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# Critical Theory: From Michael Apple's Perspective (Review)

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La teoría crítica desde la perspectiva de Michael Apple (Reseña)

A teoria crítica a partir da perspectiva de Michel Apple (Resenha)

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We have to confess the initial thoughts we had when we started to read the book *Education and power* written by Michel Apple. We definitely were expecting an optimistic discourse on how education could lead minorities to gain control and power over their circumstances, and therefore mobilize them from precarious contexts to a better social economic status. However, when reading it, we realized that this was not the author's intention. Far from being optimistic or pessimistic, Apple based this book on a critical and thoughtful understanding of education and its relationship with society at large. He refused to accept the simplistic view of educational criticism and the "almighty" power of the hidden curriculum in a context where the school is a passive mirror of society, which simply reproduces unequal societies without any process of resistance.

Methodically, he focused his analysis on the way that the State and the producers of educational material have transformed the organization of the school and the main role of teachers and students. In this review, we will emphasize on three central aspects stressed by Apple in his book. It is important to keep in mind that during his discourse he considered multiple and contradictory aspects of society and education while avoiding an attempt to create a grand narrative. For him, it is unrealistic to talk about education without understanding its interconnection with three systems: culture, government and economy.

He, as a critical teaching specialist, recognized the redefinition that educational policy suffered after World War II, and how education is no longer seen as a system that provides educational opportunities to minorities in order to equalize and increase mobility. Furthermore, his discourse reflects his contemplation of the strategies used by policy makers to blame schools for social crises such as the loss of economic competitiveness and the decline of values and standards in family, culture and education.

What we found fascinating about his analysis is that he questioned his own beliefs and values as a follower of the critical theory. This theory endorses the idea of defining the interaction of these three systems as a conspiracy made by a small group of industries, in order to keep school as a "moppet" or—as he defined—"a mechanism for reproduction of the division of labor" (Apple, 1995, p. 35), and to "teach norm, values, dispositions and culture that contribute to the ideological hegemony of dominant groups" (p. 38). In this sense, Apple partially agrees with the perception.

However, we would like to highlight three aspects he disagrees with. First, he does not think that everything is a conspiracy made by a few industries. On the contrary, he blames structural causation. Second, he believes that critical theories are ignoring an important characteristic of school, which is its capacity to produce knowledge. Certainly, the school is not just an institution made only to distribute knowledge. Third, he rejected the simplistic idea of considering students as passive products of knowledge. This last disagreement is the basis for the next central aspect that we will focus on.

Apple believed that seeing school as a mere reproductive institution can be seriously illogical. History shows us how workers have created systems of resistance in the past. They have showed "disobedience" to authority and have gone on strike over wages and benefits. This scenario can be identical to the classroom, where students have elements of contradiction, resistance, relative autonomy and transformation. "Social reproduction is by its nature a contradictory process, not something that simply happens without a struggle" (Apple, 1995, p. 84). Therefore, students adapt their environments so they can reject the explicit and hidden curriculum.

The third central aspect we want to highlight is the redefinition that the school system has experienced due to the influence of the State, policy makers, and educational material producers. In this sense, Apple compares the transformation that school structure has undergone to management concepts (types of control: simple, technical and bureaucratic). Policy makers have influenced curriculum organization by creating standardized content and examinations. They have put a lot of pressure on the educational system in an effort to force it to teach according to industrial needs. By having standardized tests and content the school is encoded, and therefore can be more easily controlled. Consequently, the student's role is modified. There is little interaction required and the outcome expected from them is very technical and binary.

The way to assess a student's learning is very extreme, "[he/she] answers correct or incorrect". There is no emphasis on understanding the process and how the student got the answers or the concept mapping he/she generated. On the other hand, textbook publishers and creators of teaching material see the school as a profitable market. They found a great business around the 1950s and 1960s when academic teachers were unsophisticated in major curriculum areas. They sold their products with the idea of facilitating the teacher's duties. However, it

has caused some side effects. The teacher's role has been redefined and minimized. Apple used the word "deskilling" to describe what happened to the teacher. People external to educational contexts design the curriculum content, specify all the steps teachers should follow while teaching; define what the evaluation mechanisms will be and anticipate student's most appropriate responses. This means teachers have lost control of their curricular and pedagogical skills; and they are expected to learn new techniques required to follow direction by textbook publishers and to control students (reskilling).

Nevertheless, the writer recognized that this cannot be considered the absolute truth. Of course, there is space for resistance. It is possible for each school to integrate and modify the content. However, individual resistance is more likely to appear than collective resistance, due to the structure of the school system.

Also, it was intriguing to see how Apple criticizes his own values and beliefs in order to make sure that he was as neutral and realistically as possible. He made a point to avoid pessimistic or optimistic postures, and rejected the possibility of creating absolute truths. In his own words, "Social and cultural life is simply too complex to be caught by totally deterministic models" (p. 86). Furthermore, he tried to motivate the reader to do more than just criticizing the way and condition of our school system and its relationship with culture, economy and governmental work. This is something that he and we have in common. That being said, however, we still wish he had emphasized more the way that educators, principals, parents, citizens, and policy makers should follow in order to improve the system.

After we finished reading the first book, we felt that something was missing on Apple's discourse. We especially felt this void because all of the things he expressed about the power of education were completely theory-based. He did not provide any practical and vivid examples on how activist or critical educators could use educational or informal settings to transform the needs of the community. However, the second book we chose to read, *Global crises, social justice and education* filled the gaps he had left in the first reading.

In this book, Apple was aware of the importance of recognizing that an educator by him/herself cannot solely drive economic transformation. Instead, he/she must think as critically and rigorously as possible about the relations between policies and practices in education and larger sets of dominance while connecting this to action with and by social movement. In regards to curriculum analysis, Apple suggested that,

when analyzing the curriculum, instead of just asking questions like *Did the students master [a particular subject matter]* or *Did they do well on [a test]*? the activist or critical educator should ask the following questions: *Whose knowledge is this? How did it become official? What is the relationship between this knowledge and the ways in which it is taught/evaluated? What can we do as critical educators, researchers, and activists to change existing educational and social inequalities for the better?*

Apple's main goal was to analyze the ways in which critical and democratic educational and social movements have sought to fight back global crisis. With this in mind, he invited six authors (Ross Collin, Keita Takayama, Assaf Meshulam, Jen Sandler, and Erika Mein) to share their testimonies on the use of critical education around the world. They exemplified four specific cases where the role of critical education mediated and challenged the relations of dominance and subordination that specific communities had faced. Far from being romantic, they divulged the work that some activist and committed educators have done in the United States, Japan, Israel/Palestine, and Mexico.

They decided to choose those four examples as a way of giving the reader a deeper view of why and how education can be impacted by globalization. They avoided general statements and provided a detailed critical analysis of what is happening in those countries, all while opening a broader panorama on what educators and community members can do to alter their realities. They were also aware that the four examples could not represent the immense complexities of education and its connections to the relations of dominance and subordination. They do however believe examples can help us understand real people and real movements trying to challenge their circumstances. In that sense, they challenge readers to understand their own role supporting the struggles toward a long revolution.

The first case presented took place in the United States. Apple invited Dr. Ross Collin to examine how globalization has shaped and is shaping specific processes and practices in public schools and literacy development. They made an analysis of the current characteristics of this country. Aspects such as the new emerging structures of dominance, several major economic changes, multiculturalism, immigration, and social movements around and inside education were highlighted. They pointed out how neoliberal tendencies have influenced the country, including areas of educational reform. Many of the school reforms proposed and implemented by this tendency

include standardized testing, schooling choice programs, and slowed growth in governmental spending on K-12 public education. In this regard, education policies were designed to put less emphasis on preparing kids for today's world, but to increase attention in improving student's standardized test scores and traditional instruction.

The writers explained how the expansion of school choice programs and educational markets correlates with increased segregation of schools by race and class. For example, students from working class families and schools of color focus their curriculum on standardized knowledge measured by high-stake tests. On the contrary, more emphasis was put on systematic thinking, experimentation and collaboration amongst white middle-class students. In addition, the most affluent families use their economic social and cultural capital to expose their kids to more experiences, attain credentials, and develop the literacies and competencies valued by the higher education market. Also those affluent parents tap into an informal network to secure their children positions in schools that cultivate images of prestige.

The authors went beyond explaining all of the negative circumstances between education and reality. They showed that there are actions and movements that can challenge realities. For instance, concerning mobilization around immigration, they analyzed the case of activist students and their use of digital tools to circulate information and link together shifting networks of students to participate in both long-planned and spontaneous events that challenge immigration issues. In this case, teachers provided them with opportunities to network with potential allies and acquire literacies useful for activism.

They also helped them to develop digital literacies for use related to activism. Consequently, the classroom was not a traditional place for teaching. Instead, it became a

laboratory of practice, exercise, and achievement of rights, of formation, of autonomous, critical and creative historic subjects, full citizens, identified with ethical values, willing to construct a social project that has as a center of attention the practice of justice of freedom, of respect, and fraternal relationship among men, and women and a harmonic relationship with nature. (Apple, 2009, p. 45)

For the second case, Apple invited Dr. Keita Takayama, who presented a very interesting case from Japan, a country that has growing neoconservative and ultra nationalist tendencies and which has strong central governmental control over education. The author focused on one of the most significant

events in the post-war history of Japanese education. In the history of Japan, part of the government and conservative parties believed that through the implementation of the Fundamental Law of Education (FLE) the country was influenced by western ideologies, such as "individuality and human rights". In that sense, it was attacking Japanese traditions and patriotism.

Therefore, the Minister of Education and policy makers strengthened its administrative control over curriculum, teachers and textbooks. By the 1990s Japan suffered social, economic and political reforms. Corporations pursued global competitiveness. They found traditional gender divisions in the workplace to be an impediment to global competitiveness. Therefore, they put a lot of pressure on policy makers to create a gender-free educational system. Incorporating feminist ideas in and outside of education became a goal. Mobilization of citizens and educators promoting gender equality in education became more prominent. The Ministry of Education adopted the child-centered constructivist curricular orientation.

This transformation was influenced by corporations and their demands. They were looking for students to possess problem-solving skills, and independent and creative thinking aptitudes. The Ministry of Education also accepted textbook references to the darker side of Japan's history during the war. Nevertheless, this did not last long. In the 2000s a call was made to eliminate all negativity from history education. They wanted new books that enabled children to be proud of being Japanese. They also included as a curricular goal for sixth-grade students to cultivate a feeling of love for their nation. The Ministry also criticized the gender policy arguing that it was destroying marriages and families.

Consequently, textbook screening officers ordered textbooks publishers to eliminate expressions such as "gender" and "gender-free" from their publications. Takayama recognized the importance of having a global view to learn from other nations about the consequences of neoliberal/neoconservative changes. Also, the need to make some alliances that cut across national boundaries proved crucial to be effective in challenging the conservative politics in Japanese education.

For the third case, he invited Assaf Meshulam to talk about Israel/Palestine. This region of the world has been characterized by their constant tensions and national/international disputes. Their education system is based on religion, national identity, and is a symbol of domination. The first part of this section is very similar to Apple's view of critical education

described in his book *Education and power*. For the writers, a school is not merely reproductive, but also a cultural producer.

However, they emphasized on the knowledge produced by dominant groups that reinforce the cultural form of those groups. In that sense, the Israeli public education system has produced the state's citizens and official knowledge with the purpose of hegemonic interest, and to control and subordinate select groups of citizens. For instance, the education policies were unfair to the Mizrahi children who would not go beyond elementary education. Furthermore, they were forced to register only at vocational schools. They did not have the possibility of enrolling in higher education. However, thanks to global influences and forces, new discourses and multicultural identities have entered their country. Those ideologies have generated the structural change that has enabled individuals and social movements to challenge the hegemonic official curriculum and pedagogy.

The Kedma School is a clear example of an activist school in Jerusalem. They had mobilized the community, parents, and activists to challenge the inequality of the Israeli public education system. It was necessary to empower the communities by improving educational achievement. They included into the curriculum elements of the Mizrahi culture, history and traditions. Also, they created a theory influenced by Freire's approach that could support the needs of the community and build in the student a spirit of belonging.

These activists created a grass-root movement involving parents and communities to create a school that did not even exist by knocking on doors, appearing on the local television, distributing flyers and putting posters-up. They faced significant opposition and criticism while donating their time. By the end, they challenged the system and achieved the change they were looking for.

For the last case, Apple invited Dr. Jen Sandler and Dr. Erika Mein to talk about Mexico, a country that faces gender inequalities and importation of neoliberal economic policies that impact people's lives and futures. These impacts rise to the surface social movements that include groups of women, indigenous, and poor people. The neoliberal tendencies have affected Mexico in a wider way. For instance, policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) has hurt the poor and has

produced a massive devaluation of the peso. It has also emphasized privatization and decentralization, and the state has reduced the education budget. However, new movements have risen and civil society has opened spaces where ordinary people can enter into dialogue about power, privilege and rights. Spaces where they can make demands on the state and the market through movements or labor unions. These civil society groups promote the community-based popular education ideology (Paulo Freire's approach), which allows the learner to develop "a critical understanding of the politics of their oppression and develop an analysis along with the skills to act, to transform their circumstances and to promote justice and liberation" (p. 171).

The authors shared in this chapter two specific examples of a movement created by civil societies. We will mention one which was led by the Center for Education in Support of Economic Production and Environment (CEP). This organization recognized a major need of the community, which was facing several issues. There was an economic breakdown due to agribusiness in the region. Four full time popular educators understood the importance of creating training programs that promoted leadership among the population. They established popular education workshops and pedagogical fairs. In order to have spaces of dialogue and analysis of the socioeconomic breakdown they created classes that promoted health, economics, citizenship and leadership. Many of these educational opportunities were even geared toward women. In addition, they included entrepreneurial ideas giving them the basis to create and sell domestic products. As a consequence, the economic activity rose in that community.

These are four clear examples of how critical education can be utilized. They give the reader a deeper view of what, why, and how education can be impacted by globalization. In addition, it provides a framework for what activist and committed educators can do to transform their realities.

## Reviewed Books

- Apple, M. (1995). *Education and power* (second edition). Nueva York: Routledge. ISBN: 0-415-91309-8
- Apple, M. (2009). *Global crises, social justice and education*. Nueva York: Routledge. ISBN: 0-415-99597-3.