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# Interview with Michael Apple: The biography of a public intellectual

MICHAEL A. PETERS



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Michael received his BA in Education from Glassboro State College, NJ (1966), an MA in Curriculum and Philosophy (1967) and EdD in Curriculum and Teaching (1970) at Columbia University, NY. He is the recipient of many awards and honors including honorary doctorates from McGill University (Canada), University of Rosario (Argentina) and the Institute of Education (London) where he is World Scholar. He also received the Medal for Distinguished Academic Achievement (Equivalent of Honorary PhD) from the University of California.

He is the author of many works including: *Can Education Change Society?* (Routledge, 2013), *Education and Power*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2012), *Global Crises, Social Justice, and Education* (Routledge, 2010), *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology of*

*Education* (2010), *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education* (2009), *Democratic Schools*, 2nd edition (Heinemann, 2007), with James A. Beane, *Educating the 'Right' Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2006), *Ideology and Curriculum*, 25th anniversary, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2004), *The State and Politics of Education* (Routledge, 2003), *Official Knowledge: Democratic Knowledge in a Conservative Age*, 3rd edition (Routledge, 2014), and *Cultural Politics and Education* (Teachers College Press, 1996). His books have been widely translated and gone into many editions. (Sources: <http://ci.education.wisc.edu/ci/people/faculty/michael-apple>, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Apple](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Apple); see also: Rage and Hope, <http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/apple1.html>; Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism and the Politics of Educational Reform, University of Toronto (2009), [http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/michael\\_apple\\_lecture.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/michael_apple_lecture.pdf); Understanding the Meaning of Educational Quality as Influenced by M. Apple, University of Bath, November 24, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7HVfxq4l-8>; Educational and Curricular Restructuring and the Neo-liberal and Neo-conservative Agendas: Interview with Michael Apple (2001), <http://www.curriculosemfronteiras.org/vol1iss1articles/appleeng.pdf>; Here I stand: a long [r]evolution. Ideology, culture and curriculum: Michael Apple and progressive critical studies, Paraskeva, João M. (2004), <http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/bitstream/1822/7054/15/15%20Chapter%205%20Minho%20Final.pdf>; Michael Apple: April 2012 Routledge Education Author of the Month, [http://www.routledge.com/articles/michael\\_apple\\_april\\_2012\\_routledge\\_education\\_author\\_of\\_the\\_month/](http://www.routledge.com/articles/michael_apple_april_2012_routledge_education_author_of_the_month/)).

This interview is a source of interactive biography enabling not only the establishment of chronology and the discussion of intellectual influences but also an understanding of the biographical aspects of intellectual projects and the inextricable links between a life history and forms of activism. In this interview conducted through the medium of email I explore with Michael Apple how his past and upbringing helped to shape his intellectual life and commitments.

Michael Peters (MP): I know you grew up in New Jersey. Can you please say something about the environment you were born into? Who were your parents? Describe your family and your earliest memories and the way they shaped you from the very beginning.

Michael Apple: In order to understand some of the reasons I look at the world in particular ways, it is important to understand that I am what has been called a 'red diaper baby'. I come from a deeply committed leftist family, one that lived in a poor neighborhood of one of the most political cities in the United States. Let me say more about this. My grandfather was a Russian immigrant who as a young man in the late nineteenth century emigrated first to England to work in mills in the Manchester area and then to the United States. He left Russia for political and economic reasons. As a communist, he was always in danger. As someone who was very poor, he had other reasons for leaving. And as someone who (the story goes) killed a policeman who was part of a pogrom engaged in deadly action against my grandfather's immediate family, he had no choice but to leave as quickly as he could.

My first political memories include going with him to the Workingmen's Circle every week where pinochle was played and politics was talked. Talked is exactly the wrong

word here. Lived, passionately argued, part of one's very being—these are perhaps better metaphors. Like other immigrant working class folks in the inner city of Paterson, New Jersey—the home of some of the most important strikes and labor struggles in the history of the US—life wasn't life without being consumed by politics. This was of course ratified in his daily life as a textile worker and tailor. But politics wasn't politics unless it was guided by reading everything one could get one's hands on: books on political struggles and on world history, including the works of Marx and other leftist authors as well; 'great' novels from the United States and elsewhere; and the Yiddish and English weeklies and dailies, especially the socialist and communist ones. I thought that *he* had personally composed one of his favorite lines—'Religion is the opium of the masses'. For him, religion was what kept 'us' backward and was a tool of oppression. Who 'us' was meant to be was a sliding signifier—the Left, Jews, workers, immigrants, and so on. Yet probably unstated, as an absent presence, within this category of 'us' were people exactly like him—poor Russian communists who rose up against the oppression of workers. His favorite joke led to another saying that has had an impact on me throughout my life. 'When the Left lines up in a firing squad, it always lines up in a circle.' (Think about it.) This is definitely one of the reasons that throughout my writings I am suspicious of the search for 'purity', for simplistic explanations of educational politics, and why I have consistently called for broad alliances or 'decentered unities' among progressive groups in so much of my work.

Let us move a generation in time—to a mother (the daughter of this grandfather) who herself was a communist and anti-racist activist. Mimi Apple never finished high school but still loved to write short stories and poetry (and gave me a middle name—Whitman, after Walt Whitman, the New Jersey poet of the people and the profane—that spoke to her love of the poetic and of what was at the time partly transgressive culture). She insisted that since we all lived there, house work was everyone's work. Thus, everyone did it—washing, cleaning, etc. She was one of the founding members of the Paterson chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and was an activist in the poor and Black communities in Paterson; but also an activist who came home to cook and to be a 'mother'. (I too became very active in CORE, becoming its publicity director at the age of 15 when I was still in secondary school.) She was deeply involved in the struggle over education and jobs, against the forms of political patronage that denied power to poor folks, and to fight the class and especially racial structuring that dominated Paterson's political, economic, and educational structures. We too—as Mimi's children—went to these meetings and worked in the campaigns for the progressive candidates, and with others did much of the 'shit work' required in mobilizations—putting together signs, distributing material, and so on. It wasn't seen as odd. We were just 'Mimi's kids' and like the kids of so many other working class, and especially anti-racist activists, we were expected to pitch in. Why? Because reality is unequal. It's *our* job to do something about it *now*. And she read long into the night to me, at me, with me.

Or a father, Harry—a printer who was from a socialist family—who worked long hours trying to make enough money to allow the family to escape the poverty of the slums of Paterson. As a printer, he was a member of one of the most historically literate and radical crafts. His sons—myself and my younger brother—spent hours at the print-shop each week. From the time we were old enough to carry a broom, we worked there. We

learned to set type, to deposit it in the correct place in the cases, to run hand presses and later to run larger presses. (I, in fact, worked part of my way through night school at a small teachers college by working as a printer during the day.) And we learned—viscerally—that work was crucial to becoming a person and that it must always be done in a way that respects your skills and your fellow workers. And we learned to love the printed word.

Both Mimi and Harry worked at politics—in CORE, in campaigns to elect labor-oriented and/or Black or Latino/a candidates. Both had an undying respect for unions and for the possibilities of collective organizations of real people. Both were cynical about the machinations behind the two major political parties. Both were (aggressively) secular and had a profound mistrust of rightist religious movements such as those that added the ‘under God’ to the Pledge of Allegiance said by students daily in schools. (This too had a major effect on me since I refused to say the words ‘under God’ each day at the beginning of the school day—and suffered mightily because of it.) Both of my parents were more than a little happy when I decided early in my life that what I wanted to be was—a teacher. To them, there was something almost sacred about being a teacher. Even though neither of them had completed high school in the allotted time, to be a teacher was to honor the family both in class terms (I was ‘getting ahead’), in political terms (It’s up to you, Michael, to ‘tell the truth’ about this society), and in intellectual terms (teaching was about critical literacy, about giving people power to understand the world and—maybe—to change it). And when I ultimately became president of a teachers’ union, well that was even better for all of the above reasons.

All of these people made it clear, by their very actions, that politics and ethics were to be lived, and that ‘literacy’ and political talk counted. Among my memories are mealtimes where everyone—including the children—was expected to have opinions about what seemed to be everything. But some ‘everythings’ returned again and again to nearly every meal. Local, national, and international politics were consumed with each meal. But of course this is partly romantic. I have dropped a net down into the past whose weave is almost guaranteed to pull up memories of this sort. Growing up poor, in a poor area, being surrounded by relatives who all seemed to live in the same area and all seemed to be in danger of constantly losing the jobs that they had—given the fact that as an aging textile city Paterson was suffering massively from what we now call capital flight—all of this made life tense and filled us with unease about the present and the future. Poverty, job loss, the inability to pay for medical care or even one’s rent (these words seem too damn abstract to deal with these experiences) weren’t ‘theorized’. We didn’t find them important because of some text published by ‘The Party’ or by a leftist intellectual. They were focused upon because they were part of our daily lives and the lives of everyone (African-American, Puerto Rican, Russian, Polish, Italian, Jewish) who lived in that area of Paterson at the time. Thus, those mealtime conversations were undoubtedly filled with other ‘everythings’—paying the rent, talk about school, family problems (a communist mother’s family and a socialist father’s family had, shall we say, interesting problems in ‘getting along’; again I am reminded of my grandfather’s old adage about leftists, firing squads, and lining up in a circle). These intense political discussions, where family=politics=arguing about everything, and where even children were expected to participate and to be argued with because the nascent and still not totally formed arguments of children were supposed to be serious enough to be taken seriously. It is this sense

of political arguments, of committed critical literacy, of not standing on the balcony but living a life of such commitments that has stayed with me throughout my career. It is the DNA that continues to form me. It is also one of the reasons I am sceptical of those figures in 'critical pedagogy' who tend to engage with the world in large rhetorical ways, but do not put their politics into lived practice.

MP: Thanks Michael. There are so many biographical leads here its hard to know which to follow. Where did the 'Apple' name come from? And let me ask you to reflect on the lived connection of growing up in a Jewish household with strong socialist sympathies? I ask this question because few people realize the historical importance of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment going back to the eighteenth century that marked the beginning of a Jewish secular engagement with the world which resulted in political movements for Jewish emancipation but also for political rights in other spheres. I have always been impressed by Moses Mendelssohn's response to the question 'What is Enlightenment?' His answer based around self-realization seemed clearer to me than Kant's. Being poor and Jewish in America is like a double alienation and in the United States there were many Jewish intellectuals who grew up reading Marx and became committed socialists and democrats.

Michael Apple: The history of the name 'Apple' is cloudy. My father's brother, 'Uncle Abe'—a 100 year old former labor organizer and steel mill worker, recounts one family 'story'. During the forced Jewish diaspora from Spain in the fifteenth century, many Jews had to leave. Some went to what is now Turkey and Greece, while others went north and east to Russia, Poland, Germany, Holland, and elsewhere. Supposedly, parts of my family settled in Holland and then what is now Ukraine. The Apple name was undoubtedly changed multiple times over the years and could have been Apfel, Appel, or something similar. There is no easy way to determine whether Apple was related to an occupation (grower or seller of fruit) or whether it had a very different genesis.

Your more important question about the Jewish Enlightenment, secular engagement, and the issue of alienation is actually a difficult one for me personally. Let me preface this by saying something more general. There are times when I am rather uncomfortable with autobiographical accounts. I do not want to slight the power and importance of the 'testimony' of oppressed groups—Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* [Harvard University Press, 1992] comes to mind. However, in a time when amateur psychoanalysis, postmodern personal narratives, and all too 'precious' autobiographical accounts are increasingly found in educational literature, I have a number of worries about such tendencies. At their best and when done *very* reflexively, they do remind us that behind even the most eviscerated writing stands an embodied person. They do remind us as well of Dewey's recognition that all educational events end in an act of personal knowing. They do ask us to take seriously Abraham Heschel's insight in his book *Who Is Man?* [Stanford University Press, 1965] that knowing is a form of 'celebration' that takes one beyond oneself. And when done well, they do enable voices that are silenced to be heard. Yet, this said, I also believe that too many of such autobiographical tendencies reflect the new middle class's infinite need for self-display. In a time of increasingly oppressive economic and cultural relations, the message of their often relatively well positioned and well educated authors is too often 'But enough about you; let me tell you about me'.

Let's return to your question of double alienation. I need to admit that I don't know what it means for something to be called Jewish; nor can I answer the question of to what extent the Jewish Enlightenment and its answers to difficult questions works through me and others like me. I know what the stereotypes say it means. But what it means to *me* is unclear. Where I am positioned within this long philosophical (and 'religious?') tradition has until recently not usually been a conscious issue for me, except in instances such as those signified in the personal fragments with which I began this interview. I do assume one thing, however. I do assume that there are others like me who were raised in totally secular and deeply political families where the 'real' religious underpinnings of their lives was an abiding commitment to social justice.

I do know that I often feel as an outsider politically and sometimes culturally in this society. I do know that the hedonistic and possessive individualism that so permeates this nation and others like it make me deeply uneasy. I do know that as a scholar, as a teacher, as a political activist, and in other aspects of my personal life, I do not usually overtly think of myself as a Jew. In fact, if someone were to ask me who I am, the word Jewish would be well down on the list of conscious attributes and positions I would perhaps enumerate. And yet I do know that at times—even when I can't articulate it clearly—I feel the gaze of others looking at me as a 'Jew' with all that such a gaze implies. I also know that at times I feel as if I must contest the public definition and stereotypes of what people believe it means to be a 'Jew'.

I do not want to give the impression that my personal struggle over identity is due to the fact that historically I and many others have been positioned as a Jew in a negative way. Rather, I believe that a constitutive aspect of being a secular and political Jew is a concern with where one fits, where one's 'home' is. If identity is being part of historical community/ies, where in that community does one belong? Whose definition of that community prevails personally and politically? In Heschel's apposite words, to be human is to 'wrestle'.

Little did I know how 'Jewish' this was until recently. Actually, in a way that I still can't quite grasp, my realization of the Jewishness of this came from a book. That book, Irving Howe's rather masculinist yet still very powerful *World of Our Fathers* [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976], placed my own political biography within a much longer history of secular 'Jewish' struggles. I recognized a continuity with thousands of others. It seems odd to me that a book could have such an effect. But perhaps this speaks to your question of the relationship between the Enlightenment, the politics of contested understandings of 'rationality', struggles in many spheres, and the complex intersections and history of secularity and politics.

Your question strikes a chord because it challenges me to ask whether much of my ongoing actions in and on a deeply unequal world is partly related to historically important political and secular traditions that work through me in ways that I don't totally understand. Why is nearly all of my writing and research organized around a set of (too damn complicated) issues—what is the relationship between knowledge and power in schools and the larger society? Who benefits from the ways this society is organized? What can be done about it? How do I understand some (not all) of the historical roots I may have in a set of multiple traditions (I don't know whether to call these 'religious' traditions since I, like many others, do not feel 'religious') that are much larger than myself?

In the end, your question makes me listen just a bit more to others who have tried to answer the question of ‘double alienation’. Perhaps Paul Berman is partly right when he suggests that there is a peculiar Jewish custom of rebelling? As he puts it, in a somewhat too reductive way, ‘There is an old and slightly peculiar Jewish custom of rebelling against Jewishness by identifying with the most marginal of all possible groups so as to rebel and still not be assimilated into the mainstream’. Whether he is correct or not, there is no doubt in my mind that whatever the answer is and whatever traditions it comes from, the key is never to stop the struggle.

MP: A wonderfully rich, reflective and compelling response. I asked the question because when I was invited to Harvard to a seminar by Cavell and Putnam I asked Cavell about his Jewish background. At the time he was writing his autobiography. I commented that his writing seemed very Jewish to me. By that I meant ‘Talmudic’ in the sense of a textual meta-commentary on his own life with both the poetry, the polyvocal element and complexity of reflexivity—let me say now, in a broad sense, Freudian. He said he was only beginning to understand the effects of his Jewish cultural upbringing on him. I very much liked your reflection on the form of biography and the way it has made its way as a cultural methodology that at once personalizes knowledge (standpoint epistemology) but also risks the charge of incestuous textual power relations with one’s own family and background. It occurs to me that two giants who are forever relevant to us and to our work, who cultivated methods we now take for granted, who wrote in many different registers—scientific, rhetoric, and poetic—and defined the academic territory of discourse are precisely Marx and Freud—two secular Jewish thinkers who inherited the mantle of Jewish thinking more than either would care to have admitted. Marx himself was also in exile for much of his academic life, as you well know. In this way I hope to reflect upon the greatness of these two thinkers that came from Jewish backgrounds and exemplify the kinds of biographical questions and probings that we are in dialogue about. Marx’s maternal grandfather was I believe a rabbi and Marx’s father was the first in his family to receive a secular education. The question of Marx’s Jewishness is beyond this interview and a complex question. He did write ‘On the Jewish Question’ of course and we know he was very hostile to religion in general. Two very difficult questions that are inescapable (I cannot not ask them—the Jewish double negative!): first, can you say briefly what your relation is to Marx *as a thinker*; second, while I know the outlines of the answer you might give, what do you think about the importance of a secular (public) education?

Michael Apple: There is no doubt that I have been strongly influenced by Marx and by a considerable number of Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, especially by theories of political economy, of the state, and just as importantly of cultural form, content, and production. Indeed, it wouldn’t be possible to fully understand my work without also seeing me as participating in a debate within Marxism and neo-Marxism over the relationship among economy, state, civil society, and culture, with my focus of course largely being on the role of education as a site for the working out of these relations. Here it is not ‘only’ my early and later reading of Marx (and not only the iconic texts, but much of his lesser known work—remember my earlier discussion of the books I was expected to read) that has been one of the fundamentals of my thinking. It includes a host of others: Sartre,

Althusser, Gramsci, Lukacs, Raymond Williams, Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno, Pierre Macherey, Habermas, Gorz, Stuart Hall, and so many others. It is also important to realize that I was strongly influenced by such things as existential and structural phenomenology, especially the work of Alfred Schutz who gave us powerful theories of the social structuring of everyday knowledge and Merleau-Ponty who gave us equally powerful theories of the phenomenology of perception. In some ways, my project has partly been the integration of social phenomenology with Marxism. Hence the importance to me of neo-Marxist understandings of the significance of cultural struggles and of the relative autonomy of culture. My background in the sociology of knowledge certainly helped to say the least.

In order to go further into this discussion, I need to say some things about the larger debate I am currently having over some of the issues surrounding Marxism in education. Here I'll need to draw upon an essay I've written on recent Marxist and Marxist-influenced work in education for the journal *Educational Theory* and on my latest book, *Can Education Change Society?* This requires that I go into some detail here.

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, 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. Let us also remember that he was writing in the nineteenth century. His analyses need to be read intertextually, as responding to the political, economic, and cultural conditions and debates at the time and as building off and disrupting existing socio-economic and philosophical traditions. I would be truly disheartened if Marxist traditions remained static, locked into nineteenth century assumptions and debates. Marx was a genius; but even geniuses may need to be corrected, made more subtle, argued with, as the world changes.

Yet it is important to realize when one reads Marx's 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. Terry 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'. 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 as *only* an economic system as the sole major driving dynamic of society. I think that this has had some truly serious deleterious effects and has at times led to largely rhetorical analyses and even to the ignoring of 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, since there continues to be much to learn from the insights of the Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions. This is especially dangerous if we are interested, as I think critical educators must be, in the role of schooling—and education in general—in social transformation.

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 (all too usually seen as whole rather than fragmented entities) and the capitalist (and usually only paid) labor process. Such challenges are of course crucial. However, other challenges, hence, either become less significant or are only valued for their ‘ancillary’ role of directly acting on capitalist relations and structures. I don’t want to be misunderstood here. 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. 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 are immensely powerful in so many people’s lives in immensely destructive ways is to not be seriously engaged with the realities billions of people face.

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 this is 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), this position still prevents crucial alliances from being formed 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. I’ve written a lot about the need to learn from the Right about the crucial role that alliances across our differences can and must play in places such as *Educating the ‘Right’ Way* and *Can Education Change Society?*, so I won’t rehearse these arguments here. But suffice it to say, that I think that the essentialist assumptions and class reductionism, and the overly simplistic formulaic and rhetorical responses, that have become all too common within a good deal of (supposedly) Marxist work in education, have served to push people away. They unfortunately can actually help create some of the conditions for the Right to occupy that space. There’s much more I’d like to say here, but . . .

Now on to your question about my position on ‘secular’ education. First, let me say that I don’t romanticize current ‘public’ (that is, state supported) education. The public sphere

in general has always been classed, raced, and gendered, with certain groups being denied a full participatory role and identity as members of what counts as the public sphere itself. Nancy Fraser's criticisms of Habermas and of his analysis of the public sphere are very thoughtful in this regard. Second, in the United States, 'secular' schools have smuggled in religious and quasi-religious content, rituals, and assumptions in many ways, so it is actually hard to find that pure thing called a secular school. Third, I have worked with religiously affiliated activists in many nations—committed Christian radical socialist union leaders in South Korea, base community movements guided by liberation theology in Latin America, Islamic feminists in Turkey, and similar groups elsewhere. When someone tells me that 'Jesus was actually a communist, so we too will devote our lives to the struggle for the poor and oppressed', I want to deeply respect this sentiment, even when I may strongly disagree with the specific religious underpinnings.

This said, as you know I have spent a lot of time critically analyzing the ways in which 'authoritarian populist' religious conservatives have attempted—often very successfully—to change the content and form of the curriculum in public schools in many nations so that it reflects their own very limited ideological perspectives. These groups have formed an alliance with neoliberals and neoconservatives that has pushed education in damaging directions. They have seen themselves as 'the new oppressed'—often reasserting patriarchal and racializing ways of seeing the world. They have also changed our ideas about democracy by trying to install conservative religious criteria as central to what counts as 'legitimate knowledge'. Climate change is denied, as is evolution, much of the core principles of physics, and so much more. As one example, the Institute for Creation Science in Texas—a very right-wing private religious institute—has been given the authority to certify science teachers for the public schools of that state. Thus, I think that there are very real dangers in not defending the idea of a public secular school.

Next, in an age of neoliberalism, where what is public is seen as necessarily bad and what is private is seen as necessarily good, the effects of this have been shown to be especially damaging as well. The *thin* democracy of markets replaces the *thick* democracy of participatory forms. As I show in *Educating the 'Right' Way*, such policies actually can create even more inequalities in education. In addition, as Charles Mills has argued, their assumptions about rationality and their ethic of the rational economic actor are based on what he calls a 'racial contract'. Indeed, I believe quite strongly that we cannot understand what is behind the neoliberal agenda unless we place race and gender side by side as underlying forces behind it.

I also have other reasons for my position on defending the public school. I see public schools as both defeats and victories. Unlike some rhetorical Marxists who picture schools as only factories that produce docile workers for capitalism, as I and others have shown schools were and are arenas for anti-racist struggles where activist identities were and are formed and where they served as crucial sites for the formation of counter-hegemonic movements that moved from the school to other sites. I also want to always keep in mind the following question: If schools were already doing what capital and other dominant groups wanted, why are these groups so angry at public schools? There must have been victories in the politics of recognition and in the ways in which gains in both a politics of recognition led as well to changing people's collective identities as agents of transformation. And these in turn have led to further struggles in other social spheres. This it seems

to me is a much more honest and dialectical understanding of the processes and possibilities of social transformation. Struggling over public and secular schools is an essential part of this.

Because of this, as I said earlier, while I am not a romantic of the current state of public/secular schooling, I think that we must continue the never-ending attempts to keep alive the visions and the practices of a truly public school. In an age of privatization and marketization, such a school is one of the last remaining public institutions. Defending it is an essential part of the defense of the public in general.

MP: Thank you for such considered responses. It is always a pleasure corresponding with someone who has such a clear view of things. I want to return to Gramsci, and to the significance of cultural struggles and the relative autonomy of culture. If we take seriously the history of cultural struggle we might say that a large part of it is synonymous with the achievement of civil rights and the recognition of identity rights. In any event, while there may be fishhooks along the way the concept of universal human rights, even if promulgated and defended by Western hegemonic powers and often in comprised fashion, the concept of the culture seems to provide a basis or standard by which oppressed groups can press their claims for legitimacy. I know you spend a great deal of time traveling and speaking around the world and we were lucky to manage to get you and Rima down to the Waikato in New Zealand this year (2014)—thank you both very much, it was great to see you! But let me ask a battery of questions: first, your relationship with Gramsci; second, the question do all cultural struggle take the form of human rights recognition in the twenty-first century; third, perhaps you could illustrate your answer with some examples from your world travels.

Michael Apple: My turn to Gramsci not only had ‘intellectual/theoretical’ and political roots, but also deeply personal ones that are connected to what I said about my background earlier on. I’ve written a lot about ‘why Gramsci?’ elsewhere; but let again say that I am deeply dissatisfied with theories and politics that make cultural struggles epiphenomenal or unimportant. I think that this is a dangerous misreading of history and, speaking honestly, can be a performance of Whiteness and imperialism when it is taken as a serious explanation of the dialectical relationship between struggles over identity, knowledge, and recognition on the one hand and structural relations on the other. But I cannot divorce this from my experiences of how important it was and is for me and my family (and so many other poor and minoritized folks in Paterson and elsewhere) to keep alive the collective memory of past struggles and understandings, of the crucial significance of the continuing battles over literacy and what it means, of the arts and of popular culture as resources of protest and of hope, and so much more. This is deeply rooted in my family tradition of printing. But it’s also connected to my lesser known activity as a film-maker with kids, teachers, and community members in schools. And as the parent of an African-American child, this is also constantly on my mind.

But some of this is indeed undoubtedly related to the international work I have done with progressive governments and movements, critical scholar and educators, dissidents, radical unions, and others in a large number of countries. In places as widely disparate as Brazil, Mexico, India, Japan, South Korea, China, Norway, Spain, South Africa, Israel/

Palestine—and the list goes on—the connections among cultural politics, the politics of recognition and memory, and a politics of redistribution are visible constantly. And I don't mean this rhetorically. All of these are *deadly* serious, sometimes resulting in my being arrested with other deeply committed friends in South Korea and elsewhere. I say this not to make me in any way special, but to point out that huge numbers of people already understand in their daily lives the importance of cultural struggles, of person rights, and of making connections among these struggles and between them and a classed, raced, and gendered economy. There a hell of a lot more I want to say here, but it's probably better said by people such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, bell hooks, Paulo Freire—and just as importantly, in the voices of protest heard in all of the countries where I have been taught these things by the actions of real people now and in the past who have demanded individual and collective rights.

MP: Reflecting on the genre of (auto)biography and on this interview—a modern form that permits a dialogical interchange—I am interested in the way in which many scholars hold the position that it is possible to draw a distinction between the author and his or her work. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Marx and others have all emphasized that thinking is a human activity that cannot ever be wholly separated from other human activities and human culture in general. In the case of what Gramsci called an 'organic intellectual' this would seem to be demonstrated in the way your personal and family background influenced your outlook and lifelong commitments. Would you agree? I leave you the last comment. Michael thank you so much for an enjoyable interview. You have been generous with your time.

Michael Apple: One of the benefits of things such as interviews—especially when they take the form of conversations with people for whom I have a large amount of respect such as yourself—is that they require not only self-reflection, but also some other things. They provide a space to challenge the idea that somehow ideas float above the realities of a person's biography. Ideas actually become embodied in such experiences, not divorced from them. But I don't want this to be seen as a static set of past experiences, as if biography is something that happened when one was growing up. I hope that I am not speaking only for me when I say that this relationship between one's ideas and personal experiences is always a process that is in motion. There's no doubt that my background in political work, in a radical family tradition, in the life of a 'red diaper baby', in printing, in becoming a teacher, in having a wife who is a feminist scholar—all of this matters, often in ways I don't completely understand. Indeed, the questions you've so insightfully asked have caused me to think more deeply about this. However, for me, reflecting on this and on what it all means has reminded me again that if I do want to continue being a critical scholar/activist, being organic—with all of the tensions, joy, and at times very real sacrifices that this entails—I have to see myself as an ongoing project. There's no end point; there's no final conclusion to it. To use Heschel's term, one 'wrestles' with this for one's entire life. But I can't live an ethical life without such wrestling. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

### Notes on Contributor

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