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Can education change society? Michael Apple's simple question and complex answer

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Apple, M. W. (2014). *Can Education Change Society?* New York, NY: Routledge

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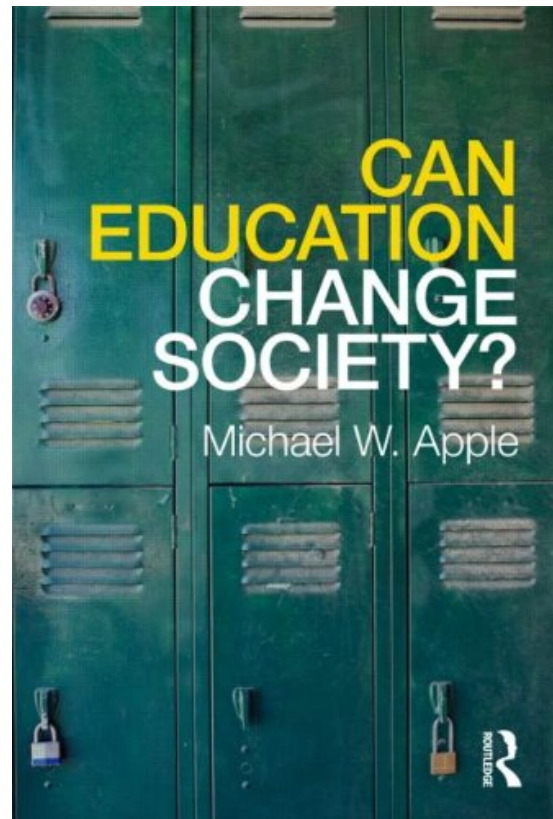
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Can education change society? The question is simple, and Michael W. Apple's response is an irrefutable, yes. However, a broader exegesis is needed because the issues confounding this question are steeped in powerful political forces from both the right and left. Within the pages of *Can Education Change Society?*, Apple continues his long-time professional exposition regarding education's role in challenging these and other hegemonic systems.

Apple's compulsion to write his latest treatise was driven by two concerns. First, he was disquieted by his perception that progressives naively and all too often assume they are the sole ideological group posing the query of how education might change society. When in reality, the question has become a hallmark of neoliberal as well as neoconservative agendas. Second, he had a growing suspicion that scholarly considerations of the question had become little more than self-serving colloquies of academics for whom "almost all their political engagement is textual" and whose work may very well "denigrate into elitism, masquerading as radical theory" (p. 40).

The early chapters of the book draw heavily on the philosophies of Paulo Friere, George



Counts, W.E.B. DuBois, and Carter Woodson. Apple attempts to unify and amplify these notable voices of past scholar/activists who not only agreed, but expected education to be counter-hegemonic. This rather grandiloquent foundation situates the following chapters within the “memory of both the people and the questions they asked” (p. 39).

Having worked directly with Friere during the early stages of his career, Apple all but deifies the Brazilian’s theory of critical pedagogy as well as his passionate commitment to personally embed himself within the oppressed populations in Sao Paulo. Friere’s work is presented as the benchmark for anyone purporting or aspiring to be a true scholar/activist and who believes education can change society. In fact, there is repeated and harsh criticism for those who use Friere to advance their academic standing, but do little to understand or change the day-to-day realities of people or groups marginalized by society.

Although he did not work directly with Counts, Apple holds the reconstructivist in high regard for his opposition to the capitalistic influences in society. In fact, it was Counts who first posed the question, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order* (Counts, 1932), that inspired the title of Apple’s book. Yet he finds Counts’ message, crafted for a predominately white audience, somewhat homogenized and romanticized. DuBois and Woodson balance Apple’s historical and theoretical framework because, unlike Counts, they are “organic intellectuals” who were “significantly more advanced and profound in their understanding of the constitutive nature of race and racializing structures” (p. 75) within society. DuBois is depicted as an articulate statesman and Woodson as a pragmatic populist. Within their context of facing overt personal and covert institutional racism, both were devoted to transforming society through education.

Having attempted to “counteract historical amnesia” and “restore the collective memory of a much broader set of voices that demanded that schools challenge the hierarchies that dominated society” (p. 96), Apple provides two present-day examples in which education has been used to change society. The first case, the Citizen Schools

of Porto Alegre, Brazil, internationalizes Apple's thesis and exemplifies how an educational structure can mitigate the oppression of the poor and transform an entire city. Created with great intentionality in the impoverished and hectored favelas of Porto Alegre, this system of elementary education is described as Friere, Counts, DuBois, and Woodson "brought to life" (p. 106). The participatory system of education was designed with input from teachers, staff, parents, and administrators. Its curriculum recognized the knowledge of the community and incorporated the interests and concerns of the common people of Porto Alegre. For Apple, the establishment and subsequent success of the Citizen Schools provides reason for hope and optimism that schools can democratize communities and empower those who are typically subjugated within society.

If the Citizen Schools personify Friere, Counts, DuBois, and Woodson, Apple's second example represents the antithesis of their ideological perspectives. The "Wal-Marting of America" (p. 128-137) provides a stark realization that counter-hegemonic forces "are not alone in acting in the space of changing the connections between education and other major institutions in society" (p. 128). Relying heavily on the analysis of Bethany Moreton (2009), Apple outlines the manner in which both neoliberals and neoconservatives, driven predominately by capitalistic interests, have leveraged the concepts of educational accountability and measurement to not only reinforce but to advance the powerful structures of the corporate elite.

Apple's point is clear, if educators hope to transform society, they cannot limit their efforts to writing and research. Like Friere, Counts, DuBois, and Woodson, today's educators must also "engage with the responsibilities of being scholar/activists, of being organic public intellectuals" (p. 146) and actively participate in efforts which challenge dominant and oppressive systems of authority. A very personal and compelling chapter (p. 138-150) recounts Apple's own such efforts which led to his de facto imprisonment in South Korea.

In order to become scholar/activists, educators must create and engage in interruptive movements which contest the barriers to

democratization and lead to a more responsive and egalitarian society. To do so, educators must build decentered unities. These unions suture together groups which, based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, or religion, are frequently oppressed. Decentered unities, a concept Apple has written about in the past (2006, 2010), are alliances in which several factions set aside their singular perspectives and work jointly to advance a common ground. Apple recognizes the complications and complexities of building coalitions and maintaining cooperative solidarity between diverse groups. However, the difficult work must be done because retrogressive forces have already accomplished this. More importantly, these efforts are critical because according to Apple, “Oppression is real. It is systemic and structural. Its power is profound in our institutions and our daily life. There are very real costs being paid by identifiable persons (p. 165-166).

Apple is the John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, USA. He earned his doctorate from Columbia University in New York City, USA and holds numerous honorary degrees from institutions in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia (University of Wisconsin – Madison, n.d). Only a limited number of educators hold comparable positions of influence from which they can challenge dominant social infrastructures. However, Apple clearly extends his invitation to all educators, regardless of status, to use their positions to impact society. He proposes “no place is too small, no policy too insignificant, that it can’t be the site of challenges” (p. 149).

Apple’s latest book, rich with academic and theoretical language, adds to his vast array of distinguished and professional accomplishments related to critical dialogue within education. It calls on the profession as a whole to reconsider the ubiquitous intersections of education and society. In other ways, *Can Education Change Society*, is an intensely personal retrospective for Apple. It leads the individual reader to review and perhaps reevaluate his or her unique personal role as a scholar/activist. If or when these challenges to the profession and to individuals are widely embraced,

Michael W. Apple may very well be added to the list of iconic figures who provided the theoretical basis for this book and who have inspired Apple and countless other educators to change society.

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