



Chatman, T. (2003). Review of *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*. *Workplace*, 10, 180- 184.

TODD CHATMAN

REVIEW OF *EDUCATING THE "RIGHT" WAY: MARKETS, STANDARDS, GOD, AND INEQUALITY*

by Michael W. Apple

1. What's wrong with public education in the United States? As Michael Apple writes in his latest book, "nearly everyone, it seems, has an opinion" on the matter (1). It also seems that evidence of problems abounds. For example, this past January, CNN reported that the latest poll data from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, showed that students who entered college in the fall of 2002 had the worst study habits of any class in the 15 years the Institute has collected such data. Yet, even as 33.4 percent of first-year college students admitted they'd spent less than six hours per week studying or doing homework during their senior year in high school, more than 45 percent of those same students claimed to have graduated high school with an "A" average ("Poor Study Habits"). So what's going on here? Shouldn't more studying, not less, lead to better grades? Has something happened to our schools, and what might we need to do about it?

2. Variations on those questions and their answers are at the heart of Apple's *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets Standards, God, and Inequality*. Building on a lifetime of research and writing about education, this new work refines and extends Apple's analysis of how the increasing influence of market logic on education has radically shifted the terms of the ongoing debate over American educational policy and practice. In a formal way, *Educating the "Right" Way* is very similar to one of Apple's earlier books, *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996). Both books begin with a practical example of the trends Apple chronicles in great detail, and both rely upon a four-part analysis of the conservative agendas that have largely taken control of U.S. educational policies. However, rather than simply rehearsing his previous arguments, each of Apple's books builds upon his previous work, deepening and broadening its scope to provide a truly invaluable history of the last 20 years of educational policy.

3. The core of Apple's thesis in *Educating the "Right" Way* is that the educational policies promoted by a coalition of rightist groups—the forces of "conservative modernization," as he calls them—bring with them myriad and dire unintended consequences, which, if left unchecked, threaten to all but destroy public education in this country. More broadly, Apple argues that the political right has successfully convinced Americans that, for varied and sometimes contradictory reasons, we can improve our schools by opening them to the healthy competition of the free market. Rigorous standards, measured primarily by standardized testing, combined with "school choice," will allow parents to see which schools are the best and to send their kids there. Meanwhile, if public institutions can't measure up, voucher plans will help parents send their kids to private or charter schools, or teach them at home. If these ideas sound familiar, that's because they form the basis of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB) of

2001, a "reform" that the Department of Education (DOE) correctly claims "contains the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965" ("Introduction"). As Apple argues, the right has succeeded in selling its educational agenda to the public because it first succeeded in redefining the "keywords" used in the debate over education, including the concepts that form the title of his book—markets, standards, God, and inequality. Yet Apple contends that the right's agenda—the one that is now the educational law of the land—takes us in the opposite direction we must go if we truly care about education in the United States.

4. Apple exposes the flaws in the right's agenda by first mapping the ideological makeup of the various "interests" on the right which have managed to shift the terrain of public debate—about education and almost everything else—squarely into their own backyards. Those interests include four main groups: neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and "the managerial and professional new middle class" (11). Apple's goal is to interrogate the questions raised by this coalition's remapping of everything from the meaning of "freedom" to the definition of "common sense." He outlines the questions that guide his book as follows: How does [the right's] language work to highlight certain things as "real" problems while marginalizing others? What are the effects of the policies that they have promoted? How do the seemingly contradictory policies that have emerged from the various fractions of the right—such as the marketization of education through voucher plans, the pressure to "return" to the Western tradition and to a supposedly common culture, the commitment to get God back into the schools and classrooms of America, and the growth of national and state curriculum and national and state (and often "high stakes") testing—actually get put together in creative ways to push many of the aspects of these rightist agendas forward? (11-12)

Taking each component of the conservative coalition in turn, Apple describes the motivations and goals of each group, then shows how this coalition has managed, through years of steady and difficult effort, to formulate an educational agenda that somehow supplies each group enough of what it wants to keep the coalition together, even as it continues to move educational policy ever further to the right.

5. That the ideas Apple warns us against have now become laws enacted by a Republican administration testifies to the accuracy and timeliness of his arguments. Indeed, the way the DOE promotes and describes the NCLB Act almost perfectly illustrates how the forces of conservative modernization enact their agendas. According to the DOE, the Act changes the federal government's role in kindergarten-through-grade-12 education by asking America's schools to describe their success in terms of what each student accomplishes. The act contains the President's four basic education reform principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. ("Introduction")

6. Not coincidentally, "the President's four basic education reform principles" map neatly onto the agendas of the four main groups responsible for the "conservative modernization" Apple indicts; the architects of NCLB took pains to include specific types of "reforms" meant to please each of the major interests within the coalition of rightist agendas. For example, the Act gives the professional managerial class "stronger accountability for results" because this "offers new and powerful roles for the individuals and groups who occupy positions within the state" (30). Authoritarian populists get "increased flexibility and local control" because this will allow them to move their kids to private, charter, or home schools that put God front and center and eliminate all that liberal claptrap about evolution and humanist values. Authoritarian populists also get "expanded options for parents" and the "teaching methods that have been proven to work," both of which also please the neoconservatives, a group that has "a vision of an Edenic past and wants a return to discipline and traditional knowledge" (Apple 11). Finally, neoliberals can fairly easily align all of the President's reform principles with their commitment to "markets and to freedom as 'individual choice'" (11).

7. Regardless of one's opinion on the forces of conservative modernization, the DOE's description of the NCLB probably sounds pretty good, which, again, is no accident. What could possibly be wrong with assessing schools on "what each student accomplishes"? Don't we want our schools to be "accountable" for the "results" they produce? It seems hard to argue with "increased flexibility," "local control," "expanded options for parents," and "teaching methods that have been proven to work." Yet, trouble arises when we stop to ask what the Act means by "success," "results," and "accountability." Oh, and "increased flexibility" for whom? The practical answers to these questions delineate the real world consequences of the right's educational agenda—consequences that Apple charitably calls "unintended." Although many of us might be more skeptical of (or cynical about) the right's intentions, the fact remains that the nominal intent of the NCLB Act is, of course, to "leave no child behind." Yet, studies show that the policies of conservative modernization do exactly that. To make matters worse, the children left behind are those who have historically been disadvantaged to begin with.

8. To make this point, Apple cites Jo Boaler's study of two schools in England, a country that has already implemented conservative educational "reforms," including high stakes testing and school performance "report cards." Boaler compared two secondary schools that took very different approaches to teaching math. In one school, teachers took a "traditional" approach, using textbooks geared to national tests, grouping students by ability, and focusing on maximum coverage. These teachers ran their classes "in such a way that speed and accuracy of computations and the learning of procedural rules for dealing with mathematical problems were highly valued" (200). The other school took a more student-centered approach: it did not group students by ability, but instead, "instruction was project-based, with a minimum of textbook-based teaching and a maximum of cooperative work among the students" (200). According to Boaler's study, students from the first school did less well overall on the standardized tests. More importantly, "young women in the second school did consistently better in a more cooperative atmosphere that stressed understanding and use rather than coverage," while "working class students were consistently disadvantaged in the more pressured and text- and test-based agenda of traditional mathematics instruction" (201).

9. Studies such as Boaler's—along with other research Apple cites from other countries that have already implemented NCLB-like policies—show that, although the forces of conservative modernization might have perfectly good intentions, we make a big mistake when we assume that "in our unequal society there is a direct relationship between policy intentions and policy results." As Apple emphatically notes, "There isn't" (202).

10. Evidence that Apple is correct is all around us in every field of public policy; for example, the unintended consequences (or "blowback") of recent U.S. foreign policy vividly highlight the chasm between ostensible intentions and real world results. Yet, while much of *Educating the "Right" Way* is devoted to a detailed analysis of the problems inherent in the right's educational policies, Apple is also at pains throughout to remind his readers that his goal is not only to expose the flaws in the forces of conservative modernization, but also (drawing on Gramsci) "to show the elements of 'good sense' as well as 'bad sense' in [the right's] criticisms of some aspects of formal education" (32-33). Apple argues that we must find those aspects of the right's critique that actually connect to the reality of our lives, and then show how progressive reforms will do more to improve education than will those being pushed by the right. Instead of becoming despondent over the right's success in restructuring public education to suit its vision and values, Apple encourages us to see the right's success as a reason for hope. As Apple writes, "If the right can do this, why can't we?" (194). Answering his own question, Apple sketches an agenda for progressive education reform that includes making critical pedagogy more practical and empirical, publishing research results more quickly and more widely, forming tactical alliances between right and left where there's common ground, and providing good, practical solutions to the age-old question every teacher knows all too well: "What will I do on Monday?" (228).

11. Apple argues that educational reforms must begin with "the act of repositioning," which "in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power" (197). (As Apple notes, this approach to social change is also known to readers of Georg Lukács as "standpoint theory" or "standpoint epistemology." These theoretical tools are also closely related to John Rawls's "original position.") Viewed from this perspective, reforms that promote charter schools and voucher plans take on a whole new meaning. Instead of improving education for those with the fewest resources, these plans tend to encourage "capital flight" from poor and "underperforming" schools, leaving the most disadvantaged children even further behind.

12. Failing to fully empathize with the least among us, the forces of conservative modernization ask all the wrong questions, such as: How do we raise scores and grades and get our kids to know more "facts"? and How can we prepare our children to get "good" jobs so that they can make "good" money? These starting points lead to predictable ends: more testing and teaching to tests, more rote recitation, and, ultimately, more students unable to cope well with the unpredictable and ever-changing realities of life in the real world where the "facts" don't always come neatly packaged in well-designed textbook examples. These ends also inevitably produce students who care little about learning and only about the test score or dollar sign at the end of every assignment, class, or life choice. "How is this going to help me get or do a job?" students often ask, as if getting or doing a job is the only reason for going to school (which, for many on the right, is, unfortunately, true). According to Apple, we'll get better results if we start with better questions, such as: How do we teach our children to think and learn? or What does it mean to live a good and fulfilling life? or How can we help every member of society accomplish that? Starting with these questions will lead to very different answers, and to solutions to our educational quandaries that are more in line with a world that values something beyond consumer satisfaction and material wealth.

13. From the perspective of many educators, the general trends Apple describes are our everyday experience. However, Apple's map of the current terrain of U.S. education policy and his suggestions for how we should approach redrawing it should give us all pause as we consider our own roles as educators and researchers. In concrete terms, this means we must be careful how we respond the next time we hear the latest report saying that students study less to get higher grades than ever. For those of us who are quick to denounce things like "grade inflation" or the lack of knowledge our students seem to bring to our classrooms, Apple's book stands as a cautionary warning. While many of us might agree that our schools are not producing the results we'd like to see, the ominous danger in jumping on the standards and grade reform bandwagons is that those bandwagons are being driven by the right, and they're taking public education straight to market. Once there, our schools will be squarely in the right's territory, and we'll have to work harder than ever to turn them around. With the passage of the NCLB Act, the challenge has become that much more difficult.