and postmodernism, which, while offering important contributions, has been part of the move *away* from Marx (Cole, 2009a, Cole, 2008). This strength could therefore be viewed as actually a weakness because it is not an accurate historical account of what she claims she is documenting—Marx and education.

Finally, challenging us to think about extending Marxism as a form of political praxis Anyon argues that critical pedagogy is one of the primary areas where Marxism in education has been extended. This is a useful way for students to conceptualize the notion of theory. That is, it takes theory off of dusty bookshelves and liberates it from the tight grip of academics and universities and puts it back where it is most useful, that is, in classrooms and in the active minds of students and teachers struggling for meaning and purpose in school and in life. Making this point Anyon explains:

Critical pedagogy is an enduring, important form of neo-Marxist practice for educators at all levels. In order to make this practice more effective in encouraging political participation by young people in struggles for social justice, we need to move our work beyond classroom walls into the world in which low-income, black and Latino, and immigrant students live. We can, in other words, involve our students in contestation in public places—public struggles over rights, injustice, and opportunity. (pp. 98-97)

However, while Anyon's focus on critical pedagogy is welcomed, she seems to either know little or care little for the international Marxist critical pedagogy of Peter McLaren, Paula Allman, Mike Cole, Dave Hill, Deb Kelsh, Ramin Farahmandpur, Gregory Martin, Nathalia Jaramillo, Shahrzad Mojab, Himani Bannerji, Basil Bernstein, John Holst, and many others, which, collectively, represents the most cutting edge Marxist educational theory and practice of the past three decades. This omission, as I argue below, is not entirely unsurprising given Anyon's reformist focus on "opportunity" within capitalism as the goal of her liberal approach to social justice, which stands in stark contrast next to the revolutionary pedagogy *against* capitalism of Cole, Hill, Kelsh, McLaren, and many others. Again, this strength could just as well have been identified as a weakness, which I address below.

Weaknesses

While the above noted *strengths* are significant in their own indirect way, it seems that there are even stronger *weaknesses* that we should devote the vast majority of our attention to. If it were my intention to use *Marx and Education* in my own courses, I would not engage the students in a passive reading of the text. Rather, we would read it actively drawing on the voices of educational Marxists not included in the book. In all fairness to Anyon, she does mention in the Introduction that her text is not meant to be comprehensive. However, the perspectives Anyon leaves out are so central to Marxism in the twenty-first century, as suggested above, they must be

thoroughly engaged. As we will see below, when the Marxist points of view that are ignored in *Marx and Education* are included, the books' *entire* framework quickly loses credibility. What is undoubtedly shameful in this is that even Michael Apple and William Ayers, who fundamentally disagree with the aforementioned Marxists, have been willing to at least engage them and debate them. Jean Anyon, on the other hand, has chosen the less than admirable approach of ignoring them or pretending that they do not exist.

The first major issue that I would like to address is in the section in her Introduction called "Basic Ideas of Karl Marx." This section is outdated, primordial, and misses the central concern of Marx: "the production of value in capitalist society and its effects on the condition of the humane race" (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2010, p. 7). A Marxist approach to education is therefore *not* so much interested in understanding how social class categories are reproduced as much as subverting the role culture plays in maintaining the ever-expanding process of value production as capitalism mutates and transforms with material and ideological technological innovations. While the *basic ideas of Marx* not highlighted in *Marx and Education* help us understand the role capitalist education plays in overcoming and preventing working class revolution, which is an ever-growing threat within the perpetually expanding universe of capitalism, Anyon leads her readers to believe that the notion of revolution is an outdated *choice*.

Claiming that there are many *Marxisms* Anyon goes on to argue that Marx's work has been used to "foster social revolution as well as repress it" (p. 7). What this suggests is that there is something in Marx's work that is repressive or authoritarian, which, being a theory *against* class, is simply not the case. She should have said that some state capitalist countries, such as the former Soviet Union, under Stalin in particular, and China after 1978 under Deng Xiaoping (Harvey, 2005), have used the symbol of Marx/communism to repress people's historic tendency toward something like democratic socialism, and this is obviously not the same thing as the writings of Karl Marx. Similarly, socialist revolutions in South America have a history of subjugating the ideas and programs of Indigenous communities as primitive or counter-revolutionary, the blame for which cannot fairly be placed in the hands of Marx. This point, while it may seem minor, is actually very significant since our American History textbooks, from

Kindergarten through grade twelve, only portray Marxism/socialism/communism, it seems, as anti-democratic and thoroughly negative. Similar tendencies exist in other Western capitalist societies although the United States is probably the most anti-capitalist, which makes sense since, in the West, it is *the* center of neoliberal, capitalist, imperial power.

For example, *American History* textbooks shape student identity by defining the spirit of *Americanism* as democratic and capitalist, as if these processes were the same or compatible, while simultaneously defining or characterizing socialism and the legacy of Karl Marx as authoritarian and negative, equating it with Nazism and fascism during WWII, which eventually died off with the fall of Soviet Communism. Underscoring the elite, anti-working-class perspective of the official curriculum in the massive, nearly two thousand page New York edition of *The Americans* (Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, and Woloch 2008), used in many high school American History courses in New York City, Karl Marx first appears in Chapter 14 in a very short paragraph on socialism and the Industrial Workers of the World during the early labor movement in the U.S. The one sentence where Marx appears reads, “socialism, carried to its extreme form—communism, as advocated by the German philosopher Karl Marx—would result in the overthrow of the capitalist system” (p. 452). Characterizing the overthrow of capitalism as “extreme” represents not the point of view and interests of the working class but of the capitalists who benefit from the labor/capital relationship or from useful labor abstracted through the money form of capital concealing the suffering, abused body postmodernism claims has been erased through the digital age and the decentralization of industrial production. Again, students are encouraged here to develop an identity set against their own class interests by ignoring or forgetting that the wage slavery of workers worldwide who suffer in maquiladores, who are poisoned by polluted drinking water and genetically-engineered food, and who suffer illness and cancers from toxic waste dumps in poor and rural areas, are concrete conditions not of an age that once was, but are alive and well in a world dominated by industrial neoliberal capitalism.

Anyon similarly portrays the overthrow of capitalism as “extreme” or undesirable, which she states most clearly noting that, “‘revolution’ itself appears an old fashioned concept” (p. 18). What Anyon seems to be consenting to here is the notion that capitalist hegemony is inevitable

precluding any further shifts in paradigm resulting in the current labor/capital relationship or abstract labor as permanent allowing social commentators to claim the end of history, an idea championed after the 1989 fall of Soviet Communism. Honing in on this failure of the left in general McLaren and Jaramillo (2010) offer the following analysis:

...the left has accommodated itself to the hegemony of capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy, not by fighting against capitalism itself but by fighting capitalism within capitalism's own 'social democratic' rules. The left has accomplished this in many ways: by accepting capitalism as inevitable but resisting its relations of exploitation within the interstices of capital; by accepting the futility of all struggle, claiming that all revolutionary struggle leads to totalitarianism yet still waiting for a rupture in capitalism's armor by a kind of "divine violence"...(p. 2)

If the goal of Anyon's class analysis, like much of the educational left in general as documented by McLaren and Jaramillo (2010), is not to overthrow capitalism, it must be to reform it, and therefore should not be called Marxist or even *neo-Marxist*, but rather not-Marxist or pseudo-Marxist, as the title of this essay review alludes. Anyon's book and her work more generally can therefore be understood as actually supporting capitalism by providing a framework *for* change *without* change or reform without subverting the process of value production and the commodification of human labor power as an ever-expanding drive to keep up with the insatiable demands of capital—a system founded upon perpetual unsustainable expansion. For decades Mike Cole, Dave Hill, Paula Allman, Glenn Rikowski, Peter McLaren, and others have most forcefully repudiated this reformist goal of pseudo-Marxist critical pedagogy. Making a case for revolutionary critical pedagogy Allman, McLaren, and Rikowski (2005) defend their position arguing that:

Revolutionary critical educators are not an apocalyptic group...Revolutionary critical pedagogy is not in the business of presaging as much as it is preparatory; it is in the business of pre-revolutionizing: preparing students to consider life outside the social universe of capital...The revolutionary critical pedagogy we are envisioning operates from the premise that capital in its current organizational structure provides the context in which working-class struggle develops. (pp. 159-160)

In much of his work done in the last ten years McLaren has consistently argued that attempts to tinker or democratize capitalism has only made it stronger as its perpetual quest for wealth and

growth focuses its creative energies on always seeking out new markets and new methods of wealth extraction and more efficient technologies (material and ideological).

Anyon's analysis of Marx's basic concepts misses this point following instead the formula that argues that Marx believed that all workers should contribute to social reproduction based on their ability and should therefore share in the "profits" of their labor based on individual needs. There is a problem with this formulation. First and foremost, Marx's critique of capitalism was not designed to democratize capitalism, an oxymoronic notion that demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of Marx's theory. Rather, his work was a theory *against* class and therefore against capitalism. The goal is not to share "profits," but to dismantle the process of profit making, as Glenn Rikowski and others have made abundantly clear. This requires dismantling the basic relationship between labor and capital and the commodification of human labor power.

Further distorting Marx's analysis of the basic relationship between labor and capital, which is capitalism, Anyon argues that, "Marx would have argued that it is not merit by which one advances in capitalist society so much as it is because of one's social class background and the opportunities (or lack thereof) that this background affords" (p. 9). Rather than focus on issues of mobility and the implicit patterns of consumption indicative of Weber's sociological theory of class it is suggestive of, Marx would have drew on his understanding of false consciousness and the ideological role that concepts such as merit play in preventing workers from rebelling against the central relationship that negatively binds them to a system of exploitation that can only ever promise crisis and ever worsening conditions.

Another troubling statement by Anyon, "no country (with the possible exception of Cuba) has been successful in putting into practice Marx's ideas of democratically distributed economic resources and profits" (p. 7), contributes to the decontextualized understanding of world events perpetuated in the American history textbook mentioned above. By leaving the questionable state of Cuba completely unexplored, Anyon takes attention away from the U.S. trade embargo and other acts of U.S. terrorism that have arguably led to the difficulties of the small island of socialism situated in a monstrous sea of neoliberal capitalism. Additionally, like mainstream American history texts, Anyon fails to mention Chavez and the democratic socialism of

Venezuela. Anyon's approach is therefore not only U.S. centric, it is extremely narrow even within the U.S.

Peter McLaren, on the other hand, has consistently mentioned Venezuela in his work and speaking engagements over the years. Due to McLaren's international solidarity and focus, he has been invited to serve on a Chavez think tank and he has been given a Catedra at the Bolivarian University in Caracas. Similarly, in Mexico, a group of critical educators established La Fundación McLaren de Pedagogía Crítica in an effort to advance the critical pedagogical movement throughout the Americas. Similarly, Mike Cole's (2009a, b, 2011) work has consistently focused on Venezuela and the global movement against neoliberal capitalism.

What is more, while Anyon mentions McLaren's (2000) *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* in passing as a footnote, she fails to reflect in any way on its international and global significance for Marxist educational scholarship in the twenty-first century. Within his book McLaren (2000) lays out the ways the Mexican-based Mayan Zapatistas "...have broken with much in the Leninist, Guevarist, and Maoist traditions in order to follow the indigenous concept of 'command obeying'" (p. 65) where leaders lead not by dictating and commanding, but by listening. This work has been highly significant in conceptualizing a Marxist praxis that breaks with the socialist history of subjugating traditional indigenous practices. Making this point McLaren (in press) elaborates at length:

The failure of many critics on the left has been their dismissal of the organic link between accumulation by dispossession and expanded reproduction. They have failed to give sufficient recognition to traditional and non-capitalistic social relations and systems of production. Many social forms that were destroyed by primitive accumulation were not accorded enough importance by Marx. Programs of modernization undertaken by communist revolutionaries thought that primitive accumulation was a stage necessary to arrive at expanded reproduction. Revolutionaries who fought against capitalist imperialism were fighting for an alternative modernity, and in doing so did not respect traditional indigenous societies and often found themselves at odds with groups who were trying to revitalize traditional systems of production. In fact, insurgent movements were often co-opted by socialist developmentalism. The struggles of the Ogoni people against degradation of their land by Shell Oil is but one example. These insurgent movements took a different political path, often hostile to socialist politics.

In another important essay that underscores this global focus lost by Anyon, McLaren and Jaramillo (2010) celebrate the Peruvian journalist turned Marxist revolutionary José Carlos Mariátegui who saw a need for greater collaboration between “worker-community organizations and indigenous organizations” as “natural allies” (p. 9). This focus on indigeneity and the important traditional role women play in indigenous communities as central to a global socialist future represents some of the most important developments in Marxist educational theory represents, again, the outdated and irrelevant nature of Anyon’s *Marx and Education*.

Further underscoring the redundancy of *Marx and Education* Anyon’s discussion of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation is equally presented in a decontextualized manner, or in a manner that makes it seem like it is a concept that only describes “the closing of the feudal commons during the transition from feudalism to capitalism during the Middle Ages” (p. 10) in Europe. That is, because Anyon draws on almost exclusively American scholars and outlines the U.S. education system from the 1970s to the present era, it seems like she would have used the concept in the American context. That is, Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation describes the process of colonization where elite investors conquer lands and then disconnect the indigenous population from it through forced removal, physical genocide, and/or ideological indoctrination. This insight helps us understand how countries like the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Mexico, for example, came to be settler-states run by Western elite capitalist models or worldviews and structures (see Malott, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011).

Closely connected to this critique is Anyon’s uncritical use of the term “the American Dream” which she situates in the context of access for “workers, African Americans, and women” (p. 19). From a critical Indigenous point of view, the American Dream has always been a nightmare. It is the result of the European ruling class’ primitive accumulation and underscores how it was meant to benefit elite Europeans only. When President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, for example, it was only those deemed white that could claim plots of land for cultivation (Malott, 2008).

While Anyon missed an important opportunity in her portrayal of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation, as argued above, she incorrectly argues that David Harvey extended the concept

through what he calls *accumulation by dispossession*. Anyon argues that, “Harvey’s appropriation and extension of Marx’s theory increases the applicability of Marx to problems we face in both the economy and education” (p. 85). However, as McLaren has noted, Harvey never claimed to be extending Marx, but rather developed the notion of accumulation by dispossession to demonstrate that the process of primitive accumulation never went away, it is ongoing as a central aspect of the capitalist process of value production. Making this point Harvey (2005) notes that accumulation by dispassion refers to “...the continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices which Marx had treated as ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ during the rise of capitalism” (p. 159). Neoliberalism’s rolling back of rights workers fought and died for, such as pensions, education, health care, and welfare, represent, according to Harvey, some of the most “egregious policies of dispossession” (p. 161).

Another curious feature of Anyon’s *Marx and Education* is her downplaying of the retreat from class, which some of the U.S. neo-Marxists of the 1970s she draws on, such as Michael Apple, have been behind. Anyon leaves one the impression that the educational left has been engaged in neo-Marxist work steadily since the 1970s, which, based on a review of the literature, is a major distortion. It is unclear why Anyon revises this history, but in so doing she comes across as someone who is against Marxism yet calls herself a Marxist. Summarizing this trend away from Marxism in the academy Anyon reflects:

The enormous growth of Marxist scholarship in U.S. colleges and universities that started in the late 1960s had abated by the early 1990s. There are many reasons, including the influence of postmodernism in academia, and the de-legitimation of allegedly communist societies like the former Soviet Union and East Germany. (p. 18)

However, because of the extreme importance of this trend, one would think that Anyon would have at least mentioned the most comprehensive summary documenting the postmodern retreat from class and attack on Marxism, which is arguably *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory* by Dave Hill, Peter McLaren, Mike Cole, and Glenn Rikowski (2002). Aside from McLaren, Apple, and Farahmandpur all of the contributors are British, which gives the reader a little clue as to where Marxist work has continued to thrive despite the emergence of postmodernism, another point Anyon fails to draw attention to. Outside of Europe Marxist scholarship and revolutionary praxis continues to develop in Peru, Venezuela, India and

elsewhere. In the United States, on the other hand, the headquarters of global, neoliberal capitalism, Marxist educational theory and practice remains shamefully out of fashion among much of the educational left, which is a tragic, yet not entirely unsurprising, trend. That is, the pressure to consent seems to be more intense the closer one gets to the center of power.

Conclusion

While it is true that any affirmation of Marxism should be welcomed, as I argued above, some analysis labeled *Marxist* can actually lead students to a distorted understanding of the tradition and the true power of Marx's work and why his theory against capitalism only grows more relevant as the trends of neoliberalism and its perpetual wars intensify. To deny Marxism its revolutionary potential, its power to shift the paradigm to a democratic socialist alternative to the neoliberal order, is to deny Marxism its true transformative, critically-developmental (but not predetermined) purpose. For Marxism to be able to assist in the global alleviation of the suffering and the ravages of capital Anyon briefly references, we must not hesitate to embrace the possibility of living a different paradigm, with fundamentally different values, non-capitalist worldview, and relationships not based on the coercion and exploitation of capital over labor; it requires that we develop the ability to imagine life beyond capital, beyond the process of value production, beyond private property, to a day when a small class of wealthy conglomerates no longer amass ever greater fortunes through the ever expanding exploitation of human labor power through commodification, union busting, and the privatization of education and the commons more generally; to imagine finally stopping the global process of primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession through speculative capital, cyclical crisis and war; to create a world where people are free to create societies in their own image without being manipulated, conditioned, and exploited by corporations and policed by each other. To get to a meaningful life after capital we must therefore not fear fundamentally transforming who we are (unbecoming labor forcing capitalists to cease to exist as such), that is revolution, and that is the challenge of Marx.

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