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Policy for the Poor and Poor Education Policy: An Essay Review

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As I write this review, I have just returned from a series of lectures in Spain. The economic crisis there is extremely serious. The media in Europe and the United States are filled with stories about political battles involving "bail-outs" of economies such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, and other nations. What is less often reported—at least in the mainstream media in the United States—is the damage that is being done to the lives and hopes of millions of real people, the effects of the neoliberal policies that are being imposed

by the IMF and other international and national financial agencies, and the destruction of hard-won gains in social welfare, health, and education. The crisis is all too easy to miss if one keeps to the tourist areas. Yet these areas are only skin-deep. Scratch beneath the surface in Madrid and similar cities and the realities become visible. That a conservative government is predicted to win the forthcoming elections in Spain says something important about the ways in which Rightist movements have been able to creatively build a discursive environment that privileges their messages about the causes of the crisis and the increasing levels of impoverishment that have ensued.

According to conservative governments in places such as Madrid and London, major cities and entire states in the United States, and so many other places, the crisis, the impoverishment, and the loss of identifiable people's possibilities, can only be solved by the religion of the market. Shrink the state, remove the safety nets, establish market discipline, fire public employees, make people more insecure by removing their right to affordable health care, slash pensions, cut funding for education, lay off teachers… I could go on enumerating the areas of pain. In Stephen Ball's words, "The public sector must be remade in order to respond to the exigencies of globalization and to play its part in the economics of global competition. Individual and institutional actors and their dispositions and responses are tied to the fate of the nation in the global economy" (Ball, 2008, p. 15). Education is clearly not immune to these intense pressures.

I purposely have used the term "religion" in the first sentence of the previous paragraph, since the positions pushed forward often seem to be immune to counter evidence. It is as if the glasses that are worn by those who hew to the positions associated with the neoliberal agenda make all of the pain invisible. Education policy is one of the arenas in which the blindness produced by these glasses is particularly evident.

In the face of the neoliberal and neoconservative interpretations that circulate so widely both nationally and internationally, there is a growing body of literature in education policy studies that critically examines the conceptual and ideological underpinnings and the ethical, political, and empirical realities of the major reforms that are currently traveling throughout the world. As I show in *Educating the "Right" Way* (Apple, 2006)[1], we cannot understand why these policies have such power unless we go more deeply into the creative ways in which the Right has worked at changing our commonsense notions so that the meanings of key words that have what might be called "emotional economies" are radically transformed (see, e.g., Williams, 1976). The "thick democracy" of full participation is being replaced by the "thin democracy" of markets and consumption practices.

[1] Editorial insertion: For a review of the 1st edition of *Educating the "Right" Way,* see Ramin Farahmandpur's review in this journal at http://edrev.info/reviews/rev239.htm.

Education is being commodified. Choice in a competitive market replaces the collective creation and recreation of our fundamental institutions. Words such as "democracy" and "freedom" become eviscerated, drained of their critical histories and of the social movements that established them as key elements in the formation of more progressive social and education policies (see Foner, 1998).

As I have also documented, to understand fully the complicated ideological assemblage behind the movement toward thinner versions of democracy, we also need to direct our attention to a wider set of conservative groups. Within the complicated alliance of *conservative modernization* are four groups: neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and members of an upwardly mobile fraction of the professional and managerial new middle class (Apple, 2006). It is also important to recognize that there are not only multiple groups and tendencies within this conservative alliance, but there are also multiple relations of power that are being fought out—not only class relations, but those of gender and race (Apple, 2006; Apple, 2010; Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2009).

Some very impressive work has been done recently on the ways in which race and racializing dynamics are exceptionally powerful in current neoliberal and neoconservative education reforms (see, e.g., Lipman, 2010; Gillborn, 2008; Buras, 2008). Similar analyses on the class basis and effects of such reforms are available as well (see, e.g., Ball, 2003; Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003) and of the inter-relations among multiple dynamics such as gender, sex, class, and disability (Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009; Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Joining the list of thoughtful books specifically about how we might better understand the effects of recent education policies is *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries*, a volume produced by a group of socially committed researchers at the University of Manchester in England. From among the vast landscape of education policies, the editors zero in on policies related to the relationship between education and poverty. The book is not meant to be an original empirical contribution. Rather it seeks to map out the terrain of what a selection of research from various orientations tells us. Though not without a few problems, the map is an interesting one. In the editors' own words, the aim of the book is to

> …examine the competing explanations for how and why poverty and education are jointly linked and implicated in maintaining disadvantages and underachievement, what policy makers have attempted to do to resolve the situation, and what other policy possibilities exist to improve the situation. (p. 8)

This clearly is a very ambitious agenda—compare explanatory frameworks, analyze the programs put forth to deal with the education/poverty couplet, and suggest alternatives that seem wiser. Let us be honest. No one book can do all of this without

significantly limiting the literature on which it draws. And no one book can fully account for the vast array of possible competing explanations of why the education/poverty relation exists, what forms it takes, and how it can be interrupted. Thus, the authors and editors construct ideal types, categories into which their selection of literature fall.

These categories are asked to do a good deal of work; and by and large they serve their purpose well. At times, though, they may be somewhat too general to deal with the hybrid nature of certain explanations and theories. And at times, these ideal types can risk missing the logics that stand behind the complexities of various approaches. For example, while it is "critical" in its social claims about education and poverty, Bowles and Gintis's early work on the relationship between schooling and capitalism (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) is strikingly functionalist in its underlying logic. Yet, it is basically not categorized as functionalist in the volume's schemata.

This is not to blame the authors. Rather, my point is to show how difficult it is to set up a conceptual apparatus that does justice to the rich complexities and contradictions of specific approaches. No matter how hard one tries—and the editors and authors of this book work very hard at this task—different logics may be at work even in one piece of research. The complex task in which they are engaged is something that Raffo and his colleagues certainly recognize, and they are clear about the limitations in their approach. If more authors in the literature on these topics were as honest about these complexities and limitations as Raffo and his colleagues, the field would be more productively reflective.

The crucial nature of the questions that the book asks and of its attempt to sort through the answers that have been given is ratified in powerful ways by some of the newest research on the relationship among affluence, poverty, and education in the United States. An example is provided by *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools and Children's Life Chances* (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Even though it is not grounded as much as I would like in a robust critical understanding of class dynamics, it is a book that should also be required reading for all people interested in thinking more cogently about education policy and in addressing honestly the economic roots of many of the problems we face. The Duncan and Murnane book puts part of its focus on the *longue durée*, on what has happened over time in terms of the complex relations among affluence, poverty, and education.

As the research in that volume documents, in the year 2009 the average (inflation adjusted) income of the families in the bottom 20% of the U.S. income distribution hardly rose at all when compared to 1977. But during this same time period, the incomes of the top 20% rose by more than a third and the top 5% rose by 50%. The extra money did not go to waste in terms of the mobility of the affluent population's children. Again looking at this over time is more than a little useful. In the early 1970s, the 20% of families with the highest income spent around $2,700 more per year than the bottom 20% on things to

"enrich" (an appropriate metaphor) their children's experiences. Thirty years later, the inflation adjusted difference had risen to $7,500. Much of the difference was spent on such things as music lessons, travel, summer camps, and similar "cultural" activities. This was money well spent. In a scenario seemingly taken from Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the role of cultural capital in the conversion strategies of class actors (Bourdieu, 1984), it should come as no surprise then that during the same period of time, the percent of children of affluent families who completed college rose by 21%. The rate of graduation from college for children of the poor and working class rose only 4% (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Class does have a way of reproducing itself.

Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools and Children's Life Chances appeared well after the publication of *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries*. Thus its data and arguments could not be included in the book. But the data provide compelling reasons for taking the Raffo, et al. volume's synthesizing project very seriously.

Aside from clear chapters on how the literature thinks about the education/poverty connection written collectively by the editors, there are a number of other chapters written by a group of international scholars, many of whom will be familiar to both a critical audience and a more mainstream one. These include Pauline Lipman, Pat Thompson, John Smyth, Meg Maguire, Daniel Muijs, Ingrid Schoon, Ruth Lupton, Jane Gaskell, and Ben Levin. Aside from its ambitious goals, what sets the book apart from others is its inclusion of a number of critically oriented perspectives both in these additional chapters and in its overall framework. Like all such books, the additional chapters are a bit uneven at times. However, a number of them have a nice critical bite that adds a good deal to the book's quality.

While I am very impressed with what the authors of *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries* have accomplished in this book, their discussions might have been strengthened if more attention had been given to programs and strategies of interruption. For example, The Centre for Equality Studies at University College, Dublin could have been given more attention, since that organization has been at the center of research and action that stresses not only poverty and inequality, but movement towards equality (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004). The same is true for CREA, an interdisciplinary research center at the University of Barcelona that is a model of how to build a research agenda and then create policies and programs that empower those who are economically and culturally marginalized in our societies (Flecha, 2011; Gatt, Ojaja, & Soler, 2011; Alexiu & Sorde, 2011; Aubert, 2011; Christou & Puivert, 2011; Flecha, 2009).

The lasting education reforms in Porto Alegre in Brazil also provide a paradigm case of how social and education policies can be joined so that impoverished citizens can and do take charge of their own lives and how the education institutions and struggles over them play essential roles in changing the identities of the poor and disenfranchised in truly

progressive ways (see, e.g., Gandin and Apple, 2003; Gandin & Apple, in press).

Finally, even given the volume's clear international awareness—another strong point—more discussion of the connections between poverty and affluence in one country and the necessity of creating impoverishment in another set of countries might have been given more note in its conceptual and political overview (see, e.g., Davis 2006; Apple, 2010). Raffo and his colleagues clearly have a relational understanding as a key element in their conceptual apparatus. But it might have been made a bit more obvious so that readers came away with that more clearly in their minds.

These points are not meant in any way to dissuade you from reading *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries*. The overall project in which it is engaged—to synthesize and make sense of what the terrain looks like—is ambitious and definitely worthwhile. Its writing is clear and thoughtful. The additional chapters on specific aspects of the power relationships involved with and on such things as the racializing aspects of neoliberal policies, on youth culture and youth identities, on the intersections of class, gender, and race in declining economies, on pedagogic and policy interventions, and on other areas, all add to the value of the book.

In many ways, the editors took on a nearly impossible task. The amount of research on poverty, affluence, and education is growing by the day. Some of it is repetitious, empirically problematic, less than nuanced conceptually, less than reflective about its own ideological preconceptions, and based on a good deal of misrecognition of what the lives of the poor (and the rich) are actually like. Some of it as well limits its questions to only those that are driven by government or foundation money at the expense of more critically oriented inquiry. And some of it has little recognition of the ways this economy *depends on* the creation of poverty both within and outside of national borders so that the affluent can live lives that are based on the invisibility of the debt they owe to those who labor so hard to produce the benefits that the affluent take for granted.

But some of the research is truly essential for those of us in education if we are to understand why we face the challenges with which we continually engage. How to make sense of all of this, how to sort through the competing commitments and explanations, how to judge the success of policies and practices, and how we maintain a consistently critical ethical and political stance—all of this needs to be taken very seriously. *Education and Poverty in Affluent Countries* provides a platform from which we can go further in dealing more reflectively with such issues.

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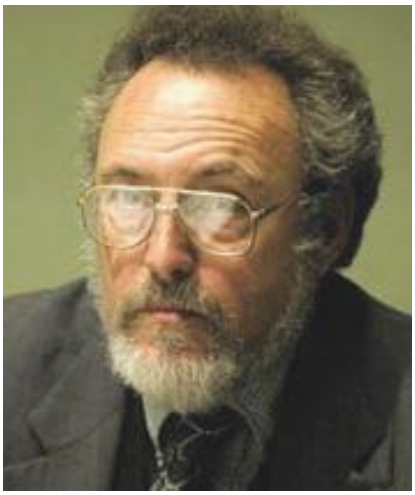

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