

**Book Review**

# Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

Michael W. Apple  
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Michael W. Apple, John Bascom Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison, United States, is one of the most influential and prolific critical educators in the world. As of August 2012, he was the author of more than 300 chapters in books, journal articles, and essays and of over 45 books. A number of the latter have appeared in multiple languages and editions. The third edition of *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*, like its predecessors published in 1993 and 1999, conveys Apple's struggle "to understand the limits and possibilities of democratic educational action" (p. ix).

This struggle involves "the immensely contradictory formations in education and elsewhere of class, race, and gender relations in politics, in economics, and in culture" (p. 202). Apple refers to his stance as "*defiant humility*" (p. xxii, emphasis in original). This

... involves defiance against the forces of dominance, capital, racism, and empire, even when, as now, they are extremely powerful and challenging them involves very real risks. And it involves humility in response to a new world and new dynamics—and to the processes of learning and unlearning that such a new world calls for. (p. xxii)

Even during this period of rightist resurgence or conservative restoration when the population is told that "what is private is now good and what is public is bad inside and outside of education" (p. 9), compromises and contradictions within the dominant right groups "almost always leave or create space for more democratic action" (p. 9).

In the newly updated preface, Apple presents a more complicated and nuanced view of what he refers to as "authoritarian populism" in Chapter 2. He now sees four elements within the dominant Right. These are neoliberals, the lead group who believe in modernizing the economy and are supporters of vouchers and choice plans, neoconservatives, supporters of a return to high standards, classics, and common knowledge and values, authoritarian populists, supporters of traditional religious principles and values, and segments of the new middle class, who are supporters of accountability and technical and managerial approaches to education.

One of the reasons that conservative analyses are on the ascendency today is that they make good sense to many people. For example, the belief that immigrants are responsible for high unemployment, that teachers' unions protect teachers at the expense of learning among students, or that parents should have a choice of school their children attend and what they are

taught. The Left must not only expose the structural roots of these phenomena, it should also learn from the Right how to use terms and provide analyses that make sense to large segments of the population.

Although Apple refers to a “new world,” many of his concerns about the need for a more democratic education system have been with him for a very long time. To understand the origins of these concerns and his continuing anger at what the education system is doing to students, readers should first read the Appendix, *Education, Power and Personal Biography—An Interview*. Apple reasonably suggests that among the experiences that helped him understand why he moved in a certain direction, such as to the Left, the most salient are that he was born into a poor working class family with leftist parents, he attended two state teachers’ colleges at night and worked as a union printer and truck driver during the day, he became a teacher in an urban minority school district in Paterson, New Jersey, and served as president of a teachers’ union. He attended graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, New York, where he said that he was able “to link my own educational and political history with an entire range of radical literature and to ground myself with it intellectually as well” (p. 200).

In addition to the new preface, the third edition of *Official Knowledge* contains updates to the preface of the second edition and to eight of the 10 chapters. The most significant change involves the addition of two new chapters. Chapter 9 differs from the others in that while they focus on primary and secondary levels of education, this one focuses on higher education. Apple’s views on the relative autonomy of culture enable him to suggest that religious movements may have an increasingly greater impact on knowledge and teaching in the United States and in many other countries. His theoretical views supporting the relative autonomy of culture place him at odds with classical Marxists who view culture as part of the superstructure and, therefore, a reflection of the economic substructure.

Apple goes on to describe the current global impact of neoliberalism on universities. These include a shift from public to private support from individuals and corporations, an emphasis on economically productive disciplines in the natural and applied sciences at the expense of the humanities, a shift from full- to part-time faculty, and from grants to loans. In combination these shifts result in a greater impact of economic factors on higher education. Students and parents stress the importance of return on investment and pressure universities to offer career oriented programs, and faculty increasingly pursue short-term research projects that conform to the expectations of corporate sponsors rather than long-term research projects that may have little or no foreseeable market value.

As one might expect, given his union and working class background, Apple argues that many critics have focused on the faculty and have neglected the impact of working conditions, outsourcing, and pay cuts on support staff like clerical workers, building maintenance and food preparation staff, and security personnel. In addition, many progressives fail to recognize “the hidden labor that enables academics to do their teaching” (p. 177) and that these workers are often women, immigrants, and racial and ethnic minorities. These observations are consistent with my experiences in administrative positions for 25 years at a community college and in full-time teaching positions at two public four-year colleges for 10 years.

This discussion is preceded in Chapter 8 by Apple’s story of his Friday Seminar. This seminar that has been meeting for over 40 years brings him together with his doctoral students, activists, and visiting scholars from other institutions and other countries. They explore ways to “alter the dominant politics of culture and the ways pedagogy and curriculum are now carried on” (p. 166).

In Chapter 6, written with Susan Jungck, Apple illustrates how teachers reacted to the introduction of a computer literacy unit in every seventh grade math class in a school district. Some of the teachers resisted this imposition. Although this resistance was quite modest, for Apple it is a positive sign that official directives must gain acceptance before they are implemented.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are a trio of extremely well developed and informative essays where Apple examines the commercial and cultural conflicts over the construction of official knowledge in education. For instance, in Chapter 3 he documents the history of debates and conflicts over what texts should be adopted and what narratives they should contain. The role of the state government in adopting and regulating such texts, especially in the southern part of the United States, is documented in Chapter 4. Traditions of racism and a hierarchical view of society help to account for the relatively greater strength of the state in determining what is official knowledge in the South. In Chapter 5 Apple describes the adoption of a commercially produced television news program, Channel One, by thousands of schools throughout the United States. Rather than the state, here business is working with school systems in an attempt to define official knowledge through this program. The existence of such a relationship reinforces the ideology that public education is not a public responsibility and opens the door for private influence.

Rather than use technology such as computers and television to prepare students for the work world, Apple attempted to use film-making as a means of encouraging students to tell their own stories and to view themselves as creative and active agents. He tells this story in Chapter 7. He and a number of his students offered a film-making course at a state-run corrections institution for girls. As students began to show enthusiasm, pride, and trust, the program was killed. It was deemed “interesting” but “it was in essence a frill” (p. 155). Apple was informed by the administrative and educational staff of the institution that the students had to get back to studying official knowledge such as remedial reading and life skills courses. In sum, “[t]alents were uncovered. Joys and possibilities were made visible, only to be once again denied” (p. 155). Apple leaves it up to the reader to determine the extent to which this program was a success. In terms of its limited scope, he makes the valuable point that effective education change must start with the local context; “After all, this is where we act” (p. 150).

In the second of the new chapters, Chapter 10, the book’s final chapter, Apple welcomes “the very public radical change in ideological and educational positions by someone who was one of the most visible figures promoting the rightist agenda in education for decades” (p. 184). This is Diane Ravitch, the public historian of education. Although he believes that Ravitch is late in her conversion, he welcomes her more progressive views about unions, privatization, standardized testing, multiplication of charter schools, and excessive accountability.

Overall, Apple has done an outstanding job of demonstrating that official knowledge in education is socially constructed. At the same time, he has done an equally outstanding job of demonstrating how with a mixture of anger, compassion, theory, and practice, a lot of help from friends and allies, and examples from opponents, activists can help challenge that official knowledge. The message of *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* is quite clear. We must be willing and able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of current educational policies and practices and we must be equally willing and able to resist and replace those policies and practices. To his immense credit, Apple has delivered this message in straightforward, understandable, and, with rare exception, jargon-free language.

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