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Reviewed by Michael W. Apple

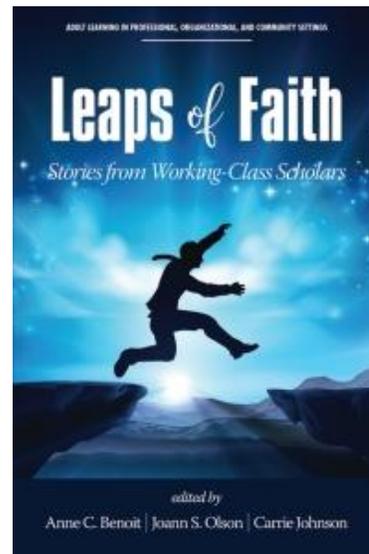
Beijing Normal University, China

University of Wisconsin, Madison, United States

Education and Working Class Biographies: An Essay Review of *Leaps of Faith*

I approached *Leaps of Faith* with a good deal of anticipation. There were a number of reasons for this, some academic and some more personal. The first reason is my concern with the politics of voice. Whose voices are publicly heard in discussions and debates about education policies and practices? Whose voices are missing? How does this map on to the structures of dominance and subordination – and struggles against these structures – in the larger society? The second reason directly relates to my continuing worry that class relations are not given the attention they deserve. While there is a good deal of research on the ways in which education is mediated by class, race, gender, ability, and other attributes of “difference” – and this research is definitely necessary – detailed attention to the actual long-term experiences of classed actors *in their own voices* is not as common as it should be. Third, within parts of the scholarship of critical education and especially “critical pedagogy,” class is often dealt with in largely rhetorical and fairly mechanical and reductive ways, ignoring the very real complexities surrounding class formation, class mobility, class fractions, and class histories and cultures.

In some of this same seemingly socially critical literature, the intersections of class and the equally complex dynamics of race and gender are at best pointed to, but not as seriously illuminated, explored, and explained as they should be. Thus, we clearly need books that do two things. They should portray class in “thick” ways as it is lived out in real life. At the



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same time, they should provide us with a sense of how class exists as well in its connections to other constitutive relations of power, inequality, and identity.

Leaps of Faith is meant to be a contribution to a number of the issues involved in voice and a better understanding of how class is experienced. It focuses on a particular selection of people who have working class backgrounds who have successfully overcome many of the barriers to advancement in education, including especially their class identities. This often involved struggling with the feeling that they do not totally belong in academic and professional life. It is not surprising that a large portion of people whose lives are portrayed here are professionals in Adult and Continuing Education. After all, the volume is a contribution to a series of books in Adult Learning in Professional, Organizational, and Community Settings.

The editors have chosen not to change the stories in any substantive way, either in form or content. In Series Editor Carrie Boden's words in her introductory remarks,

The authors' stories appear in the exact format they have chosen to tell them, including qualities you may admire, stories boasting grit and growth mind-set, as well as ones you may find less appealing, stories told in tones that seem like self-flattering truths or learned helplessness. The scholars who have shared their stories in this book have chosen to out themselves and their feelings of marginalization. Responding to this deep conversation with academic critique serves as an unfortunate replication of academic cultural elitism that these narratives compel the reader to disallow. To create an inclusive space, I have chosen to let go of several academic writing conventions and to allow these narratives to stand as written. (p. xii)

In some ways, this choice can be seen as a partial response to my arguments in *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013). One of the most important roles that critical "scholar/activists" can play is opening spaces so that the voices of the marginalized can be heard. This is clearly a good reason for the publication of books of stories like these.

The stories themselves are varied, often honest, and deeply personal. They document the struggles of real people in real institutions over time. While most of these accounts conclude with success, the theme of being uncomfortable and "between two worlds" often remains. Paraphrasing Raymond Williams's words, the "emergent" professional class cultural forms of the authors today rub against the "residual" working class cultural forms of their origins (see, for example, Williams, 1977). The result is the creation of what are sometimes tense and contradictory elements in peoples' identities.

Getting Personal

Again, there also are personal reasons for my interest in *Leaps of Faith*. Let me be honest here. I am one of the kinds of persons the book describes. I come from a poor and deeply political working class family. I am one of the first people in my immediate family to finish secondary school and was the very first to attend any form of post-secondary education. I worked as a printer for a number of years, went part-time to a small teachers college that only recently had transformed itself from a two-year institution to a four-year one. That initial experience in higher education seemed boring and disconnected from the vibrant cultural and political experience of the poor and largely immigrant community I was from. It is not surprising I did very poorly in that institution. Nor given that historical period is it surprising that I then spent time in the Army, which trained me to be a truck driver and a teacher. Nor is it surprising that, like many of the people represented in this book, being an educator was compelling to me. The fact that there was a severe teacher shortage at the time and that I was “trained” as a teacher in the Army provided an opportunity for the school district to hire me as a full-time substitute teacher in the poor inner-city schools I had attended, even though I only had completed one year of college. Of course, there were also assumptions about gender and race at work here as well. Poor students who often were minorities as well were seen as “undisciplined,” and having a young man with Army experience to teach them is “exactly what these children need.”

The story does not end there, and it connects with the biographies of a number of the chapters in the book. After teaching for a number of years and serving as the president of a teachers union while completing my undergraduate work part-time at two small teachers colleges, I applied – with much trepidation – to Columbia University for graduate study with a focus on education, philosophy, and sociology. After a period of “adjustment” – a word that doesn’t come close to how I felt – including worrying whether I really “belonged” in a demanding and rigorous setting like an Ivy League graduate school, I was awarded a fellowship. Given this personal history, it is no surprise that the stories that are included in *Leaps of Faith* ring true with me. (For more on this, see Apple, 2019).

However, there are differences in my account that do not surface as readily in the accounts given in the book. I was what was then called a “Red Diaper Baby.” Members of my family were part of a long tradition of working class radicalism that was found especially in textile workers and printers in the industrial cities of the East Coast of the U.S. Coming from this tradition, I found political activism to be “normal.” Indeed, while still a secondary school student, I was the publicity director of the Paterson, NJ chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality and was deeply involved in a number of mobilizations.

Hence, I came to graduate school with an identity that was already partly politically formed by a working class sensibility that was itself animated by

anti-corporate and anti-racist sentiments and movements. This is important. Columbia University sits side-by-side with Harlem with its long history of racial struggles. At the time, the university had a reputation as also one of the major “slumlords” in that section of New York City. But it also had a number of faculty who were deeply immersed in critical theory, research, and action and who served as models for combining academic and political work that I was slowly realizing could be my future as well. In addition, there was a diverse group of students who had ethical and political understandings similar to my own. Columbia was both intellectually powerful and politically motivating, and had space for a growing community of students who provided solace and support for each other. I did not have to surrender part of my identity since so much of it was able to be kept in the educational and political work I and others continued to do. This sense of collectivity and the maintenance of political elements that were so important in parts of working class culture does not surface clearly in the personal stories told by the contributors to *Leaps of Faith*. This points to one of the shortcomings of personal narratives. They can be insightful about the life of the individual, but at the same moment can also minimize the *collective* histories and forms of support that stand behind that very same individual and that are important identity markers.

I do not intend my own personal narrative to be self-congratulatory. There are still times when I wonder “how did all this happen to me?” “How did a kid from the slums of New Jersey and who failed in his first foray into higher education get to be the holder of distinguished professorships while at the same time keeping alive a sense of working class activism?” Like many of the contributors to the book, I still feel the tensions of being simultaneously inside and outside of the university. But to me, this is a richly productive tension. I do not ever want to be fully comfortable in higher education. This tension both reflects my background and my commitment and struggle to challenge and interrupt the role of higher education in reproducing the relations of dominance and subordination that still characterize it. Reading *Leaps of Faith* helped me remember why these tensions remain a key element in my life, even though the volume does not adequately represent the political traditions of working class militancy that often accompany the feeling of not really fully belonging. Yet while the accounts in the book do not fully represent these traditions, it is important to recognize that many of the authors are working in areas where they are acting on their perceived responsibility to assist working class and marginalized students to get ahead. This is interesting to say the least, since historically important collective sensibilities need not be conscious to still be present.

Going Further

So far, in keeping with the style of the chapters of *Leap of Faith*, this essay review has been rather personal. While I do respect the editors’ commitment to honor the voices of the story tellers and to not “academicize” the stories, the book does provide an opportunity for me to publicly reflect on some other critical issues. Volumes such as *Leaps of Faith* do not set out to deal

with some of the points I want to raise. Indeed, it is a credit to the editors that after reading this book I was led to reflect even more about how we should think about some of the topics and relations the reader might need to consider in understanding the complexities of working class stories. Most of the points I raise here will be a mix of the academic and the political. Each is stimulated by the voices that are found in this book. They are meant to motivate the reader to go further into significant debates that the book's editors have chosen not to explore given their understandable commitments.

Consider the concept of class itself. The volume would have benefitted from at least pointing the reader to some of the more robust theories of and debates over class analysis (see, e.g., Weis 2008 & Wright, 1989), the interconnections between class and ideological and cultural sensibilities (Hochschild, 2016), and the effects of daily life in impoverished realities (Desmond, 2016). There is also a tendency in the book to normalize the mores of middle class habitus and its use of cultural and social capital, making it seem as if it too was not filled with tensions, contradictions, and intense insecurities (see Rollock et al., 2015; Weis et al., 2014). Indeed, such insecurities may actually be even more intense given the deeply competitive educational and economic realities and rates of downward mobility that people experience currently.

Furthermore, the working class is not necessarily uniform culturally, politically, or religiously – or even economically. It is riven by class fractions, by rural and urban differences, by the existing racial order and the conscious and unconscious privileging of Whiteness, and by documented and undocumented immigrant status. It is also increasingly quite mixed in terms of levels of education. For example, given the destructive effects of capitalist transformations of the structures of paid labor, large numbers of people who are working in exploitative part-time low-wage positions may have college degrees. Furthermore, because of the COVID crisis and its effects on paid and unpaid labor, very many poor and working class as well as middle class women have “chosen” to stay home, have lost their jobs, have left schooling – and the list of losses goes on and on. We would need to update the stories told here to account for these current transformations.

But it is not only the realities of class and paid and unpaid labor that should be a focus. The growth in power of “authoritarian populist” religious conservative movements and their supporting institutions also plays an important role here in the formation of identities (see for example, Apple, 2006, and Oberlin, 2020). Religious histories and identities, especially around gender, are also not homogeneous. That may make a difference in how identities are performed and on how one feels “at home” in educational and many other institutions. One wonders what might emerge from these stories if that was added.

Race enters here as well. Religious affiliations that from the outside look very similar may lead to dramatically different ideological outlooks and identities. Seemingly conservative evangelical churches with a poor and

working class membership can use Biblical texts in radically different ways for radically different social agendas. Thus, inerrantist Biblical believers can reinforce and legitimate white supremacy and patriarchal authority in government policies and daily lives (Jones, 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). They can also lead first generation working class college students in higher education to enroll in conservative evangelical institutions of higher education. Compare this to the fact that, at the same time, Biblical texts can and do support the constant challenges of poor and working class African American communities to an oppressive racial order. They contribute to activist identities of a different kind (see, e.g., Gates, 2021). It is useful to ask what the differential effects of this seeming religious homogeneity, but really quite different identities, are on these working class and poor students' understanding of the social uses of adult and continuing education and of their own role in such an education.

Such questions lead me to wonder even more about the centrality of race and about what more might have been said about its role. While powerful experiences of race and racialization are clearly present among a number of the stories, what that meant in daily life, and how it was experienced, reproduced, and resisted in cultural, political and bodily ways, could have been explored further in the final summative chapter (see, e.g., Berrey, 2015; Wiegand & Wiegand, 2018). Once again, many of these experiences that could shed light on these concerns are present if one reads the chapters with that in mind. I just wish that more was done with it.

Do not misinterpret my points here. The chapters are often insightful, and the book as a whole is certainly worth reading. Furthermore, even with the absences I have noted, *Leaps of Faith* serves other important useful functions. For a nation that is a bit too uncritically accepting of books of self-disclosure like *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance, 2016), the contributions here at times speak back to the stereotypes that are reinforced by such popular memoirs. The stories do not do that consciously. Indeed, Vance's book does not make an appearance in *Leaps of Faith*. But though not as strong as it might be in engaging with this, the diversity of working class accounts offered here is still worth noting.

Even with this diversity, there is one key concept underlying many of the chapters. This is the "imposter syndrome" – a sense that one doesn't really belong in higher education and especially in graduate schools, although it undoubtedly has effects in work places and elsewhere as well. The concept itself is useful, but can be and has been used as a substitute for more complicated analyses of the dynamics of identity(ies) and the contradictory mix of feelings of belonging and marginalization that organize experiences. From personal experience, I do not want to dismiss it as a way of generating initial understandings of what it is like to find oneself in an institution that one has struggled mightily to enter and at the same time feels "strange" when there.

I have vivid memories of my first year as a graduate student at Columbia University. This was my first experience in full-time university life, itself a strange feeling. I entered a seminar room for the initial meeting of a seminar in philosophy, found a seat by myself, and waited for the professor, a deservedly well-known analytic philosopher. Around me sat about 10 other students, all of whom had done their undergraduate work at elite universities. Their bodies were relaxed. Mine felt stiff, unable to transform into anything other than a rigid straight-up position. My body mirrored and expressed my semi-conscious conception of “what am I doing here?” “Is the night-school person from that small teachers college really ready for this?” It was the physical embodiment of Bourdieu’s points about “body hexus” and class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

If I stopped here, some the complexities that arise from what might be called the imposter syndrome could be lost. Among the most powerful emotions that surged through my body over the next weeks and months was an emotion close to anger and an even stronger commitment. Given my grounding in progressive politics and a family of working class radicalism, a sense arose in me of “I’ll show you who belongs here!” and “Do any of you understand the ways that this society really works?” and “Your comfort and ease rests on a foundation of other people’s work.” That anger and the collective history of community and personal political commitments and activities that worked through me can be like an antidote. It can not be subsumed completely under the assemblage of largely psychological concepts such as “imposter.”

This is not to say that we should reject concepts such as the impostor syndrome. Rather, they are like a door into the question of the complexities of identity that must be opened. But once we are inside, we need to recognize that there is a need for more complex critical socioeconomic and ideological understandings and insights. Anne Benoit’s concluding chapter is helpful in this regard and is thoughtful about a range of issues that asks us to consider a number of these complexities, so this helps.

Conclusion

In her book *The Way Class Works*, Lois Weis correctly reminds us of the significance and effects of class in education and the larger society. In her words, “Class is a fundamental organizer of social experience, both ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’” (Weis, 2008, p. 3). As she goes on to say, it must be understood not only as one’s position in the economic structures and processes of the larger society, but also as “practices of living – the social and psychic practices through which ordinary people live, survive and cope.... Such recognition of both the structuring effects of class and the ways in which class is lived out has never been more pressing, given key shifts in the global economy and accompanying deepening social inequalities” (pp. 2-3).

Leaps of Faith provides us with interesting views of how particular segments of the working class see the world. It also illuminates their personal efforts to overcome the obstacles that all too often create

complicated and contradictory identities that make these efforts harder. The choice that the editors made to not change these narratives and to not have these accounts speak more directly to the complexities of the existing critical literature and debates on class analysis and their complex intersections with gender, race, religion, and “other” relations of differential power has some clear benefits. It makes many of the chapter stories ring true on a personal level. But it also partly limits some of the critical power that would have been more visible if that had been done. Consequently, it misses an opportunity to better connect the reader with these powerful critical perspectives.

Again, it may be unfair to evaluate this project on what it could have done. This was not the aim of the book. It succeeds in its own aims in many ways. It takes voice seriously, something that should be applauded. That may be enough for a modest volume such as this.

One way of going beyond these more modest aims on a more specifically practical educational terrain would be for the reader to search out material on the growing critically democratic policies and practices that are transforming education so that minoritized, poor, and working class youth have more powerful and fulfilling educational experiences. At the same time, the reader might look for some of the more recent and very interesting work on enabling marginalized people to have a more participatory role in research directed to why this is and is not the case (Winn & Souto-Manning, 2017). This latter, more participatory, research agenda helps to provide both activist identities and voice to those who too often are seen as “less than,” and as “not quite belonging,” in dominant educational institutions. New counter-hegemonic identities are one of the results, thereby counteracting the feelings of being an “impostor.”

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About the Reviewer

Michael W. Apple is Hui Yan Chair Distinguished Professor of Education, Beijing Normal University and John Bascom Professor Emeritus of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Among his most recent books are *Can Education Change Society?*, *The Struggle for Democracy in Education: Lessons from Social Realities*; *Disrupting Hate in Education: Teacher Activists, Democracy, and Global Pedagogies of Interruption*; and the fourth edition of his classic text *Ideology and Curriculum*.



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