

## Book Review

Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* New York: Routledge, 1993. 226pp. Prices: hardback \$49.95; paperback \$15.95

Michael Apple's *Official Knowledge: Democratic Restoration in a Conservative Society* is a continuation of his efforts over the past two decades to demonstrate the relationship between education and power in society. His previous works, such as *Ideology and the Curriculum* (1979, revised 1990), *Education and Power* (1985) and *Teachers and Texts* (1989), elaborated the argument that education is a highly contested terrain, as the powerful in society attempt to impose their knowledge-systems on the dominated groups. Apple argues that conservatives in America are attempting to restore their old hegemony, over counter-hegemonic activities by the dominated which oblige the conservatives to negotiate and compromise but not to surrender.

*Official Knowledge* continues Apple's theme by challenging the "conservative restoration" of American society which has dominated the political scene in the 1980s and 1990s. The Right is calling for "going back to basics", for meritocracy in schools, and for "standards, common culture, traditions and choice." The resurgence of Rightist tendencies in education tends to determine "what education is for, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate" (p.9). The Right struggles to convince society that all that is public is "bad" and all that is private is "good". Apple shows how the Right is attempting to impose its values and reimpose its control on the school system in the United States. It has mounted a systematic attack on the curriculum, and on teachers, and is pushing for the satisfaction of the needs of business and industry in schools. It is tightening its control of teachers, as texts and manuals are imposed to "guide" what teachers should or should not do in their classrooms.

Apple sees education as an arena in which ideological conflict is acted out. It is an arena where distinct groups, with their own political and economic and educational interests, struggle to determine what legitimate education should be. The conservatives want to dismantle the "welfare state"—which was born out of the struggles of African-Americans, women, Hispanics, and others—and to replace it with "free enterprise".

In spite of the resurgence of the Right, progressive forces continue to resist. Apple gives the example of a progressive teachers' newspaper, which integrates school work with the broader experiences of society. The Rightists call for a "return to elite cultural literacy" (p.45), reserving for the masses mere functional literacy which serves the interests of capital. They see education as the generation of commercially useful skills. Progressive educators by contrast see education as facilitating critical thought among learners, and work towards critical literacy for all.

A considerable part of the book is devoted to the issue of textbook selection, and how certain companies make money out of publishing Rightist literature approved for schools. Apple sees textbooks as providing critical links for teachers and learners between the analysis of educational problems and analysis of the issues and conditions of real life. But he cautions that it "cannot be assumed that what is in the texts is [actually] what is taught nor what is taught is [actually] learned" (p.61). Texts are not neutral; they represent some knowledge systems and exclude others.

Apple is sceptical of the idea that that education is non-political and facilitates upward social mobility. *Official Knowledge* asks fundamental questions about exactly whose knowledge is represented in schools. The conservative educational programme is geared towards making children into "civilised", "moral" and obedient citizens. This is

the kind of education that tries to divorce children from their own cultural experiences. But Apple believes that it cannot succeed. Knowledge must reflect the contradictions between the dominant culture and other cultures. Knowledge is not simply a mirror of the interests of the ruling class. It is the product of intense conflict and negotiation, with the Right attempting to re-build hegemonic control by incorporating some of the perspectives of the dominated. Progressive teachers are urged not to lose sight of the power of the people, or of popular organisations, to struggle, resist, and transform.

One of the book's most vivid examples of conservatives attempting to regain hegemony in education is related in chapter 5. The U.S. federal government commissioned a company called Whittle Communications to set up a nationwide educational television network. This was the Right's attempt to achieve control of audio-visual media in schools. The network broadcast carefully only selected snippets of international and national news, with commercial breaks for advertising. Apple asks whose news it was that was being reported, by examining how people and events were portrayed in the news. He argues that the federal agreement with Whittle was an attempt to divert attention away from cuts in educational budgets. Nor does he have any time for the argument for the network that children nowadays need to know more about the world in order to be able to participate in a democratic society. The "democracy" of the Right does not mean real citizen participation in government "but [how] to live in an unfettered commercial market" (p.116). Apple is happy report that teachers and students have resisted the Whittle network. Teachers use the television sets and video-recorders for other purposes, while students ignore the screens and chat to each other or catch up on homework.

The book is easy reading and its autobiographical nature is a major strength. It begins by recounting the life of Apple's son, and ends with the life of the author himself—from truck driver to university professor—to illustrate the politics of education and what it can do for the children of the poor. His son's life shows what it is like to be an African-American child in white American schools. Apple also analyses the informal teaching and learning processes he engages in with his graduate students, some of them international students, during his Friday seminars at the University of Wisconsin.

The book, however, has limitations. It is too American in its concerns. Apple exposes the hypocrisy of a political system whose self-proclaimed commitment to "democracy" excludes so many people along racial and genderlines. But he does not see the context of the American scene as part of an international network of exploitation and educational imperialism, fostered by the United States all over the world under the pretext of giving aid. The "conservative restoration" is felt all the more painfully by people in the Third World, who are doubly oppressed by their own governments as well as by American imperialism, and who have no opportunity to negotiate and compromise with the latter.

Apple is an internationally famous author, teacher, and activist in the politics of education. He is so well travelled across the globe, and he has so many international graduate students, that it pains an international reader to find that these lived experiences are ignored. Does he really value the views of the international students who admire him so much for his challenges to the American hegemonic order? Is he not prepared to give them some lead in applying his critique of American education to their own countries? Surely the struggle against the "conservative restoration" is global in nature. This is the paradox of Apple's work, and of so many other works of a progressive genre in the West.

This book is too optimistic about the potential of the dominated to struggle against the dominant. The struggles of teachers and students within schools are not theorized sufficiently to show how they link up with the struggles of the oppressed against the *status quo* outside the schools. Meanwhile capitalism is coopting past resisters as new compromisers. Can the struggle be realistically limited to the school? If not, the school

should link up with the oppressed in all sections of society. This is what I think the book fails to demonstrate even in the American context.

The book is an excellent exposure of the "conservative restoration" in American society, specifically in education. Apple shows how education is a contested political enterprise, and analyses education with the tools of a social scientist rather than those of a conventional educationalist. I strongly recommend *Official Knowledge* for graduate students, teachers, and policy analysts in educational ministries.

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### **References**

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- Apple, M.W. (1989) *Teachers and Texts: a Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education* New York: Routledge