

Globalization, Mission, and the Latest Development of Critical Educational Studies: An Interview with Professor Michael W. Apple

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Received: July 2, 2023

Accepted: July 26, 2023

Published: September 30, 2023

To cite this article: HU Pingping & Michael W. Apple (2023). Globalization, Mission, and the Latest Development of Critical Educational Studies: An Interview with Professor Michael W. Apple. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(3), 170–176, DOI: [10.53789/j.1653-0465.2023.0303.020](https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2023.0303.020)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2023.0303.020>

Abstract: Globalization is the third stage in the development of Professor Apple’s critical educational studies, which is also called “the third trilogy.” In this interview, Professor Apple first elaborated on the reasons for his taking globalization into account. Then, he told the story of the family and social missions he had undertaken as a critical scholar/activist. Finally, he introduced the latest developments in critical educational studies, claiming that critical educational studies are now in a period of transition because many studies are quite fragmented. The solution to this problem is what he called the theory of “decentered unities.” He suggested that critical scholars should pay more attention to intersectionality. When they are examining the various dynamics, they should try to look at the interconnections of all these dynamics.

Keywords: globalization; mission; decentered unities; intersectionality

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1 Globalization during the Stage of the Third Trilogy

H (HU): Hi, Professor Apple, thank you for sparing the time for the interview. In recent years, you published some books about globalization or global issues during the stage of the third trilogy, such as *Globalizing education: Policies, pedagogies & politics* (Apple, & Kenway, & Singh, 2005), *Global crises, social justice, and education* (Apple, 2010) with which many scholars are not very familiar. Could you tell us something about them? And how are they related to your other works of that period?

A: Sure. I have been lucky enough that many of my books have been translated into many languages. And that means I spent a lot of time in other countries. South Korea, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, England, Norway, Slovenia. These are the whole range of countries that I have now been asked to speak in and to learn from. One of the things that drive me intellectually is to build a theory that works not just in the United States, but in other countries. And that means I must be very open to being criticized and to being taught about where my theory is strong and where my theory is weak. So, as I began to understand the issues around neoliberalism, as an example, and the movement towards privatization throughout the world, it became increasingly important for me to look carefully at places that have different relationships between the state, economy, and education. Because of that, I began to see that the nature of the state became crucial. I had always been involved in the theory of the state, and the relationship of education to the economy. One of the things that I was very interested in when I wrote *Education and power* (Apple, 1982) was theories of transformation and mediation, how pressures from the outside affect schooling. And it became increasingly clear to me that the nature of the state was crucial. There may be neoliberal policies that are worldwide, with a focus increasingly on privatization, a focus on the connections between schools and the economy. The central government in the United States covers 7% of these schools' budget. That means local capital is crucial in the United States. And national capital can have communities fight against each other to lower taxes, recruit businesses, to come to their school districts or their states. So, there are different power relations and different ways in which neoliberalism works. I also had to begin to think about the states, not just in their relationship to capital, but what is their relationship to minority groups, and to different ethnic groups. Also, it's not just capital and cultural traditions, and it's religious traditions now that are often increasingly powerful in the world. Now, I have written about religious movements on the curriculum in the United States in *Educating the "right" way* (Apple, 2006). Well, now I was going to India and other places. I am seeing patterns, patterns in which there is a very vibrant powerful anti-Muslim movement in India. In Brazil where fundamentalist Christians are increasingly more powerful. And a strong fundamentalist Christian movement growing in Latin America. So, I have to begin to say, well, this now is very complicated. I now realized there were similarities across nations, but differences. The global then became very important for me to think about curriculum, about policy. And then in all these nations, there is more testing and more struggles over testing, over efficiency, over PISA scores. Several districts in Seoul say, "You must move here because this is where the

best test scores are.” Even though in many places in Korea, there is too much testing, there is now even more pressure from middle-class people to have more testing. So that’s the same in the United States. And it’s the same in Norway, in Sweden, in Germany, in England.

H: That means there are a lot of similarities as well as differences despite the different countries.

A: Exactly.

H: What do you think can account for the similarities, as we know the differences are because of the different country characteristics.

A: Well, there are worldwide movements around neoliberalism. So that is global. But that is appropriated in different ways in different countries. Neoliberalism provides mechanisms that say we want more testing, more often, and more measurement. So that is worldwide. But new economies require more middle-class growth, and more competition among many people because there are many more factories and many more businesses that require computer skills and technical knowledge. So that’s the argument in *Education and power* (Apple, 1982). So, I haven’t lost that. Now there is much more emphasis on education for mass mobility to the middle class. That is, people are now investing in their futures. So now we have neoliberalism, having a marriage with a new middle class, an increasingly affluent middle class who depend on education for advancement and put immense pressure on schools. We can see that in India where parents have climbed buildings where tests are being given. It’s very funny and tragic at the same time because this is truly high stakes. I have to understand this and I want the best for my children as well. It is ethical to want the best for your children, but it’s not ethical to cheat. So, we have this very puzzling situation of an alliance between capital, the state, and a rapidly mobilizing new middle class. There are similarities but there are also differences. But the same hegemonic forms are there. The question is which ones are more powerful. So, for all of these, I have to take into account the global stuff. Here is another reason. I want to be taught. That means that I must listen very carefully to multiple voices, and that is crucial to me. Because whether I like it or not, and I do like it, my work has been translated all over the world. And that gives me a moral obligation to understand the rest of the world too. And one of the most important elements of critical pedagogy is that a teacher must sometimes be a learner. So, I welcome the criticism of my work, provided that it is respectful. To be global means you must also respect people who disagree.

2 Mission and Family Responsibility

H: It seems that you never stopped working hard and writing although you have been officially retired since May 2017. What motivated you to continue working so hard as a critical scholar even after retirement when other people would usually enjoy living a peaceful life?

A: Well, here I have a lesson from my parents. My parents never finished secondary school on time. My mother never finished secondary school. My father finished secondary school many years later. Now the reason I say this is, I mentioned I come from a family of printers. And that meant the written word was central in my

family. I come from a communist and socialist family. And my father once said to me the following and this is the most important thing that he has ever said to me. And it reminded me of the entire family. I come from a poor working-class family, and the entire family sacrificed for me to go to college. And then they sacrificed for me to become a teacher. And there was one time when I finished a book, I was beginning to get a little cynical for the book had won an award. It was *Educating the "right" way* (Apple, 2006). It won the best book of the year from AERA, the American Educational Research Association. The book won many awards, and I was happy, but I was beginning to wonder whether my work was making a difference. That is, I was critically analyzing things. The story is very important to answer your question. And I went to see my father, and I had to talk to someone about this because I remembered when I was teaching elementary school, and I taught the child to read, I knew I did that. I knew I changed someone's life. That's what gives teachers joy. And I wasn't certain that all of the books, all of the awards, and I had gotten already several honorary doctorates from universities throughout the world, whether my ego was getting in the way, whether what was important or what had become important to me was winning awards, not changing the world. And I told my father this. And he looked at me and got angry. He said this was very disrespectful. "Your mother, and I, and the entire family sacrificed for you. You are doing what we always said was important. Your job is to continue doing that to pay us back for our sacrifices". That's very emotional. So even when I say it now, I get very tense. But it's the most important thing in my life that I must pay back the sacrifices that many people have made so that I can write and speak and teach. I may be retired because of health things, and I miss teaching. It was a sacrifice to give that up. But I also want to take very seriously my father's brilliant statement "Never stop teaching". So, my task is to continue the struggle. And so, there are many ways of doing that. One is to teach classes. I am not doing that as much. But I am lecturing. I am writing. And I think when I die, there will be a computer keyboard in my hand. I hope so. Not hope that I would die, but I am always thinking and rethinking. And as long as I have something to say about the world, I must let the world teach me and I must teach the world.

H: Thank you. So, your motivation comes not only from your family's responsibility but also from social responsibility.

A: Exactly, yes.

H: And this seems to be one of the tasks you mentioned as a critical scholar. Among all the 9 tasks of the critical scholar/activist in the book *Can education change society* (Apple, 2013), which one or ones do you think are the most important? And why?

A: This is hard because it depends on the situation. The first task of any critical scholar and activist is, to tell the truth. And there are times when you can't do other things. Everything else starts there. So, before you can tell it, you have to do the research. You have to do the listening.

H: Does it mean that to bear witness to negativity, to say things honestly, to tell the truth, is the precondition of all the other tasks?

A: Yes. But I understand. I think it would be arrogant for me to tell people what risks they should take. Let

me give one example of this. A number of my students are in places where they are strong feminists. They are very angry about the way women are treated. But there are nations where women are given almost no rights to speak. They are widows or divorced, and their salary is the only thing keeping their parents and children alive. My job is not to tell them they are wrong. My job is to work with them to change their lives and to support them with international support. This is hard stuff, but my position is I can't tell people what to do unless I do it myself.

3 The Latest Development in Critical Educational Studies

H: Could you share with us some of the latest developments in critical educational studies now?

A: Yes. This is a difficult question because of what used to be called critical educational studies, and there is a debate about where its borders are, what's in, and what's out. In *Can education change society* (Apple, 2013), I call for decentered unities. What I mean by that is the borders have to be democratically decided upon. The borders used to be class, anything that was critical in class terms, social class, economic class. That was critical education. Then feminists said they don't feel there in that. So, they say what about women's lives? And I agree with that. That's what led me to write *Teachers and texts* (Apple, 1986) about that you can't understand teaching unless you understand that it's women's work in many places. So then is the issue of race. Critical race theory becomes very important. Some of the best work in critical educational studies is now being done on race. What about sexuality? There is a lot of work done in queer theory, on lesbian and gay theories. And I want to applaud that. But there is also new work now on disability rights, on disability theory. So, we were seeing rapid growth, which is both good and bad. The good part is to be in critical education, and you need to know something about class, race, gender, and sexuality in the body and disability. That's very good because it's perfectly possible. So, we have to then begin to understand what is called intersectionality. Some of the best work now that's going on is on intersectionality, as well as outstanding work in each of these dynamics about class or gender. At the same time, I am now more sophisticated about class than I was before. In each of these, we have to make gains. Class isn't just its relationship to gender and race. It has its dynamic. We'd better be the best class analyst possible. And we need to be the best analyst of gender. Now that's the problem because now critical educational studies are quite fragmented. And there are tensions between those people who say no matter what class, economy is important, more important than anything else, or class is crucial because I remain a class theorist. So given that, we have to say each of these requires great attention. At the same time, we ask what the connections are among them. So, to be poor and a woman is different from to be wealthy and a woman. But to be a woman, to be poor or wealthy, things are that they are the same. This means that critical educational studies are in a period of transition. It understands it must find ways to connect these things. But it also must know something really powerful about each one. And it must study each one independently. Class is independent of gender, but it is dependent on gender at the same time. There are more women in poverty than men. What do we think about

that? That creates a problem for me. I am calling for a theory of decentered unities. That is, I want us to look at the interconnections of all of these dynamics. At the same time, we are open to adding more such as disability. And I want us to sacrifice some of our agendas individually for things that pull us together. I am looking for the things that bind us together. What I mean by “decentered” is we need a critical democratic discussion from all of these separate entities, separate dynamics about what is important, and what we can work on together. I’ll give one example. HIV aids activists. In some nations like South Africa, about one-quarter of the schools have almost no teachers. Some of the teachers have died of aids. It’s horrible. Some people would say that’s about the politics of sexuality. That’s not important; we’re about capitalism and class. I would say: Ok, let me tell you how these work together. The reason why many teachers have died there is that large drug companies insist on making huge amounts of money. And in South Africa, they are not reducing the cost of the medicine. So, they still charge huge amounts of money for the drugs. No one has to die in the whole world. No one has to die of aids. Some medicines stop the disease provided that you keep taking the medicines. So capital is a search for profit. It is what is causing the death of many teachers and nurses, doctors, and factory workers in South Africa. So here we have aids activists, education activists and parents who want teachers for their kids, and anti-corporate activists. There is an example of finding decentered unities. They all have separate things that they have to struggle with. I am an education activist. I want the best teachers in South African and US schools. HIV activists want medicines. And anti-corporate activists want capital to stop killing people. Okay, here is an example of a decentered unities. So that’s the stuff I want to think about. That is what I am pushing for. OK?

H: Does it mean that you began to consider more elements when you examine the relationship between power, capitalism, education, etc. ?

A: Exactly. At the same time, I don’t want to lose the power of each individual. I still think a lot about class. And I think a lot about race and gender.

H: OK, so finally, what suggestions do you have for the scholars or activists in the world who are engaging in critical education so that they can do critical education better?

A: This I can’t do in a short thing. Let me say a couple of things. First, I think it takes hard work, it’s not easy. We must read more than anyone else because we must understand more. We must not be anti-intellectual. That is, we must study. But you don’t learn just from books; you learn from listening to people, which you must understand. The real question is “critical of what”? And that means we have to think about what the relations of dominance and subordination and the struggles against it are. We can’t remain on the balcony. We can’t be up here, and not listen to the people’s understandings. I need to know about this. Now I can understand “Critical of what.” And now I understand powerfully what I might have to say about this. I want to remind people that my books are about “something” and that “something” cannot be learned only from books. That is something that answers the question of “Critical of what.” And that must be learned in real life as well. Ok?

H: Ok. Thank you very much for sharing with us the valuable information and educational ideas. I hope more of your new books will help scholars worldwide better understand what is going on in this field. Thank you



again!

A: Thank you!

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Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to sincerely thank Professor Michael Apple and all his team members for their encouragement and help during her stay at the Wisconsin University as a visiting scholar.