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Commentary

Knowledge and sociality: on the Institute of Education (London) as a second home

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Abstract

I have had a close and long-standing relationship with the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). In order to understand why and how for many years the IOE became my 'second home', I infuse this article with a combination of critical academic and political points and a detailed sense of personal history. In the process, I trace out the development of a number of my arguments about the relationship between knowledge, power and education. I connect this to the role of the IOE in this development, both as an institution and with regard to people with whom I had close contacts over the years. Among the people I particularly focus on is Geoff Whitty, who was a key figure in all of this.

Keywords education and social transformation; critical democracy; ideology; world scholar; research assessment; rightist movements; Geoff Whitty

The early years

As some of the readers of this issue of the *London Review of Education* may know, I have had a close and long-standing relationship with the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). In order to understand why and how for many years the IOE became my 'second home', I need to infuse this essay with a sense of personal history.

After completing my doctorate in 1970, I began working on a long-term project of transforming our (mis)understandings of the relationship of knowledge and power in education. Coming from my experiences of teaching in poor urban and rural areas in the US, and formed by my roots in antiracist and anticorporate activism, and by my time as a president of a teachers' union, I was extremely dissatisfied with the technicist and behavioural traditions that formed the common sense of the field. These traditions functioned as an 'epistemological fog' that enabled all too many educators, governments and groups in economic and cultural dominance to uncritically reproduce their own positions of cultural and economic authority. Just as importantly, I also was increasingly dissatisfied with the reductive and essentialising assumptions that underpinned a good deal of the critical research on the complex relationship between schooling and the larger society.

Coming from a family history of activism in leftist movements, I had already read a good deal of radical material, including the iconic texts of Marx. But my more immediate intellectual background added greatly to these traditions. More recently, I was influenced by analytic and continental philosophy, social phenomenology, the sociology of knowledge (especially, but not only, in its Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions) and critical curriculum studies. Of considerable importance were a number of authors, especially Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci. Both of them made it clear that the struggles over culture, consciousness, memory and 'tradition' were crucial elements in what Gramsci (1971) called a 'war of position' (see also Williams, 1961; Hall, 2016).

Gramsci's argument stresses a politics of social transformation that is broader than the economism of much of the traditional Left. Without denying the crucial significance of political economy (see, for example, Eagleton, 2011), this is grounded in a set of counter-hegemonic actions in which *everything* and *multiple sites* count. When taken up today, it supports a position that critically democratic action in education, in the media and cultural institutions, in healthcare, in community lives, in the economy and paid and unpaid workplaces, in the family, in the struggle over incarceration and the 'injustice system' – *all* of these are significant. Action against dominant relations involving gender and sexuality, race, class, ability, age, environmental degradation and peace all count. The task is to then work hard to *connect* these actions to each other, and to build alliances across our differences so that the 'we' that is formed is broader and more mutually supportive. Thus, the local counts, not only the regional and national. In Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2013) words, the politics of recognition and of representation are crucial, as well as a politics of redistribution. While not yet fully formed in my mind, the at times tense combinations of these multiple political and intellectual tendencies were providing me with essential tools – and many questions. When integrated around a commitment to both understand and interrupt dominant educational policies and practices, they constituted the foundations for the larger project on which I was working (see Apple, 2013c).

Thus, in the early 1970s, I began publishing a series of preliminary studies on the ideological fundaments that organised common sense. As a result of this early work, a growing relationship developed between myself and critical sociologists of education in the UK. It was deepened when I was interviewed in the mid-1970s by Roger Dale for the Open University course on Schooling and Capitalism, and by the reprinting of my essay 'Commonsense categories and curriculum thought' (see Dale et al., 1976; for my early relationship with people such as Roger Dale, see Apple, 2020a).

Through my earlier correspondence with those associated with that course and a number of critical people in the sociology of education, it became clear that my work in critical curriculum studies and critical policy studies was closely paralleled by the conceptual, empirical and political analyses in the new sociology of education in England (see, for example, Young, 1971; Whitty and Young, 1976). These very similar intellectual and political commitments opened the path that ultimately led to the IOE.

As these personal, political and academic relations grew, this generated an invitation to give a series of lectures at varied institutions in England. This first set of lectures was in 1976. Among the events in what was a packed schedule was a 'seminar' at the IOE. I was prepared to discuss parts of the book on which I was then working, a book that ultimately became the first edition of *Ideology and Curriculum* (Apple, 1979, 2019). However, what was supposed to be a 'small' seminar soon grew to fill the largest

lecture hall at the Institute. Indeed, its start time had to be delayed by an hour as more and more people arrived. Needless to say, I was heartened by the crowd and by the post-lecture response.

Seated in the first row of that lecture hall directly in front of me (and I do mean directly in front of me) was Basil Bernstein. Nearby was Michael F.D. Young. Others present included Geoff Whitty, Roger Dale, Madeleine Arnot (then McDonald), Tony Green, and many others with whom I had corresponded or whose work I had read.

Immediately after the lecture, Bernstein came up to me and said something like: 'That was good. But, there are a few things about which we need to talk.' That first discussion lasted for nearly three hours. (Indeed, I still have the diagrams and notes he made on napkins during that meeting to emphasise his points.) The issues that were generated out of those 'few things' kept us in close contact for years afterwards. Anyone who knew Basil at the Institute also knew he was theoretically very creative. But they also knew that he could be volatile and at times 'difficult'. I learned to be patient – and, when necessary, to challenge his over-statements and his at times mercurial responses. As someone who came from an activist background in the slums of an old industrial city in the US, I also share a history of not being passive in the face of particular actions. This patience – and a willingness to respond – was necessary in my multiple interactions with Basil, since I had things to learn from his insights (and he had things to learn from me and other people at the IOE and elsewhere; Apple and Wexler, 1978). This mutual recognition cemented an 'interesting' relationship with him, although it did not always stop him from getting close to the edge.

Basil was not the only figure with whom I interacted in my numerous trips to the Institute in those early years. Michael F.D. Young and I often met. We both agreed and disagreed about the way to understand the politics of official knowledge, and we engaged in a number of public discussions and debates on this at the IOE. Also included in that list were many others, such as Miki David, Debbie Epstein, Tony Green and Gunther Kress. At the same time, I continued close relationships with a number of people, in particular Roger Dale, Madeleine Arnot and Geoff Whitty.

The ongoing discussions with colleagues at the IOE and elsewhere were sometimes at a distance, but they certainly were kept alive by the yearly Westhill sociology of education conference organised by Len Barton in which most of us participated, a conference that continued in various forms and locations after Barton moved to the Institute. Westhill was a site where some of the very best arguments about critical theory and practice were tried out and debated. The Institute was always well represented there, as were other colleges of the University of London, as well as the Open University, and the universities of Bath, Sheffield, Cardiff, Birmingham and others. Just as important for our intense discussions was the participation of people such as Paul Willis, Richard Johnson and John Clarke from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham. Added to this was the presence of a number of international figures, such as Jean Anyon and Sandra Acker, as well as critical educators from Spain, Germany and elsewhere.

The issues that were dealt with were powerful and diverse, yet all of them were interconnected. They included difficult topics such as: what counted as truly critical research; how we were to understand base and superstructure; political economy; hegemony; the relationship between economic and cultural reproduction; the dangers of economic essentialism and reductionism; the importance of ideology and ideological struggle; the politics of knowledge; the role of the state (and even what actually constituted the state); the limits and possibilities of resistance; the realities of schools and other institutions, policies and practices in formal and informal education; the politics of teacher education; class analysis, and both making it more nuanced and why it was insufficient to understand and interrupt oppressions based on gender, race and ability – and the list could go on (see, for example, Barton et al., 1983; Walker and Barton, 1983; Apple, 1982).

It was exactly the debates over these issues that formed a central set of questions about understanding and interrupting that were driving me. And it became even clearer to me that among the places where I continually found significant colleagues who were struggling with the educational and political implications of them was again the IOE.

As personal and institutional relationships grew

Throughout my career, I have insisted on the importance of maintaining close connections between academic work and the relationships between education and the larger assemblage of mechanisms of

exploitation and domination. Equally important is the fact that I have argued that this also requires an organic connection with the daily 'stuff' of education, with the realities of teaching, curriculum, evaluation, communities, students and so much more. We could not 'stand on the balcony' (Apple, 2013b). This is often rarer than we would like to admit.

Since 1970, the University of Wisconsin, US, has been a fine primary home for me for this set of commitments. No institution is perfect; but one of the major reasons for my seeing the IOE as a second home is the fact that the IOE has been very responsive to my multiple commitments, both academic and political. The Institute was – and I believe still is – a truly serious place. And as I just noted, for me it also was the home of a considerable number of people with whom I engaged in intense discussions, debates and collective work over the years. (Speaking honestly, one of the other places where I have spent a considerable amount of time, and where I would say this about the institution, would be the University of Manchester Institute of Education, where I was Visiting Professor and then Professorial Fellow for a number of years. Similar things might be said about my time at the University of Melbourne.) That sense of collectivity is crucial. It rests on a lived form of sociality, one in which knowledge is not seen as a noun, but in many ways as a verb, as a joint process that rests on the ongoing debates, struggles and political/educational efforts by people who build off and on each other's work.

Given these things, my commitment to the IOE became more visible over the years that followed. I spent a considerable amount of time there as Visiting Scholar and Visiting Professor, and then, from 2007 to 2009, as World Scholar and Professor of Educational Policy. Later on, I was elected as a Fellow of the Institute, a recognition that I value. (It is important for me to say that this was a joint decision made not only by me, but also by my wife, the noted historian of medicine and women's health, Rima Apple. Rima also had appointments in London, especially at the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, and she had close connections with colleagues who were engaged in the histories and politics of women's health.)

A key figure in all of this was Geoff Whitty. Not only was he instrumental in organising that first set of lectures in England, but throughout the next decades he became an even closer colleague and friend. He shared many of my academic, ethical and educational commitments. Because of these commitments, he was invited to be Visiting Professor at the University of Wisconsin, so that my colleagues and students could benefit from his analyses in a more concerted way. Over the years, Geoff then went on to become a professor at the Institute and then its director. Because of my continuous presence at the IOE, I was basically seen as a representative of both the IOE and the University of Wisconsin. This too cemented ongoing relationships between the Institute and Wisconsin. It also helped to form a sense that this relationship could be expanded to include other institutions with whom Geoff and I had close connections and for whom we had a good deal of respect. In recognition of this, for a number of years Geoff and I worked together to organise a cooperative relationship among Wisconsin, the IOE, and the University of Melbourne, an alliance that came to be called 'the 3 Deans Network'.

The aim here was to deepen the discussions and to strengthen the collective understandings that were being developed among these three institutions. It also aimed to have substantive effects on the policies and practices that were being implemented in each of our nations. Given the existing political and economic realities that we faced, the former aim was more successful than the latter. A practical and personal example of the political and educational realities we faced in doing this can be found in the story of a cancelled lecture of mine in Melbourne (see Apple, 2014). However, that did not diminish our commitment to have effects in the 'real world'. Ultimately, after my appointment as World Scholar ended, this initial coalition was expanded to include a much larger array of institutions. This had the benefit of increasing representation, but it also may have lessened the intensity of the interactions.

These institutional initiatives did not encompass all that Geoff and I worked on, both when I was in residence at the IOE and when I was elsewhere. At times, Geoff and I also published significant work together (see, for example, Apple and Whitty, 1999; Apple et al., 2009). While we often saw eye to eye, we did not always totally agree about some of the specific politics and possibilities of educational institutions and reforms, or about the conceptual/political resources that were necessary or wise in the struggles over education. However, these differences led to ongoing discussions and debates that were among the most valuable experiences for both of us.

I have written at greater length about some of the mutual influences of Geoff and me (Apple, 2020b), and about how some of his work on the critical sociology of curriculum contained important insights that confirmed and extended my own insights about the politics of knowledge (see Apple, 2018; Whitty, 1985). Yet, as I reflect back on my experiences with Geoff and at the Institute, alongside its place as a centre of critical work, among the things that stand out were the epistemological/political transformations that

were being instituted at universities throughout England. This pressure intensified during the period when Geoff was Director and when I was World Scholar there. I refer here to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

It was at this time that institutional environments, reward structures and what counted as evidence of 'excellence' were increasingly being radically transformed. The effects of this policy, which Stephen Ball (2003) has rightly labelled as 'performativity', became increasingly visible as the neoliberalisation of the education sector and the imposition of 'audit cultures' took hold. A number of the effects of these policies, and the pressures that they bring with them, are pointed to in this telling response by Rosalind Gill. As she put it, the university 'either thieves time or transmutes it to high-intensity and competitive performance' (Gill, as quoted in McManus, 2021: 124; see also Marginson and Considine, 2000; Marginson, 2016). Gill (quoted in McManus, 2021: 124) goes on, perhaps partly over-generalising her claims to heighten their deserved emotional salience:

A punishing intensification of work has become an endemic feature of academic life ... serious discussion of this is hard to find either within or outside universities, yet it is impossible to spend any significant amount of time with academics without quickly gaining an impression of a profession overloaded to breaking point, as a consequence of the underfunded expansion of universities over the last two decades, combined with hyperinflation of what is demanded of academics, and an audit culture that, if it was once treated with scepticism, has now been almost perfectly internalized.

While demands for evidence of 'appropriate performance' and the realities of 'audit cultures' were indeed present at that time in the US, and have grown much more influential today (see, for example, Apple, 2013a), the structures to enforce them were much less prominent then. Exactly the opposite was true at the Institute, and at so many other institutions in England. The IOE was certainly not insulated from these policies and their effects. Indeed, some might claim that because of the visibility and productivity of its faculty, it actually may have benefited financially in a number of ways because of them. That did not mean that the increasingly visible negative effects were dismissed or accepted. (In conversations with administrators and faculty at a number of universities where I have held the position of Visiting Distinguished Professor, they often speak very honestly that one of the reasons that my appointment is welcomed and approved is a combination of having 'someone like you' and 'having your vita' for use in the internal and inter-institutional competitions for ratings and funding.)

During the period I was appointed there, I was present in Geoff's office when he received a phone call that the Institute had received a 5 not a 5* on the all-important RAE. Neither Geoff nor I were romantic about the ways in which the RAE created a system with a considerable number of deeply problematic outcomes on the political economy of institutions, on people's careers and research agendas, on the weakening of the ongoing movements to establish more caring communities and on the politics of education research in general (see Lynch, 2022; Lynch et al., 2012). But, as Director of the IOE, Geoff could not treat these issues as abstractions. In all the years I had worked with Geoff, I can never remember a tenser period. He had to act, to find ways to mediate these pressures and to protect the institution, its faculty and staff in so many ways.

I was not privy to the intense discussions that arose from this. In some ways, being a World Scholar meant that I was both 'in' and 'out' at the same time, protected from some of the exceptionally difficult deliberations and undoubted sacrifices and compromises that ensued. Because of this, I cannot judge the wisdom of Geoff's and others' decisions at the Institute, or their sense of what was 'necessary'. What I can say is that the emotional labour that was attached to Geoff's ongoing actions in response to all of this took a toll. This was a toll not only on Geoff, but also on the Institute as a whole, and on all of the students and staff there. The critical discussions of the rating – and of the entire system on which they were based – were intense. Geoff was deeply concerned about the system and its effects, a fact that also reminded me that he was a product of the Institute himself, having studied there originally. It matched my own sense that this was a place that needed to be defended, given its history and one's personal connections to it.

But my sense of this was not limited to the IOE. One of the major effects on me personally during this period was that it caused me to redouble my own political and educational activism against these policies as they grew in influence at the University of Wisconsin and other institutions with which I was affiliated. These were not abstract issues. I spent a good deal of time at the University of Melbourne, and then at the University of Manchester after my three years as World Scholar at the IOE. Neoliberalisation,

audit cultures, performativity – these increasingly became parts of the daily life of these institutions as well. My experience at the IOE, and with Geoff and others there, made it clear that these were ‘high-stakes’ concerns and needed to be understood – and interrupted whenever possible. There was no balcony here.

While powerful, these issues, and my ongoing discussions and connections with Geoff, are not the only things that need to be pointed to. As I noted, in the middle of all this, the IOE was still a centre for those intense debates over the role of education in a society riven with relations of exploitation and domination, and also over conscious attempts to answer the question that arises out of these debates – What can we do about it? Both because of the increased time I spent at the Institute as World Scholar during this period, and because the aim of the alliance was to develop closer interactions and collective work on exactly these kinds of questions that guided the Wisconsin, Melbourne and IOE cooperative agreement, I developed very close and continuing ties with other colleagues at the Institute, particularly with Stephen Ball, David Gillborn and Deborah Youdell. Added to this list were discussions with people such as Hugh Starkey, who was very involved in the process of building joint courses that were a key part of the agreement between the three universities. (The IOE was the site for a number of these courses.)

These IOE ties often led to long-lasting and mutually beneficial interactions that continue to this day, again especially with Stephen, Dave and Deborah. Once again, this too generated a series of influential co-publications (see, for example, Apple et al., 2010). Even when a number of these well-known critical scholars moved to other institutions, the close relationships we had developed over the years continued. These connections were again of course partly strengthened by my close connections to Geoff. However, they also document that the connections originally made through my work at the Institute had a lasting influence, even after I was less often there physically.

On being World Scholar

Let me say more about this. In an entire series of books in the 1990s and 2000s, I was struggling with how best to grapple with some damned hard issues. Why was the Right winning? How did its ‘socially creative pedagogic project’ operate at the level of daily experience? What exactly was the Right? What constituted this new hegemonic bloc? Was it only neoliberalism? Could it be fully understood in class terms? What roles did religion, racialisation and gendered specificities play in its formation? What contradictions did this bloc create? (see, for example, Apple, 1996, 2006, 2014).

Just as importantly, one other set of questions increasingly came to the fore. How might the various factions of the Right be interrupted? What can we do? And who is the ‘we’? (Apple, 2013b; Apple et al., 2018; Verma and Apple, 2021; see also Wright, 2010). These demanding questions could not be adequately dealt with by only thinking about the US. Generating serious and substantive answers again needed to be recognised as a *collective* process – one that had a long history of struggles to make sense of what actions counted and who the actors actually were (Apple and Au, 2015).

Given these compelling questions, spending considerable time at the Institute became even more useful. It provided a consistent lesson on the significance of thinking internationally. There were clear parallels between the growth of rightist politics in the US and England. However, the differences were at times striking. If I wanted to develop more productive approaches to both understanding and interrupting these hegemonic movements, policies and practices, I had to listen carefully to, and learn from, other nations and ‘nations to be’. (For an earlier discussion of the historical differences in class politics in the US and England, for example, see Karabel, 1979.) During these multiple decades, I had repeated and, at times, long-term experiences doing political and educational work in Brazil, Turkey, Norway, South Korea, China, India, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere (Apple et al., 2003; Apple, 2010). These were crucial to my continued development and understanding. However, even with the expansion of my intensive international commitments, the diverse faculty and students and the openly critical nature of the Institute provided key elements in reminding me of what I still had to learn. Thus, even after Geoff Whitty was no longer the director and a number of my closest colleagues there had left for other institutions, and even after the IOE had been merged into UCL, I still felt personally part of it. Much of this was due to the nature of what it meant to be World Scholar there.

The role of World Scholar was a complex but satisfying one, especially for someone with my interests. During the three years I held that position, I did not teach specific courses. Rather, I was asked to give Institute-wide lectures and seminars, to speak in a large range of classes across

disciplinary boundaries and to meet individually with students and faculty about their research, and about educational projects with which they were involved.

Since many of the classes were reading material of mine, especially the then recent second edition of *Educating the 'Right' Way* (Apple, 2006), there were intense discussions of my theories and arguments about rightist social movements, ideological transformations, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic actions, and what this all meant for educational policies and practices in schools and communities. These often included detailed discussions of interruptive movements, often based on my continuing work with critical educators and community activists in Porto Alegre in Brazil (Gandin and Apple, 2003), or with democratic schools in the US and elsewhere (Apple and Beane, 2007). The discussions also usually involved substantive back and forth about many of the issues that I had been struggling with over the years, and the debates over how best to understand what their implications were.

This last point is significant. The IOE had continued to be a centre of diverse approaches to understanding power and relations of dominance and subordination, and what this meant for education. Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, cultural studies, post-structural feminisms, queer theories, critical race theories, critical disability studies, postcolonial and decolonisation theories – all of these were represented. Being World Scholar there at that time was as meaningful for me as it was for the multiple students and faculty with whom I interacted. It created a situation where not only was I called upon to teach, but I was also called upon to deal honestly with an entire range of critical approaches to understanding and interrupting dominant theories, policies and practices – and to think even more deeply about the specifics and realities of real schools in real communities.

This did not mean that I necessarily agreed with the assumptions and politics of this range of approaches. That certainly was not, and is not, the case. However, it created an environment that brought out a part of me that I fear is also rarer on the Left than I would like. That can be summarised by the phrase I sometimes use: 'I am not in a church, so I'm not worried about heresy'. It comes close to something that my still missed late friend Paulo Freire always reminded us to take seriously. To paraphrase him, 'A critical pedagogue needs to be not only a teacher but a learner'. For him and for me, this was not an abstraction. It had to be lived out (see Freire, 2021). Speaking honestly, I am not always good at it. Yet being at the Institute at that time in the position of World Scholar made acting on it much more likely.

Conclusions

I have chosen to speak rather personally about my relationship to the IOE. The examples I have used in these reflections could be added to. There also could be others – ones that might be less fully positive. After all, like all institutions of this type, there are tensions, hierarchies, egos, serious political and epistemological differences, and a lack of 'care' (Lynch, 2022). I am certain that, no matter what my ethical and political commitments, being in the 'privileged' position of World Scholar undoubtedly tended to make certain power dynamics less visible to me. Issues around gender, sexuality and race, for example, would not be as visible unless one listened even more carefully to stories of the daily lives of the real people who worked there. Indeed, I can attest to the fact that issues surrounding such dynamics did exist and did have serious impacts on people's lives, with a number of talented people leaving the IOE for other places because of these and similar problems.

But I also know from personal experiences at the Institute that there are deeply committed people there who have laboured long and hard to make it a space where these dynamics are less likely to prevail, to engage in that same array of critically democratic impulses and actions that Fraser (1997, 2013) called the politics of redistribution, recognition and representation. As Geoff Whitty and I agreed upon, it is an institution worth our best efforts.

For me, this was revived at the symposium at the Institute to honour Geoff a short time before his death. I was asked to give an address about him and about his many contributions (Apple, 2018). As you might imagine, it was an emotional event. Yet, in some ways, it was oddly comforting. If I was to officially say farewell to Geoff in public, it was right that it be in that place, in the institution that was not only a key part of Geoff Whitty's life, but mine as well. It indeed was my second home.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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