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Introduction



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Why Emerging Perspectives and New Departures?

The title of this book does not pretend to be pompous but just to recognize the reality of drastic departures in sociology of education today. What marks the development of the discipline of sociology of education is a large number of emerging perspectives resulting from the growing scholarship of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. However, we decided against coining a catchy term to encapsulate with elegance and precision these new departures because we are not in the business of creating another cottage industry in sociology of education. Yet, we are witnessing the emergence of various different theoretical and methodological strands in sociology of education which drastically depart from the established tradition. Philosophically, one may argue that these new perspectives criticize the old perspectives, retain what is valuable, and improve their analysis, in a kind of sociological *Aufhebung*,¹ marking the latter part of this century.

Three elements stand out in these new departures and emerging perspectives. First, in sociology of education there is the emergence of new epistemological approaches which differ sharply from positivism and empiricism. Second, the sociology of education is pressed to confront the dilemmas posed by the dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism, or poststructuralist forms of theoretical representation, and its implications for the scholarship of class, race, and gender. Finally, the sociology of education

is asked to confront the new risks and challenges that these new theoretical developments pose for educational research, and particularly for the future of public education in the United States and elsewhere. Hence, this introduction serves the dual purposes of outlining these problems and introducing the different chapters of the book.

The Logic of Explanation in the Sociology of Education: New Departures?

Sociology of education has come a long way from the Durkheimian foundational suggestion that to study education is to study how the older generations transmit the culture to the new generations. It has also moved beyond the new sociology of education approach inspired by the reception of Karl Mannheim's critique of knowledge as "a tool in the struggle for status and power" (Wexler 1987, 26). The new perspectives are also moving beyond the question of school knowledge, linking the sociology of knowledge tradition with the classroom-based "pedagogical interest of the curricularists in both classroom interaction and school knowledge" (Wexler 1987, 35). The task has been magnified. The functions traditionally assigned to education—particularly to the schooling of promoting skills, cognitive training, and preparation for citizenship—are either becoming obsolete in the view of some scholars or at least put into question by changes in the process of work and key dynamics in educational environments (Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994).

Additionally, the emerging perspectives in sociology of education have left the bedrock of the East-West confrontation (that marked so much of the scholarship in sociology during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) where Marxism and neo-Marxism were seen as challengers to the established positivist and structural-functionalist paradigm. Indeed, the new perspectives in sociology of education have also come a long way in understanding the limitations of the normal positivist science implied in much of the traditional number-crunching and hypothesis-testing scholarship. There is still an important gap between the new perspectives in sociology of education and its ability to impact educational policy formation and the practices in school settings. But there is always a beginning for everything.

**From The Logic of Positivism in
Educational Planning to Emerging
Perspectives in the Sociology of Education**

The logic of educational planning is closely linked with the model of normal social science, dominated by the epistemological paradigm of positivism (Wallerstein 1991a; Morrow and Brown 1994). Explanations are based on the possibility that establishing regularities can be differentiated from accidental generalizations or laws. However, work in the social sciences shows that the social sciences, in sharp contrast with the natural sciences, face a principle of ambiguity. Many events, given the open-ended and eventual idiosyncratic nature of social life, do not conform to a rule of universality and hence invalidate the rule, or at least do not make the notion of universality a precondition for scientific work but another "contested terrain." To account for this, conventional sociology of education has resorted to statistical probabilistic models rather than generalization of laws or law-like explanations. Laws, and law-like models of explanations, should be differentiated from merely empirical generalizations which address the issue of how to move from empirical observations to definitions of causality.

The problem is how to identify causal explanations without relying on interpretations. The simple approach to this problem is to think of theoretical statements as hypothetical deductive postulations; that is, logical constructions rather than real entities (Bredo and Feinberg 1982, 21). The question then is whether it is possible to sharply differentiate, as a logical distinction, between theory and observation, a principle which has been challenged in the most recent work in sociology of education. Likewise, how to differentiate theory from method, considering that a great deal of the empirical work that is being developed in the recent perspectives in sociology of education is theory-driven research, relying on case studies.

The new scientific models in sociology of education do not consider scientific work as separated from its theoretical foundations and universally applicable. The debates among paradigms and approaches, ranging from modernist to postmodernist perspectives and structuralists to poststructuralist models, indicate that any pretension to establish a sense of certainty and analytical precision in a world, which is increasingly unpredictable and imprecise, may be pompous and even naive (Samoff 1990; Morrow and Torres 1995; Morrow and Torres, in press). Indeed, if anything, the new

perspectives in sociology of education address the understanding of reality as a concrete totality with a great degree of variability and volatility. Hence, the challenge is to traditional notions of linear and evolutionary concepts of knowledge, around which not only deterministic inferences and deductive conclusions are based, but also empirical foundations are organized.

In addition to a more flexible and even playful notion of science, empirical events, and theoretical analysis, the new perspectives in sociology of education tend to downplay the normative distinction between value judgments and empirical judgments. The new emerging perspectives employ more open-ended scientific models, trying to search less for patterns of regularity, universality, and reproducible results than for representations of the dynamics of transformation of complex totalities that cannot be parceled out into distinct domains. Hence, the new perspectives in sociology of education, despite their reliance on case studies and theory-driven methodologies, are heavily interdisciplinary and comparative. In this context, there is no specific call for specialized methods or means to identify laws or law-like processes.

To be sure, there is an understanding that reality shows some recurrent patterns and regularities. These patterns and regularities can be studied at different levels which cannot be easily dissociated, including meta-theories, middle-range theories, and empirical research. None of these levels of scientific work can be easily differentiated, nor can they be pursued as totally independent instances. They are, however, moments in the division of labor of the research process where grand-theorizing, specific, context-bound theories, data collection, and data analysis of discrete data can be singled out as discrete steps in the research process. Yet, there is a constant iteration in all these moments, with the "empirical" moment deconstructing the "meta-theoretical" or "theoretical" moment and vice versa, in an endless succession of iterations and revisions throughout the whole research process. Contrary to the old scientific tendency, which emphasizes disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary work, the new perspectives in sociology of education tend to be interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and comparative in nature (Morrow and Torres 1995; Liebman and Paulston 1994; Paulston and Liebman 1994).

These new emerging perspectives in sociology of education consider that reality is constituted through nonlinear events and through profound discontinuities in real life phenomena. This, of course, questions traditional notions of objectivity. In the new and

emerging perspectives, the notion of social objectivity is not a premise of “good” research, but an agonic process to be hoped for; it involves in a dialectical process both the researchers and the so-called research object. Objectivity becomes another goal to be achieved through processes of iteration, multiple checks and balances throughout the whole research process, multiple processes of intersubjective exchanges among researchers and population “studied,” and the quality of the intellectual analysis in decodifying the different processes of representation (and hence, languages, voices, identities) of the people involved in the research.

Broadening the notion of objectivity includes a critical reconsideration of the notion of subjectivity as an asset rather than a liability in the research project. The subjectivity and singularity of the researcher cannot be ignored when attempting to achieve a notion of a universal, clearly established, and procedurally bound notion of social objectivity which can be easily attained through the implementation of methodological rules—as if the subject matter will remain unpolluted. In short, in social research there are not ready-made “recipes” which can be thought of as simple, easy to apply, and universal; a set of hygienical rules which, in turn, can be implemented in a laboratory-like, environmentally controlled model.

An important example of these dilemmas is the discussion on race in educational research. Research shows that race is difficult to talk about, especially in large groups and for fear of being misconstrued (Cooper et al. 1994). Investigating race relations involves questions of power, that is, not only the differential power of researchers over the researched population, but also the differential power of university researchers from different races, ages, and occupational positions (Gitlin 1994). All make the discussion on race (and undoubtedly any discussion involving class and gender themes) more complex (Cooper et al. 1994). Self-reflective behavior by researchers, addressing how difficult it is to investigate issues of race, even when the research team is made of multicultural perspectives and experiences, leads a group of researchers to spell out their own dilemmas about race, gender, age, and reputation and how that affects the methodology and substantive part of their own research (Cooper et al. 1994). Some findings from the literature suggest that for the study of nonsensitive, nonracial issues, the race of the researcher matters very little, and has no bearing on the research quality of outcomes. Yet, some argue, for instance, that “White researchers tend to use a methodological approach that is hierarchical. Their approach manipulates those being interviewed as objects

and dictates that there should be as little human contact as possible and no emotional involvement. The danger of this approach to research lies in the feelings of exploitation it creates within minority communities and the distorted knowledge that results" (Cooper et al. 1994, 7).

These are some of the reasons that when trying to understand reality "as it is" or as it "appears to be," the practitioners of these emerging perspectives in sociology of education are more skeptical than their more conventional counterparts in assuming that science and ideology are clearly distinct, potentially antagonistic, and certainly irreconcilable practices in research. On the contrary, while agonizing to establish as many checks and balances as possible to understand reality as a social construction, they do not deposit their trust in scientific practices which are clearly differentiable and discernible through the systematic application of the scientific method and certain ethical and epistemological precepts regarding the separation of value judgments and empirical judgments. The notion of the "empirical" reality thus appears as a much more complex theoretical notion for sociologists employing these emerging perspectives in sociology of education.

There are, of course, several policy implications related to this new epistemological criteria. Educational planners schooled in the positivistic social sciences argue that there is a fundamental social order underlying the dynamic of things themselves. This order is discernible through the methodical and rigorous application of a specific method of social science. This method must reflect the premises of all scientific methods according to the model of natural sciences; that is, a method based on foundationalism, objectivity, the search for control and manipulation of variables, experimentalism (or quasi-experimentalism), universality, and rationality (Silos 1995). This scientific method permits the discovery of regularities which can be measured and quantified, applied in experimental or quasi-experimental analyses, or used to study correlations, causalities, or manipulated (controlled) in future analyses. The goal of social science is to develop a set of arguments which study causal relations, and, when possible, these detected patterns or regularities can be applied like laws or empirical guidelines. These laws can be summed up in brief, concise, simple phrases; they can even be presented mathematically and used—previous to empirical exam and proof and subject to the falsifiability of the hypothesis—to manipulate and indeed plan the process of development of social reality. More complicated analyses trying to understand the historical nuances of things, their interre-

lations, and the theoretical multidisciplinary analysis of numerous observations which may make the analysis problematic, tentative or uncertain, are rejected as unnecessary (Samoff 1990). Or, if they are considered pertinent in theoretical terms, they are considered lacking usefulness for planning, which is based on well-defined problems, with a sense of urgency and immediacy, and motivated not by theoretical reasons, but by actions which quickly and efficiently resolve specific and pressing problems (Torres 1996[a]).

A central claim of the new perspectives in sociology of education is the need to think of reality as ever changing with a number of dimensions or layers which constitute independent spheres but share intertwined dynamics. Hence, the emphasis on the scholarship of class, race, and gender as an integrated set of theories is not only facing the challenge of postmodernism, but also moving beyond the political immobilism of many postmodernist positions.

The Scholarship of Class, Race, and Gender: Integrated Perspectives?

R. Morrow and C. A. Torres' work (Morrow and Torres 1995) advanced the proposition that the scholarship of race, class, and gender as integrated perspectives has emerged from the tradition of critical modernism, and, as such, constitutes a response to the excesses of postmodernism.

As it has been discussed elsewhere (Torres 1996[c]; Morrow and Torres 1995), postmodernism argues that there is a "new" epoch in society and thus a new cultural paradigm. Some of the key sociological implications of postmodern society and culture can be summarized as involving various processes of fragmentation as follows: (1) a decentering and fragmentation of power that calls into question theories of domination and hegemony; (2) an uncoupling of material interests and subjective expressions in collective action, resulting in the shift of the demands of social movements from distributional to cultural-ethical issues; (3) the emergence of heterogeneity as opposed to the homogenization that has been previously characteristic of the world system; and (4) a growing distrust and disillusionment with democracy, resulting from the fragmentation of political communities and identities.

Hence, postmodernism argues that power has become decentered and fragmented in contemporary societies. Thus, to suggest the notion of a ruling elite, conducting its business with decisive

influence in the formulation of public policy or education, will obscure—in a postmodern view—the multiplicity of powers that interact in society and its policy outcomes (Bowles and Gintis 1986). How does one define power that is fragmented and lacking an unifying principle? Does this undermine the nonsynchronous, parallelist conception of the relations of class, gender, and race in cultural reproduction? Does, in short, the fragmentation of power undermine conceptual frameworks and “grand narratives” such as of hegemony and domination (Torres 1996[c])?

The so-called death of grand narratives poses political and epistemological questions. For Michel Foucault, truth depends on strategies of power rather than epistemological criteria. This is a central concern for a theory of the state and power. Does this mean that if we rely on skeptical poststructuralist accounts we cannot define some “master signifier,” that helps us to ground, ethically and politically political action? Otherwise we cannot validate *ex ante* any policy recommendation in education from a theoretical standpoint, nor can we validate *ex post facto* the same principles for political action. The most obvious implication is the lack of direction and the absence of a political program. One possible consequence of this is “a false radicalism which engages in constant but ultimately meaningless transgression of all defended viewpoints” (Hulme 1986, 6). This political activism highlights David Harvey’s concern that we may end up with philosophical and social thought, which is characterized by ephemerality, collage, fragmentation, and dispersion (Harvey 1989).

Political activism based on “false radicalism” doesn’t challenge the fragmented politics of divergent special and regional interest groups. This situation, added to the secular, internecine struggles of progressive groups, the structural and historical action of the capitalist state, and actions from the Right, undermines the communities of learning and political action, hindering the ability of progressive groups to challenge differential access to resources (influence, power, and wealth), of elites and dominant classes in education. This “transgressive” activism may challenge the narratives of neo-conservative and neo-liberal projects in education, which is not a minor accomplishment considering the power of the “common sense” narrative of the Right, but it offers few if any guidelines for practical politics. The problem is compounded when social subjects are considered to be politically decentered (Torres 1996[c]; Morrow and Torres 1995).

The notion of the decentering of social subjects implies an uncoupling of the close link between objective social interests and subjective expressions (e.g., class consciousness) assumed by much

modernist social theory. The resulting contradictory loyalties of individuals increasingly undermines a central organizing principle of struggle. One oft-noted consequence of this relative uncoupling of social position and political action is that the “new” social movements are more concerned with cultural (and ethical-political) demands than distributional ones. Decentered individuals are not supposed to have “class consciousness” in classical terms, yet they strive to achieve “self-actualization” in Anthony Giddens’ social psychological analysis (Giddens 1991; Morrow and Torres 1995).

Postmodernism argues that nation-states are now being dimmed in the context of a growing interdependent world, and in the context of more local struggles. Yet, as Immanuel Wallerstein argues, the history of the (capitalist) world system has been a historical trend towards cultural heterogeneity rather than cultural homogenization. Thus, the fragmentation of the nation in the world system is happening at the same time that there is a tendency towards cultural differentiation or cultural complexity, that is, globalization (Wallerstein 1991[b], 96). Globalization and regionalization seem to be dual processes occurring simultaneously. This fact has not been overlooked by certain strands of postmodernism, providing an avenue to understand the simultaneous rise of ethnicity and nationalisms with globalization, not necessarily as contradictory but related phenomena.

In this increasingly more complexly organized multicultural and multilingual world system, the bases of traditional forms of political community have been eroded. There is an emerging theory and practice of distrust in democracy. Hence, the previous models of democratic checks and balances, separation of powers, and the notion of democratic accountability no longer work, not even at the level of formal rather than substantive democracy. Distrust in democracy and democratic theory as part of a modernist discourse cannot be associated to all postmodernist strands per se. However, it poses problems for the changing patterns of power in education, and raises concerns about the narrowing of the meaning of democracy. The redefinition of the meaning of democracy needs to be extricated from the forming patterns of social regulation because: “Not only have the interests represented been narrowed; participation exists within a restricted range of problems and possibilities” (Popkewitz 1991, 215).

Any redefinition of the notion of democracy situates the school at the center of the modernist-Enlightenment project, again. Postmodernism would argue, however, that the ethical, substantive and procedural elements of democratic theory should be re-examined

considering postmodern culture. The challenge for educators, parents, students and policymakers is to think critically about the failures of the past and about the myriad of exclusionary practices that still pervade the process of schooling—hence bringing to the forefront issues of power and domination, class, race, and gender. The validity of the notion of instrumental rationality guiding school reform should also be examined because it gives attention to administration, procedures, and efficiency as *the* prime criteria for change and progress, and because it assumes that there is a common framework structuring the experience of *all* people (Popkewitz 1987, 335–354; Torres 1996[b]; Popkewitz, in this book).

Thus, a central problem with postmodernist perspectives is that by ignoring the critical contributions of critical modernism, they fall into the trap of depoliticizing the process of human empowerment and liberation. Henry A. Giroux poses the problem bluntly: “The flight from foundationalism is at the same time often a flight from politics” (Giroux 1988, 61). Giroux continues: “Various brands of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and neo-pragmatism have declared war on all the categories of transcendence, certainty, and foundationalism. First principles are now seen as mere relics of history. The unified subject, long the bulwark of both liberal and radical hopes for the future, is now scattered amid the valorizing of decentering processes. Moreover, the attack on foundationalism has resulted in a one-sided methodological infatuation with deconstructing not simply particular truths, but the every notion of truth itself as an epistemological category.” (Giroux 1988, 61)

In criticizing postmodernism, Jürgen Habermas’s ethical rationalism provides the basis of a powerful counterattack against the flight of postmodern philosophy from ethics and politics, and constitute, to be sure, a central referent for emerging perspectives in sociology of education (Morrow and Torres, in press).

The Risks and the Challenges Ahead

Risks

Theory is a mode of discourse which goes beyond mapping (Paulston, 1996). Theory also goes beyond description, even beyond “thick description” and “history from below” discourses as proposed by advocates of educational ethnographies. Theory also goes beyond what advocates of the history of the subordinate social sectors would

suggest, and certainly beyond the type of theory advocated by hypothetical-deductive approaches. R. Morrow and D. D. Brown have shown that “the narratives of scientific methodology are characterized by stories obsessed with questions about empirical evidence, proof and validity” (Morrow and Brown 1994, 40).

Many of the new perspectives in sociology of education try to tell us a story; a story full of colorful characters, with a narrative thread which should be unveiled with as much detail as possible. In telling this story, the new perspectives try to advance a set of theories which, through the synthetic and analytical moments of empirical research, can be useful to illustrate the institutional educational processes involved in the story. In so doing, through iterations and critical analysis, the recent production of these emerging perspectives helps to offer a sequence of dynamic photographs; a magnifier to show the interrelatedness of interactive dimensions, and multifaceted or multifarious nature of educational phenomena. While not discarding the need for multivariate analysis, new perspectives in sociology of education are more cautious—even skeptical at times—of empirical data as defined in the traditional paradigms.

Traditional positivist forms of explanation are suspected by critics of making a linkage between theory and data which is too simplistic. Positivistic analysis is also suspected of containing a naive set of assumptions about the evolving nature of reality, and of reflecting indeed limited objectivity in the data that was supposed to represent, as a proxy, even the most tenuous contours of social reality. The question then is how to improve upon traditional empirical research involving the “descriptive and analytical (formal) languages through which social phenomena are interpreted and explained” (Morrow and Brown 1994, 41).

These criticisms notwithstanding, there is also a serious risk to cast aside the need to obtain data, any data in the traditional formal language, and to rely almost exclusively on empirical research of impressionistic accounts, detailed descriptions which do not transcend the facts as presented in the evolving narratives of the informants, or stories that although socially constructed cannot replace the need for further structural analysis and criticism. Some data, even with all its limitations, is better than no data at all. That is the reason that a number of researchers, working with new perspectives in sociology of education, are worried about much of the postmodernist speculations. Many postmodernists analysis constitute simply a rehashing of evolving theoretical discourses, with sophisticate and yet, sometimes, extremely simplistic and logically contradictory set

of observations, or even patronizing political suggestions. These risks bring us to the challenges ahead for the new perspectives in sociology of education.

Challenges

These emerging perspectives in sociology of education, almost by definition, have made notions of social justice, the promotion of goals of diversity, multiculturalism, and detracking (as an attempt to avoid school resegregation) central landmarks of their normative work (Wells and Oakes in this book). In addition, they have resorted to cultural studies in education that attempt to deal with areas virtually ignored by traditional researchers (Giroux in this book). Likewise, they have emphasized the importance and resilience of social movements as progressive responses to the bureaucratic behavior of the capitalist state (Apple and Oliver in this book). In striving to achieve these practical and political agendas, the emerging perspectives in sociology of education have seen the need to integrate theories in the scholarship of class, race, and gender as a cornerstone of their contributions to the debates. An important contribution is the discussion of critical marginality as a linchpin of the scholarship of class, race, and gender (Solórzano and Villalpando in this book), and the importance of critical race theories to assess the processes of resegregation of minority students, particularly blacks in the United States (Ladson-Billings in this book). It also will contribute to the study of the dynamics of self-selection, and the structural underpinnings of the process of college choice in the United States and its implications for working class, minority students, and women (McDonough, in this book).

For these emerging perspectives, education continues to play a major role in the socialization of the citizenship, in promoting a democratic culture (Mitchell, in this book), in promoting a public sphere, and creating public intellectuals who could challenge the status quo and through their labor could offer to society, as their mirror, the criticism of its structural and procedural problems. These public intellectuals will draw from the growing scholarship of class, race, and gender, and from the difficult—even agonic process—of trying to tell a story that integrates as many elements that constitute social identities as possible, without relinquishing the power of reason to the politics of identity as the sole criteria for praxis.

In this context, a number of critical themes deserve consideration by these new emerging perspectives. Most try to defend the notion of

public education, in a properly deconstructed mode, as a precondition to solidify the social democratic pact. Several criticisms from the Right and from some currents of the Left need to be considered:

(a) Is it true that schools do not actually prepare students for a highly volatile and rapidly changing labor market? In short, can we assume that there is virtually little or no contribution of schools to workers' training?

(b) Is it true that the shared aims of citizenship education—"critical thinking" and better teaching—are in conflict with the presumed economic roles of education? In other terms, as Stanley Aronowitz suggests in several works—contrary to both radical and technocratic critiques of schooling—schools have never successfully prepared workers for specific occupations, except at the graduate level; at best, schooling is a "socializing" instrument insofar as students learn discipline and respect for authority. And, even in this respect, schooling has generally failed to socialize working-class kids whose rebellion against authority is, argue Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio (1994), among the most ubiquitous features of our time;

(c) Is it true that socializing children to respect authority, which defined the role of schools in the industrializing era, worked for some but not for others? Schools as socializers never worked for many children (take as an example the large number of pupils who attended religious or parochial schools and never practice their religion with the fervor and dedication expected). At a different level, the question is whether training in discipline and following orders is dysfunctional when post-industrial work requires people to act independently of constituted authority; and

(d) Finally, is the process of work that long has been considered by Liberal-Pluralists and Marxists as the defining human activity which defines the character of human nature, losing its ethical authority? If this is the case, this contributes to the crisis of an educational system that has defined itself in relation to the labor requirement of the social order. These arguments need to be addressed head on, and discussed critically from the emerging perspectives in sociology of education. Let us advance three critical standpoints.

First, at the level of the empirical argumentation, it is unclear that the picture that several right-wing and some left-wing critics of public education paint of the all-embracing crisis of schooling is entirely adequate. Our own research, and the research of the contributors of this book, has convinced us that there is plenty of knowledge acquisition and creation going on in the schools; that schools

are segmented with excellent schools side by side with poor scholastic schools; that while resistance to cultural knowledge may prevail in several school settings this does not carry people a long way in dealing with the complexity of capitalist society and the evolving processes of discrimination, oppression, and domination. This knowledge production takes place in a convoluted mixture where students' and teachers' resistance, emancipatory practices, bureaucratic behavior, and ideological normatives all intersect in different ways, at different times, and for different purposes. It is unclear, then, whether the picture that these standard criticisms present to us aptly and accurately describes what goes on in schools and classrooms in America and elsewhere for that matter (Wells and Oakes in this book).

Second, if there are empirical questions about knowledge acquisition, citizenship training, and human capital formation in schools, then at least what can be said about the arguments is that they rest on a set of generalizations that can be, in a democratic conversation about schooling, questioned as perhaps too catastrophic at times, and even, we are afraid, as apolitical (Torres 1996[c]).

Third, at a political and practical level, it is clear to us that people, struggling to defend public education from the attacks of traditionalists, the New Right, fundamentalist education, voucher advocates, anti-multiculturalist forces, and so forth will find the critical arguments advanced above less than persuasive, and somewhat biased toward accepting the position of the Right, which claims that public education cannot be redeemed and should be done with. There is plenty of room for social reform, social transformation, and the implementation of innovative models of teaching and learning as described in recent contributions to the reform of public education (Apple and Beane 1995; Rose 1995; Wells and Oakes, in this book). This is not a debate waged in academic circles, but part of the national debate about schools. As discussed by Peter Applebome in *The New York Times*, "a vocal core of scholars and educational revisionists has created a stir by arguing that there has been no broad decline in American education and that the notion that schools are failing miserably has as much to do with politics as reality" (*The New York Times*, Wednesday, 13 December 1995).

What these new emerging perspectives all seem to tell us is that the dream of a public education system of good quality, one which constitutes a precondition for a reasonably well-trained labor force and politically competent citizenry in late capitalist societies, is not dead. But defending ardently public education does not mean that

we are content with its present shape, form, and orientation. Yet, its demise in the hands of abrupt privatization and cultural strife will not contribute to democracy. Public education is ready to be reinvented in light of the promise of a democratic covenant, and certainly as an antidote, one of the many needed, against the deleterious trends of savage capitalist social relations. Indeed, what the new scholarship of class, race, and gender also tells us is that oppression, domination, and discrimination in schools and societies have not disappeared or gone away. If anything, oppression, discrimination, and domination have increased and appear now as a Medusa of many “cabezas.” What this scholarship for social empowerment also tells us is that there is still enough democratic energy and utopian optimism to figure out that, in the long haul, fighting for a system of public education of good quality is a good fight for the good life of children and, by implication, for all of society.

Mike Rose, in the closing pages of his much-acclaimed *Possible Lives*, has captured the spirit of the fighting political hope of the new emerging perspectives in sociology of education. It deserves to be quoted at length, as a fitting conclusion of this introduction.

My work in the classroom has mostly been with people whom our schools, public and private, have failed: working-class and immigrant students, students from nonmainstream linguistic and cultural backgrounds who didn't fit a curriculum or timetable or definition of achievement and were thereby categorized in some way as different or deficient. There are, as we have seen along this journey, long-standing social and cultural reasons for this failure of our schools, tangled, disturbing histories of discrimination, skewed perception, and protection of privilege.

And yet there were these rooms. Vital, varied, they were providing a powerful education for the children in them, many of whom were members of the very groups defined as inferior in times past and, not infrequently, in our ungenerous present. What I began to see—and it took the accumulation of diverse classrooms to help me see it—was that these classrooms, in addition to whatever else we may understand about them, represented a dynamic, at times compromised and contested, strain in American educational history: a faith in the capacity of a people, a drive toward equality and opportunity, a belief in the intimate link between mass education and a free society. These rooms were embodiments of the democratic ideal. To be sure, this democratic impulse has been undercut and violated virtually since its first articulation. Thomas Jefferson's proposal to the Virginia legislature for three years of free public schooling, for example, excluded the commonwealth's significant

number of enslaved Black children. But it has been advanced, realized in daily classroom life by a long history of educators working both within the mainstream and outside it, challenging it through workingmen's organizations, women's groups, Black schools, appropriating the ideal, often against political and economic resistance, to their own emancipatory ends.

The teachers I visited were working within that tradition. They provided example after different example of people doing public intellectual work in institutional settings, using the power of the institution to realize democratic goals for the children in their charge, and finessing, negotiating, subverting institutional power when it blocked the realization of those goals. At a time of profound disillusionment with public institutional life, these people were, in their distinct ways, creating the conditions for children to develop lives of possibility.

My hope is that these classrooms will help us imagine—and, in imaging, struggle to achieve—what schools in the public domain, and perhaps a range of public institutions, can be (Rose 1995, 412–413).

Notes

1. The notion of *Aufhebung*, the centerpiece of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, implies three different moments linked in a complementary way: in the first place “to suppress” (*wegraumen*), in the second place, to retain (*aufbewahren*), and in the third place “to sublimate” (*hinaufnehmen*).

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