

Strategic Alliance or Hegemonic Strategy? Conservatism Among the Dispossessed

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ABSTRACT This article examines a growing phenomenon—the growth of seemingly conservative sentiments among disenfranchised groups. I take as a prime example of such growth the strategic support of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies by an African American activist group, the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). At the core of my analysis is a concern about what is at stake for all of us if rightist multiculturalism succeeds in redefining what and whose knowledge is of most worth and what our social and educational policies are meant to do. I argue that no matter what one's position is on the wisdom of BAEO's strategic actions, the entire case provides a crucial example of the politics of disarticulation and re-articulation, on the ways in which social movements and alliances are formed and re-formed out of the material and ideological conditions of daily life, and of the politics of discursive re-appropriation. Thus, an analysis of such movements is important both in terms of the balance of forces and power involved in specific educational reforms, but also in terms of more general issues concerning the processes of social transformation and agency. A critical but sympathetic understanding of groups such as BAEO may enable us to avoid the essentialism and reductionism that enters into critical sociological work on the role of struggles over state policies. Further, it can provide a more nuanced sense of social actors and the possibilities and limits of strategic alliances in a time of conservative modernization.

Mapping Conservative Modernization

This is both a good and bad time in the world of educational policy. On the one hand, there have been very few periods when education has taken such a central place in public debates about our present and future. On the other hand, an increasingly limited range of ideological and discursive resources dominates the conceptual and political forms in which this debate is carried out. These debates are occurring on an uneven playing field, one in which what were formerly seen as rightist policies have now become 'commonsense' (Apple, 2000, 2001). Yet, such conservative policies have a different kind of cachet today. There is a sense that these are not only things that will protect a romantic past; these policies are now often seen as 'radical' but necessary solutions to an educational system that is out of control and is no longer responsive to the needs of 'the people'.

Thus, a new kind of conservatism has evolved and has taken center stage in many nations, one that is best seen as 'conservative modernization' (Dale, 1989, 1990; Apple, 2001). Although parts of these positions may have originated within the New Right, they are now not limited to what has traditionally been called the Right. They have been taken up by a much larger segment of government and policy-makers and, as we shall see in this article,

have even been appropriated by groups who one would least expect to do so, such as African American activists. How are we to understand this? In answering this question, while my focus here shall largely be on the USA, the tendencies I describe have implications well beyond one nation.

The concepts we use to try to understand and act on the world in which we live do not by themselves determine the answers we may find. Answers are not determined by words, but by the power relations that impose their interpretations of these concepts. Yet, there are key words that continually surface in the debates over education. These key words have complicated histories, histories that are connected to the social movements out of which they arose and in which they are struggled over today. These words have their own histories; but they are increasingly interrelated. The concepts are simple to list: markets, standards, accountability, tradition, God, and a number of others. Behind each of these topics is an assemblage of other words that have an emotional valence and that provide the support for the ways in which differential power works in our daily lives. These concepts include democracy, freedom, choice, morality, family, culture, and a number of other key concepts. And each of these in turn is intertextual. Each and every one of these is connected to an entire set of assumptions about 'appropriate' institutions, values, social relationships, and policies.

Think of this situation as something of a road map. Using one key word—markets—sends you onto a highway that is going in one direction and that has exits in some places but not others. If you are on a highway labeled market, your general direction is toward a section of the country named the economy. You take the exit named individualism that goes by way of another road called consumer choice. Exits with words such as unions, collective freedom, the common good, politics, and similar destinations are to be avoided if they are on the map at all. The first road is a simple route with one goal—deciding where one wants to go without a lot of time-wasting discussion and getting there by the fastest and cheapest method possible. There is a second route, however, and this one involves a good deal of collective deliberation about where we might want to go. It assumes that there may be some continuing deliberation about not only the goal, but also even the route itself. Its exits are the ones that were avoided on the first route.

There are powerful interests that have made the road map and the roads. Some want only the road labeled market, because this supposedly leads to individual choice. Others will go down that road, but only if the exits are those that have a long history of 'real culture' and 'real knowledge'. Still others will take the market road because for them God has said that this is 'his' road. And finally, another group will sign on to this tour because they have skills in map-making and in determining how far we are from our goal. There's some discussion and some compromise—and perhaps even some lingering tension—among these various groups about which exits will ultimately be stopped at, but by and large they all head off in that direction.

This exercise in storytelling maps out on to reality in important ways. The first group is what is appropriately called *neo-liberals*. They are deeply committed to markets and to freedom as 'individual choice'. The second group, *neo-conservatives*, has a vision of an Edenic past and wants a return to discipline and traditional knowledge. The third, one that is increasingly powerful in the USA and elsewhere, is what I call *authoritarian populists*—religious fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals who want a return to (their) God in all of our institutions [1]. And finally, the map-makers and experts on 'whether we got there' are members of a particular fraction of the managerial and professional *new middle class*.

In analyzing this complex configuration of interests around conservative modernization, I have argued that we need to act in a way similar to what Eric Hobsbawm described as the historian's and social critic's duty. For Hobsbawm, the task is to be the 'professional

remembrancers of what [our] fellow citizens wish to forget' (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 3). That is, it requires us to detail the absent presences, the there that is not there, in most rightist policies in education. How does their 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, aspects of which have now taken on a life of their own at times—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 reductive 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?

In a number of recent books, I have critically analyzed why and how this has occurred. Along with others (see, for example, Whitty *et al.*, 1998; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), I have examined a range of proposals for educational 'reform', such as marketization, standards, national/statewide curricula and national/statewide testing. This critical examination has demonstrated that, even with the—often good—intentions of the proponents of many of these kinds of proposals, in the long run they may actually exacerbate inequalities, especially around class and race. Furthermore, they may paradoxically cause us both to mis-recognize what actually causes difficult social and educational problems and to miss some important democratic alternatives that may offer more hope in the long run (see Apple *et al.*, 2003; Apple, 2000, 2001; Apple & Beane, 1999).

It is helpful to think of this as having been accomplished through the use of a vast socio/pedagogic project, a project that has actively—and in large part successfully—sought to transform our very ideas about democracy. Democracy is no longer a political concept; rather it is wholly an economic concept in which unattached individuals—supposedly making 'rational' choices on an unfettered market—will ultimately lead to a better society. As Foner (1998) reminds us, it has taken decades of creative ideological work to change our commonsense ideas about democracy. Not only does this change fly in the face of a very long tradition of collective understandings of democracy in the USA, but it has also led to the destruction of many communities, jobs, health care, and so many other institutions not only in the USA but also throughout the world (Katz, 2001; Greider, 1997). Hidden assumptions about class and a goodly portion of the politics of whiteness may make it hard for us to face this honestly (see Fine *et al.*, 1997).

But let me stop myself here. I should have put two words in the last sentences of the preceding paragraph—*us* and *we*—in quotation marks. Who is the 'we'? Does it include all those who have been hurt by that combination of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies that now play such an important role in our discourse in education? If these policies have a disproportionate and negative effect on, say, the working class and on people of color—as they seem to do—should we assume that, for example, all persons of color will recognize this and will reject both the policies and their underlying ideologies? That this is not the case is the subject of the rest of this article.

Strange Allies

Given the history of their struggles both for redistribution and recognition, it would be very difficult to integrate historically disenfranchised social groups, especially people of color, under the umbrella of conservative modernization (Fraser, 1997; Apple, 2000). However, this does not make it impossible. One of the ways in which hegemonic alliances are built is through a process in which dominant groups creatively use the elements of 'good sense' that disenfranchised groups possess and then attach their neo-liberal and neo-conservative

agendas to these elements (Apple, 2001). Unfortunately, the partial success of such a strategy among those groups who are often counted as ‘despised others’ (Fraser, 1997) in our societies is a subject that many progressives would like to forget. Yet, there is increasing evidence that there are growing numbers of members of ‘minority’ groups, conservative women, and gays and lesbians who are activists in neo-liberal and neo-conservative movements, and to a lesser extent in authoritarian populist religious movements. (Of course, given the crucial role that Black churches have played in the historical struggles for justice [West, 1982], it would be surprising if there were not elements of such sentiments within African American communities.)

There have been exceptions to this relative neglect. In a recent book, Dillard (2001), for example, critically examines a number of the key actors within conservative circles who themselves are members of historically oppressed groups, but who—for a variety of personal and political reasons—give vocal support to neo-liberal and neo-conservative causes. Aggressively ‘free’ market policies, a rejection of affirmative action and the use of race and/or gender as a category in public decisions, mobilizing for public funding for religiously-based schooling, welfare ‘reform’, and a host of similar issues provide the centers of gravity for these individuals. Many of the figures on which she focuses will be familiar to those on the USA side of the Atlantic: Dinesh D’Sousa, Thomas Sowell, Clarence Thomas, Linda Chavez, Glenn Loury, Richard Rodriguez, and similar national spokespersons of conservative causes. Each of these figures is a person of color. Among them are well-known academics, journalists, government officials, and a Justice of the Supreme Court. Other figures may be familiar only to those readers who have closely followed the cultural and political debates on the Right in the USA over such things as educational policy, sexuality, affirmative action, and welfare reform: Star Parker, George Schuyler, Andrew Sullivan, Elizabeth Wright, Bruce Bawer, and Susan Au Allen, among others [2].

There is of course a history of dominant groups using—or at least giving visibility to—‘minority’ voices to ‘say the unsayable’ in the USA and elsewhere (Lewis, 1993, 2000). Thus, for example, Ward Connerly, a prominent conservative African American businessman and a vocal member of the Board of Regents of the University of California, has taken a very visible stand against affirmative action. For him, government involvement is actually harmful to Black Americans. ‘While others are assimilating, blacks are getting further and further away from one nation indivisible’ (quoted in Dillard, 2001, p. 50). His insistence on ‘individual merit’ and his rejection of state intervention for the cause of equality has clearly been employed by the larger, and mostly White, conservative movement to legitimate its own policies. As a prominent conservative spokeswoman put it, ‘You can’t have white guys saying you don’t need affirmative action’ (Dillard, 2001, p. 15). Hence powerful neo-liberal and neo-conservative movements both inside and outside government circles can steadily expand the realm of what is in fact sayable by prefacing what would otherwise be seen as consistently racist positions with a quote from a well-known Black spokesperson. One of the most articulate critics of such moves states that this enables dominant economic, cultural and racial groups ‘to cannibalize the moral authority of minority voices by skirting responsibility’ (Dillard, 2001, p. 20).

Because of this very history of dominant groups employing the selective voice of the ‘other’ to legitimize its actions, there has been a concomitant history of regarding those members of minority communities who openly affiliate with conservative movements as ‘pariahs’. They have been dismissed as either ‘traitors’ or ‘sell-outs’, and even seen as ‘self-loathing reactionaries who are little more than dupes of powerful white . . . conservatives’ (Dillard, 2001, p. 4). While these labels are powerful indeed, many conservative persons of color see themselves very differently. In their self-perception, they are ‘crusading rebels’ against a state and a liberal elite within the ranks of their own communities whose own self-

understanding as 'helping the people' actually mystifies policies that work to destroy the very moral and social foundations of their communities. Here they can also turn to a rich history of nationalist, self-help and conservative moral principles within these communities as a source of 'authenticity' and legitimacy (Dillard, 2001, p. 13).

Of course, there are internally developed conservative traditions within, say, communities of color, many of which have made lasting contributions to the very existence and continuity of the cultures within these communities (see Lewis, 1993, 2000). However, given the fact that so much of the conservative tradition in the USA was explicitly shaped by racist and racializing discourses and practices [3], and by a strongly anti-immigrant heritage as well, and given the fact that much of the current neo-liberal and neo-conservative attacks on the public sphere have had disproportionate effects on the gains of poor communities and on communities of color, the current existence and growth of such movements among dispossessed groups is more than a little striking [4]. This makes their current iterations all the more interesting. As we shall see, neo-liberal and neo-conservative economic, political and cultural movements and some of the African American groups that have been connected to them are both seeking to redefine the relations of power in particular social fields, with education being a prime site where these relations of power are being worked through (Bourdieu, 1984). A complex process of discursive and positional disarticulation and re-articulation is going on here, as dominant groups attempt to pull dispossessed collectivities under their own leadership and dispossessed groups themselves attempt to employ the social, economic and cultural capital usually possessed by dominant groups to gain collective power for themselves. As we shall see, the label 'conservative' cannot be employed easily in understanding the actions of all of the dispossessed groups who do ally themselves with conservative causes without at the same time reducing the complexity of the particular social fields of power on which they operate.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the processes of discursive and social disarticulation and re-articulation that one could find today involves the growing African American support for neo-liberal policies such as voucher plans (see Moe, 2001). A key instance is the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a group of African American parents and activists that is chaired by Howard Fuller, the former superintendent of Milwaukee public schools, one of the most racially segregated school systems in the USA. BAEO provides vocal support for voucher plans, 'choice' (a sliding signifier whose meaning has increasingly become fixed around issues of vouchers in the USA when it is used in political discourse), and similar conservative proposals. It has generated considerable support within Black communities throughout the nation, particularly within poor inner-city areas, and has an identifiable presence in 27 cities within the USA [5]. The fact that the Supreme Court of Wisconsin has ruled that the Milwaukee voucher plan is constitutional and the US Supreme Court recently ruled that the Cleveland voucher plan is also constitutional gives more legal and political legitimacy to BAEO's efforts, since both plans were officially aimed at providing the 'right to exit' for inner-city and largely 'minority' residents.

A sense of the language that underpins BAEO's commitment can be seen in the following quote:

Our children are our most precious resource. It is our responsibility to love them, nurture them and protect them. It is also our responsibility to ensure that they are properly educated. Without a good education, they will [not] have a real chance to engage in the practice of freedom: the process of engaging in the fight to transform their world. (BAEO website)

BAEO's mission is clear: 'The Black Alliance for Educational Options is a national, nonpartisan member organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase educational options for Black children' (BAEO website). Its position is even clearer in its manifesto.

BAEO Manifesto

Current systems of K-12 education work well for many of America's children. But, for far too many children, the current systems do not work well at all. A high percentage of these children are poor children of color living in urban areas. For these children, the old educational strategies and institutional arrangements are not preparing them to be productive and socially responsible citizens. This requires that we dramatically change our teaching and learning strategies and create new governance and financial structures.

BAEO believes we must develop new systems of learning opportunities to complement and expand existing systems. We need systems that truly empower parents, that allow dollars to follow students, that hold adults as well as students accountable for academic achievement, and that alter the power arrangements that are the foundation for existing systems.

BAEO understands that there are no 'silver bullets' or 'magic wands' which will instantly make things better for our children. BAEO is also not anti-public school. However, we do believe that parent choice must be the centerpiece of strategies and tactics aimed at improving education for our children. We must empower parents, particularly low-income parents, to make the best choices for their children's education.

Consider the potential impact of this power in the hands of families who previously have had little or no control over the flow and distribution of the money that drives the policies and procedures of the educational systems of this country. Consider how the absence of this power means that their children will remain trapped in schools that more affluent parents, some of whom oppose parental choice, would never tolerate for their own children. Consider how this power shift may change the shape of the future for their children.

BAEO will bring together the ideas, aspirations, energies, and experiences of all generations in this struggle. (BAEO website)

The use of language here is striking. The language of neo-liberalism (choice, parental empowerment, accountability, individual freedom) is re-appropriated and sutured together with ideas of collective Black freedom and a deep concern for the community's children. This creates something of a 'hybrid' discourse that blends together meanings from multiple political sources and agendas. In some ways, this is similar to the long history of critical cultural analyses that demonstrate that people form bricolages in their daily lives and can employ language and commodities in ways undreamed of by the original producers of the language and products (see Willis, 1990).

While this process of re-articulation and use is important to note, it is equally essential to recognize something that makes the creative bricolage in which BAEO is engaged somewhat more problematic. A very large portion of the group's funding comes directly from conservative sources such as the Bradley Foundation. The Bradley Foundation, a well-known sponsor of conservative causes, has not only been in the forefront of providing support for vouchers and privatization initiatives, but also is one of the groups that provided significant support for Herrnstein and Murray's book, *The Bell Curve* (1994), a volume that argued that African Americans were on average less intelligent than Whites and that this was

genetic in nature. Thus, it would be important to ask about the nature and effects of the connections being made between rightist ideological and financial sources and BAEO itself. It is not inconsequential that neo-liberal and neo-conservative foundations provide not only funding but media visibility for 'minority' groups who support—even critically—their agendas.

The genesis of such funding is not inconsequential. Many of the strongest proponents of vouchers and similar plans may claim that their positions are based on a belief in the efficiency of markets, on the fear of a secularization of the sacred, or on the dangers of losing the values and beliefs that give meaning to their lives. However, historically, neither the economic nor the moral elements of this critique can be totally set apart from their partial genesis in the struggles over racial segregation, over busing to achieve integration, and in the loss of a federal tax exemption by conservative—and usually White only—religious academies. In short, the fear of the 'racial other' has played a significant role in this discursive construction of the 'problem of the public school' (Apple, 2001). Does this mean that groups such as BAEO are simply being manipulated by neo-liberal and neo-conservative foundations and movements? An answer to this question is not easy, but even with my cautions stated above it is certainly not a simple 'yes'.

Strategic Compromises?

It is important not to engage in reductive analyses here, ones for example that assume that simply because a group's funding comes from a specific source, therefore all of its own agendas will be fundamentally determined by where it gets its money. This is certainly not always the case. Indeed, in public forums and in discussions Tom Pedroni and I have had with some of leaders of BAEO, they have argued that they will use any funding sources available so that they can follow their own specific program of action. They would accept money from more liberal sources; but Bradley and other conservative foundations have come forward much more readily [6]. In the minds of the leaders of BAEO, the African American activists are in control, not the conservative foundations. Thus, for BAEO, they see themselves as strategically positioning themselves in order to get funding from conservative sources. What they do with this funding, such as their strong (and well-advertised in the media) support for voucher plans (although this support too is contingent and sometimes depends on local power relations), is wholly their decision. For them, the space provided by educational markets can be re-occupied for Black cultural and/or nationalist politics and can be employed to stop what seems to them (more than a little accurately in my opinion) to be the strikingly ineffective, and even damaging, education of Black children [7].

However, while I have a good deal of respect for a number of the leaders of BAEO, it is important to remember that they are not the only ones strategically organizing on this social field of power. Like BAEO, groups affiliated with, say, the Bradley Foundation also know exactly what they are doing and know very well how to employ the agendas of BAEO for their own purposes, purposes that in the long term often may run directly counter to the interests of the majority of those with less power at both the national and regional levels. Is it really in the long-term interests of people of color to be affiliated with the same groups who provided funding and support for books such as Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994)? I think not, although once again we need to recognize the complexities involved here.

I am certain that this kind of question is constantly raised about the conservative stances taken by the people of color who have made alliances with, say, neo-liberals and neo-conservatives—and by the activists within BAEO itself. When members of groups who are consistently 'othered' in this society strategically take on identities that support dominant

groups, such questioning is natural and I believe essential. However, it is also crucial to remember that members of historically oppressed and marginalized groups have *always* had to act on a terrain that is not of their choosing, have always had to act strategically and creatively to gain some measure of support from dominant groups to advance their causes (Lewis, 1993, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994). It is also the case that more recently national and local leaders of the Democratic Party in the USA have too often assumed that Black support is simply *there*, that it doesn't need to be worked for. Because of this, we may see the further development of 'unusual alliances' over specific issues such as educational policies. When this is coupled with some of the tacit and/or overt support within some communities of color not only for voucher plans but for anti-gay, anti-abortion, pro school prayer, and similar initiatives, the suturing together of some Black groups with larger conservative movements on particular issues is not totally surprising (see Dillard, 2001).

The existence and growing power of committed movements such as BAEO, though, does point out that we need to be careful about stereotyping groups who may publicly support neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies. Their perspectives need to be examined carefully and taken seriously, not simply dismissed as totally misguided, as people who have been duped into unthinking acceptance of a harmful set of ideologies. There are complicated strategic moves being made on an equally complex social field of power. I may—and do—strongly disagree with a number of the positions that groups such as BAEO take. However, to assume that they are simply puppets of conservative forces is not only to be too dismissive of their own attempts at social maneuvering, but I also believe that it may be tacitly racist as well.

Saying this doesn't mean that we need to weaken our arguments against marketization and privatization of schooling. Voucher and tax credit plans (the latter ultimately may actually be more dangerous) will still have some extremely problematic effects in the long term. One of the most important effects could be a *demobilization* of social movements within communities of color. Schools have played central roles in the creation of movements for justice. In essence, rather than being peripheral reflections of larger battles and dynamics, struggles over schooling—over what should be taught, over the relationship between schools and local communities, over the very ends and means of the institution itself—have provided a crucible for the *formation* of larger social movements toward equality (Hogan, 1983; Wong & Apple, 2002). These collective movements have transformed our definitions of rights, of who should have them, and of the role of the government in guaranteeing these rights. Absent organized, community-wide mobilizations, these transformations would not have occurred.

This is under threat currently. Definitions of democracy based on possessive individualism, on the citizen as only a 'consumer', are inherently grounded in a process of de-racing, de-classing, and de-gendering (Ball, 1994). These are the very groups who have employed struggles over educational access and outcomes to form themselves as self-conscious actors. If it is the case, as I strongly believe it is, that it is the organized efforts of social movements that ultimately have led to the transformation of our educational system in more democratic directions (Apple, 2000), the long-term effects of neo-liberal definitions of democracy may be truly tragic for communities of color, not 'only' in increasing inequalities in schools (see Apple, 2001; McNeil, 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000), but in leading to a very real loss of the impetus for *collective* solutions to pressing social problems. If all problems are simply 'solved' by individual choices on a market, then collective mobilizations tend to wither and perhaps even disappear. If history is any guide here, the results will not be pleasant. Thus, although short-term support for neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies may seem strategically wise to some members of less powerful groups, and may in fact generate short-term mobilizations, I remain deeply worried about

what will happen over time [8]. It is the long-term implications of individuating processes and ideologies, and their effects on the necessity of larger and constantly growing social mobilizations that aim toward substantive transformations within the public sphere, that need to be of concern as well.

A concern over the effects of individuation that such ‘choice’ programs may ultimately bring is unfortunately actually mirrored in the (already limited) literature on Black support for neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies. All too much of the critical literature on such ‘strategic alliances’, even such work as Dillard’s compelling book (2001), tends to focus on individuals, rather than on larger social movements. As I noted above, it is social movements that historically have had the power to transform social and educational policy and practice. An emphasis on individuals does humanize the issues that are in contention and it does allow us to see the people behind the Rightist presence within marginalized communities. However, this very focus causes us to miss the dynamics that have led to the growth of groups such as BAEO and to the strategic moves that are being self-consciously made on the unequal social fields of power in which educational policy operates.

This doesn’t vitiate the strength of what such analyses of the growing conservative tendencies among some ‘othered’ communities have given us. However, the question is not whether it is possible to build a Rightist-led coalition that will include elements of ‘multiculturalism’. Indeed, as I have shown in this article, such a process is in part already being successfully attempted. Instead, the questions we must constantly ask are the following: At what cost? At whose expense?

We do know, for example, that the integration of some elements of communities that have historically been seen as ‘the other’ has occurred, that certain elements have been brought under the umbrella of conservative modernization. For instance, some Latino/as, Asian Americans, gays and lesbians and others have given their support to what are surprisingly conservative causes. Although perhaps overstating her arguments for political reasons, Dillard, for example, is at her most perceptive when she sees that the roots of the support of conservative positions among some members of oppressed groups may often be based in not wanting to ‘be black’. It is worth quoting her at length here.

[One] point on which Latino, Asian-American, women, and homosexual conservatives seem to agree is the desire, to restate the matter bluntly, not to be like blacks—members of a group that persists in pressing for collective redress from the government rather than pursuing the path of individualism, upward mobility, and assimilation. That some Latino and Asian-American conservatives have engaged in this narrative is troubling. If Toni Morrison is even partially correct in asserting that previous waves of immigrants have embraced (white, middle class) American identity ‘on the back of blacks,’ then there is reason to fear that new immigrants will seek to replicate this pattern. In the process, the already tense relationships among African Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans could degenerate. That some African American conservatives, a contingent that remains predominantly middle and upper-middle class, appear content to follow suit—to assimilate on the backs of the black poor—is doubly disturbing. (Dillard, 2001, p. 182)

Although I do not think that her arguments are as applicable to groups such as BAEO, for many other persons and organizations with which she does deal Dillard’s points need to be taken very seriously. For the implication of such arguments is that the major losers in the shifting discursive terrain surrounding race and identity may very well prove once again to be poor Blacks, a group that BAEO expressly want to defend. Once more, they will be pathologized. Their voices will be silenced. And they will continue to be

'everybody's convenient and favorite scapegoat' (p. 182). Given the central place that race has played in the development of the neo-conservative movement of 'return' and the neo-liberal movement of 'choice' (Apple, 2001), we should not be surprised if rightist multiculturalism promises more of the same, but covered in a new and seemingly more diverse discourse.

'Not wanting to be Black' does not explain the support of vouchers by groups such as BAEO, however. Instead, it is the very fact of *being Black*, of recognizing and fighting against their social and cultural positioning as the ultimate 'other', that has caused them to seek out strategic—some might say heretical—alliances with some of the main tendencies that, paradoxically, have been in the forefront historically in supporting such positioning. In *Educating the 'Right' Way* (Apple, 2001), I call for thinking heretically about possible alliances that might subvert parts of the agendas involved in conservative modernization. Whether BAEO's 'heretical actions' actually do subvert such agendas and the racial stratification of schools remains to be seen. I fear that they may not. But one must also ask what choices they in fact do have given the structures of inequality that currently exist.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined a growing phenomenon—the growth of seemingly conservative sentiments among 'despised others'. At the core of my analysis is a concern about what is at stake for all of us if rightist multiculturalism succeeds in redefining what and whose knowledge is of most worth and what our social and educational policies are meant to do. Yet, no matter what one's position is on the wisdom of BAEO's strategic actions, the entire case provides a crucial example of the politics of disarticulation and rearticulation, on the ways in which social movements and alliances are formed and re-formed out of the material and ideological conditions of daily life, and of the politics of discursive re-appropriation (Hall, 1996; Apple, 2001) [9]. Thus, an analysis of such movements is important both in terms of the balance of forces and power involved in specific educational reforms, but also in terms of more general issues concerning the processes of social transformation and agency. A critical but sympathetic understanding of groups such as BAEO may enable us to avoid the essentialism and reductionism that enters into critical sociological work on the role of struggles over the state (Apple *et al.*, 2003). It can provide a more nuanced sense of social actors and the possibilities and limits of strategic alliances in a time of conservative modernization (see Pedroni, *in progress*).

While I support the struggles of groups such as BAEO and have a good deal of sympathy with their critique of the current functioning of public (state supported) schools, I have very real worries about whether they can control the uses to which their support of neo-liberal policies will be put. Yet, having said this, there may be some salutary effects of their efforts to mobilize around vouchers.

If the common school loses its legitimacy among significant numbers of people within communities of color—and there is some evidence that this may be happening within some communities (Moe, 2001)—this may force a re-examination of the unequal ways schools are currently financed in the USA, where a school's funding is dependent on the local tax base and its very real inequalities. It also may create the conditions in which teachers and their unions may have to work much more closely with local communities than is the case now simply in order for teachers to maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of people of color. I say this knowing that, oddly enough, this might provide evidence for parts of the neo-liberal case about school markets. Fear of competition among teachers and other educators then may have hidden effects that may, finally, lead to even more support among them for needed changes in schools.

Having said this, however, I predict the opposite. While these changes may occur, it is unfortunately just as likely that the effects will be ones less positive in their long-term consequences. Less funding will be given to public (state supported) schools. A politics of blame will evolve in which parents who have no choice but to keep their children in underfunded and highly policed inner-city schools will be seen as the source of the problem of the common school. Much depends on the balance of forces at the time. Given what I and others have shown about the often-negative results of the combination of neo-conservative and neo-liberal reforms in schools, I am not sanguine about what will happen. At the very least, though, we need to be aware that the complicated politics and strategic maneuverings that are occurring on the terrain of educational policy will have complicated, contradictory and unforeseen results. The example of BAEO signifies the beginning, not the end, of this story.

Although I have focused on the growth of strategic alliances between 'despised others' and conservative forces in the USA, I predict that such alliances may not be limited to this one nation [10]. This may be disturbing to many progressively inclined educators, and this leads to my final point. Any groups that disagree with BAEO about the wisdom of supporting vouchers and of making tactical alliances with the Right have a task that goes well beyond simply criticizing their position or their strategy. Critics of their positions and strategies must have a detailed and in-depth understanding both of what generates their anger at public (state supported) schools and at the lack of responsiveness that all too many school systems have shown to communities of color and the poor and working class for decades. The conditions to which groups like BAEO are responding are *real* and immensely destructive for real children in real communities (see Kozol, 1991). Thus, those who worry about BAEO must ask what they themselves are for. They need to redouble their own efforts to end the racial contract that underpins 'our' economic and political institutions (Mills, 1997), to work even harder to provide the economic and cultural conditions that would make African American parents have faith in their schools, and to challenge the ways in which a politics of 'whiteness' underpins so much of the daily life of this society. Simply saying no to BAEO, then, is not enough. Indeed, I would claim that it is a racializing act itself unless it is accompanied by powerful anti-racist actions.

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Notes

- [1] The term 'authoritarian populism' originally comes from the compelling work of Stuart Hall. Unlike Hall, however, I would prefer to limit its use to a particular group of people who make up the 'religious right'. For more on this, see Hall (1980) and Apple (2001).
- [2] Although her analysis could be more detailed and subtle in certain places, Dillard (2001) does a good job of detailing the 'structures of feeling' of conservative

affiliations among a number of people who usually are not expected to take such position. She deals with a wide range of different forms of conservative leanings: from the economy, the legitimacy of activist government, the politics of the body, and the role of religion in public affairs on the one hand, to questions dealing with what knowledge should and should not be taught as 'legitimate' and, say, the place of race in university admissions on the other.

- [3] 'Progressive' traditions in the USA were not free of such racializing and racist logics. See Selden (1999).
- [4] That, say, a number of African American groups, ones that are making alliances with distinctly conservative movements, exist and are growing says something very important about the fascination with identity politics among many progressive scholars and activists in education and elsewhere. Too often writing on identity (wrongly) assumes that identity politics is a 'good thing', that people inexorably move in progressive directions as they pursue what Nancy Fraser would call a politics of recognition (Fraser, 1997). Yet, any serious study of rightist movements demonstrates that identity politics is just as apt to take, say, angry and retrogressive forms—anti-gay, racist nativism, anti-women, etc. For many such people, 'we' are the new oppressed, with that 'we' not including most people of color, feminists, 'sexual deviants', immigrants, and so on (see Kintz, 1997 and Blee, 2002). Yet, as I noted earlier, even people within these 'despised' groups themselves may take on such retrogressive identities.
- [5] BAEO is a heterogeneous organization. Much, though not all, of BAEO's leadership is from the middle class, but it does have a good deal of grassroots support. Where it specifically meets and intersects with Rightist organizations, those who interact with such organizations tend not to be among the poor and working class. However, a class analysis is not sufficient here. Racial solidarity may come first; race fundamentally mediates class relations. Thus, the issue of the class position of BAEO's leadership needs to be thought about in complex and subtle ways. I wish to thank Tom Pedroni for this point.
- [6] In this regard, Tom Pedroni's ongoing research on BAEO is of considerable importance. See Pedroni (in progress).
- [7] The political issue they are facing is in some ways similar to the debates over 'market socialism'. Can economic and political forms developed under the auspices of less progressive tendencies and power relations be employed to further goals that are organized around a very different set of ideological sentiments? See Bardhan and Roemer (1993) and Ollman (1998).
- [8] Dillard (2001) herself is very fair in her assessment of what the implications of such support may be. She nicely shows the contradictions of the arguments and logic of the people she focuses upon. In doing so, she draws upon some of the more cogent analyses of the relationship between democracy and the maintenance of the public sphere on the one hand and an expansive and rich understanding of what it means to be a citizen on the other. Readers of her discussion would also be well served to connect her arguments to the historical struggles over the very meanings of our concepts of democracy, freedom, and citizenship such as that found in Eric Foner's illuminating book, *The Story of American Freedom* (1998), but Dillard's discussion is substantive and useful. It also serves as a reminder of the continuing importance of a number of democratic and critical writers such as Hannah Arendt (1973, 1990), whose work, while not perfect by any means, unfortunately is no longer read as often as it should be.
- [9] An analysis of groups such as BAEO could enable us to extend the range of Basil Bernstein's work on *recontextualization* as well. See Bernstein (1990).

[10] Heidi Safia Mirza's ongoing work on the role of schooling in communities of color in England is very interesting in this regard.

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