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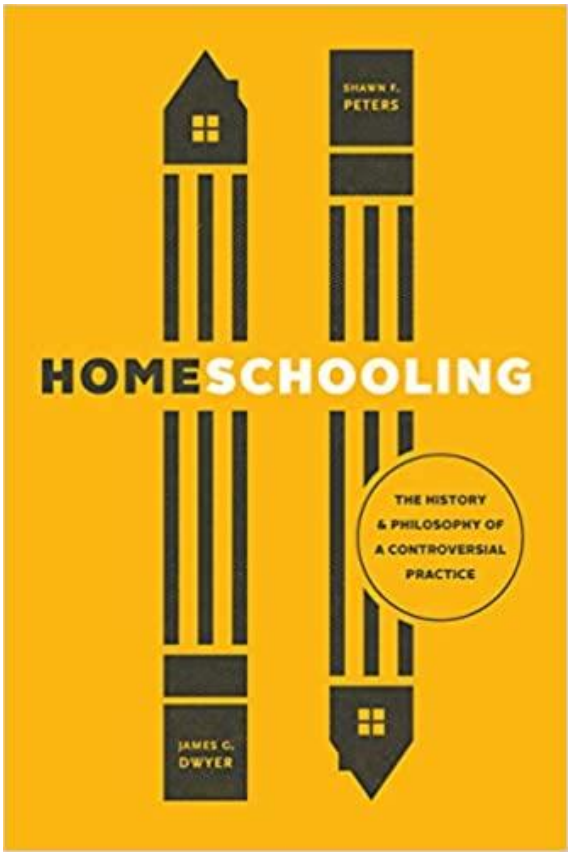
Homeschooling, Democracy, and Regulation: An Essay Review of *Homeschooling*

Prologue

The essay review that follows this prologue was written before the COVID-19 crisis emerged with such devastating consequences in the United States and many other nations. This crisis has transformed the lives and realities of huge numbers of people. Such pandemics are in some ways equalizers. Illness and death are faced by people across the economic spectrum. But let us also remember that these realities are still strikingly unequal. Minoritized and poor people are much more apt to suffer the worst consequences of the disease, not only in health care, but in all aspects of their lives. People living in refugee camps, slums, poor rural and urban communities, war zones, and so many other places face the pandemic under very different conditions than those who are more affluent and more secure. At the same time, large numbers of working class, poor, and undocumented people cannot "shelter at home" as protection against the virus when they are living paycheck to paycheck. Yet so many of these same jobs offer no other forms of physical protection. Nor do they offer health insurance. The choice is to work or to not eat.



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In response to the health crisis and the ensuing crises in other aspects of our societies, crucial institutions have been closed. Among the most important are schools, colleges, and universities both private and public. But the closure of these institutions has carried with it a continued set of social and educational responsibilities that have not disappeared, including teaching what is considered important content, providing meals for large numbers of students, responding honestly and with care to the varied needs of students with disabilities, and so much more. And here too, existing inequalities are reproduced, as well as new ones being produced.

One of the areas where these tensions and inequalities are visible is in the topic of the essay you are about to read—homeschooling. With the closure of schools, a hybrid form of education is being developed, often in very uncertain and tentative ways. Many of the results are not known yet. It would be unfair to the authors of the book that I examine in the essay that follows this prologue to hold the authors accountable for a situation with which they did not envision. Nor would it be fair to all of the homeschooling community(ies) to judge them in relationship to the crisis we are currently experiencing. In the rest of this prologue, then, let me raise some issues that are not dealt with in the body of the essay, but that can have very real and perhaps long-lasting effects on homeschooling and on the larger body of schooling in general.

1) The hybrid forms of homeschooling (basically a variant of distance education in which the school system and its curriculum enters the home in a more or less organized manner) that are being developed and put into use now can change the political economy of education. Large corporate publishers and media conglomerates are already involved in producing material for homeschoolers and distance education. With nearly all educational material now being sent electronically into the homes of all children (or at least those children who have computers and internet connections), the market opportunities for private publishers to commodify and sell a prepackaged curriculum will multiply in extraordinary ways. This can have contradictory effects. It opens the home and thus the entire educational process even more as a center of profitability. It can deskill teachers, as more and more of the curriculum is commodified and not subject to more personal transformations by teachers. On the other hand, it can create opportunities for teachers to share material electronically with each other and to tell their stories of success and spread them across various media. Many teachers are already doing this. But let us not romanticize these possibilities. Commodification and profit are already powerful dynamics in education and it would be wise to think more seriously about the implications of this now.

2) Another hidden effect, but this one more positive, is the realization on the part of very large numbers of parents of the crucial roles that teachers actually play and how the intellectual and caring labor they are called upon to do deserves even more respect and support. In a time when conservative and neoliberal policies that are deeply disrespectful of teachers and their organized representative bodies dominate a good deal of educational policies, this may enable a greater sense of the importance of providing teachers with the financial and emotional support that is required to do their jobs. This could bring about a renewal of significant interest and appeal in becoming a teacher among new generations.

3) On the other hand, the commodification of curricula and the standardization of teaching that may occur through the hybrid educational forms that are being sent to homes now, may have the opposite effect. As home education of this type gets regularized, teaching can be become more anonymized as something that can be increasingly impersonal and given over to machines. It is less apt to deal with individual students' needs and the ways in which teaching as an intensely personal set of relationships with the children who are present with you every day become

slowly transformed into something that is even more routinized.

4) As I have argued elsewhere and as the book you will read about in the essay review recognizes, homeschooling is quite a controversial practice. There are major concerns about its teaching quality, about what it actually teaches, about accountability and what counts as evidence of good practice, about its commitment to a society with a robust diversity, and many other concerns. The COVID-19 crisis has forced school systems to rapidly decenter education from the school to the home. This may make homeschooling seem more acceptable, without parents and community members being aware of the range of concerns that have been raised. (Oddly enough, this actually makes Peters and Dwyer's book Homeschooling *even more worthwhile reading, if the caveats and worries about its arguments that I raise in my essay are also taken seriously.)*

5) The inequalities that are now being produced by the economic, employment, housing, and health structures and resources that dominate U.S. society are becoming more than a little visible in the roll-out of education in the home due to the crisis. This has not gone unnoticed in discussion by educators, communities, parents, and students. Taking this seriously is of course absolutely essential. However, there are other differences and inequalities that will be produced that should be of concern to us. Most schools are part of the public sphere. Their task is not only to teach content, but to embody the norms of a larger social community that (at least rhetorically) is respectful of diversity, is based on critical citizenship, and interrupts gender, class, and race inequalities, and this list has thankfully been extended by the movements throughout society for thicker forms of redistribution, recognition, and representation. With the possible normalization and acceptance of the movement of education from the school to the home, we may lose many of these more democratic goals. Once again, given the growth of public racisms, of hate crimes, of anti-Muslim feeling and policies, of antisemitism, of homophobic and patriarchal sentiments, we should be very cautious in normalizing forms of education that may not be committed to thicker forms of democracy.

6) It is not only political issues that need to be dealt with here. There are also epistemological concerns about what knowledge and ways of knowing are to be considered "important." We already know that in many schools attended by poor and minoritized children, the emphasis on test preparation squeezes out those subjects that are not easily tested or not seen as "economically important." The economic, cultural, and social capital of more affluent parents compensates for the increasing de-emphasis on these subjects through the family's ability to add an entire range of out-of-school and after-school experiences. We need to ask if one of the hidden effects of the hybrid home-based distance models that are being employed to deal with school closings will be to exacerbate the lack of attention to those subjects that are already becoming minimized or even lost. This could make it harder once schools "return to normal" to argue for a more central place of these subjects, especially given the economic arguments that will become more salient as we try to recover economically.

There are many more points I could make here. But I hope that these comments are useful in situating the issues in a context that has radically changed the educational and larger social/economic landscape. These additional issues will not be easy to deal with. But I don't want them to cause us to ignore the strengths and limits of an interesting book that itself was crafted before the closing of entire school system and the shift to a particular form of schooling in the home. With this is mind, let's now turn to the essay review itself.

Homeschooling and the Conflicts Over Democracy

It is not an overstatement to say that public schooling is under threat. The economic hollowing out of rural communities has led to a large number of school closures. Capital flight and the increasing pressure to reduce corporate taxes has created a severe fiscal crisis in many urban and suburban school districts as well. The results of the persistent and vocal criticisms of teachers and teacher unions are still being felt, even when there have been very real successes of the protests against these attacks in a number of states. School systems throughout the country are replacing veteran teachers with less broadly prepared Teach for America candidates. The very real issues surrounding racial injustices are ever more visible. And at the same time, the ideological battles over "controversial" content have not lessened and the conflicts involving many key topics have continued to intensify. All of this is occurring when the very idea of the "public" and of public commitments and responsibilities in education and the larger society are being challenged.

In a series of books, I have critically examined the role that social movements and their underlying ideological commitments and assumptions have played in the transformation of educational policies and practices. Much of my attention has focused on what I have called "conservative modernization"—the tense, and often tactical, alliance among neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and a particular fraction of the professional and managerial new middle class that has had powerful effects on so many aspects of our society (Apple, 1996, 2006a, 2014). I have also directed considerable attention to whether more critically democratic educational policies and practices can be built and defended during a time of such resurgent conservative tendencies (Apple, 2013; Apple & Beane, 2007; Apple, Gandin, Liu, Meshulam & Schirmer, 2018).

The more conservative movements have had major effects on educational policies concerning privatization and "choice," educational funding (or the lack of it), teacher education, what counts as important curricular knowledge, testing, and so much more. But they can be seen in less visible ways, in alterations to our basic underlying commonsense understandings of our society as well. One of the most significant ideological transformations that have occurred in the last decades is the transformation of the meaning of democracy from "thick" to "thin." Rather than democracy being seen as a collective and fully social and participatory form, it is slowly being transformed into simply an issue of individual choice.

This struggle over the meaning of democracy has a very long history in the United States (see, e.g., Foner, 1998). As Raymond Williams reminded us, there are crucial concepts that emerge from and help organize our daily lives and provide us with meanings that help us make sense of these lives. These "key words" don't stand alone, but are part of an *emotional economy*. They are connected to and justify an entire array of institutions, actions, values, dispositions, and social interactions (Williams, 2014). Thus, thinking about democracy as simply a matter of individual choice is not simply a change in meanings. It is—profoundly—a radical shift in an entire assemblage of meanings and actions. The act of "desocializing" democracy, of reducing it to "possessive individualism" (Bromley, 2019; Cunningham, 2019), has effects at all levels, including the creation of what might be called "historical amnesia," in which the history of the contested character of democracy is forgotten and a neoliberal version of unbridled individual choice is naturalized as the only "true and right" one.

A prime example in education of the tendencies, complexities, and contradictions of this version of democracy is, of course, voucher and neo-voucher plans. But another that shares a number of these characteristics is

homeschooling. If you think that homeschooling is simply a passing fad or a small sidelight to the real story of U.S. schooling, think again. It is one of the fastest growing movements in educational "reform." This makes the book written by Shawn Peters and James Dwyer, *Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice*, a valuable addition to the literature. While it has both strengths and weaknesses, it still comes at exactly the right time.

Let me say something personal here. I have specifically focused on homeschooling in *Educating the "Right" Way* (Apple, 2006a) and elsewhere, and have urged educators and researchers to pay considerably more attention to it. I have been critical of major parts of this movement and especially of a number of its more conservative and, at times, authoritarian and patriarchal tendencies.

However, I want to be very cautious here. We need to resist the impulse to stereotype homeschoolers. As Peters and Dwyer also recognize, it is a very diverse group: "unschoolers" who seek "freedom" for their children to explore; parents who want a greater focus on environmental issues; parents of children with disabilities who find that schools are not responsive enough; parents of color who seek a socially and culturally relevant educational experience for their children; and conservative religious parents who want to create something like a gated community to "protect" their children from the secular world and its "pollution." And the list could be expanded. But that being said, the majority of homeschoolers tend to be in that more conservative last group I mentioned.

As the parent of a child of color myself, a child who was in many ways pushed out of school and marginalized as "the other" in white-dominated schools, I know the emotional, social, and financial labor that this situation requires. There are very real reasons for the worries, distrust, and anger that arise within minoritized communities when they deal with the all-too- often unresponsive nature of too many of our schools (Hill, 2018). Thus, I have a good deal of sympathy for parents of color who actively seek to create educational forms and experiences that counteract this (Anderson, 2018). But….to be honest, in the long run I do not think that homeschooling provides a sufficient response to what is needed to transform our schools, not "only" for communities of color but for the wider range of communities as well (Apple, 2006b).

In saying this, however, our response should not be to ignore homeschooling or its continued growth, since as I noted earlier, the increase in its numbers now includes millions of children both in the US and elsewhere.

What is happening in England provides a useful example. A recent government report indicated that in the year 2018/2019, the numbers of homeschooled children there had gone up by 13%, from 52,000 to 60,000. The raw numbers do not seem impressive compared to that of the United States. But in 2015/2016, the number of children registered as being homeschooled in England was 37,000. The word *registered* is important as well here. "Because there is currently no requirement for parents to register with local authorities if they elect to home-school their child, the report notes that the official figure is likely to be lower than the actual total" (Weale, 2020, p. 1). Indeed, my own experience in England both as a faculty member and working with social and educational activists there had led me to believe that this statement is itself probably an understatement.

Homeschooling is not only growing in places such as the US and England, but in a number of other nations. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the countries that have witnessed rapid growth over the last two decades is China. Even though homeschooling is not officially legal in China, once again parents there who homeschool their children are not required to register with the authorities. However, the

latest estimates are that approximately 25,000 children are being homeschooled. The largest increase has been Confucian home education, "which emphasizes the transmission of Confucian studies and Chinese traditional culture" (Sheng, 2019, p. 712). In this case, home education has been seen as a part of social-class differentiation for middle-class parents, as a form of "distinction" that sets themselves and their children apart from others (Sheng, 2019, p. 728. See also Bourdieu, 1984).

The problem of getting accurate numbers of homeschooled children is certainly true in the US as well. We do know that the count is in the millions. Like many others, Peters and Dwyer's data on the numbers of children who are being homeschooled (around 2 million) probably under-estimates the actual reality. This is partly because many states not only have little oversight of homeschooling, but it is highly probable that state authorities also have less than perfect understandings of the student population in various forms of homeschooling. The reality of partial homeschooling provides one example. As previous research has documented, a number of school districts throughout the nation have made what are in essence financial bargains with homeschooling parents. The children are kept on the official school rolls, even though they may only be taking one course or only engaging in organized athletic activity. This bargain enables schools to legally keep state financial aid, funds that are at times informally shared with parents. There are also the numbers of children whose parents refuse to inform state authorities that they are indeed homeschooling. Other examples abound.

But no matter what the exact numbers are, the history and the political, ethical, and educational arguments that Peters and Dwyer give us in *Homeschooling* remain more than a little useful. In many ways, the book stakes out a middle ground between advocates and those who worry about the lack of accountability of home education. As the authors state, "the task of the book is to shed new light by combining the historian's nuanced observation with the philosopher's normative analysis" (p. 3).

To accomplish this dual task, the book is divided into two sections. The first is historical, while the second is more conceptual and technically philosophical. The two emphases do not connect quite as much as they might, but both constitute useful contributions in different ways.

The historical section is clearly written and reminds us that homeschooling is not new. Indeed, it was basically the way schooling was carried on in the early years of the nation before public institutions of formal education were established. While this more general history is helpful, much of the historical material of the book directs our attention to the legal history of homeschooling. I would definitely have liked a good deal more social and political analysis and will point to some areas in need of this shortly, but what the book gives us is still certainly worth reading.

The attention given to legal history is in keeping with the focus of the book's second section. Here, the logical and ethical assumptions that underpin homeschooling are critically examined for their consistency, coherence, and legality. The aim is not to challenge most forms of home education, but to raise questions that both proponents and opponents need to consider if their arguments are to rise above the more usual rhetorical level. A word of caution is useful here. For those readers who are less familiar with the analytic traditions in legal theory and philosophy of education, it may take some time to feel totally comfortable with the analysis. But I would urge you to be patient. It is thoughtful, and filled with arguments that should make both proponents and opponents of homeschooling be more cautious about the assumptions that underlie their arguments.

Homeschooling ends with a series of recommendations. Among the most important

are those that argue for increased state accountability and assessment of homeschooling and more mechanisms both for financial support for homeschooling and for homeschoolers to have more options in how such assessment should go on. In the authors' words, the aim is to advocate for a "carrot and stick approach to regulation" (p. 227). While I don't always agree with these recommendations, they are still worth debating.

Thinking About Silences

While I am generally positive about *Homeschooling*, there are a number of areas where the authors fall short. This requires that I raise some questions about what the book's focus is and what are its silences.

As I noted above, the book argues the case for some substantive accountability and regulation requirements of homeschooling and details the ethical and social foundations for such requirements. Many of these seem sensible in general, although their specifics sometimes seem a bit naïve given the power relations and ideological commitments underlying parts of the homeschooling communities. Furthermore, at times, the suggestions for regulatory requirements are rather odd. For example, the authors suggest that one of the ways in which one might judge the quality of homeschooling could be organized around and based on IQ tests for homeschooled children. This acts as something like a "value-added" criterion and would supposedly allow us to evaluate the basic quality of the homeschool experience. Given the history of IQ as a measure and the deeply flawed ways in which it has been applied to social policy, serious questions would have to be raised about any attempt to reintroduce it as a form of evidence.

Though usually thoughtful analytically, the recommendations can be questioned in another way as well. By and large, they are often grounded too much in a rather unrealistic and overly romantic understanding of the role of the state *in practice* in overseeing "progress." Intentions don't always explain functions. One doesn't need to draw on Foucault's analysis of the state to be cautious of the ways in which the rationalizing ethos of state discourse and programs can and often does function to create and cement in place a system that has perverse effects. Indeed, well before the current over-emphasis on Foucault in critical educational analyses, more structural investigations made these worries very clear (see, e.g., Apple, 1979/2019). Such unquestioned faith in the supposedly rational state ignores the fact that the state is just as often *not* a neutral arbiter, but is riven with raced, classed, and gendered interests. Indeed, issues of race and the state's role are and should be central to any analysis of state functions. This is not adequately dealt with throughout the authors' more programmatic suggestions. (See Rothstein, 2017; Glotzer, 2020). Because of this, even though I am not necessarily anti-statist in general, a bit more caution in the recommendations is again called for.

The lack of a sufficient focus on race surfaces again in the historical section of the book as well. The crucial place of race now and in the past as a truly constitutive part of decisions to homeschool is not dealt with in the detail that it deserves in *Homeschooling*. Yet, the issue of "choice" and especially some of its economic and legal justifications historically have connections to the complicated politics of race in education and large-scale social programs. Indeed, public choice theory itself has part of its roots in the politics of whiteness and the resistance to school integration (see, e.g., MacLean, 2017; see also Mills, 1997).[1] It

[1] We shouldn't assume that there is a necessary divide between economic understandings and identities and the supposedly more ethically driven commitments of religious sensibilities that

is actually very important to understand, since some of the grounding for homeschooling has very similar roots in white parents' responses to court-ordered desegregation programs and their movement to establish private alternatives to avoid integration as much as possible. This is especially the case for some of the conservative groups who have actively supported homeschooling at its outset.

What actually counts as homeschooling historically and currently is rather too limited in the book as well—and here again race and class and differential power relations enter in. More could have been said about the ways in which the hidden education of enslaved and oppressed populations kept their traditions alive when formal schooling was either forbidden or rightly seen as a part of a process of pacification. Pointing to such things such as the anarchist and socialist formal and informal schools that were founded as part of the diverse "counter-hegemonic" traditions of schooling in the US (see, e.g., Teitelbaum, 1995) and of the informal teaching that went on in homes to keep political and cultural traditions alive and vibrant in a society that sought to homogenize what it meant to be "American" and "a good citizen" would have been useful as well. Of course, no book can cover everything. But it is important to recognize that there are and continue to be multiple forms of education that are carried out in homes and communities that are vital parts of critical understandings of this society. By not at least pointing to this in Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other communities, the authors missed an opportunity to make the invisible more visible.

There is one final absence that I want to note. *Homeschooling* is less substantive and rigorous than it might have been about issues of curriculum. This is not a minor point. It is clear that questions of meaning and identity, questions that are often the foundation of one's participation in social movements in education and the larger society are fundamental to the growth of such practices as homeschooling (Apple et al., 2018; Binder, 2002). Very conservative views on evolution, sexuality, and the "god given" nature of gender relations, the central place of irredentist beliefs about biblical knowledge, the deep-seated concern with the growth of secularity, and so much more are key aspects of the lives of a large group of homeschoolers. These deserve considerably more attention (Kintz, 1997).

The nature of the conservative positions do appear in the second section of the book in the analytic discussions of how one might deal procedurally with the commitments and assumptions found in some parts of the homeschooling movement. But the actual curricular implications and what these might mean to an increasingly diverse society and to the social goal of enhancing a thicker democracy are not as rigorously treated as they could be.

Conclusion

Don't misinterpret my points here about the state, race, curriculum, and areas that might have been included to strengthen the book's analysis. While my worries about the state might cause us to urge some caution and to think more rigorously about whether the state in general can be the neutral democratic arbiter that the authors seem to call for, I too agree that there needs to be serious public accountability and regulation of educational choice plans, privatization initiatives, and homeschooling. But naturalizing the existing state, and not critically examining how the

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underpin a large portion of homeschooling. Historically, the development of the former was often done in close relationship with the latter. As Gloege (2015) has documented, conservative evangelicalism and modern business grew symbiotically. Key elements of public choice theory grow out of this soil as well and can meet the expressed needs of these seemingly diverse groups.

state itself must be made more thickly democratic and participatory, is not sufficient. We need a more structural analysis of the state and of the classed, raced, gendered/sexed nature of its underlying functions and commitments. It is exactly here that Erik Olin Wright's exceptional work on how we might evaluate social reforms and their more thickly democratic and participatory potential in his book *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Wright, 2010), is so valuable. I urge readers of this essay to look at it.

With these issues in mind, I have raised a number of questions about presences and absences in what is otherwise a well-balanced and carefully argued volume. My criticisms and suggestions of Peters and Dwyer's efforts are aimed at continuing a dialogue over the nature of formal schooling and the controversial place of homeschooling in our societies. I do not assume that that there is necessarily general agreement either to my position or that offered by Peters and Dwyer, or within the diverse communities who engage in home education. But that's the point. It is a *contested* space. This means that we should welcome the debates over it. *Homeschooling* contributes in a number of interesting ways to these ongoing debates, and for this it should be welcomed.

Indeed, some of its contributions should again be noted. It is not rhetorical, a welcome change from some of the heated rhetoric coming from both sides, but perhaps especially from some of the more conservative ideological proponents of homeschooling such as the Home School Defense Association and similar groups. For this very reason, Peters and Dwyer's opinion, one with which I agree, that the very conservative and ideologically driven Home School Legal Defense Association can be a very real obstruction to sensible discussions of a range of justifiable worries about homeschooling seems quite wise.

Furthermore, I also agree with their cogent discussion of and worries about the ways in which conservative religious movements associated with homeschooling reproduce patriarchal forms and identities. As the book says, "the current regime of nonoversight inflicts particular harm on girls…" (p. 228; see also Apple, 2006b). While we need to be respectful of people's religious beliefs, issues of patriarchal authority and the reproduction of gendered inequalities are and should be deeply troubling.

Also worth noting is the book's honest and at times critical analysis of the some of the research conducted by the the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI). Empirical research is certainly not to be scoffed at or ignored. But it is appropriate to ask if some of the often glowing results of the research on homeschooling meet the rigorous criteria that we would expect for such an important policy question.

Finally, even though the authors' social concerns about the nature of democracy and fairness may not be as "thick" and socially critical as I might like, there can be no doubt about their commitment to aspects of what might be called "deliberative democracy" and to enabling multiple voices to be heard. In a time of vitriol and disrespect at a national level and in a whole array of state legislatures, they deserve our thanks for this. In some ways, their arguments keep open the possibility of taking that commitment to collective dialogue to a more critical level, one that brings to the surface the larger implications of our decisions.

In my mind taking that next step is crucial. Those more critical concerns and the delicate balance they require are echoed by Lubienski and Brewer (2015) in their own critical analysis of some of the larger social assumptions that underpin homeschooling. They remind us of what is at stake when we allow democracy to be redefined as self-interested "choice."

> [The] increase in homeschooling [is] a manifestation of the larger movement to privatize aspects of our social lives that have traditionally crossed into the

> public sphere and not remain solely within the private individual. …While claims about parental rights and duties to shape a child's educational experiences are valid, when considering the education and socialization of future generations, the public has a legitimate interest in the process. As is such, the elevation of the individual over the collective good in this process may undermine the public's right and responsibility to ensure that future generations are prepared for participation in a pluralistic democracy. Juxtaposed to this process lies an ascendant neo-liberal ideology that operates from and within a distain for the public sphere as it seeks to privatize and commoditize what has been traditionally beneficial to all, not merely individuals. (pp. 144-145)

This quotation reminds us of something that needs to be constantly kept in mind. Our decisions about educational policies and practices are statements about the ethics and politics of the current and future society in which we live. They are statements not only about that society, but also about our own and our children's individual and collective responsibilities in and to that society. Discussions about homeschooling thus are not and cannot be simply about "choice." On that Peters, Dwyer, Lubienski, and Brewer—and Michael W. Apple—can agree.

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