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The Cultural Politics of Home Schooling

Michael W. Apple

If one of the marks of the growing acceptance of ideological changes is their positive presentation in the popular media, then home schooling clearly has found a place in our consciousness. It has been discussed in the national press, on television and radio, and in widely circulated magazines. Its usual presentation is that of a savior, a truly compelling alternative to a public school system that is presented as a failure. Although the presentation of public schools as simply failures is deeply problematic,¹ it is the largely unqualified support of home schooling that concerns me here. I am considerably less sanguine.

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¹It is important that we remember that public schools were and are a victory. They constituted a gain for the majority of people who were denied access to advancement and to valued cultural capital in a stratified society. This is not to claim that the public school did not and does not have differential effects. Indeed, I have devoted many books to uncovering the connections between formal education and the recreation of inequalities (see, e.g., Apple, 1990, 1995). Rather, it is to say that public schooling is a site of conflict, but one that also has been a site of major victories by popular groups. Indeed, conservatives would not be so angry at schools if public schools had not had a number of progressive tendencies cemented in them.

In a relatively short article, I cannot deal at length with all of the many issues that could be raised about the home schooling movement. I want to ask a number of critical questions about the dangers associated with it. Although it is quite probable that some specific children and families will gain from home schooling, my concerns are larger. They are connected to the more extensive restructuring of this society that I believe is quite dangerous and to the manner in which our very sense of public responsibility is withering in ways that will lead to even further social inequalities. To illuminate these dangers, I have to do a number of things: situate home schooling within the larger movement that provides much of its impetus; suggest its connections with other protectionist impulses; connect it to the history of and concerns about the growth of activist government; and, finally, point to how it actually may hurt many other students who are not home schooled.

At the very outset of this article, let me state as clearly as I can that any parents who care so much about the educational experiences of their children that they actively seek to be deeply involved are to be applauded, not chastised or simply dismissed. Let me also say that it is important not to stereotype individuals who reject public schooling as unthinking promoters of ideological forms that are so deeply threatening that they are—automatically—to be seen as beyond the pale of legitimate concerns. Indeed, as I demonstrated in *Cultural Politics and Education* (Apple, 1996), there are complicated reasons behind the growth of antischool sentiments. As I showed there, there are elements of “good” sense as well as bad “sense” in such beliefs. All too many school systems are overly bureaucratic, are apt not to listen carefully to parents’ or community concerns, or act in overly defensive ways when questions are asked about what and whose knowledge is considered “official.” In some ways, these kinds of criticisms are similar across the political spectrum, with both left and right often making similar claims about the politics of recognition (see Fraser, 1997). Indeed, these very kinds of criticisms have led many progressive and activist educators to build more community-based and responsive models of curriculum and teaching in public schools (Apple & Beane, 1995).

This said, however, it is still important to realize that although the intentions of critics such as home schoolers may be meritorious, the effects of their actions may be less so.

Although there are many home schoolers who have not made their decision based on religious convictions, a large proportion have. In this article, I focus largely on this group, in part because it constitutes some of the most committed parents and in part because ideologically it raises a number of important issues. Many home schoolers are guided by what they believe are biblical understandings of the family, gender relation-

ships, legitimate knowledge, the importance of “tradition,” the role of government, and the economy. They constitute part of what I have called the “conservative restoration,” in which a tense alliance has been built among various segments of “the public” in favor of particular policies in education and the larger social world. Let me place this in its larger context.

Education and the Conservative Restoration

Long-lasting educational transformations often come not from the work of educators and researchers, but from larger social movements that tend to push our major political, economic, and cultural institutions in specific directions. Thus, it would be impossible to understand fully educational reforms over the past decades without situating them within, say, the long struggles by multiple communities of Color and women for both cultural recognition and economic redistribution (see, e.g., Fraser, 1997). Even such taken-for-granted things as state textbook adoption policies—among the most powerful mechanisms in the processes of defining “official knowledge”—are the results of widespread populist and anti-Northern movements and especially the class and race struggles over culture and power that organized and reorganized the polity in the United States a century ago (Apple, 2000).

It should come as no surprise, then, that education is again witnessing the continued emergence and growing influence of powerful social movements. Some of these may lead to increased democratization and greater equality, whereas others are based on a fundamental shift in the very meanings of democracy and equality and are more than a little retrogressive socially and culturally. Unfortunately, it is the latter that have emerged as the most powerful.

The rightward turn has been the result of years of well-funded and creative ideological efforts by the right to form a broad-based coalition. This new alliance, what is technically called a *new hegemonic bloc*, has been so successful in part because it has been able to make major inroads in the battle over common sense—that is, it has stitched together different social tendencies and commitments creatively and has organized them under its own general leadership in issues dealing with welfare, culture, the economy, and—as many know from personal experience—education. Its aim in educational and social policy might best be described as “conservative modernization” (Dale, 1989). In the process, democracy has been reduced to consumption practices. Citizenship has been reduced to possessive individualism. And a politics based on resentment and a fear of the “Other” has been pressed forward.

There are a number of major elements within this new alliance (for more detailed discussion, see Apple, 1996). The first, *neoliberals*, represent dominant economic and political elites who are intent on “modernizing” the economy and the institutions connected to it. They are certain that markets and consumer choice will solve all of “our” social problems, because private is necessarily good and public is necessarily bad—hence, their strong support of vouchers and privatized choice plans. Although there is clear empirical evidence about the very real inequalities that are created by such educational policies (Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998), this group is usually in leadership of the alliance. If we think of this new bloc as an ideological umbrella, neoliberals are holding the umbrella’s handle.

The second group, *neoconservatives*, are economic and cultural conservatives who want a return to “high standards,” discipline, “real” knowledge, and what is in essence a form of Social Darwinist competition. They are fueled by a nostalgic and quite romanticized vision of the past. It is often based on a fundamental misrecognition of the fact that what they might call the classics and “real” knowledge gained that status as the result of intense past conflicts and often were themselves seen as equally dangerous culturally and just as morally destabilizing as any of the new elements of the curriculum and culture they now castigate (Levine, 1996).

The third element is made up of largely White working-class and middle-class groups who mistrust the state and are concerned with security, the family, gender and age relations within the home, sexuality, and traditional and fundamentalist religious values and knowledge. They form an increasingly active segment of *authoritarian populists* who are powerful in education and in other areas of politics and social and cultural policy. They provide much of the support from below for neoliberal and neoconservative positions, because they see themselves as disenfranchised by the “secular humanism” that supposedly now pervades public schooling. They are also often among those larger numbers of people whose very economic livelihoods are most at stake in the economic restructuring and capital flight that we are now experiencing.

Many home schoolers combine beliefs from all three of these tendencies; but it is the last one that seems to drive a large portion of the movement.

Satan’s Threat

For many on the right, one of the key enemies is public education. Secular education is turning our children into “aliens” and, by teaching them to question our ideas, turning them against us. What are often accurate concerns about public schooling that I noted earlier—its overly bureaucratic

nature; its lack of curriculum coherence; its disconnection from the lives, hopes, and cultures of many of its communities; and more—are here often connected to more deep-seated and intimate worries. These worries echo Pagels's (1995) argument that Christianity historically has defined its most fearful satanic threats not from distant enemies but in relation to very intimate ones. "The most dangerous characteristic of the satanic enemy is that though he will look just like us, he will nevertheless have changed completely" (Pagels, as cited in Kintz, 1997, p. 73).

Some of the roots of this can be found much earlier in the call of conservative activist Beverly LaHaye for the founding of an organization to counter the rising tide of feminism. In support of Concerned Women of America, she spoke of her concern for family, nation, and religion:

I sincerely believe that God is calling the Christian women of America to draw together in a spirit of unity and purpose to protect the rights of the family. I believe that it is time for us to set aside our doctrinal differences to work for a spiritually renewed America. Who but a woman is as deeply concerned about her children and her home? Who but a woman has the time, the intuition, and the drive to restore our nation? ... They may call themselves feminists or humanists. The label makes little difference, because many of them are seeking the destruction of morality and human freedom. (as cited in Kintz, 1997, p. 80)

It is clear from this quotation what is seen as the satanic threat and what is at stake here. These fears about the nation, home, family, children's "innocence," religious values, and traditional views of gender relations are sutured together into a more general fear of the destruction of a moral compass and personal freedom. "Our" world is disintegrating around us. Its causes are not the economically destructive policies of the globalizing economy (Greider, 1997), not the decisions of an economic elite, and not the ways in which, say, our kind of economy turns all things—including cherished traditions (and even our children)²—into commodities for sale. Rather, the causes are transferred onto those institutions and people that are themselves being constantly buffeted by the same forces—public sector institutions, schooling, poor people of Color, other women who have struggled for centuries to build a society that is more responsive to the

²I am thinking here of Channel One, the for-profit commercial television show that is in an increasingly large percentage of our middle and secondary schools. In this "reform," students are sold as a captive audience to corporations intent on marketing their products to our children in schools (see Apple, 2000, and Molnar, 1996).

hopes and dreams of many people who have been denied participation in the public sphere, and so on.³

As I noted at the beginning of this article, however, it is important not to stereotype individuals involved in this movement. For example, a number of men and women who are activists in rightist movements believe that some elements of feminism did improve the conditions of women overall. By focusing on equal pay for equal work and opening up job opportunities that traditionally had been denied to women who had to work for pay, women activists had benefitted many people. However, for authoritarian populists, feminism and secular institutions in general still tend to break with God's law. They are much too individualistic, and they misinterpret the divine relationship between families and God. In so doing, many aspects of civil rights legislation, the public schools' curricula, and so many other parts of secular society are simply wrong. Thus, for example, if one views the Constitution literally as divinely inspired, then it is not public institutions but the traditional family—as God's chosen unit—that is the core social unit that must be protected by the Constitution (Kintz, 1997, p. 97). In a time of seeming cultural disintegration, when traditions are under threat and when the idealized family faces ever more externally produced dangers, protecting our families and our children are key elements in returning to God's grace.⁴

Even without these religious elements, a defensive posture is clear in much of the movement. In many ways, the movement toward home schooling mirrors the growth of privatized consciousness in other areas of society. It is an extension of the "suburbanization" of everyday life that is so evident all around us. In essence, it is the equivalent of gated communities and of the privatization of neighborhoods, recreation, parks, and so many other things. It provides a "security zone" both physically and ideologically. Kintz (1997) described it this way:

As citizens worried about crime, taxes, poor municipal services, and poor schools abandon cities, the increasing popularity of gated communities, ... fortress communities, reflects people's desire to retreat. ... They want to spend more of their tax dollars on themselves instead of others. ... Further, they take comfort in the social homogeneity of such

³Of course, the very distinction between "public" and "private" spheres has strong connections to the history of patriarchal assumptions (see Fraser, 1989).

⁴This is a particular construction of the family. As Coontz (1992) showed in her history of the family in the United States, it has had a varied form, with the nuclear family that is so important to conservative formulations merely being one of many.

communities, knowing that their neighbors act and think much as they do. (p. 107)

This “cocooning” is not just about seeking an escape from the problems of the “city” (a metaphor for danger and heterogeneity). It is a rejection of the entire idea of the city. Cultural and intellectual diversity, complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, and proximity to “the Other”—all these are to be shunned (Kintz, 1997, p. 107). In place of the city is the engineered pastoral, the neat and well-planned universe where things (and people) are in their “rightful place” and reality is safe and predictable.

Yet, in so many ways, such a movement mirrors something else. It is a microcosm of the increasing segmentation of America society in general. As we move to a society segregated by residence, race, economic opportunity, and income, “purity” is increasingly more apt to be found in the fact that upper classes send their children to elite private schools; where neighborliness is determined by property values; where evangelical Christians, ultraorthodox Jews, and others only interact with each other and their children are schooled in private religious schools or schooled at home (Kintz, 1997, p. 108). A world free of conflict, uncertainty, the voice and culture of the Other—in a word I used before, *cocooning*—is the ideal.

Thus, home schooling has many similarities with the Internet. It enables the creation of “virtual communities” that are perfect for those with specialized interests. It gives individuals a new ability to “personalize” information, to choose what they want to know or what they find personally interesting. However, as many commentators are beginning to recognize, unless we are extremely cautious, “customizing our lives” could radically undermine the strength of local communities, many of which are already woefully weak. As Shapiro (1999) put it,

Shared experience is an indisputably essential ingredient [in the formation of local communities]; without it there can be no chance for mutual understanding, empathy and social cohesion. And this is precisely what personalization threatens to delete. A lack of common information would deprive individuals of a starting point for democratic dialogue. (p. 12)

Even with the evident shortcomings of many public schools, at the very least they provide “a kind of social glue, a common cultural reference point in our polyglot, increasingly multicultural society” (Shapiro, 1999, p. 12). Yet, whether called personalizing or cocooning, it is exactly this common reference point that is rejected by many within the home schooling movement’s pursuit of “freedom” and “choice.”

This particular construction of the meaning of freedom is of considerable moment, because there is a curious contradiction within such conservatism's obsession with freedom. In many ways this emphasis on freedom, paradoxically, is based on a fear of freedom (Kintz, 1997, p. 168). It is valued but also loathed as a site of danger, of "a world out of control." Many home schoolers reject public schooling out of concern for equal time for their beliefs. They want "equality." Yet it is a specific vision of equality, because coupled with their fear of things out of control is a powerful anxiety that the nation's usual understanding of equality will produce uniformity (Kintz, 1997, p. 186). But this feared uniformity is not seen as the same as the religious and cultural homogeneity sponsored by the conservative project. It is a very different type of uniformity—one in which the fear that "we are all the same" actually speaks to a loss of religious particularity. Thus, again there is another paradox at the heart of this movement: We want everyone to be like "us"—"This is a 'Christian nation'"; "Governments must bow before 'a higher authority'" (Smith, 1998); but we want the right to be different—a difference based on being God's elect group. Uniformity weakens our specialness. This tension between (a) knowing one is a member of God's elect people and thus, by definition, different; and (b) also being so certain that one is correct that the world needs to be changed to fit one's image, is one of the central paradox's behind authoritarian populist impulses. For some home schoolers, the paradox is solved by withdrawal of one's children from the public sphere to maintain their difference. For still others, this allows them to prepare themselves and their children with an armor of Christian beliefs that will enable them to go forth into the world later on to bring God's word to those who are not among the elect. Once again, let us declare our particularity, our difference, to better prepare ourselves to bring the unanointed world to our set of uniform beliefs.

Attacking the State

At the base of this fear both of the loss of specialness and of becoming uniform in the "wrong way" is a sense that the state is intervening in our daily lives in quite powerful ways, ways that are causing even more losses. It is not possible to understand the growth of home schooling unless we connect it to the history of the attack on the public sphere in general and on the government (the state) in particular. To better comprehend the antistatist impulses that lie behind a good deal of the home schooling movement, I need to place these impulses in a longer historical and social context. Some history and theory is necessary here.

One of the keys to this is the development of what Clarke and Newman (1997) have called the "managerial state." This was an active state that

combined bureaucratic administration and professionalism. The organization of the state centered around the application of specific rules of coordination. Routinization and predictability are among the hallmarks of such a state. This was to be coupled with a second desirable trait, that of social, political, and personal neutrality rather than nepotism and favoritism. This bureaucratic routinization and predictability would be balanced by an emphasis on professional discretion. Here, bureaucratically regulated professionals such as teachers and administrators still would have an element of irreducible autonomy based on their training and qualifications. Their skills and judgment were to be trusted, if they acted fairly and impartially. Yet fairness and impartiality were not enough; the professional also personalized the managerial state. Professionals such as teachers made the state "approachable" by not only signifying neutrality, but by acting in nonanonymous ways to foster the "public good" and to "help" individuals and families (Clarke & Newman, 1997, pp. 5-7).

Of course, such bureaucratic and professional norms were there not only to benefit "clients." They acted to protect the state by providing it with legitimacy. (The state is impartial, fair, and acts in the interests of everyone.) They also served to insulate professional judgments from critical scrutiny. (As holders of expert knowledge, we—teachers, social workers, state employees—are the ones who are to be trusted because we know best.)

Thus, from the end of World War II until approximately the mid-1970s, there was a "settlement," a compromise, in which an activist welfare state was seen as legitimate. It was sustained by a triple legitimacy. There was (largely) bipartisan support for the state to provide and manage a larger part of social life, a fact that often put it above a good deal of party politics. Bureaucratic administration promised to act impartially for the benefit of everyone. And professionals employed by the state, such as teachers and other educators, were there to apply expert knowledge to serve the public (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 8). This compromise was widely accepted and provided public schools and other public institutions with a strong measure of support because, by and large, the vast majority of people continued to believe that schools and other state agencies did in fact act professionally and impartially in the public good.

This compromise came under severe attack as the fiscal crisis deepened and as competition over scarce economic, political, and cultural resources grew more heated in the 1970s and beyond. The political forces of conservative movements used this crisis, often in quite cynical and manipulative—and well-funded—ways. The state was criticized for denying the opportunity for consumers to exercise choice. The welfare state was seen as gouging the citizen (as a taxpayer) to pay for public handouts for those who ignored personal responsibility for their actions. These "scroungers"

from the underclass were seen as sexually promiscuous, immoral, and lazy, as opposed to the “rest of us,” who were hard-working, industrious, and moral. They supposedly are a drain on all of us economically, and state-sponsored support of them leads to the collapse of the family and traditional morality (Apple, 2000). These arguments may not have been totally accurate, but they were effective.

This suturing together of neoliberal and neoconservative attacks led to a particular set of critiques against the state. For many people, the state was no longer the legitimate and neutral upholder of the public good. Instead, the welfare state was an active agent of national decline, as well as an economic drain on the country’s (and the family’s) resources. In the words of Clarke and Newman (1997):

Bureaucrats were identified as actively hostile to the public—hiding behind the impersonality of regulations and “red tape” to deny choice, building bureaucratic empires at the expense of providing service, and insulated from the “real world” pressures of competition by their monopolistic position. Professionals were arraigned as motivated by self-interest, exercising power over would-be costumers, denying choice through the dubious claim that “professionals know best.” Worse still, ... liberalism ... was viewed as undermining personal responsibility and family authority and as prone to trendy excesses such as egalitarianism, anti-discrimination policies, moral relativism or child-centeredness. (p. 15)

These moral, political, and economic concerns were easily transferred to public schooling, because for many people the school was and is the public institution closest to them in their daily life. Hence, public schooling and the teaching and curricula found within it became central targets of attack. Curricula and teachers were not impartial, but elitist. School systems were imposing the Other’s morality on “us.” And “real Americans” who were patriotic, religious, and moral—as opposed to everyone else—were suffering and were the new oppressed (Delfattore, 1992). Although this position fits into a long history of the paranoid style of American cultural politics and was often based on quite inaccurate stereotypes, it does point to a profound sense of alienation that many people feel.

As I mentioned previously, there are elements of good sense in the critique of the state made by both right and left. The government has assumed all too often that the only true holders of expertise in education, social welfare, and so forth are those in positions of formal authority. This has led to a situation of overbureaucratization. It also has led to the state being “colonized” by a particular fraction of the new middle class that

seeks to ensure its own mobility and its own positions by employing the state for its own purposes. However, there is a world of difference between acknowledging that there are some historical tendencies within the state to become overly bureaucratic and to not listen carefully enough to the expressed needs of the people it is supposed to serve, and a blanket rejection of public control and public institutions such as schools. This not only has led to cocooning, but it also threatens the gains made by large groups of disadvantaged people for whom the possible destruction of public schooling is nothing short of a disaster. The final section of my analysis turns to a discussion of this last point.

Public and Private

We need to think relationally when we ask who will be the major beneficiaries of the attack on the state and the movement toward home schooling. What if gains that are made by one group of people come at the expense of other, even more culturally and economically oppressed groups? As we shall see, this is not an inconsequential worry in this instance.

A distinction that is helpful here is that between a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition. In the first (redistribution), the concern is for socioeconomic injustice. Here, the political-economic system of a society creates conditions that lead to exploitation (having the fruits of your labor appropriated for the benefit of others), economic marginalization (having one's paid work confined to poorly paid and undesirable jobs or having no real access to the routes to serious and better-paying jobs), and/or deprivation (being constantly denied the material that would lead to an adequate standard of living). All these socioeconomic injustices lead to arguments about whether this is a just or fair society and whether identifiable groups of people actually have equality of resources (Fraser, 1997, p. 13).

The second dynamic (recognition) is often related to redistribution in the real world, but it has its own specific history and differential power relations as well. It is related to the politics of culture and symbols. In this case, injustice is rooted in a society's social patterns of representation and interpretation. Examples of this include cultural domination (being constantly subjected to patterns of interpretation or cultural representation that are alien to one's own or even hostile to it), nonrecognition (basically being rendered invisible in the dominant cultural forms in the society), and disrespect (having oneself routinely stereotyped or maligned in public representations in the media, schools, government policies, or in everyday conduct; Fraser, 1997, p. 14). These kinds of issues surrounding the politics of recognition are central to the identities and sense of injustice of many

home schoolers. Indeed, they provide the organizing framework for their critique of public schooling and their demand that they be allowed to teach their children outside such state control.

Although both forms of injustice are important, it is absolutely crucial that we recognize that an adequate response to one must not lead to the exacerbation of the other—that is, responding to the claims of injustice in recognition by one group (say, religious conservatives) must not make the conditions that lead to exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation more likely to occur for other groups. Unfortunately, this may be the case for some of the latent effects of home schooling.

Because of this, it is vitally important not to separate out the possible effects of home schooling from what we are beginning to know about the possible consequences of neoliberal policies in general in education. As Whitty et al. (1998) showed in their review of the international research on voucher and choice plans, one of the latent effects of such policies has been the reproduction of traditional hierarchies of class and race—that is, the programs clearly have differential benefits in which those who already possess economic and cultural capital reap significantly more benefits than those who do not. This is patterned in very much the same ways that the stratification of economic, political, and cultural power produces inequalities in nearly every socioeconomic sphere. One of the hidden consequences that is emerging from the expanding conservative critique of public institutions, including schools, is a growing antitax movement, in which those who have chosen to place their children in privatized, marketized, and home schools do not want to pay taxes to support the schooling of “the Other” (Apple, 1996).

The wider results of this are becoming clear—a declining tax base for schooling, social services, health care, housing, and anything “public” for those populations (usually in the most economically depressed urban and rural areas) who suffer the most from the economic dislocations and inequalities that so deeply characterize this nation. Thus, a politics of recognition—“I want to guarantee ‘choice’ for my children based on my identity and special needs”—has begun to have extremely negative effects on the politics of redistribution. It is absolutely crucial that we recognize this. If it is the case that the emergence of educational markets has consistently benefited the most advantaged parents and students and has consistently disadvantaged both economically poor parents and students and parents and students of Color (Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Whitty et al., 1998), then we need to examine critically the latent effects of the growth of home schooling in the same light. Will it be the case that social justice loses in this equation, just as it did and does in many of the other highly publicized programs of “choice”?

We now have emerging evidence to this effect, evidence that points to the fact that social justice often does lose with the expansion of home schooling in some states. A case in point is the way in which the ongoing debate over the use of public money for religious purposes in education is often subverted through manipulation of loopholes that are only available to particular groups. Religiously motivated home schoolers are currently engaged in exploiting public funding in ways that are not only hidden, but in ways that raise serious questions about the drain on economic resources during a time of severe budget crises in all too many school districts.

Let me say more about this, because it provides an important instance of my argument that gains in recognition for some groups (say, home schools) can have decidedly negative effects in other spheres, such as the politics of redistribution. In California, for example, charter schools have been used as a mechanism to gain public money for home schoolers. Charter school legislation in California has been employed in very "interesting" ways to accomplish this. In one recent study, for example, 50% of charter schools were serving home schoolers. "Independent study" charter schools (a creative pseudonym for computer-linked home schooling) have been used by both school districts and parents to gain money that otherwise might not have been available. Although this does demonstrate the ability of school districts to use charter school legislation strategically to get money that might have been lost when parents withdraw their children to home school them, it also signifies something else. In this and other cases, the money given to parents for enrolling in such independent study charter schools was used by the parents to purchase religious material produced and sold by Bob Jones University, one of the most conservative religious schools in the entire nation (Wells, 1999).

Thus, public money not legally available for overtly sectarian material is used to purchase religious curricula under the auspices of charter school legislation. Yet, unlike all curricula used in public schools that must be publicly accountable in terms of its content and costs, the material purchased for home schooling has no public accountability whatsoever. Although this does give greater choice to home schoolers and does enable them to act on a politics of recognition, it not only takes money away from other students who do not have the economic resources to afford computers in the home, but it also denies them a say in what the community's children will learn about themselves and their cultures, histories, values, and so on. Given the fact that a number of textbooks used in fundamentalist religious schools expressly state such things as Islam is a false religion and embody similar claims that many citizens would find deeply offensive,⁵ it

⁵See Re'em (1998) for an interesting analysis of some of this content.

does raise serious questions about whether it is appropriate for public money to be used to teach such content without any public accountability.

Thus, two things are going on here. Money is being drained from already hard-pressed school districts to support home schooling. Just as important, curricular materials that support the identities of religiously motivated groups are being paid for by the public without any accountability, even though these materials may act in such a way as to deny the claims for recognition of one of the fastest growing religions in the nation, Islam. This raises more general and quite serious issues about how the claims for recognition by religious conservatives can be financially supported when they may at times actually support discriminatory teaching.

I do not wish to be totally negative here. After all, this is a complicated issue in which there may be justifiable worries among home schoolers that they are not being listened to in terms of their values and culture. But it must be openly discussed, not lost in the simple statement that we should support a politics of recognition of religiously motivated home schoolers because their culture seems to them to be not sufficiently recognized in public institutions. At the very least, the possible dangers to the public good need to be recognized.

Conclusion

I have used this article to raise a number of critical questions about the economic, social, and ideological tendencies that often stand behind significant parts of the home schooling movement. In the process, I have situated it within larger social movements that I and many others believe can have quite negative effects on our sense of community, on the health of the public sphere, and on our commitment to building a society that is less economically and racially stratified. I have suggested that issues need to be raised about the effects of its commitment to cocooning, its attack on the state, and its growing use of public funding with no public accountability. Yet, I also have argued that there are clear elements of good sense in its criticisms of the bureaucratic nature of all too many of our institutions, in its worries about the managerial state, and in its devotion to being active in the education of its children.

In my mind, the task is to disentangle the elements of good sense evident in these concerns from the selfish and antipublic agenda that has been pushing concerned parents and community members into the arms of the conservative restoration. The task of public schools is to listen much more carefully to the complaints of parents such as these and to rebuild our institutions in much more responsive ways. As I have argued in much greater

detail elsewhere, all too often, public schools push concerned parents who are not originally part of conservative cultural and political movements into the arms of such alliances by their (a) defensiveness, (b) lack of responsiveness, and (c) silencing of democratic discussion and criticism (Apple, 1996). Of course, sometimes these criticisms are unjustified or are politically motivated by undemocratic agendas (Apple, 1999). However, this must not serve as an excuse for a failure to open the doors of our schools to the intense public debate that makes public education a living and vital part of our democracy.

Luckily, we have models for doing exactly that, as the democratic schools movement demonstrates (Apple & Beane, 1995). There are models of curricula and teaching that are related to community sentiment, that are committed to social justice and fairness, and that are based in schools where both teachers and students want to be. If schools do not do this, there may be all too many parents who are pushed in the direction of antischool sentiment. This would be a tragedy both for the public school system and for our already withered sense of community that is increasingly under threat.

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