

## Chapter 2

# Rethinking Agents of Transformation: Social Mobilizations and Official Knowledge



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**Abstract** Questions of structures and agency are significant in any serious considerations of the possibilities, limits, and effects of educational reforms. But the interrelations between educational policy and practice cannot be answered unless we deal directly with a number of issues: Who are the agents and what are the structures, movements, and identities that might lead to actions that support or resist dominant educational policies and practices. In this chapter, I critically examine three examples of agentic work. Each has its basis in successful struggles over knowledge, over what are considered to be “legitimate” or official understandings, and over the educational mechanisms that make these understandings available. The first two examples direct our attention to a set of agents who are not talked about enough—students as political/epistemological actors. The third asks whether tactical “hybrid” alliances between ideologically different movements can successfully challenge dominant structures and policies. All of them demonstrate the importance of our understanding the nature of collective alliance building and the creation of activist identities. Each of them contributes to the larger questions that I raised above.

**Keywords** Student activism · Politics of knowledge · Hybrid alliances · Neoliberalism

## Introduction

Questions of structure and agency are significant in any serious considerations of the possibilities, limits, and effects of educational reforms. But the interrelations between educational policy and practice cannot be answered unless we deal directly with a number of issues: *Who* are the agents; and *what* are the structures,

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movements, and identities that might lead to actions that support or resist dominant educational policies and practices.

In this chapter, I critically examine three examples of agentic work. Each has its basis in successful struggles over knowledge, over what are considered to be “legitimate” or official understandings, and over the educational mechanisms that make these understandings available. The first two examples direct our attention to a set of agents who are not talked about enough—students as political/epistemological actors. The third asks whether tactical “hybrid” alliances between ideologically different movements can successfully challenge dominant structures and policies. All of them demonstrate the importance of our understanding the nature of collective alliance building and the creation of activist identities. Each of them contributes to the larger questions that I raised above. Let us begin by situating them within the struggles over knowledge.

## Whose Culture, Whose Knowledge?

From the early 1970s onwards, the issues surrounding the politics of knowledge have been a major concern of the sociology of curriculum and to the critical analyses of educational policy and practice. Central to the development of this tradition both theoretically and empirically were the analyses of people such as Bernstein (1977), Bourdieu (1984), Young (1971), Whitty (1986; Whitty & Young, 1977) and myself (Apple, 2019). At the very core of this work is the commitment to the idea that interrogating what counts as “legitimate” or “high status” culture, and making visible the struggles over transforming it, are essential to building thick democratic educational institutions both in the content of what is taught and how it is taught, as well in who makes the decisions about these issues. In many ways, it connects directly to both a Gramscian argument that in a “war of position” cultural struggles count in crucial ways (Gramsci, 1971; see also Apple, 2013) and Nancy Fraser’s arguments about the significance of a politics of recognition as well as a politics of redistribution (Fraser, 1997) in significant movements toward social change.

Few words in the English language are more complex than *culture*. Its history is interesting. It derives from “coulter,” a word originally used to name the blade of a plow. Thus, it has its roots literally in the concept of farming—or better yet, “cultivation” (Eagleton, 2000: 1). The British cultural scholar Raymond Williams reminded us that “culture is ordinary.” By this, he meant that there was a danger that by restricting the idea of culture to intellectual life, the arts, and “refinement,” we risk excluding the working class, the poor, the culturally disenfranchised, the racialized “Other,” and diasporic populations from the category of cultured (Williams, 1958; see also Williams, 1976, 1982; Hall, 2016).

However, even with Williams’ caution, and even with its broader farming roots, culture has very often been associated with a particular kind of cultivation—that of refined pursuits, a kind of specialness that needs to be honed. And it is seen to be best found in those populations that already possess the dispositions and values that

make them more able to appreciate what is considered to be the best that society has to offer. Culture then is what is found in the more pristine appreciations and values of those above the rest of us. Those lower can be taught such appreciations, but it is very hard and at times expensive work both on the part of those who seek to impart this to society's Others and even harder work for those "not yet worthy" people who are to be taught such refined dispositions, values, and appreciations. This sense of culture then carries with it something of an imperialist project (Eagleton, 2000: 46). As many readers may know, this project has a long history in museums, in science and the arts, and definitely in schools and their curricula.

Given this history, as you might imagine the very idea of culture has been a source of considerable and continuing controversy over its assumptions, its cultural politics, its view of the differential worth of various people in society, and over who has the right to name something as "culture" in the first place. As you might also imagine, there is an equally long history of resistance to dominant understandings of "legitimate" culture and an extensive literature in cultural studies, in social science, and in critical education that has taken these issues seriously (see, e.g., Apple et al., 2009; Apple, 2013; Eagleton, 2000; Clarke et al., 1979; Nelson & Grossberg, 1988; Said, 1993, 1994). The critical sociology of curriculum is both a stimulus to and a product of this history. Indeed, it is hard to fully understand the nature of these debates within education without also connecting it to these larger issues.

One of the most significant advances that have been made in education is the transformation of the question of "What knowledge is of most worth?" into "Whose knowledge is of most worth?" This rewording is not simply a linguistic issue. While we need to be careful in not assuming that there is always a one-to-one correspondence between "legitimate" knowledge and groups in power, in changing the focus the question asks that we engage in a radical transformation of our ways of thinking about the connections between what counts as important knowledge in educational institutions and in the larger society and the existing relations of domination and subordination and struggles against these relations. As I have documented, because it is a site of conflict and struggle, "legitimate" or "official" knowledge is often a compromise, not simply an imposition of dominant knowledge, values, and dispositions. Indeed, hegemonic blocs are often required to compromise in order to generate consent and exert leadership (Apple, 2014). All of this has crucial implications for understanding what we choose to teach, how we teach it, and what values and identities underpin such choices (Apple, 2014).

Just as importantly, the question also demands that one word in the final sentence be problematized—the word *we*. Who is the "we"? What groups arrogate the center to themselves, thereby seeing another group as The Other? That word—"we"—often symbolizes the manner in which ideological forces and assumptions work inside and outside of education. Especially when employed by dominant groups, "we" functions as a mechanism not only of inclusion, but powerfully of exclusion as well. It is a verb that masquerades as a noun, in a manner similar to the word "minority" or "slave." No one is a "minority." Someone must *make* another a minority; someone or some group must *minoritize* another person and group, in the same

way that no one can be fully known as a slave. Someone or some group must *enslave* someone else.

Ignoring this understanding cuts us off from seeing the often ugly realities of a society and its history. Perhaps even more crucially, it also cuts us off from the immensely valuable historical and current struggles against the gendered/sexed, classed, and raced processes of dehumanization. By severing the connections between nouns and verbs, it makes invisible the actions and actors that make dominance seem normal. It creates a vacant space that is all too often filled with dominant meanings and identities.

These points may seem too abstract. But behind them is something that lies at the heart of being critically democratic educators. A major role they must play is to articulate both a vision and the reality of the fully engaged critical scholar and educator, someone who refuses to accept an education that doesn't simultaneously challenge the unreflective "we" and also illuminates the path to a new politics of voice and recognition in education. The task is to give embodied examples of critical analyses and of a more robust sense of socially informed educational action as it is actually lived out by real people, including committed educators and cultural workers in the complex politics at multiple levels of education, even when there predictably are tensions and contradictions. The critical traditions that have evolved have always been deeply concerned with these complex politics at multiple levels, especially but not only in terms of the issues surrounding policies involved in what should be taught, what counts as successful teaching, how is it assessed, and who should decide.

Of course, these concerns are not new. Teachers, social activists, and scholars in multiple disciplines have spent years challenging the boundaries of that usually unexamined space of the "we" and resisting the knowledge, perspectives, epistemological assumptions, and accepted voices that underpin them. There was no time when resistance, both overt and covert, was not present (Berrey, 2015). This is especially the case in education, a field where the issues surrounding what and whose knowledge should be taught and how it should be taught are taken very seriously, especially by those people who are not included in the ways in which dominant groups define that oh-so-dangerous word of "we" (Apple, 2013; Apple & Au, 2014; Au et al., 2016; Warmington, 2014).

Yet, there is another reason that the issues surrounding the curriculum are central here. For all of the well-deserved attention that is given to neoliberal agendas and policies, to privatization and choice plans, to audit cultures and standardization, we must continue to pay just as much attention to the actual stuff that is taught—and the "absent presences" (Macherey, 2006) of what is not taught—in schools, as well as to the concrete experiences of those who live and work in those buildings called schools. Documenting and understanding these lived realities are crucial to an interruptive strategy and to making connections between these experiences and the possibilities of building and defending something so much better. They are also crucial in building counter-hegemonic alliances that create and defend alternatives to dominant assumptions, policies, and practices in education and the larger society. This is not a utopian vision. There are very real instances of the successful building of such

alliances, of constructing a more inclusive “we,” ones that show the power of connecting multiple groups of teachers, students, parents, and community members around an issue that they share. The conflicts over school knowledge often play a key role here. And that is a major focus of the three examples I give in the later sections of this chapter.

## Knowledge and Progressive Mobilizations

First, let me make some general points. One of the most significant areas that remain understudied is the complex role of struggles over what counts as “legitimate knowledge” in the formation of social mobilizations. Yet this phenomenon is crucial to the debates over whether education has a role to play in social transformation (see, e.g., Apple, 2013; Apple et al., 2018). In the next section of this chapter, I examine the place of conflicts over official knowledge in the formation of counter-hegemonic movements. I pay particular attention to some examples of student and community mobilizations in the United States to defend progressive curricula and to build alliances that counter rightist gains. After that I turn my attention to the building of *hybrid alliances* across ideological divides and raise the question about whether these temporary tactical alliances can create important interruptions of dominant policies and practices.

It is worth stressing again that these examples of the politics of culture and identity surrounding schooling document the significance of curriculum struggles in the formation of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements. As I noted above, the fact that there is all too often an absence of in-depth analyses of what is and is not actually taught, of the politics of “official knowledge,” (Apple, 2014) in so many critical discussions of the role of neoliberalism in education is notable. We simply cannot grasp the reasons why so many people are convinced to come under the ideological leadership of dominant groups—or act to resist such leadership—if we don’t give a prime place to the struggle over meanings in the formation of identity.

Social movements—both progressive and retrogressive—often form around issues that are central to people’s identities, cultures, and histories (Giugi et al., 1999; Apple, 2013; see also Binder, 2002). More attention theoretically, historically, and empirically to the centrality of such struggles could provide more nuanced approaches to the reasons various aspects of conservative modernizing positions are found compelling, and just as importantly to the ways in which movements that interrupt neoliberal agendas have been and can be built (Apple, 2013).

The importance of this is clearly visible in the two analyses of mobilizations against rightist efforts to move the content of the curriculum in very conservative and often racist directions that follow. The first alliance was built in response to the conservative takeover of a local elected school board in the western part of the United States. It galvanized students, teachers, parents, and other community groups to not only overturn some very conservative curricular decisions, but also resulted in the election of a more progressive school board. Both neoliberal and

neoconservative policies were challenged successfully, in spite of the fact that the conservative majority of the school board had received a large amount of financial and ideological support by the Koch brothers' backed group American for Prosperity,<sup>1</sup> one of the most powerful and well-funded rightist organizations in the United States (see, e.g., Schirmer & Apple, 2016).

The second example focuses on the role of students in the struggle over racist policies of incarceration and funding cuts in education. Here the students employed what is usually seen as "elite knowledge" to interrupt dominant policies and to build a larger alliance. At the same time, they successfully challenged not only educational decisions, but the normalization of the racializing underpinnings of the "carceral state" (Foucault, 1977; Alexander, 2012). Let us now turn to the examples.

## Students in the Lead<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, conservative organizations have increasingly focused their efforts on the local state. In late summer of 2015, field organizers for the well-funded and powerful right-wing group Americans for Prosperity marched through the streets of Jefferson County, Colorado (known as Jeffco), knocking on doors and leafleting voters about the upcoming school board recall election. Jeffco had become deeply tangled in political battles, and the school board became a key site for these struggles. Jeffco had a mix of conservative and liberal tendencies. This mix was important outside as well as inside the town. In such a political context, skirmishes between conservative and progressive forces were considered predictive for the rest of the state. As one political analyst told news reporters, "As Jefferson County goes so goes the state of Colorado, that's why the stakes are so high here is because it is a leading indicator or a bellwether ...it is ground zero for all kinds of political wars but at the moment that political war is over the public education system" ("In 'Purple District,' Jeffco School Board Recall Could Have Big Influence", 2015).

In 2013, three conservative school board members gained control of the Jeffco school board, and immediately pushed forward a series of controversial educational policies. First, the school board recruited and hired a new superintendent, whose starting salary of \$280,000 a year – one of the highest education employees in the state – provoked public consternation (Garcia, 2014b). Second, the conservative school board and superintendent expanded school choice models by increasing funding for additional charter schools and requiring that private and public charter schools receive equal per-pupil funding as public schools (Garcia, 2014a). Third, the school board disbanded the union-approved teacher pay salary scale and instead implemented a highly controversial performance-based pay compensation model.

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<sup>1</sup> The Koch brothers are among the wealthiest people in the US. They are major leaders and funders of rightist movements and organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the material in this section is drawn from Apple et al. (2018).

The final straw in the school district, however, was when the newly conservative board ordered changes to the school district's Advanced Placement U.S. History curriculum to promote more "positive" aspects of national heritage by eliminating histories of U.S. social movements. The curriculum changes were designed to "promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free-market system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights" while minimizing and discouraging the role "civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law" ("High schoolers protest conservative proposal", 2014). This kind of ideological pressure is increasingly visible not only in the United States, but in multiple nations (See, for example, Verma & Apple, 2021).

This last "reform"—the attack on more progressive elements in the curriculum—provided the spark that turned into a fire that could not be controlled by the Right. In response to the curriculum changes, hundreds of students walked out of six high schools in the district in protest. Marching and carrying signs that read slogans such as, "There is nothing more patriotic than protest", "People didn't die so we could erase them", and "My education is not your political agenda", "I got 99 problems and the B.O.E. [Board of Education] is all of them," the students' demonstrations caught national attention.

The effects of this spread not only to an increasing number of students, but also to the district's teachers and the community. The students' willingness to mobilize inspired teachers to conduct a two-day sick-out in protest of the changes to their pay scales, which would now implement performance-pay for teachers based on students' standardized test performance. This change frustrated many teachers, who believed such compensation models were not only disproved by research, but also damaged the collaboration and mentorship necessary for effective teaching (Robles, 2015). Parents also began to organize, creating an online petition which garnered tens of thousands of signatures from around the country.

Deeply distressed with not only the curricular changes, but also a lack of investment in important school programs, like defunding an all-day kindergarten for "at-risk" students, a group of parents, teachers, and community members organized a recall election of the three conservative school board members. The grassroots recall election triggered the interest of Americans for Prosperity. Determined to support the conservative candidates and defeat the community recall effort, Americans for Prosperity spent over \$180,000 (a very large amount for a local school board race) on their opposition campaign, paying for flyers, door knocking, and a \$70,000 television ad. As the Colorado state director of Americans for Prosperity candidly declared, "We advocate competition. Education shouldn't be different," Fields says. "Competition really raises the quality of education. ... Where you get the best solutions is through free market principles" (Robles, 2015). Despite their heavily-financed campaign to protect the conservative school board, the efforts of Americans for Prosperity were not successful. In November 2015, all three of the conservative candidates were recalled. This defeat became a symbol of progressive potential for many other communities throughout the nation.

While this seems like simply a small "local" defeat, in many ways Jeffco constitutes a test case for the conservative movements' focus not only on national and



state-wide rightist elections, but increasingly on local mobilizations. Jeffco was a politically mixed school district that faced neoliberal education reform agendas: high-paid administrators, expanding school choice policies at the expense of educational equity, changes to teachers' employment rights, and diminished community morale. In the district, progressives mounted opposition campaigns to the conservative policy regime of the school board. In response to organized progressive activism, Americans for Prosperity poured more funds into the conservative campaigns in the district. Yet, unlike a number of other high profile school districts, progressives in Jeffco successfully defeated the conservatives (see Schirmer & Apple, 2016; Apple et al., 2018). Why did such a well-funded rightist campaign lose in Jeffco?

Three key elements exist in the struggles in Jeffco. First, conservative forces in Jeffco not only focused their vision on key educational policy forms—such as teachers' contracts and school choice proposals—but as well on such issues as *educational content* itself—the knowledge, values, and stories that get taught in schools. This recognition of the cultural struggles at stake in educational policy signaled their engagement in a deeper level of ideological reformation. By overtly restricting the curriculum to supposed “patriotic” narratives and excluding histories of protest and injustice, the conservative school board majority attempted to exercise their power to create ideological dominance. Yet, despite the school board's attempt to control the social narratives of meaning, they missed a key component of ideological formation: meaning is neither necessarily objective nor intrinsic, and therefore cannot simply be delivered by school boards or other powers, no matter the amount of campaign financings. Rather, meaning is constantly being constructed and co-constructed, determined by its social surroundings.

In the case of Jeffco, this meant that students' response to the curricular changes became very significant. Students' organized resistance became a leading and highly visible cause. One of its major effects was that it also encouraged teachers to mobilize against the school board. This is the second key element in Jeffco. In Jeffco, *both* students and teachers alike engaged in direct actions of protest and, importantly, exit. Students walked out of school; teachers withheld their labor in coordinated sick-outs. As social movement scholars inform us, the most significant impacts of social movements are often not immediate changes to social policy or programs, but rather the personal consequences of participating in activism. Once engaged with networks of other activists, participants have both attitudinal willingness and structural resources and skills to again participate in other activist efforts (e.g., McAdam, 1989). Organizing and participating in a series of effective walk-outs created activist identities for Jeffco high schoolers. Cultural struggles over what should be taught, struggles that were close to home for students and parents, galvanized action. This has important implications for how we think about what kinds of struggles can generate progressive transformations. As I noted earlier, and as Nancy Fraser reminds us, a politics of recognition as well as a politics of redistribution is crucial (Fraser, 1997; see also Apple, 2013).

Finally, supporters of public education in Jeffco were able to develop a coalition around multiple issues: curricula, teachers' compensation models, and school



choice. This mobilized a coalition that had sufficient popular support and power to successfully recall the conservative candidates. Thus, progressives in Jeffco were able to form a powerful alliance that addressed multiple registers of the impending conservative reforms. This is truly significant since in other similar places it was conservatives who formed such alliances (Schirmer & Apple, 2016). The creation of what I have elsewhere called “decentered unities” (Apple, 2013) provided the social glue and cooperative forms of support that countered rightist money.

The failure of the Right in Jeffco reveals some key lessons in the strategies of rightist movements. As I pointed out, the Right has shown a growing commitment to small political spaces, and the political persistence necessary to take control of them. There are now many examples where the Right has successfully occupied micro political spaces by waging lawsuits against the liberal school boards, running political candidates to take over local school boards, and providing large amounts of financial support for these candidates. We also know that conservative movements offer identities that provide attractive forms of agency to many people. In the process, these movements engage in a form of social pedagogy, creating a hegemonic umbrella that effectively combine multiple ideological elements to form a more unified movement (Schirmer & Apple, 2016; Apple, 2006).

But as the example of Jeffco demonstrates, the Right is not alone in understanding this. In Jeffco, this creative stitching together of new activist identities into a united movement was crucial. Stimulated by student protests against the attacks on progressive elements within the curriculum, a series of issues that could have divided people into separate constituencies instead united students with parents and teachers around curricular changes, anti-school choice plans, and against merit pay for teachers. Whether this alliance can last is an open question. But there can be no doubt that the initiatives taken by students to challenge conservative attempts to redefine “official knowledge” played a crucial role creating new more activist identities not only for students but for others as well. The leadership of students was a key.

## **Elite Knowledge, Racialization, and the (In)Justice System**

The above example of Jeffco directs our attention to the local level and to issues internal to schools. However, there are other examples of how progressive alliances can be built that start out with a focus on school knowledge, but extend their effects well beyond the school system to the larger society. These alliances may start with educational action and then spread out to other institutions and groups in important ways. And once again, students have often been at the center. The movement by students in Baltimore to interrupt the all too visible school-to-prison pipeline is a significant example here (see Alexander, 2012).

Baltimore is one of the poorest cities in the United States. It is highly segregated by race, and not only has extremely high rates of impoverishment and unemployment among minoritized communities, but also among the highest rates of incarceration of people of color in the nation. The city and state were faced with

predictable economic turmoil due to the fiscal crisis of the state in a time of capital flight and the racial specificities of capital's evacuation of its social responsibilities to the urban core (See also Mills, 1997). As very necessary social programs were being cut, money that would have gone to such programs was in essence being transferred to what is best thought of as the (in)justice system. In this case, a large amount of public money was to be spent on the construction of a new detention facility for "juvenile offenders." The unstated choice was "jail" or social and educational programs. And the choice increasingly seemed to be jail.

This meant that educational funding for the development of innovative and more culturally responsive school programs, teachers, community outreach, building maintenance—the entire range of things that make schooling an investment in poor youth in particular—were under even more threat than usual. In this example again, youth mobilization was a central driving force in acting against this neoliberal and racializing agenda (Farooq, 2012).

Student activists within minoritized communities in that city pressed forward with a campaign to block the construction of the youth detention facility. A key here is a curriculum project—the Algebra Project—that was created as an effort to equip marginalized poor youth of color with "academic" knowledge that is usually denied to them, especially high status mathematical knowledge such as algebra and similar subjects (Moses & Cobb, 2002). The Algebra Project has developed a national reputation for its hard work in pressing for responsive models of curriculum and teaching in a subject—mathematics—that has been a very real sorting device that actively marginalizes and segregates all too many youth of color. While the Project is controversial within some segments of oppressed communities, there can be no doubt about its fundamental commitment to providing a transformative education to youth of color (Moses & Cobb, 2002). The similarities between the goals of this approach and Antonio Gramsci's position that oppressed people must have both the right and the means to reappropriate elite knowledge are very visible (see Apple, 1996).

When public funding for the Algebra Project in which the students participated was threatened, the leaders of the project urged students to "advocate on their own behalf." This continued a vital tradition in which the Algebra Project itself had aggressively (and appropriately and creatively) pushed state lawmakers "to release about \$1 billion in court mandated education funding, engaging in civil disobedience, student strikes and street theater to drive home its message: 'No education, no life'" (Farooq, 2012: 5).

Beginning in 2010, the students engaged in a campaign to block the building of the detention center. They were all too familiar with the tragic and strikingly unequal rates of arrests and incarcerations within black and brown communities compared to dominant populations. They knew first-hand about the nature of police violence, about what happened in such juvenile "jails," and the implications of such rates of arrest and violence on their own and their community's and family's futures.

Using their mathematical skills and understanding that had been developed in the Project, they engaged in activist oriented research demonstrating that youth crime had actually dropped precipitously in Baltimore. Thus, these and other facts were on their side. Coalitions against the detention center were formed, including an alliance with community groups, with critical journalists, and with the Occupy

Baltimore movement. The proposed construction site was occupied. And even with dispersals and arrests, “daily civil disobedience and teach-ins persisted.” All of this generated a good deal of public attention and had the additional effect of undercutting the all too common and persistent racist stereotypes of youth of color as uncaring, irresponsible, unknowledgeable, and as uninvolved in their education. The coalition’s persistence paid off. The 2013 state budget did not include funding for yet another youth prison (Farooq, 2012: 5). But the activist identities developed by the students remained.

The implications of this example are clear. The campaign grew from the Algebra Project and its program of reconstituting knowledge, what it means to know, and who are seen as knowers. It then led to enhanced understandings of oppressive realities and misplaced budget priorities, to activist identities, to committed action, to alliance building, recursively back to even more committed action, and then to success. Like the previous example from Jeffco, it was students who took control of their own lives and their lived experiences, this time with an oppressive (in)justice system that incarcerated large numbers of the community’s youth.

Once again, among the most important actors were the students. Their mobilization and leadership was based not only on the larger concerns with the claims of neoliberalism. Rather the radical changes that the conservatives wanted to make that would limit the possibilities of serious and progressive engagement with important and often denied subject matter also drove the students to act. Clearly, then, the curriculum itself can be and is a primary focus of educational struggles, and is exactly what can be seen in the struggle by the youth of color involved in the Algebra Project in Baltimore when they employed that project and its knowledge to create alliances and to successfully stop the building of a new juvenile prison there. A form of knowledge that was usually seen as “useless” and simply the knowledge of elites was connected to the lived realities of youth in a manner that enabled them to become activists of their own lives (Apple, 2013).

## Hybrid Alliances and Agentic Possibilities

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have focused on the agency of groups of people—particularly students—who take on active roles in defending and extending thick democratic policies and practices. They seek to challenge the epistemological and political common-sense of dominant groups and exert leadership in the process of interrupting neoliberal and neoconservative agendas. Conflicts over social and cultural understandings played a major role in each of these examples.

These movements were constituted by largely progressive groups and basically dealt with people whose political positions were largely liberal to left in orientation. This kind of analysis opens up our sense of who the agents of social transformation are to a larger array of actors, in these cases students. The Baltimore example also places race inside and outside of school as a fundamental dynamic, something I have repeatedly stressed as a constitutive dynamic both nationally and internationally (Apple, 2013).

But such an analysis also has weaknesses. It too often ignores the agency of conservative groups and movements and it ignores the power of religious identities in the struggles over culture and meaning. I now want to turn to this issue and ask an increasingly significant set of questions. Is it possible to form alliances with *ideologically conservative* and often religious movements to also interrupt aspects of neoliberal and neoconservative agendas, policies, and practices? My focus here will be on religiously conservative groups.

In order to deal with some of the issues that are raised by these question, in this section I must be somewhat more personal. There are a number of reasons for this. First, these are not simply academic and theoretical questions for me. I am an actor in mobilizations around them. Second, because this involves personal political/educational praxis, where theory and action are merged in a dialectical relationship for me, my answers to these important question are contingent and contextual. I do not have any certainly about them. Because of this, this section of the paper is more suggestive both analytically and politically.

Give this, let me begin this section with an honest personal statement. I have been struggling for years with the question of what role religious understandings and commitments should play in public education and in the larger society—and especially in both limiting and enhancing progressive mobilizations. Part of this is perhaps due to my search for my own religious roots as a secular and politically progressive “public intellectual” (Apple, 2019). And part of it is connected to my quite strong ethical and educational disagreements with the increasingly influential role that what I have called “authoritarian populist” religious conservatives are playing in educational policy around privatization, educational finance, home schooling, curriculum politics, teacher certification, and a number of other areas (see Apple, 2006; Hall, 2017).

Yet at the same time as I worry about the effects of religious authoritarian populism, I also applaud and support more progressive religious groups that have served as a counter to some of the more conservative (and at times racist) religious mobilizations that have grown in influence over the past decades in the US and elsewhere. Thus, I remain hopeful that these groups and actions can serve as a corrective to the ways in which religious groups are often portrayed in the media and in the narratives of a large number of progressive critics and critical educators. Conservative evangelicals are primarily focused upon in these narratives, while much more socially and culturally critically oriented religious groups are less often included except perhaps in passing. I recognize that these narratives have an effect on how I try to deal with my contradictory feelings about the place of religious understandings and commitments in education in the larger society.

Of course, in saying this, there is no doubt in my mind that we must not ignore the fact that many conservative religious groups play a key role in the “hegemonic bloc” that supports much of the damaging neoliberal and neoconservative agenda in education and so much else. Indeed this is one of the reasons I have devoted a good deal of attention to them elsewhere (see Apple, 2006, 2014). However, in the United States and in many other nations, religious support for critical democracy,

for anti-racist, non-homophobic, and more robust thick participatory forms of public institutions including schools, and similar things have been essential to building and defending more progressive policies and in cementing alliances to defend them (Apple et al., 2018). Much of the motivation behind these actions is inspired by deeply religious convictions.

Let me again give a personal example. I am often asked to work in many countries where authoritarian tendencies have been institutionalized. This has meant that I am faced with a choice: Either remain largely publicly “neutral” or speak out against oppressive relations. My choice has almost always been to act in solidarity with marginalized groups and to speak out publicly in support of their demands, sometimes with results that are predictable. Interestingly, these are just as often profoundly transformative experiences in challenging my presuppositions about religion and other relations. Thus, when I was arrested in South Korea for speaking out against the military dictatorship in power at that time, a number of the people who were arrested with me were also deeply religious, guided by an understanding that “Jesus spent his life working for the poor and oppressed. I will commit myself to this myself no matter what the risks.” This is a powerful sentiment, one I believe needs to be supported (see Apple, 2013).

There are lessons to be learned here, both for me and for many people within the critical educational community who are suspicious of religion or who automatically assume that it is by its very nature deeply politically conservative. It raises clear questions about the tendency among some factions of the secular Left inside and outside of education to dismiss religious understandings. It raises strategic questions as well about whether religious and secular groups can find common ground, even when there are deep divisions among (and at times within) them.

In saying this, as I noted above I do not at all wish to ignore the growing power of ultra-conservative and repressive religious movements and ideologies in many nations such as Myanmar, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Israel/Palestine—and yes in parts of the United States. Indeed, I have written very critically about them in *Educating the “Right” Way* and elsewhere (see, e.g., Apple, 2006). However, I fear that many progressive activists and scholars who are struggling to build and defend more thickly democratic institutions and social relations may be pushing away a considerable number of people who are religiously motivated. This is a very real limitation of a number of the critical positions that the Left in education has taken over the years. Too often many advocates for radical egalitarian positions have been overly dismissive of religious motivations and understandings. This is more than a little unwise tactically and also forgets the history that a number of religious movements have played in the ongoing struggles for social justice in so many societies, especially but not only with racialized and minoritized oppressed groups (see, for example, West, 2002). Indeed, this act of historical amnesia can be a performance of “whiteness.” It is also more than a little odd in another way. One of the guiding figures in the development of critical education internationally was Paulo Freire, someone who himself was strongly influenced by liberation theology.

In countering this overly dismissive attitude, we need to think more subtly about how we should understand the complexities of religious movements and thereby open up other possibilities. Let me take the belief that the divide that separates authoritarian populist religious advocates and secular progressive groups is so wide that it is impossible to find common ground. To begin, rather than assuming that religious conservatism is based on a totally rightist sensibility about everything we may hold dear, it would be wiser to look at what I call the elements of “good sense” as well as bad sense in people’s anger about current policies inside and outside of education and how they are convinced to follow the leadership of more neoliberal and neoconservative groups (Hochschild, 2016). This is a wise position not only theoretically, but strategically as well. People are not “puppets.” They have real reasons for their worries—and it is not automatic that they move to the right rather than toward more progressive politics. It takes hard ideological work, what I have called a vast social/pedagogic project, for people to agree with rightist “solutions.” Discursive politics are crucial elements here, both in responding to religious sentiments, but also in other areas of social life (Apple, 2006).

But the fact that dominant groups have been successful in moving many people to the right by connecting to people’s partly accurate understandings of their daily lives, means that progressives must also do a much better job of making connections to the core meanings of their lives and to the real problems people experience (Hochschild, 2016; Apple, 2013). A politics based on better attempts to understand the realities of people’s lives has a much greater chance of having them listen more carefully to our arguments.

Do not misunderstand me. There is of course a very real danger here. People’s commonsense may already be articulated around racist nativist understandings, by unarticulated assumptions grounded in possessive individualism and selfishness rather than a concern for a more robust sense of the common good. Thus, while I agree that there is a definite need to listen carefully and to talk across our ideological differences, not only do *both* sides have to be willing to do this, but we must not do it in a manner that somehow legitimates things such as anti-immigrant racism and other profoundly racist positions,<sup>3</sup> educational visions of children as simply future workers, the attacks on women’s control of their bodies, an arrogance in assuming that “God only talks to me,” and similar ethically problematic positions. This will be difficult. Obviously we need to go into these dialogues with respect for real people’s concerns and a greater knowledge of the local. But we also need to realize that respect must come from both sides and that we will have to think very carefully about what compromises are worth making in order for the dialogue to go further and lead perhaps to joint understandings and joint actions.

This is something I’ve given a good deal of thought to and have tried to embody in personal and professional actions. For example, in books such as *Educating the*

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<sup>3</sup>There is a complex historical connection between conservative religious forms in the United States and racist understandings and positions. See for example Heyrman (1997), Kintz (1997), Noll (2002), and Goege (2015).



*“Right” Way* and *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2006, 2013), I have previously called for “hybrid alliances” between what are usually very different ideological and religious allegiances. A prime example in education in the United States was the case of Channel One, a for-profit television station that was broadcast in a very large number of public and private schools and that, thankfully, for many economic and political reasons is no longer in operation (see Apple, 2014).

Channel One provided 10 minutes of “news” accompanied by 2 minutes of well-designed commercials. Many schools agreed to have Channel One in their schools not only because it was slickly marketed as a “solution” to real school problems about making our students “more knowledgeable about current affairs,” but also because it gave the school equipment such as a satellite dish, TV monitors, and other things that can add up to many tens of thousands of dollars. The catch is that, as a captive audience, students were required to watch the commercials. Teachers and students were given no choice about this. Not to do this meant that Channel One would sever the contract and the equipment would be removed. This connected then and now to the growing concern about the increased uses of schools as sites of profit (Apple, 2014; Burch, 2021).

In response to this, I and others formed an alliance with conservative religious groups to remove Channel One from schools. For the conservative evangelicals, “children are created in God’s image” and it is “ungodly” for them to be bought and sold as commodities for profit in schools. For me and other progressives, we may not have agreed with the specific theological position taken by the conservative religious advocates, but we too were and continue to be deeply concerned about commodifying children as a captive audience for corporate profits. Thus, these two usually diametrically opposed ideological positions were unified around a specific educational project, stopping the selling of children for profit. This alliance enabled the removal of Channel One from a number of school districts. But it has also led to the reduction of stereotypes on both sides and to keeping open a space for further dialogue.

This focus on things that bind us together, not pull us apart, can also be seen outside the United States. A prime example can be found in Porto Alegre in Brazil where religiously inspired movements played a very large role in the growth of progressive mobilizations there—and of keeping them together. This was especially the case in education where critical democratic educational institutions, policies, and practices that drew on a rich combination of progressive religious understandings and equally progressive more secular educational theories and politics were combined. These gains are under threat currently with the growth in power of rightist movements, including very conservative and powerful evangelical movements that receive considerable amounts of funding from similar movements in the United States. But the defense of the continued existence of such critically democratic schools, curricula, and teaching practices still stands as a remarkable achievement (Apple et al., 2018).

Of course, the United States is not Brazil. But if too many progressives in the United States and elsewhere tend to automatically mistrust groups who find meaning in religious understandings, in the process this risks marginalizing religious



motivations and traditions that could underpin alliances over crucial elements of agreement. These alliances are visible in such growing grassroots populist movements surrounding the “Moral Monday” actions that have been stimulated by important religious leaders such as the Rev Dr William J. Barber and others. They are visible as well in the pro-immigrant sanctuary commitments advanced by multiple churches, mosques, synagogues, and other formal and informal religious institutions and meeting grounds found among multiple populations here. They are also visible in the growing pro-environmental worries among a number of evangelical movements. It is well worth considering whether “hybrid” alliances across our differences that advance specific progressive projects inside and outside of education can be built.

*But*, and it is an important but, in even considering this I again do not want to minimize my original worries. It remains very important to recognize that the continuing growth of “authoritarian populist” conservative religious movements who are actively defending existing and even more radical and at times anti-democratic policies may still make this difficult in education and other areas. These movements are among the fastest growing advocates for particular kinds of educational reform throughout the US and many other nations (see, e.g., Verma & Apple, 2021). Take as one example the growth of homeschooling, one in which millions of children are engaged. In some ways, the home schooling phenomenon is partly a reaction to the attention being given to the ways in which the “crisis in public schools” is portrayed in the media. Much of it is also part of a larger reaction to the perceived dominance of secular values in schools, to the feelings that conservative religious knowledge and ways of understanding the world are not given equal weight in the curriculum. Yet, just as importantly, while the homeschooling movement is varied, in all too many cases it functions as the creation of ideological “gated communities” in which the culture and body of the Other are seen as forms of pollution that must be avoided at all costs (Apple, 2006; see also Kintz, 1997). Struggles over culture, over identities, and over Whiteness and the feeling that one is part of the “new oppressed” are core parts of the emerging politics of education on the right and within the religious right in particular.

While we should want to be respectful of diversity, it is important to understand that in many parts of this movement, issues of Biblical authority intersect with long histories of racial fear, of the loss of “our” God-given roles as men and women, and of a government that actively takes away “liberty” (Apple, 2006, 1996; MacLean, 2017). It will not be easy to find dialogic space when faced with these kinds of positions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, there will be dangers as well as possibilities and any attempts to engage cooperatively with such groups should be approached with honesty and the maintenance of a deep commitment to justifiably held anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and social justice values about this. These are not things that should be sacrificed as we try to build a broader we.

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<sup>4</sup>There is a growing population of Black homeschoolers, however. This is a group with whom I have a good deal of sympathy. The lamentable conditions within which large numbers of minoritized students have to somehow survive in all too many schools are too painful to recount once again.

There are still fundamental differences between the larger agendas of the groups involved in these debates. Dialogue across ideological boundaries and a focus on the elements of good sense among people who disagree are necessary and can engender more respect and understanding. Therefore it should (very cautiously) be sought after. However, let us again be honest. As I noted above, such dialogue can give legitimacy to positions which we justifiably find homophobic, sexist, racist, and anti-immigrant. We need to constantly reflect on whether these dialogues, possible hybrid alliances, and the policies and practices that might evolve from them are leading in more critically democratic directions in the long term.

## Conclusion

As you know, like me, many people have consistently grounded their work in the belief that it is absolutely crucial to understand the social realities of schooling (see, e.g., Whitty, 2002). What is happening today makes these analyses even more significant. As I have shown, it is not neoliberalism and its attendant policy initiatives alone that are changing our commonsense about education. Indeed it is a major error to reduce our critical analyses of education to simply being a reflection of one set of tendencies within a dominant hegemonic bloc (Apple, 2006, 2014; Apple et al., 2018)).

In expanding our focus, I have taken insights about the role of curriculum conflicts and the creation of identities and alliances, and have focused on struggles over “culture,” over what counts as “official knowledge” in schools and over its uses not only inside the school but in assisting and generating mobilizations against dominant policies and practices. All this is grounded in a strong ethical/political position that we have an obligation to challenge these dominant policies and practices and that it is crucial to defend a robust education that is based on human flourishing.

But for those of us engaged in critical social and cultural research, one other question has stood behind each of these other issues. It is the central organizing question that gives meaning to these others. Indeed, it is the basic issue that guides any critical education and especially the critical sociology of education. Can schools change society? This is the fundamental question that has guided almost all of my books and much of the political and educational action many critical educators throughout the world. However, I do not think that we can fully deal with this question unless we connect it another one. Who are the actors individually and collectively who now and in the future will be agents of such substantive changes? Dealing honestly with what this means—and honestly facing the dilemmas and contradictions involved—is fundamental to a more robust understanding of critical educational theory, research, policy, and practice.

The three examples I gave in this chapter signify the continuing search to answer the first of these questions in the affirmative. As I argue in *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013), schools are key parts of society, not something that stand outside of it. Struggling over “legitimate” culture, over educators’ labor processes,

over privatization, over identities, and so much more *is* struggling over society. Anything less risks accepting cynicism and despair.

But, in taking this position, we should not be “romantic.” Indeed, as Geoff Whitty warned us early on, we need to recognize that there are persistent dangers of what he called the “romantic possibilitarian” tendencies of the Left (Whitty, 1974). Instead, in Raymond Williams’ wise words, our “journey of hope” (Williams, 1989) must be grounded in our own continual development of serious knowledge of the concrete ways in which our individual and collective attempts to build a more socially critical and responsive education always occurs in a social and cultural field whose traditions and realities offer both limits and possibilities (See Wright, 2010, 2019). Continuing on this journey requires that we ask and answer the questions surrounding the politics of knowledge inside and outside of education.

Just importantly as I have stressed throughout this chapter we must ask and answer the question of who are the agents of transformation—again individually and collectively—in these politics. As I have shown here, among these agents nationally and internationally are students. But is it sufficient to simply add them to a list of progressive actors? Are there complex and contradictory possibilities involved in tactically “temporary” hybrid alliances as well? This too has crucial implications for our collective mobilizations against dominant policies and practices in education and the larger society.

Let me end this chapter with a final set of crucial questions, many of which are raised in *The Struggle for Democracy in Education: Lessons From Social Realities* (See Apple et al., 2018). Each of the examples I have discussed here has led to a victory. Such victories should of course be celebrated. But will they last? Will the activist identities that have been formed out of these conflicts be maintained? Will the hybrid alliances that cut across what are substantial ideological and religious differences open a space for the further joint actions that both challenge dominant agendas and policies? Can they also lead to shifts toward more progressive understandings on the part of more conservative ideological movements that partially weaken their previous ideological affiliations?

Only long-term research and long-term socially committed actions can answer these questions. There’s work to be done.

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