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Can Education Change Society? by Michael Apple

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Education and Broadening the Public Conversation

A Review of Michael Apple's, *Can Education Change Society?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

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Michael Apple, in his new book, *Can Education Change Society*, asks us to seriously consider the role of education as a *substantive* vehicle for engendering change at a societal level. While one might consider a flip answer to the question which acts as the title of this book, Apple pushes us a little harder toward an answer which seems carved in quicksilver: It depends. In his answer, Apple requires that we critically reflect on who we are, who the public is that education serves, what our better natures might be, what our experiences have been, how the historical crafting of academics in the United States predisposes us in various and specific directions, and how all those considerations constitute a knowledge base that acts upon us as we act upon it.

Though that last phrase has more than a hint of Foucault in it, it also connotes the recursive dance between humans and the societies and technologies they build in which to house themselves. Apple doesn't miss this for a moment. Additionally, while parsing the difficulties of how complex and multi-faceted it actually is to answer the question of his title, Apple stays true to the questions and political humanity of his prior works and builds on them with this more personal and experiential volume. Apple invites the reader "to do what she or he always does--ask whether the reflections, examples, and arguments I offer here fit [your] reality and [your] society" (2), and, in doing so, he includes the reader in meaning making.

Early in the book, we learn that while aging has brought a new understanding of arthritis and disability to Apple, his struggle to sign the official document that would warrant the equipment necessary for his use and comfort in his office produced a very personal understanding of what many people in society have and will have to endure, a labeling that removes them from *normal* and into *disabled*. Apple states that he "didn't see the world as a disabled person" (12) but did see the public document he needed to sign as a way of labeling him "less than what I really was" (12). This simple act of signing - of actually *experiencing* such labeling - produced for Apple, or required him, as he puts it, "...to pull...even further away from the reductionist and essentializing impulses within critical and educational studies with which I was already struggling" (12).

Apple's struggle with the dichotomy between normal and disabled signals a recurring theme and a deepening analysis of a signature question for both him and one of the focal educators of this book, Paulo Freire: Whose knowledge is of most worth? And this question, along with Apple's more personal experience, loops us into a reevaluation of what he calls 'decentered unities,' with "disability rights movements inside and outside of education point[ing] to new ways of forming decentered unities in both thinking about

and acting on the relationship between education and power and in the formation of critical pedagogies" (31).

Decentered unities lie at the heart of Apple's educational/societal formations and, in this new book, they maintain that position and provide a way for us to understand the nature of what constitutes the public. Apple defines his idea of decentered unities as "spaces that are crucial for educational and larger social transformations that enable progressive movements to find common ground and where joint struggles can be engaged in that do not subsume each group under the leadership of only one understanding of how exploitation and domination operate in daily life" (13). In keeping with the necessity of recognizing and inviting each other into *any* conversation that we have concerning education and society (power relations), Apple provides not only the voice of Paulo Freire - Apple's close personal friend and teacher, but also three major historical critical/activist voices of public education in the United States, George Counts, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson. Each of these educators involved himself in the question of whether or not education can change society or, in Counts' case, *dare* the school to change the social order.

Along with the historical voices of Counts, De Bois, and Woodson, Apple provides commentary and insights from many current scholars involved in the re-visioning of public education, while threading voices and stories throughout of those who might not otherwise be heard: Porto Alegre Brazilian educators, Wal-Mart's effect on public education, activists in S. Korea, and acknowledgements of those involved in struggles for equality/equity in fields other than education (all participating in the Occupy Wall Street protests), but who affect education and policy. For Apple, who also protested, "...it was a compelling and inspiring alliance that cut across class, gender, and race lines and showed the very possibility of engaging in collective efforts that would challenge the well-funded attack on the dignity and very lives of so many people and on the tradition of progressive politics..."(156-7). Progressive alliances, Apple avers, must cohere and in doing so must persevere in the fight against neoliberalism and its emphasis on the market and privatization.

As much a treatise against neoliberalism as it is a call to enter the important conversation of how education and society interact, Apple's argument against all attempts to turn schools into training camps for the marketplace has grown in its intensity and vigorous invective. To support such privatization (vouchers and the like) encourages the success of profiteers and businesses, while diminishing or entirely erasing the possibilities for those who would question the market as the only representation of societal success. In fact, a sole focus on the market and its necessary attributes, competition, commodification, privatization, cost-benefit analyses, creates a context in which "...'choice' functions as the partial destruction of collective memory"(6). Collective memory contains within it identity and the inherent struggles and possibilities of what it means to be a member of a specific group. To privilege only those identities that serve the market, Apple states, creates power inequities, social injustice, erasure, and an allegiance to the *we* of the ruling class, the values of which the *public* curriculum represents. Simply put, much of the message of *Can Education Change Society?*

represents Michael Apple's call to those involved in education to critically examine values U.S. public education currently lauds. Can education change society? It depends. What do we want, who do we want it for, who, in fact, does 'we' include? Perhaps Apple's final paragraph says it best:

The tasks then are numerous and the realities will be hard to change. But let me end this book with two points that I always try to remember. First, dominant groups would not be so angry at schools and other educational institutions if we were doing what they wanted. These institutions must have major victories in them already. In a time of rising cynicism, it's good to recall this fact. Second, we cannot know the answer to the question of whether education can change society in the abstract. A position on the balcony may provide a comfortable seat to watch the fray, but answers can best be found by joining in the creative and determined efforts of building a counter-public. There is educational work to be done (166).

Can Education Change Society? continues Michael Apple's work in education, social justice, equity, and ability, reminding us in very certain terms that *public* education, if it exists as truly public, must necessarily include the dynamic variation and complexity of who we are in the grand conversation we construct to define us.

Note: All quotations are taken from *Can Education Change Society?* Michael Apple. (2013). New York, NY: Routledge.