



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

March 25, 2013

Volume 17 Number 2

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

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Being Clear and Speaking Back:
An Essay review of *Public Education Under Siege*

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Katz, Michael B. & Rose, Mike (Eds.) (2013) *Public Education Under Siege*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

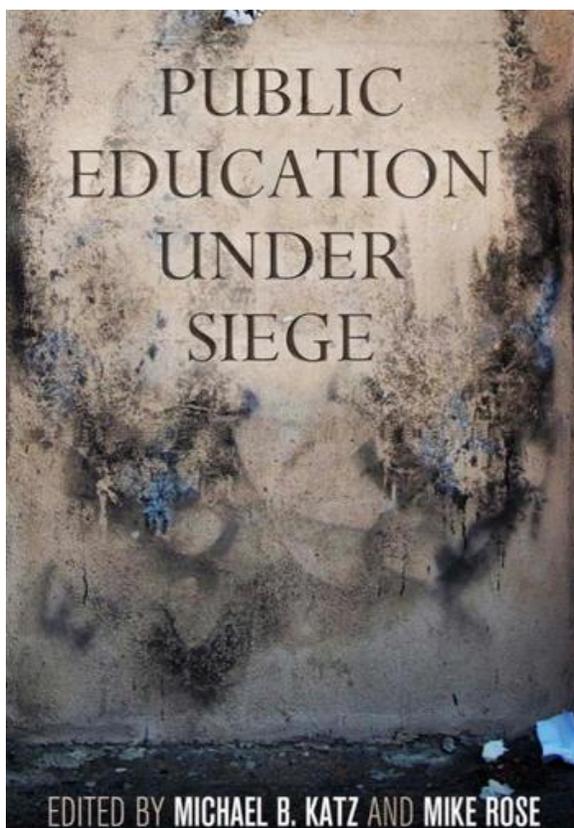
Pp. 256 ISBN 978-0-8122-4527-1

Citation: Apple, Michael W. (2014 March 25) Being Clear and Speaking Back: An Essay review of *Public Education Under Siege*. *Education Review*, 17(2). Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/essays/v17n2.pdf>

Let me begin this essay by saying that *Public Education Under Siege* is an important book for a number of reasons, including not only its content but its style. Its title speaks to the agenda that Michael B. Katz and Mike Rose and the authors of the multiple chapters

included in the book are deeply committed to — a defense of the very idea of the public in general and of the public school in particular, countering the attacks on teachers and their collective organizations, opposing the pathologization of poor students and students

of color and of the communities from which they come, and challenging the assemblage of reforms now dominating the educational landscape.



The list of topics is extensive: school choice, legislation such as No Child Left Behind, prevailing methods of school finance, testing, teacher unions, conservative foundations, race and the achievement gap, the effects of the criminalization of youth of color, community involvement and parental participation, grassroots movements, the history of school reform, and more democratic and responsive reforms than those that now dominate the educational agenda.

The book, hence, is dealing with a complex assemblage of issues. But we are facing a very complex set of what are often quite radical

attacks on the means and ends of public schools, on the people who work in them, and on the students and communities who depend the most on a robust public sphere and on the institutions within it.

Elsewhere I have engaged in a more detailed critical analysis of the forces that stand behind these transformations. In *Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (Apple 2006; see also Apple 2014), I demonstrate that we are confronting a new alliance, what in more political and conceptual terms might be called a new hegemonic bloc, that is in leadership in educational “reform” and the reform of all things social. This alliance is a complex and at times unstable formation of various groups that has created an umbrella that is best thought of as *conservative modernization*. It is composed of: neoliberals who believe that private is necessarily good and public is necessarily bad; neoconservatives who want to return to a romantic vision of a past and a restoration of a (supposedly) common culture; authoritarian populists who believe that only by bringing conservative religious principles and beliefs to the center of all of our institutions can “America be saved”; and a particular fraction of the professional and managerial new middle class who are deeply committed to technical solutions, managerialism, and audit cultures.¹ Unfortunately, many of these assumptions are also found within some elements of the Democratic as well as Republican parties.

¹ For an analysis of the networks that connect many of these tendencies together internationally, see Ball (2012).

When all of these elements are sutured together, the effects are powerfully present. We can see this in the kinds of legislation being pushed through state legislatures with more than a little help by ALEC and similar rightist organizations. It can be seen in the increasing view of schools as sites of profit generation. It is visible in the reduction of important knowledge into only that which is easily testable, linked to what is viewed by powerful groups as economically useful, and the mandating of performance pay for teachers based on these reductive forms of accountability. And it is all too present in the denial of evolution and climate change, and in the rapid growth of religiously-based home schooling not only here in the United States but in other nations as well.

There are of course very real fissures in this alliance. Witness for example the conflict over the common core, where Tea Party sympathizers in many states have called for the rejection of the common core, while at the same time business groups have supported it. Yet, even with these internal conflicts, conservative modernization maintains enough coherence to move education policy and practice in quite specific directions, ones that seem to be leading to more not less inequality.

While *Public Education Under Siege* doesn't offer a complete or analytically coherent treatment of the movements and networks behind the attacks on public schools, this doesn't detract at all from the overall value of the book. After all, that's not its aim. And what it gives us is still significant. It is worthwhile quoting directly from Katz and Rose's concluding chapter to get a clearer sense of where the

book stands on these dominant movements and policies.



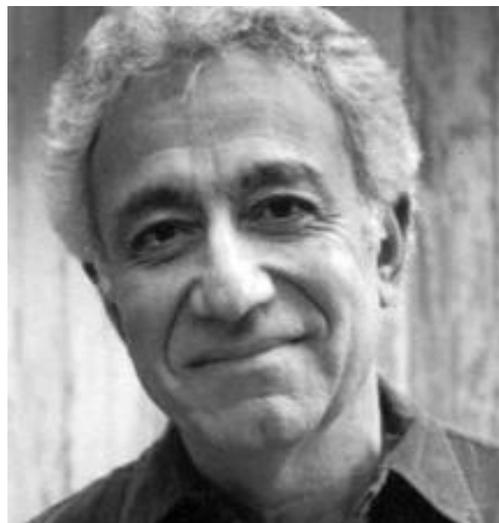
Michael B. Katz

“Anyone who challenges the core elements of the mainstream consensus risks branding as a self-interested or naïve guardian of the existing state of affairs, as the authors in this volume point out. But the matter is not so simple... Along with mainstream reformers, dissenters from the dominant template for reform share a belief that all children are capable of learning and a strong dissatisfaction with the ways things stand in education. They worry, however, about the directions in which mainstream reform wants to push public education. They show that most of the testing regimes advocated by mainstream reformers are unreliable. They point out that tests, by themselves do not measure

teacher quality. They value teaching experience far more than mainstream reformers, and they summon examples of good teaching and exciting classrooms where students learn unencumbered by worries over high stakes tests. They believe, too, in the limits of markets as models for educational policy and practice and believe that market models will result in new forms of educational inequality. Although they agree that the poverty of students should not provide an excuse for poor educational outcomes, they consider it disingenuous and misleading to evaluate teachers without taking into account the obstacles that they face and the factors that inhibit the performance of their students, and they particularly object to the exclusion of reforms such as job creation, housing, and health care from the mainstream reform agenda.” (pp. 223-224)

For the contributors to the volume, our inability to deal powerfully and rigorously with the realities of *poverty* prevents us from realizing the kinds of concerted efforts and movements that would be necessary to confront the “problem” of American education (p. 224). In order to do that, the concluding chapter by Katz and Rose thoughtfully argues for a “new narrative” of education and for a larger vision of the ends and means of an education more deeply committed to social justice. An education worthy of its name must restore a sense of

connectedness, of civic responsibility and civic consciousness, one that does not reduce schooling to simply a reflection of the “needs of the economy.” It should go without saying that these are means and ends with which I strongly agree (see, e.g., Apple and Beane 2007).



Mike Rose

Many of the chapters included in the book first appeared in a special issue of *Dissent*. That publication is one of my favorite journals for cogent social criticism written for a somewhat more general progressive audience. While for many years *Dissent* has consistently offered important essays on many of the issues that progressives face, education — especially K-12 education — has not been a prime focus of its attention. Perhaps the best popular journal that does this is one that many readers of this essay review may be familiar with-- *Rethinking Schools*. (See <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/index.shtml>)

However, another magazine that is aimed at the general progressive political audience has now taken up the cause of more democratic

and socially committed education reform. This is *The Progressive*. Under its new editor, Ruth Coniff, through its recently created website “Public School \$hakedown,” it too has established itself as an important center for criticisms of dominant school reforms and for the building of alternatives. This too is an important intervention. (See <http://publicschoolshakedown.org/>)

I am more than a little pleased to see that *Dissent* has joined the growing list of journals that have now taken the politics, policies, practices, and effects of education reform as crucial issues for public debate. I would urge that these journals begin to communicate with each other to form an alliance among themselves or at least more consciously share with each other what they are doing as part of a more collective movement within the critical media to interrupt what is currently taken as commonsense in education reform.

But let us return to the book itself. *Public Education Under Siege* is not only important for what it represents in terms of the issues politically-oriented journals take up. Nor is it only significant for what it says. It is also important to note *how* it says it. Yes, the book’s analyses of what are the limits and dangers of our current fascination with markets, testing, blaming and shaming teachers, anti-union sentiment, and similar things are powerfully stated. But just as importantly in terms of the role of “public intellectual” efforts, they are refreshingly free of the kinds of overly academic artifice that is all too common in such critical work. Do not misunderstand me. Anyone who has read my work over the years surely knows that I am

not opposed to serious and substantive theoretical and empirical analyses. Indeed, it should be evident that the world in which we live is very complicated and new critical theories and vocabularies must constantly be built and rebuilt to take account of the transformations and power relations that surround us.

However, as I argue at much greater length in *Can Education Change Society?*, if we are to successfully interrupt dominant agendas we must also learn to speak in different registers, to reach out in understandable ways to a public that constantly hears the opposite of what we are saying (Apple 2013). We need to remember that we are involved in what the great Italian political theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci called a “war of position” rather than a “war of maneuver.” By that he meant that we are no longer facing something like World War I where opposing forces were in trenches facing each other. The leaders called charge — and whoever was left standing won. Rather, dominant groups have recognized that *everything* counts. Just as the Right has done, in order to win against dominant forces it is crucial that more democratic and progressive groups occupy as many parts of society as possible. Cultural struggles, the constant battles over commonsense in the media, in everyday conversation, in government documents, in the debates over legislations and over how supposed reforms are represented, over textbooks and textbook authorities, and so much more — all of these are essential parts of creating “counter-hegemonic” movements. Thus clarity, speaking and writing in a way that doesn’t ask the listeners or the readers to

do all of the work, that doesn't ask them to constantly feel as if they need the Oxford Unabridged Dictionary close at hand or to be conversant with the latest postmodern vocabularies to understand what is at stake and what the possible alternatives are, are more than a little significant.

The Right has learned these lessons well. They have become quite good at speaking in "plain-folks Americanisms." What they say is often divisive, often covertly or overtly racist, sexist, anti-immigrant, homophobic, and just as often unapologetically in favor of dominant class actors. But there is a politics to style. And they are good at it. As odd as it may seem to say this, we may have a good deal to learn from them about how to engage in the larger politics of commonsense (Apple, 2006).

Let me say more about the linguistic politics involved in this by focusing on one of the most important words that are a site for this kind of activity—*democracy*. It is a word with extraordinary currency, what Raymond Williams (1985) would call a "keyword" in our social and individual lives and imagination and is thus deeply involved in our emotional economies. The concept of democracy is what socio-linguists would identify as a prime example of a sliding signifier. It has no essential meaning, but is instead mobilized by various ideological tendencies as a rhetorical device both as a source of legitimation but also to connect current movements to historical traditions. Indeed, as Eric Foner (1998) has demonstrated, democracy has been a contested concept throughout the history of the United States.

It has often required very creative ideological work to convince people to come under the leadership of particular groups' versions of democracy. Neoliberals have been particularly successful in what must be seen as a vast socio-political pedagogic project to change our definitions of democracy from "thick" to "thin." Thus, rather than seeing democracy as a political process in which all people who can be affected by a policy or an institution participate as fully as possible in both collectively building and rebuilding it, democracy becomes simply an economic concept. Its more complicated "thick" meanings are eviscerated, reduced to individual consumption practices on a market. Schools then become commodities that can be chosen by individual consumers on the "free market." Students become commodities as well. They are valued for their test scores. And those who can produce higher test scores can be recruited as a source of value for schools on that competitive market.

The effects of this are fully raced and classed. But these effects are hidden in the rhetoric of democracy as choice and the search for efficiency and cost-benefit analysis (Apple 2006; see also Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Gillborn 2008; Buras 2011). Rhetorical politics are, hence, crucial. And commonsense is a crucial site of these politics. This makes what *Dissent*, *The Progressive*, *Rethinking Schools* — and the book I am discussing here — are doing even more significant than might otherwise be the case if conditions were different.

As one might expect from a book such as this, even though this is indeed a fine collection,

there are places where I wish the discussion had gone further. For example, the call in the volume for teacher unions to move from a model based on “industrial unionism” to one guided by “professional unionism” is thoughtful and has a number of insights. Yet, as Lois Weiner, for example, has argued, such a model does not go far enough in the direction of *social justice unionism* (see Weiner 2012). It also forgets that significant elements of industrial unionism remain crucial given the current and well-orchestrated attacks on teachers’ salaries, job security, pensions, and health care right now. These are not either/or propositions.

The major emphasis of the chapters and of the book as a whole is schooling for and with poor and minoritized communities. This of course is wholly appropriate and what the authors say is often powerful and insightful. Yet it also has its limits. The “problem” is not only poor and minoritized people, but also the affluent. There isn’t a poor person’s problem, but a rich person’s problem. Not a problem of people of color, but of the very idea of whiteness as the human ordinary. Not a gay problem, but a straight problem. I could go on. But the essential point I am making here is that to the extent that the focus is only on transforming and defending education for those whom all too many people in this society treat as the “Others,” there is a grave risk of ignoring the pervasive neglect of what the affluent are taught about themselves, and about their historical and very current debts to those people they so distressingly see as the “Others.”

Part of the explanation is that the affluent in this society exist in something like an epistemological fog, one that is sometimes willfully opaque. Most governments, the media, and unfortunately a very large portion of those who define millions of people as “Other” live within this epistemological fog. They do not see debts that must be repaid. They know little about the lives of those whose paid and unpaid labor makes their affluence possible, about their real economic conditions, about their housing, about the state of schools in impoverished areas, about the services that poor and minoritized people need and all too often don’t get, and so on. They don’t understand that for millions of people food, housing, health care, decent education, and so much more are not nouns, but *verbs*. These activities require immense, constant, and creative efforts. The affluent population’s lack of knowledge here provides an epistemological veil (Davis, 2006, p.42). What goes on under the veil is a secret that must be kept from “public view.” To know is to be subject to demands.

This is what makes books such as Katy Swalwell’s *Educating Activist Allies: Social Justice Pedagogy with the Suburban and Urban Elite* (Swalwell, 2013) an important addition to the literature on school reform. It focuses on what needs to be and can be done in engaging in more critical teaching with the next generation of more affluent youth, and hence, serves as a fine complement to the thoughtful and well-written chapters in the Katz and Rose volume.

Michael Katz and Mike Rose are each deservedly well-known for their cogent analyses of education and of larger issues of social policy. Each of them has engaged in “bearing witness”² to the realities of and inequalities produced by our prevailing institutions; and each has focused attention on the limits and possibilities of social transformation (see, e. g., Katz 2001, 2013 and Rose 2012, 2014). These critically democratic impulses are what guide this edited collection as well.

Behind many of its chapters is a particular and very positive vision. For the authors and editors of this collection, the United States is in essence a vast experiment. Very few nations have attempted to build a nation from all over the world. Part of this of course is made necessary by the fact that our economic empire has “come home” so to speak. Yet, in Deborah Meier’s words, “We forget that democracy is an unfinished project, (p. 147). Meier’s statement is a statement of hope, of the ongoing struggle to keep the river of *thick* democracy on course. As one of the wisest analysts of the relationship between culture and power reminded us, “We must speak for hope, as long as it doesn’t suppress the nature of the danger” (Williams 1989, pp. 322). Books such as *Public Education Under Siege* remind us of the ever present need to take the

dialectical relationship both danger and hope seriously.

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² I have discussed the importance of the act of “bearing witness, as well as the nature of other tasks in which the “critical scholar/activist” in education should engage in Apple (2013).

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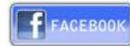
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