

REFRAMING THE QUESTION OF WHETHER EDUCATION
CAN CHANGE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT. Among the most important questions critical educators can ask today are the following: Can schools play a role in making a more just society possible? If not, why not? If so, what can they do? These questions provide the basis for this article by Michael Apple, as well as for the books under discussion here. The books by David Blacker, John Marsh, Mike Cole, and Pauline Lipman discussed in this essay are either Marxist, have been influenced by Marxist and socialist ideas, or are published by presses that have a long history of publishing material with a Marxist and/or socialist orientation. In order to adequately deal with them, Apple devotes much of this essay to a set of arguments about the possibilities and limits of these ideas. After specifying those arguments, he discusses how they are developed in the books themselves. He grounds this discussion in a call for creating a broader “we” that is based on a more historically grounded understanding of the ways in which struggles over schooling actually can make a difference.

MARX RETURNS

The lengthy and quite destructive world economic crisis and the growth in power of neoliberal policies and assumptions have generated both a range of substantive debates in the popular press and a good deal of critically oriented empirical, historical, and conceptual literature on capitalism, neoliberalism, social policies, and the nature of social justice. Well before Thomas Piketty’s recent volume, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*,¹ there was a resurgence of analyses about whether our dominant economic and social institutions are, by their very nature, *fundamentally* in opposition to human flourishing. As Terry Eagleton observed when he was discussing the continuing relevance of Marx today, “You can tell that the capitalist system is in trouble when people start talking about capitalism.”² The field of education has certainly participated in such critical discussions.³

As some readers of this essay already may know, there is a long history of the influence of Marxist and socialist thought at the level of both theory and practice in education in the United States, England, Brazil, and many other nations. In the United States, we can see this influence in various places, including in the anticapitalist and antiracist work of W. E. B. Du Bois, in the Socialist Sunday Schools of the last century and similar movements, and at times even in parts of the

1. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

2. Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), xi.

3. See, for example, Michael W. Apple, Wayne Au, and Luis Armando Gandin, eds., *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

official curricula in the segregated schools of Virginia both during and immediately after the Depression.⁴ Nearly all of this work was guided by a concern with the complex roles that schools played in the reproduction and at times subversion of existing social, cultural, and especially economic relations.

Perhaps the most notable example is the short book published by George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*⁵ At least rhetorically influenced by some Marxist ideas, but actually more social democratic than Marxist, this book was a call to activism, a call to use the schools to create a society in which cooperative norms and social justice would be the fundamental aims of all economic, political, and cultural policies and practices. In hindsight, we might admit that Counts was a bit naïve and that he was less radical than he may have seemed at the time. However, the question raised in the title still has resonance in critical scholarship today. Can schools play a role in making a more just society possible? If not, why not? If so, what can they do? These are the questions that provide the basis for the books under discussion here.

The books by David Blacker, John Marsh, Mike Cole, and Pauline Lipman discussed in this essay are either Marxist, have been influenced by Marxist and socialist ideas, or are published by presses that have a long history of publishing material with a Marxist and/or socialist orientation.⁶ In order to adequately deal with them, much of this essay will need to be devoted to a set of arguments about the possibilities and limits of these ideas. Only after specifying those arguments can I engage in a discussion about how they are developed in the books themselves. Moreover, given the intricacy of the issues involved, here I can simply outline a much more complex set of arguments that I and others have developed in greater detail elsewhere. Because of this, I hope that the reader will be patient with the fact that at times what I present here has numerous references to those places where I have developed these arguments in considerably more detail.

4. See, for example, Michael W. Apple, *Can Education Change Society?* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Kenneth Teitelbaum, *Schooling for "Good Rebels": Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); and Karen Riley, ed., *Social Reconstruction: People, Politics, Perspectives* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006).

5. George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932).

6. The books are David Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame* (Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2013); John Marsh, *Class Dismissed: Why We Can't Teach or Learn Our Way out of Inequality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011); Mike Cole, *Marxism and Educational Theory: Origins and Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

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BEING CAUTIOUS OF ESSENTIALISM AND REDUCTIONISM

In many ways, critical scholarship is currently in a contradictory situation. It has a role in restoring Marxist understandings. But it is equally important to be cautious of a number of reductive tendencies that have been part of the history of these understandings.

There are a number of widely held stereotypes of the Marxist *traditions* (the plural is crucial). Among the most influential is that in Marxist theories everything is reducible to the economy. Interestingly, it is neoliberalism that reduces everything to economic needs, not, when read carefully, Marxism. Of course, there are times, especially in his more popularly oriented work, when Marx writes in such a way that he seems to be saying that the political and cultural spheres — indeed all of society — are simply reflections of the economic. This is not surprising since, as J. L. Austin reminds us,⁷ language can be used for multiple things — for example, to describe, explain, legitimate, and mobilize. For Marx, all of these were important and much of his writing reflects these multiple functions.

Yet when one reads his detailed investigations of the social, political, or even military motives and dynamics behind important historical events or tendencies, one can often find that his descriptions and analyses do not always portray such things as surface manifestations of deeper economic ones. Once again, Eagleton is wise when he says that “material forces do sometimes leave their mark quite directly on politics, art, and social life. But their influence is generally more long-term and subterranean than this.”⁸ This, however, has not prevented parts of the Marxist traditions from tending toward quite reductive analyses and explanations. Thus, while in his more subtle writings Marx himself was less reductive than some of his followers inside and outside of education, the legacy of relatively mechanistic theories of determinism is often visible in the form of economic and class reductionism in some of the recent Marxist and quasi-Marxist understandings in education.

But this is not the only danger. Many progressive scholars and activists often tend to treat as epiphenomenal all things that do not overtly engage with both class (unfortunately still too often seen through the lens of a simplistic two-class model) and capitalism (understood as *only* an economic system) as the sole major dynamic driving society.⁹ As we will see later in this essay, this tendency has had deleterious effects and has at times led to largely rhetorical analyses and even to disregarding the specificities both of the politics of culture and the state and of the relatively autonomous politics involving race and gender. This is a distinct pity

7. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2d ed., ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

8. Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 113.

9. See Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (New York: Verso, 1985); Erik Olin Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Erik Olin Wright et al., eds., *The Debate on Classes* (New York: Verso, 1989).

since there continues to be much to learn from the insights of the Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions.

One result has been that for too many critical analysts the answer to the question of whether education can change society is “yes” if and only if it overtly challenges class (usually seen as a whole rather than as composed of fragmented entities) and the capitalist (and usually only paid) labor process. Such challenges are of course crucial. One consequence of this stance, however, is that other challenges either become less significant or are only valued for their “ancillary” role of directly acting on capitalist relations and structures. Do not misunderstand me. I have argued in many places that class relations and the political economy of the dynamics and structures that are dominant locally, nationally, and internationally are fundamental to dealing with the ways in which our societies operate.¹⁰ One would have to be living in a world totally divorced from reality not to see the power of class relations and economic dynamics and structures in today’s crisis in particular. To ignore the fact that capitalism(s) have become truly global and exert immense, highly destructive power over so many people’s lives is to fail to seriously engage with the realities billions of people face.¹¹

But others have gone further into the land of reductive analysis, often assuming that everything of importance can be reduced to these dynamics and structures and engaging in formulaic responses that obliterate complexities, intersecting power relations and oppressions, and in the process unfortunately push possible allies away. This last point is especially significant in dealing with the role of education in social transformation. Even if this reductive approach is true (and I do not believe that such an approach demonstrates either an adequate understanding of social movements and their relationship to social transformations or an adequate recognition of the power of movements over person rights),¹² this position still prevents the formation of crucial alliances that are absolutely essential to progressive projects inside and outside of education, since it tends to misrecognize or minimize the fact that this society has complicated and multiple power relations that inform and work off each other and that it is also characterized by contradictory structures and dynamics.

In my most recent work, following Nancy Fraser’s arguments about the necessity of engaging with the politics of redistribution (dynamics of exploitation and of material disadvantage) and recognition (relations of dominance involving personhood, respect, and cultural authority), I have argued that we need to look for what I have called “decentered unities.” These are spaces that are crucial for educational and larger social transformations that enable multiple progressive

10. See, for example, Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power*, rev. classic ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

11. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006); and Michael W. Apple, ed., *Global Crises, Social Justice, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

12. Michael W. Apple and Kristen Buras, eds., *The Subaltern Speak: Curriculum, Power, and Educational Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

movements to find common ground and where these different groups can engage in joint struggles without being subsumed under the leadership of only one understanding of how exploitation and domination operate in daily life.¹³

I have been partly guided by Fraser's analysis of the importance of having a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition that *do not* contradict each other and that can be guided by mutual respect.¹⁴ I am also guided by critical race theory's more recent movement toward an analysis of intersectionality, the urge to see the structures and dynamics of differential power relationally, as having relative autonomy, but still as implicated in one another, therefore requiring analysis and actions based on such intersectional understandings.¹⁵ Thus, transformative politics such as dealing with the question of whether schools can change society should be seen as often as possible as sets of projects that can interweave and support each other — on terms in which as many movements as possible can agree. They become key aspects of what Raymond Williams so eloquently named "the long revolution,"¹⁶ the cumulative effects over time of multiple popular movements that challenge dominance in all of our institutions.

For Fraser, thick democracy in the economy and in all spheres of this society depends on transformations involving multiple relations of exploitation and domination. In essence, then, redistribution requires recognition and recognition requires redistribution. Let me say something more about this, using the intersections of political economy and racializing dynamics.

While "recognition refers to social practices through which people communicate mutual respect and validate their standing as moral equals within a society,"¹⁷ it is important to note that the analytic distinction between redistribution and recognition is exactly that — an analytic one. These dynamics are deeply interconnected. The denial of respect and the stigmatization of "others" reinforce material disadvantages. Indeed, this can lead to their production. Furthermore, inequalities in class can themselves "impose harms of disrespect" as well.¹⁸

13. Apple, *Can Education Change Society?*; and Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997). More recently, Fraser has added the politics of representation: see Nancy Fraser, *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics* (New York: Verso, 2008).

14. Fraser, *Justice Interruptus*.

15. See, for example, David Gillborn, *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Kalwant Bhopal and John Preston, eds., *Intersectionality and "Race" in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2012). The complexities involved in various critical approaches and the ways in which each takes account of power dynamics can be seen in Apple, Au, and Gandin, eds., *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*.

16. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

17. Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York: Verso, 2010), 16.

18. Ibid. See also Kathleen Lynch, John Baker, and Maureen Lyons, eds., *Affective Equality: Love, Care, and Injustice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

At times, the books under discussion here help us think about this in conceptual and political ways, but, aside from Lipman, most do not do so rigorously enough. For example, the interconnections of class and “race” are visible in a historical fact that Mike Cole does point to, but unfortunately he does not go far enough in allowing it to challenge some of his economic assumptions. One of the most significant roots of capital accumulation during the growth of capitalism as a global economic system was the enslavement and trade in black persons. The denial of personhood enabled the enslavement and commodification of other human beings, which in turn was dialectically connected to a further process of murderous misrecognition. As Eric Williams reminds us, slavery was one of the foundations of capitalism, giving more evidence to the antireductionist arguments cautioning us to be very careful of using class as the only element that should be privileged in critical analysis.¹⁹ While capitalism is implicated in so many of the crucial inequalities we face and certainly makes them even more difficult to overcome, it is not the root of all of the truly *constitutive* dynamics and structures we face.²⁰

This makes our task harder. We definitely need to be theoretically powerful and appropriately biting about the destructiveness of the neoliberal restructuring and commodification of all that we hold dear. We definitely need to take action against an economic system and its accompanying cultural and ideological assemblage that creates the conditions that make this seem sensible and doable. Yet at the same time, we also need to recognize the destructive but still relatively autonomous effects of these other relations of domination and subordination inside and outside of education. This means that while we need to see “society” as significantly constituted by economic relations, it is not totally so. These are not the only relations that constitute it and that need to be transformed. If the answer to the question “Can education change society?” is dependent on understanding society as *only* its economic relations or as totally dependent on and a mere reflection of these relations, then any substantial change can only be valued in one way and along one dynamic: Did it change the economy and class relations?

These relations need to be constantly interrupted. But not only is the above position rooted in base/superstructure theories that have been criticized for decades *within* Marxist theories (a literature and robust series of debates that Cole, for example, either ignores or dismisses), as well as in a multiplicity of other critical traditions, but as I noted earlier it can have a fundamentally *demobilizing* effect.²¹ This would be a truly disastrous consequence. Actions in social movements that

19. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). See also Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

20. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 38.

21. Critiques of base-superstructure theories can be found in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Carey Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

are “close to home” change people. Such actions give people activist identities and teach strategies that echo throughout society, ones that have been, can be, and are taken up in other struggles.²²

If everything that we do as critical educators — whether it is critical research; or building counterhegemonic curricula and critical pedagogical practices; or working with youth and women in oppressed immigrant communities on expanding forms of critical literacy; or building alliances with disability rights activists, environmental movements, and gay communities; or working creatively on employing the media for counterhegemonic purposes — is valued solely for its effects on the economy or a relatively unnuanced understanding of class relations, it drastically limits what it means to fight back against what is happening to so many people. This makes it much less likely that activist identities will have a chance to build into social movements. The powerful example of Porto Alegre and the successful struggles to build and defend “Citizen Schools” and “participatory budgeting,” processes that have been influential in counterhegemonic work in education and many other spheres of society, make these points even more crucial.²³

CAN EDUCATION CHANGE SOCIETY?

These arguments have major implications for how we might understand the politics of education in relation to the books under discussion in this essay. Let me return to the foundational question to explore this further: Can education change society? First, this way of wording the question has some serious conceptual, empirical, and political problems. First, it is important to realize that education *is* a part of society. It is not something alien, something that stands outside. Indeed, it is a key set of institutions and a key set of social, economic, political, and personal relations. It is just as central to a society as shops, businesses, factories, farms, health care institutions, law firms, unpaid domestic labor in the home, and so many other places in which people and power interact.

But there are other things that make it decidedly not an “outside” institution. Even if one holds to the orthodox belief that economic institutions are the only core of a society that basically count as truly transformative and therefore before we can change the schools we need to change the economy, schools are places where people *work*. Building maintenance people, teachers, administrators, nurses, social workers, clerical workers, psychologists, counselors, cooks, crossing guards, teacher aides — all of these groups of people engage in paid labor in and around the places we call schools. Each of these kinds of positions has a set of labor relations

22. See, for example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

23. Porto Alegre has been the home of the World Social Forum and has become a model for economic, political, and cultural transformations that have education as a central focus. For discussions of Porto Alegre, see Luis Armando Gandin, “The Citizen School Project,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education*, ed. Apple, Au, and Gandin. See also Apple, *Can Education Change Society?*

and class distinctions attached to it. And each is stratified not only by class, but by race and gender as well.

Thus, teaching is often seen as women's paid work; this is also the case for such positions as school nurse and school cafeteria worker. In many areas the same women who serve the food in school cafeterias are women of color, as are teacher aides in many urban areas. The labor of building maintenance is usually done by men. School secretaries are most often women. Not only is the labor process of each different (although there is a significant dynamic of proletarianization and intensification of teachers' work),²⁴ but there are significant differences in pay and social prestige attached to each. Clearly, therefore, it would be very wrong to see schools as other than "society."

As paid work places, they are *integral parts* of the economy. As differentiated work places, they reconstitute (and sometimes challenge) class, gender, and race hierarchies. And as institutions that have historically served as engines of working-class mobility in terms of employing upwardly mobile college graduates from groups who have often been seen as "not quite worthy" or even as "despised others" such as people of color, they have played a large role as arenas in the struggle over economic advancement for marginalized and oppressed groups, thereby signaling partial victories rather than only defeats.²⁵

But it is not just as workplaces that schools are part of the economy. They are also increasingly being commodified and marketed through voucher plans, charter schools, and the like. The students inside them are increasingly being bought and sold as "captive audiences" for advertising in "reforms" like Channel One. Interrupting the selling of schools and children *is* a form of action that challenges the economy. Communities across the country have mobilized against Channel One and against the content and form that it seeks to legitimate as "the news." Not recognizing this ignores the ways in which cultural struggles are crucial and, while they are deeply connected to them, cannot be reduced to economic issues without doing damage to the complexity of real life.²⁶

Take the history of African American struggles against a deeply racist society. Schools have played a central role in the creation of movements for justice in general, but have also been central to the building of larger scale social mobilizations within communities of color. In essence, rather than being peripheral reflections of larger battles and dynamics, struggles over schooling — over what should be taught, over the relationship between schools and local communities, over racial segregation, over the very ends and means of the institution itself — have provided

24. Apple, *Education and Power*.

25. Kristen Buras, "Race, Charter Schools, and Conscious Capitalism: On the Spatial Politics of Whiteness as Property (and the Unconscionable Assault on Black New Orleans)," *Harvard Educational Review* 81, no. 2 (2011): 296–331.

26. Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*, 3d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014).

a crucible for the *formation* of larger social movements toward equality in all other spheres.²⁷ These collective movements have transformed our definitions of rights, of who should have them, and of the role of the state in guaranteeing these rights. Absent organized, community-wide mobilizations, these transformations would not have occurred.²⁸ In cases such as this, education has been and is a truly powerful arena for building coalitions and movements, one whose social effects can echo throughout the society.

But this is not all. As both Blacker and Cole rightly remind us, education clearly plays a key social role in the formation of identities. That is, students spend a very large part of their lives inside the buildings we call schools. They come to grips with authority relations, with the emotional labor both of managing one's presentation of self and of being with others who are both the same and different and simultaneously reproducing and sometimes subverting dominant norms and values. Transformations in the content and structure of this key organization could have lasting effects on the dispositions and values that we do and do not act upon, on who we think we are and on who we think we can become. This is always hard to accomplish, but a large number of radical educators throughout the world are doing it. Our task is not to make their job harder by dismissing their labor.

Yet, schools also are part of the cultural apparatus of society in *other* ways than building (positive or negative) identities. They are key mechanisms in determining what is socially valued as "legitimate knowledge" and what is seen as merely "popular." In their role in defining a large part of what is considered to be legitimate knowledge, they also participate in the process through which particular groups are granted status and which groups remain unrecognized or minimized.²⁹ Thus, here too schools are at the center of struggles over a politics of recognition with respect to race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and other important dynamics of power. These too are spaces for political and educational action. Indeed, the fact that so many economically, culturally, and religiously conservative groups are attacking curricula and teaching in schools signifies that there have indeed been cultural victories.

I am not a romantic about this, but too often some Marxist theorists only stress the politics and processes of reproduction and mis-recognize the complex and contradictory struggles and arenas that actually exist in the real world of education. They may thus paradoxically contribute to cynicism and inaction rather than their

27. Jean Anyon, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014).

28. On the importance of social movement formation and the ability of struggles in one sphere to transfer to another, see Mario Giugni, Dennis McAdam, and Charles Tilly, eds., *How Social Movements Matter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

29. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: The Social Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Basil Bernstein, *Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*, vol. 3 of *Class, Codes and Control*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); and Richard Teese, *Academic Success and Social Power: Examinations and Inequality*, 2d ed. (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013).

avowed purpose of engaging in the building of counterhegemonic understandings and movements. Because of this, as I hinted at earlier, I have worries that even with the power of some of the arguments made by authors such as Blacker, Marsh, and at times Cole, this may be one of the results of their work.

Because of this, let me say some things about the role of critical research in education. My points here are tentative and certainly not exhaustive, but they are meant to begin a dialogue with these authors and the reader of this essay over just what it is that “we” should do.

In *Can Education Change Society?* I detail a series of tasks in which critical analysis (and the critical analyst) in education must engage. While I will not rehearse all of them here, a number of them bear on the work of David Blacker, John Marsh, Mike Cole, and Pauline Lipman:

1. It must “bear witness to negativity.” That is, one of its primary functions is to illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination — and to struggles against such relations — in the larger society.
2. In engaging in such critical analyses, it also must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action. Documenting these spaces and the agentic possibilities and actions that already exist needs to be done both at the level of individual experience and at the institutional level. This is an absolutely crucial step since, as I previously noted, otherwise our research can simply lead to cynicism or despair.
3. At times, this also requires a broadening of what counts as “research.” Here I mean acting as critical “secretaries” to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power. When accompanied by truly cooperative work with those individuals and groups who are building successful counterhegemonic programs, institutions, and alternatives, this increases the power of such descriptions.
4. In the process, critical work has the task of keeping the multiple traditions of radical and progressive work alive. In the face of organized attacks on the “collective memories” of difference and on critical social movements — attacks that make it increasingly difficult to retain academic and social legitimacy for multiple critical approaches, including but not only Marxist theories, that have proven so valuable in countering dominant narratives and relations — it is absolutely crucial that these traditions be kept alive, renewed, and when necessary criticized for their conceptual, empirical, historical, and political silences or limitations. This includes not only keeping theoretical, empirical, historical, and political traditions active but, very importantly, extending and (supportively) criticizing them. And it also involves keeping alive the dreams, utopian visions, and “non-reformist reforms” that are so much a part of these radical traditions. “Purity” should not be our goal. Instead, we should be guided by an

openness to expanding the critical understandings we need to more fully cope with the range of dynamics that are so destructive in our societies. Let us always remember that the Right understands that education is a crucial set of institutions for social transformation — when it is tactically linked to a larger project. The Right has been so successful in part because it has been willing to build alliances across some of its substantive differences, something I have been at pains to document.³⁰ So too should the Left.

5. Keeping such traditions alive and also supportively criticizing them when they are not adequate to deal with current realities cannot be done unless we ask these questions: For whom are we keeping them alive?, and How and in what form are they to be made available? All of the things I have mentioned in this taxonomy of tasks require the relearning or development and use of varied or new skills necessary for working at many levels with multiple groups. Thus, journalistic and media skills, academic and popular skills, and the ability to speak to very different audiences are increasingly crucial. This requires us to learn how to speak in different registers and to say important things in ways that do not require that the audience or reader do all of the work. This is a skill that is found in some of the books under review here, but not all of them.

6. Critical educators need also to *act* in concert with the progressive social movements their work supports or in movements against the rightist assumptions and policies they critically analyze. It also implies learning from these social movements. This means that the role of the “unattached intelligentsia,” someone who “lives on the balcony,” is not an appropriate model.³¹ As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, for example, our intellectual efforts are crucial, but they “cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of the world is at stake.”³²

These tasks are demanding. No one person can engage equally well in all of them simultaneously. Confronting the realities of education in a deeply unequal and often uncaring society so that we can *collectively* answer the originating question of this essay will never be easy. What we can do is honestly continue our attempt to come to grips with the complex intellectual, personal, and political tensions and activities that respond to the demands of this role. And this requires a searching critical examination of one’s own structural location, one’s own overt and tacit political commitments, and one’s own embodied actions once this

30. Michael W. Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

31. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harvest Books, 1936); and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

32. Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (New York: New Press, 2003).

recognition, in all its complexities and contradictions, is taken as seriously as it deserves.

GAINS AND LOSSES

Where do these books stand in relation to these tasks and to the concerns I have noted throughout the earlier sections of this essay? Nearly all of the books take a particular position on the question of whether education can change society. Each is committed to the task of "bearing witness to negativity." Thus, for most of them their answer is *no*. One of the reasons for their negative answer is that, by and large, they limit the way they think about education's effects to its possible (or impossible) role in interrupting economic inequalities. This is a crucial issue, but it indeed is also more than a little limiting.

Both Blacker and Marsh are felicitous writers, and their books include a nice combination of the theoretical, empirical, historical, and personal. Blacker is a philosopher of education and brings to bear a range of philosophical insights (for example, from John Dewey, Baruch Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, G. W. F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, the Stoics, and others) and combines them with insights from figures within the historical and more contemporary Marxist traditions (such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Fredric Jameson, G. A. Cohen, Gilles Deleuze, Alex Callinicos, and Slavoj Žižek). The range of his knowledge is impressive. He is deeply concerned with the question of whether education can indeed change society. His response is not just no, but a strong negative. Basically, educational activism is a waste of time. But he says this in subtle and engaging ways.

His ultimate answer is to return to a renewed Stoic tradition in the form of what he calls "compartmentalized fatalism." One must "accept fate" — but continue the fight "even when it is perceived as hopeless." There are echoes of Gramsci's statement about "pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will" here. But even with Blacker's almost poetic concluding chapter on our fate, it is missing a sense of the power of organized social movements.³³ But perhaps this is asking too much of Blacker's book.

Still Blacker offers us a good deal. His book can serve as a primer for some of the basic concepts of Marxist understandings for those readers who are unfamiliar with them. Very importantly, he is correct to focus on *contradictions*, perhaps the key explanatory concept within the Marxist vocabulary. One of the things that also sets this book apart is the attention Blacker pays to environmental sustainability, as well as his analysis of student debt and the conceptual/political issues surrounding student voice. In attending to these issues, Blacker recognizes spaces of contradiction and possible action.

33. Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, chap. 7. See also Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Hoare Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 175n75. Blacker uses this Gramsci quotation as an epigraph to the chapter.

There are omissions in his arguments, however. Because of the focus he has chosen for this book, here too there is no discussion of the theories — Marxist or otherwise — of the politics of culture or the state as a site of contradictions. Its arguments have implications for the curriculum and its forms and content, but these are not really developed. Yet, within the Marxist, neo-Marxist, and other critical communities, there is a robust tradition of critical examination of the role of knowledge and its forms of organization in the cultural reproduction of class relations and class consciousness. Not only would the inclusion of this have added a good deal to his discussion of what schooling actually does and its role as a site of partial victories and defeats, but it would also have contributed to his analysis of the specific knowledge requirements of capitalism.³⁴

But even with these criticisms, the book is definitely a worthwhile contribution to energizing the application of Marxist theories to education. And it certainly shows that it is possible to write about deeply complex issues in a way that doesn't "require the reader to do all the work."

Marsh has a somewhat different project in mind. He sets himself a more empirical and less theoretical task, bringing together in understandable language the massive amount of data on the relationship between schooling and economic inequality. In so doing, he provides the reader with a clear statistical portrait of rates of comparative poverty, health, and similar relations.³⁵ In many ways, he provides a model for how to write about such things.

He too concludes that there is not much that can be done in schools. I have some sympathy with this position since it is honest about the fact that, for example, impoverishment and "zip code" explain much more about the effects of schooling than the internal qualities of schools themselves. This is something we must never forget and all of the books provide cogent examples of why this point is so crucial.

In some ways, Marsh's book is not only about the ways in which our kind of economy "naturally" generates impoverishment and its accompanying effects. It is also an interesting attempt to explain the history of how discussions of poverty came to be dominated by education rather than the need to pursue a sustained and critically democratic intervention into wages and jobs. Only these kinds of structural changes can lead to major gains in educational attainment.

Here Marsh is trying to understand the issue that underpinned much of Gramsci's corpus — and a good deal of my own. What is it about "common sense" that prevents class solidarity and the formation of radically oriented counterhegemonic movements? For Marsh, this question can be stated in the following way: Why do people believe that we can teach or learn our way out of poverty and inequality? What he gives us in terms of the history of how this

34. Apple, *Education and Power*.

35. Marsh, *Class Dismissed*.

happened is very thoughtful. However, he underplays what the Right has done over the past decades.

As I have demonstrated in an entire series of books, the Right has engaged in a large-scale and quite successful creative social-pedagogical project to radically change people's common sense.³⁶ It has basically understood Gramsci's point that in a "war of position" *everything* counts: paid and unpaid workplaces, health care, the family, religion, culture, the media, and definitely schools and education in general. In the process, the Right has attached itself to the elements of good sense that people have that something is definitely wrong with existing sets of institutional arrangements. It has taken what Raymond Williams would call "keywords" such as *democracy* and *freedom*,³⁷ disarticulated them from their previous more socially "thick" and participatory meanings, and rearticulated them to thinner and more individually possessive meanings and identities. Without a fuller understanding of this process, we cannot comprehend why people think about education and the economy the way they do. What Marsh gives us is of considerable interest, although more analysis and support would be needed to develop a robust explanation.

But Marsh also wants to provide us with a set of strategic answers and in this way seeks to go beyond the cogent but more philosophical arguments of Blacker. For Marsh, the answer lies in greater equality of income and greater economic security, and this can only come about if we reverse the decline in membership in and the power of unions. As a former union president myself, I have some sympathy with this position. Once again, though, in this particular book Marsh defines schools almost exclusively by their connections to economic structures and to paid work. With the latter's focus on empirical realities and the former's focus on a more theoretical agenda, both Blacker and Marsh do a very thoughtful job of critically examining what this means, and what they say is indeed of critical importance. Yet, as I have argued, education is about more than the economy (and even when the economy is the root concern, existing economies are very complex). Otherwise, we paradoxically accept neoliberal assumptions. The absence of a more complex understanding of the multiple roles that schools play and their histories as arenas of crucial struggles over both redistribution and recognition sets limits on Blacker's and Marsh's discussions. These limits are even more visible in Mike Cole's volume.

Marxism and Educational Theory is an older book than the others, having been published in 2008. Being an older book doesn't mean a lesser book. And once again I have some sympathy with parts of Cole's avowed project. He has notably "fought the good fight" to carve out a space for (some parts of) the Marxist traditions for many years. He clearly recognizes that in the current state of much of

36. See, for example, Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way*; Apple, *Can Education Change Society?*; and Apple, *Official Knowledge*.

37. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

critical educational theorizing, too often postmodern and poststructural theories in education are seen as fully replacing more structural understandings.³⁸ While “post” theories have important insights, that many people have appropriated postmodern and poststructural theories relatively uncritically and have totally replaced structural theories with them is more than a little unfortunate. Thus, Cole’s attempt to place Marxism back at the center of the agenda of critical educational theory has important elements of good sense.

The book has some useful discussions and makes a number of fruitful points about some of the overstatements of “post” theorists — for example, Cole argues for the importance of thinking much more robustly about the connection between the “local” and the “big picture.” Yet, its development of a nuanced Marxist alternative is truncated at crucial places. Even though Cole argues at one or two junctures against an economically deterministic version of Marxism, his proposed alternative is still largely a restored economicist Marxism. In a number of ways, the book reads like something of a primer on this limited version of Marxism. And perhaps because of this, it is nearly devoid of substantive and theoretically and politically generative discussions of culture, the state, and similar kinds of things. Yet these have long been and remain today key areas of Marxist and neo-Marxist attention in education and in the larger field of social, economic, cultural, and educational theory. Similar absences are visible in Cole’s failure to address any new developments in class analysis and our understanding of the dynamics of class composition, formation, and mobilization. Indeed, it is almost as if nothing recent was written in these areas. This is a disappointment, since Cole can be insightful.

Cole spends a good deal of time on the issues arising from our attempts to build a critical understanding of “race” and especially on the development of critical race theory. He is to be commended for trying to take race seriously both in this book and elsewhere. But although he attempts to outline a theory that he believes is connected to elements of a more Marxist understanding, it still seems more than a little reductive and stereotypes some of the best of critical race theory. It would have been better if, rather than simply mentioning such analyses, Cole had drawn more robustly from work such as Zeus Leonardo’s recent arguments about what is necessary in building connections between both Marxist theories and critical race theories and if he dealt in a serious theoretically and politically powerful manner with the work of Stuart Hall.³⁹

These are not the only problems in *Marxism and Educational Theory*. There is almost no discussion of the specifics of education and educational theory in the book as well. Some sociocultural theories that have influenced educational

38. Cole, *Marxism and Educational Theory*.

39. Zeus Leonardo, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Race Critique: Political Economy and the Production of Racialized Knowledge,” in *Intersectionality and “Race” in Education*, ed. Bhopal and Preston, 11–28. See also Zeus Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009). On Hall, see, for example, David Morely and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

theories are discussed, but not those points that specifically address education. Most chapters end with an obligatory “implications for education” section, one that is usually one or two pages at most. But these are no more than suggestions, such as “Students need to be critically aware of systems of imperialism,”⁴⁰ and they do not help us go beyond his answer that schools can’t do much of anything that has serious implications for transformation. All of this is a pity since Cole does want to be engaged with and in mobilizations. But what this actually means for schools as sites of economic, political, and cultural struggles and for actually participating in these mobilizations is left unanswered — and at times even unasked.

These struggles, set in the context of the realities of educational policy and practice and the place of schools in larger political economies of class and race, are at the center of Pauline Lipman’s *The New Political Economy of Urban Education*. For her, the intersections of class *and* race are crucial.⁴¹ And she is the one who comes closest to the tasks I outlined earlier.

Lipman integrates the theoretical perspectives of some of the best work in critical geography and the politics of space. In the process she goes much further than Cole in providing a more robust theoretical and political understanding of the role of schooling in the reproduction of actually existing political economies and class and race dynamics and relations. She also helps us see some of what, for all of their evident good points, Blacker and Marsh miss — the crucial role schools can play in the formation of counterhegemonic social movements.

In discussing Lipman’s work here, I need to be honest. The reader should know that Lipman’s book is published in the “Critical Social Thought” series that I edit for Routledge. I wrote the introduction to it as well. Thus, I am obviously more than a little positively predisposed to the volume. Having said this, however, in essays such as this one that seek to comment on important recent work within the Marxist and Marxist-influenced traditions, it is also important to recognize major advances even when there may be a personal connection with the book.

Lipman’s book is a continuation of her larger project of understanding the ways in which neoliberalism actually works inside education at the level of policy and practice.⁴² Her focus is on the connections between the local and the global in cities and on the ways in which both class *and* race are central to the neoliberal project. But Lipman sees this project as constantly being contested by real people — especially people of color — in real communities and schools. Schools and the policies and practices that relate to them provide crucial arenas for social mobilization and for the formation of counterhegemonic identities and movements. They are central institutions in the struggle against neoliberal ideologies and agendas. At the same time that she provides powerful and deeply

40. Cole, *Marxism and Educational Theory*, 109.

41. Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education*.

42. See, for example, Pauline Lipman, *High Stakes Education: Inequality, Globalization, and Urban School Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

critical theories to help us understand this, she acts as a critical secretary of these movements. Lipman is not romantic about all of this — nor should we be — but she recognizes agentic spaces and their possibilities.

As I noted earlier, this is an absolutely crucial point. And for all of the insights and data that Blacker and Marsh give us, because of their foci in these particular texts, this issue is not addressed as seriously as it should be. As I also noted, the ultimate effect can be exactly the opposite of what Blacker and Marsh want: neglecting this point can lead to the demobilization of social movements and the closing of a significant space for the development of activist identities that then can take this activism to new sites.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have discussed a group of volumes that seek to restore, extend, and/or include while elaborating upon what has traditionally been considered Marxist and Marxist-oriented work. I have raised a number of concerns about some of their arguments, understandings, and conclusions. But it is again important that I not be misunderstood. I come from and hope to have helped develop Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions in education and still ground much of my work within them. My aim here is a fraternal one. I have come to the task of reading these books after spending much of my time over the past two decades trying both to better understand the ideological project of the Right and why it has been so successful and to learn how to interrupt it. Because of this, I have urged the Left to spend less time on factional infighting and the quest for purity and to learn some important lessons from the Right about forming alliances that cut across differences.

My arguments here are grounded in the hope that the “we” that is created can be broader and that it can also be based on a more historically grounded understanding of the ways in which struggles over schooling actually can make a difference — but this will only be possible if we move beyond viewing schools as defined solely by their role in reproducing economic inequalities. Marxist and neo-Marxist arguments play a central role in such understandings and each of these volumes makes a contribution in its own way. But no set of traditions can remain static. There is so much more to learn and to do.