We have entered a period of reaction in education. Our educational institutions are seen as failures. High dropout rates, a decline in “functional literacy,” a loss of standards and discipline, the failure to teach “real knowledge” and economically useful skills, poor scores on standardized tests—all of these are charges leveled at U.S. schools. And all of these, we are told, have led to declining economic productivity, unemployment, poverty, a loss of international competitiveness, and so on. Return to a “common culture,” make schools more efficient, make them more responsive to the private sector: do this and our problems will be solved.
Behind all of this is an attack on egalitarian norms and values. Although hidden in the rhetorical flourishes of the critics, in essence “too much democracy”—culturally and politically—is seen as one of the major causes of “our” declining economy and culture. Similar tendencies are quite visible in other countries as well. The extent of the reaction is captured in the words of Kenneth Baker, former British secretary of education and science in the Thatcher government, who evaluated nearly a decade of rightist efforts in education by saying, “The age of egalitarianism is over.” He was speaking positively, not negatively.

The threat to egalitarian ideals that these attacks represent is not usually made quite this explicitly, since they are often couched in the discourse of “improving” competitiveness, jobs, standards, and quality in an educational system that is seen to be in total crisis.

It would be simplistic, however, to interpret what is happening as only the result of efforts by dominant economic elites. Many of these attacks do represent attempts to reintegrate education into a national and global economic agenda. Yet, they cannot be fully reduced to that, nor can they be reduced to being only about the economy. Cultural struggles and struggles over race and gender coincide with class alliances and class power.

Education is a site of struggle and compromise. It serves also as a proxy for larger battles over what our institutions should do, who they should serve, and who should make these decisions. And yet, by itself it is one of the major arenas through which are worked resources, power, and ideology specific to policy, finance, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation in education. Thus, education is both cause and effect, determining and determined. Because of this, no one essay could hope to give a complete picture of this complexity. What I hope to do instead is to provide an outline of some of the major tensions surrounding education in the United States and other countries as they move in conservative directions. A key word here is directions. The plural is crucial to my arguments, since there are multiple and at times contradictory tendencies within the rightist turn.

It is impossible to understand current educational policy in the United States without placing it in its global context. Thus, behind the stress on higher standards, more rigorous testing, education for employment, and a much closer relationship between education and the economy in general, is the fear of losing in international competition and the loss of jobs and money to Japan and the “Asian Tiger” economies, to Mexico, and else-
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where—even given their current economic crises. In the same way, the equally evident pressure in the United States to reinstall a (selective) vision of a common culture, to place more emphasis on the "Western tradition," on religion, on the English language, and similar emphases are deeply connected to cultural fears about Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This context provides a backdrop for my discussion.

The rightward turn—what I have elsewhere called the conservative restoration—has been the result of the successful struggle by the Right to form a broad-based alliance. This new alliance has been so successful in part because it has been able to win the battle over common sense. That is, it has creatively stitched together different social tendencies and commitments and has organized them under its own general leadership in issues dealing with social welfare, culture, the economy, and education. Its aim in educational and social policy is what might best be described as "conservative modernization."

There are four major elements within this alliance. Each has its own relatively autonomous history and dynamics, but each also has been sutured into the more general conservative movement. These elements include neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and a particular fraction of the upwardly mobile new middle class. I shall pay particular attention to the first two groups since they—and especially neoliberals—are currently in leadership in this alliance to "reform" education. However, in no way do I want to dismiss the power of these latter two groups.

Neoliberals

Neoliberals are the most powerful element within the conservative restoration. They are guided by a vision of the weak state. Thus, what is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad. Public institutions such as schools are "black holes" into which money is poured—and then seemingly disappears—but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results. For neoliberals, there is one form of rationality more powerful than any other: economic rationality. Efficiency and an "ethic" of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms. All people are to act in ways that maximize their own personal benefits. Indeed, behind this position is an empirical claim that this is how all rational actors act. Yet, rather than being a neu-
ternal description of the world of social motivation, this is actually a construction of the world around the valuative characteristics of an efficiently acquisitive class type.6

Underpinning this position is a vision of students as human capital. The world is intensely competitive economically, and students—as future workers—must be given the requisite skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively.7 Further, any money spent on schools that is not directly related to these economic goals is suspect. In fact, as “black holes,” schools and other public services as they are currently organized and controlled waste economic resources that should go into private enterprise. Thus, not only are public schools failing our children as future workers, but like nearly all public institutions they are sucking the financial life out of this society. Partly this is the result of “producer capture.” Schools are built for teachers and state bureaucrats, not “consumers.” They respond to the demands of professionals and other selfish state workers, not the consumers who rely on them.

The idea of the “consumer” is crucial here. For neoliberals, the world in essence is a vast supermarket. “Consumer choice” is the guarantor of democracy. In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television.8 By turning it over to the market through voucher and choice plans, it will be largely self-regulating. Thus, democracy is turned into consumption practices. In these plans, the ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser. The ideological effects of this are momentous. Rather than democracy being a political concept, it is transformed into a wholly economic concept. The message of such policies is that of what might best be called “arithmetical particularism,” in which the unattached individual—as a consumer—is deraced, declassed, and degendered.9

The metaphors of the consumer and the supermarket are actually quite apposite here. For just as in real life, there are individuals who indeed can go into supermarkets and choose among a vast array of similar or diverse products. And there are those who can only engage in what can best be called “postmodern” consumption. They stand outside the supermarket and can only consume the image.

The entire project of neoliberalism nationally and internationally is connected to a larger process of exporting the blame from the decisions of dominant groups onto the state and onto poor people.10 Yet, with their emphasis on the consumer rather than the producer, neoliberal policies
need also to be seen as part of a more extensive attack on government employees. In education in particular, they constitute an offensive against teacher unions, which are seen to be much too powerful and much too costly. While perhaps not conscious, this needs to be interpreted as part of a longer history of attacks on women’s labor, since the vast majority of teachers in the United States—as in so many other nations—are women.11

There are varied policy initiatives that have emerged from the neoliberal segments of the new hegemonic alliance. Most have centered around either creating closer linkages between education and the economy or placing schools themselves into the market. The former is represented by widespread proposals for “school-to-work” and “education-for-employment” programs and by vigorous cost-cutting attacks on the “bloated state.” The latter is no less widespread and is becoming increasingly powerful. It is represented by both national and state-by-state proposals for voucher and choice programs.12 Behind this is a plan to subject schools to the discipline of market competition.13

Some proponents of “choice” argue that only enhanced parental “voice” and choice will provide a chance for “educational salvation” for minority parents and children.14 Terry Moe, for instance, claims that the best hope for the poor to gain the right “to leave bad schools and seek out good ones” is through an “unorthodox alliance.”15 Only by allying themselves with Republicans and business—the most powerful groups supposedly willing to transform the system—can the poor succeed.

There is increasing empirical evidence around the world that the development of “quasi markets” in education has led to the exacerbation of existing social divisions surrounding class and race.16 There are now increasingly convincing arguments that while the supposed overt goal of voucher and choice plans is to give poor people the right to exit public schools, among the ultimate long-term effects may be to increase “white flight” from public schools into private and religious schools and to create the conditions where affluent white parents may refuse to pay taxes to support public schools that are suffering more and more from the debilitating effects of the fiscal crisis of the state. The result is even more educational apartheid, not less.17

In his own review of evidence from the United States, England, New Zealand, and Australian experiences, Whitty argues that while advocates of choice assume that competition will enhance the efficiency and respon-
siveness of schools, as well as give disadvantaged children opportunities they currently do not have, this may be a false hope.\textsuperscript{18} These hopes are not now being realized and are unlikely to be realized in the future "in the context of broader policies that do nothing to challenge deeper social and cultural inequalities." He continues, "Atomized decision-making in a highly stratified society may appear to give everyone equal opportunities but transforming responsibility for decision-making from the public to the private sphere can actually reduce the scope for collective action to improve the quality of education for all."\textsuperscript{19}

This position is ratified by Henig, who states, "The sad irony of the current education-reform movement is that, through over-identification with school choice proposals, the healthy impulse to consider radical reforms to address social problems may be channeled into initiatives that further erode the potential for collective deliberation and collective response."\textsuperscript{20} When this is coupled with the fact that such neoliberal policies in practice may reproduce traditional hierarchies of class, race, and gender, this should give us serious pause.\textsuperscript{21}

There is a second variant of neoliberalism. This one is willing to spend more state and private money on schools, if and only if schools meet the needs expressed by capital. Thus, resources are made available for "reforms" and policies that further connect the education system to the project of making our economy more competitive. Two examples can provide a glimpse of this position. In a number of states, legislation has been passed that directs schools and universities to make closer links between education and the business community. In the state of Wisconsin, for instance, all teacher education programs must include identifiable experiences on "education for employment" for all of its future teachers; and all teaching in the public elementary, middle, and secondary schools of the state must include elements of education for employment in its formal curricula.\textsuperscript{22}

The second example is seemingly less consequential, but in reality it is a powerful statement of the reintegration of educational policy and practice into the ideological agenda of neoliberalism. I am referring here to Channel One, a for-profit television network that is now broadcast into schools (many of which are financially hard-pressed given the fiscal crisis) enrolling more than 40 percent of all middle- and secondary school students in the nation. In this "reform," schools are offered a "free" satellite dish, two
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VCRs, and television monitors for each of their classrooms by a private media corporation. They are also offered a free news broadcast for these students. In return for the equipment and the news, all participating schools must sign a three-to-five-year contract guaranteeing that their students will watch Channel One every day.

This sounds relatively benign. However, not only is the technology "hard-wired" so that only Channel One can be received, but broadcast along with the news are mandatory advertisements for major fast food, athletic wear, and other corporations that students—by contract—must also watch. Students, in essence, are sold as a captive audience to corporations. Since, by law, these students must be in schools, the United States is one of the first nations in the world consciously to allow its youth to be sold as commodities to those many corporations willing to pay the high price of advertising on Channel One to get a guaranteed (captive) audience. Thus, under a number of variants of neoliberalism not only are schools transformed into market commodities but so too now are our children.23

As I noted, the attractiveness of conservative restorational politics in education rests in large part on major shifts in our common sense—about what democracy is, about whether we see ourselves as possessive individuals ("consumers"), and ultimately about how we see the market working. Underlying neoliberal policies in education and their social policies in general is a faith in the essential fairness and justice of markets. Markets ultimately will distribute resources efficiently and fairly according to effort. They ultimately will create jobs for all who want them. They are the best possible mechanism to ensure a better future for all citizens (consumers).

Because of this, we of course must ask what the economy that reigns supreme in neoliberal positions actually looks like. Yet, far from the positive picture painted by neoliberals in which technologically advanced jobs will replace the drudgery and under- and unemployment so many people now experience, the reality is something else again. As I demonstrate in a much more complete analysis in Cultural Politics and Education, markets are as powerfully destructive as they are productive in people's lives.24

Let us take as a case in point the paid labor market to which neoliberals want us to attach so much of the education system. Even with the proportional growth in proportion of high-tech related jobs, the kinds of work that are and will be increasingly available to a large portion of the American population will not be highly skilled, technically elegant posi-
tions. Just the opposite will be the case. The paid labor market will increasingly be dominated by low-paying, repetitive work in the retail, trade, and service sector. This is made strikingly clear by one fact: there will be more cashier jobs created by the year 2005 than jobs for computer scientists, systems analysts, physical therapists, operations analysts, and radiologic technicians combined. Further, eight of the top ten individual occupations that will account for the most job growth in the next ten years include the following: retail salespersons, cashiers, office clerks, truck drivers, waitresses/waiters, nursing aides/orderlies, food preparation workers, and janitors. It is obvious that the majority of these positions do not require high levels of education. Many of them are low-paid, nonunionized, and part-time, with low or no benefits. And many are dramatically linked to, and often exacerbate, the existing race, gender, and class divisions of labor, nationally and globally.  

This is the emerging economy we face, not the overly romantic picture painted by neoliberals who urge us to trust the market. Neoliberals argue that by making the market the ultimate arbiter of social worthiness, this will eliminate politics and its accompanying irrationality from our educational and social decisions. Efficiency and cost-benefit analysis will be the engines of social and educational transformation. Yet among the ultimate effects of such "economizing" and "depoliticizing" strategies is a continued failure to interrupt the growing inequalities in resources and power that so deeply characterize this society.

Two of these effects are of particular import to my discussion of education. Many communities have indeed felt the severe consequences of exporting jobs to low-wage and largely nonunionized countries in terms of unemployment, downsizing, companies reneging on collective bargaining agreements, and so forth. The fiscal crisis this has caused—for example, through declining tax revenues, states and localities engaging in corporate givebacks to keep or attract industry, and so on—is all too visible in terms of the decaying educational infrastructure in cities and rural areas in many nations. Yet there is a second effect that needs to be mentioned, one that is more ideological in terms of the formation of common sense. Global competition consistently frames public discussions of educational policy and practice. Reductive testing and accountability proposals, constant cost-cutting, marketization, closer links between education and the economy, and so much more are made to seem inevitable. Conservative discourses are nat-
uralized by the “realities” of global competition.

How this naturalization is discursively constructed is important. Nancy Fraser illuminates the process in the following way:

In male dominated capitalist societies, what is “political” is normally defined contrastively against what is “economic” and what is “domestic” or “personal.” Here, then, we can identify two principal sets of institutions that depoliticize social discourses: they are, first, domestic institutions, especially the normative domestic form, namely the modern restricted male-headed nuclear family; and, second, official economic capitalist system institutions, especially paid workplaces, markets, credit mechanisms, and “private” enterprises and corporations. Domestic institutions depoliticize certain matters by personalizing and/or familializing them; they cast these as private-domestic or personal-familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters. Official economic capitalist system institutions, on the other hand, depoliticize certain matters by economizing them; the issues in question here are cast as impersonal market imperatives, or as “private” ownership prerogatives, or as technical problems for managers and planners, all in contradistinction to political matters. In both cases, the result is a foreshortening of chains of in-order-to relations for interpreting people’s needs; interpretive chains are truncated and prevented from spilling across the boundaries separating the “domestic” and the “economic” from the political.27

For Fraser, this very process of depoliticization makes it very difficult for the needs of those with less economic, political, and cultural power to be heard accurately and acted upon in ways that deal with the true depth of the problem. This is because of what happens when “needs discourses” get retranslated into both market talk and “privately” driven policies.

For our purposes here, we can talk about two major kinds of needs discourses. There are first oppositional forms of needs talk. They arise when needs are politicized from below and are part of the crystallization of new oppositional identities on the part of subordinated social groups. What was once seen as largely a “private” matter is now placed into the larger political arena. Sexual harassment, race, and sex segregation in paid labor, and affirmative action policies in educational and economic institutions provide examples of “private” issues that have now spilled over and can
no longer be confined to the “domestic” sphere.28

A second kind of needs discourse is what might be called reprivatization discourses. They emerge as a response to the newly emergent oppositional forms and try to press these forms back into the “private” or the “domestic” arena. They are often aimed at dismantling or cutting back social services, deregulating “private” enterprise, or stopping what are seen as “runaway needs.” Thus, reprivatizers may attempt to keep issues such as, say, domestic battery from spilling over into overt political discourse, and will seek to define it as purely a family matter. Or they will argue that the closing of a factory and moving it to another nation because of “cheaper” labor is not a political question, but instead is an unimpeachable prerogative of private ownership or an unassailable imperative of an impersonal “market mechanism.”29 In each of these cases, the task is to contest both the possible breakout of runaway needs and to depoliticize the issues.

In educational policy in the United States, there are a number of clear examples of these processes. In California, for instance, a recent binding referendum that prohibited the use of affirmative action policies in state government, in university admission policies, and so forth, was passed overwhelmingly because “reprivatizers” spent an exceptional amount of money on an advertising campaign that labeled such policies as “out of control” and as improper government intervention into decisions involving “individual merit.” Voucher plans in education—where contentious issues surrounding whose knowledge should be taught, who should control school policy and practice, and how schools should be financed are left to the market to decide—offer another prime example of such attempts at “depoliticizing” educational needs. Both show the emerging power of reprivatizing discourses.

A distinction that is useful here in understanding what is happening in these cases is that between “value” and “sense” legitimation.30 Each signifies a different strategy by which powerful groups or states legitimate their authority. In the first (value) strategy, legitimation is accomplished by actually giving people what may have been promised. Thus, the social democratic state may provide social services for the population in return for continued support. That the state will do this is often the result of oppositional discourses gaining more power in the social arena and having more power to redefine the border between public and private.

In the second (sense) strategy, rather than providing people with policies
that meet the needs they have expressed, states and dominant groups attempt to *change the very meaning* of the sense of social need into something that is very different. Thus, if less powerful people call for “more democracy” and for a more responsive state, the task is not to give “value” that meets this demand, especially when it may lead to runaway needs. Rather, the task is to change what actually *counts* as democracy. In the case of neoliberal policies, democracy is now redefined as guaranteeing choice in an unfettered market. In essence, the state withdraws. The extent of acceptance of such transformations of needs and needs discourses shows the success of the reprivatizers in redefining the borders between public and private again and demonstrates how a people’s common sense can be shifted in conservative directions during a time of economic and ideological crisis.

**Neoconservatism**

While neoliberals largely are in leadership in the conservative alliance, the second major element within the new alliance is neoconservatism. Unlike the neoliberal emphasis on the weak state, neoconservatives are usually guided by a vision of the strong state. This is especially true surrounding issues of knowledge, values, and the body. Whereas neoliberalism may be seen as being based in what Raymond Williams would call an “emergent” ideological assemblage, neoconservatism is grounded in “residual” forms.31 It is largely, although not totally, based in a romantic appraisal of the past, a past in which “real knowledge” and morality reigned supreme, where people “knew their place,” and where stable communities guided by a natural order protected us from the ravages of society.32 Among the policies being proposed under this ideological position are national curricula, national testing, a “return” to higher standards, a revivification of the “Western tradition,” and patriotism. Yet, underlying some of the neoconservative thrust in education and in social policy in general is not only a call for “return.” Also behind it—and this is essential—is a fear of the “other.” This is expressed in its support for a standardized national curriculum, its attacks on bilingualism and multiculturalism, and its insistent call for raising standards.33 As noted earlier, such proposals have become more strident as neoconservatives assail the “threats” of increased immigration and cultural blending posed by global mobility and interac-
tion.

Behind much of this is a clear sense of loss—a loss of faith, of imagined communities, of a nearly pastoral vision of like-minded people who shared norms and values and in which the “Western tradition” reigned supreme. It is more than a little similar to Mary Douglas’s discussion of purity and danger, in which what was imagined to exist is sacred and “pollution” is feared above all else.34 We/they binary oppositions dominate this discourse, and the culture of “the other” is to be feared.

This sense of cultural pollution can be seen in the increasingly virulent attacks on multiculturalism (which is itself a very broad category that combines multiple political and cultural positions) in the denial of schooling or any other social benefits to the children of “illegal” immigrants, and even in some cases to the children of legal immigrants, in the conservative English-only movement, and in the equally conservative attempts to reorient curricula and textbooks toward a particular construction of the Western tradition.35

In this regard, neoconservatives lament the “decline” of the traditional curriculum and of the history, literature, and values it is said to have represented. Behind this complaint rests an entire set of historical assumptions about “tradition,” about the existence of a social consensus over what should count as legitimate knowledge, and about cultural superiority.36 Yet, it is crucial to remember that the “traditional” curriculum whose decline is lamented so fervently by neoconservative critics “ignored most of the groups that compose the American population whether they were from Africa, Europe, Asia, Central and South America, or from indigenous North American peoples.”37 Its primary and often exclusive focus was often only on quite a narrow spectrum of those people who came from a small number of northern and western European nations, in spite of the fact that the cultures and histories represented in the United States were “forged out of a much larger and more diverse complex of peoples and societies.”38 The mores and cultures of this narrow spectrum were seen as archetypes of “tradition” for everyone. They were not simply taught, but taught as superior to every other set of mores and cultures.39

As Lawrence Levine reminds us, a selective and faulty sense of history fuels the nostalgic yearnings of neoconservatives. The canon and the curriculum have never been static. They have always been in a constant process of revision, “with irate defenders insisting, as they still do, that
Indeed, even the inclusion of such “classics” as Shakespeare within the curriculum of schools in the United States came about only after prolonged and intense battles, ones that were the equal of the divisive debates over whose knowledge should be taught today. Thus, Levine notes that when neoconservative cultural critics ask for a “return” to a “common culture” and “tradition,” they are oversimplifying to the point of distortion. What is happening in terms of the expansion and alteration of official knowledge in schools and universities today “is by no means out of the ordinary; certainly it is not a radical departure from the patterns that have marked the history of [education]—constant and often controversial expansion and alteration of curricula and canons and incessant struggle over the nature of that expansion and alteration.”

Of course, such conservative positions have been forced into a kind of compromise in order to maintain their cultural and ideological leadership as a movement to “reform” educational policy and practice. A prime example is the emerging discourse over the history curriculum—in particular the construction of the United States as a “nation of immigrants.” In this hegemonic discourse, everyone in the history of the nation was an immigrant, from the first Native American population who supposedly trekked across the Bering Strait and ultimately populated North, Central, and South America, to the later waves of populations who came from Mexico, Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, Russia, Poland, and elsewhere, to finally the recent populations from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and other regions. While it is true that the United States is constituted by people from all over the world—and that is one of the things that makes it so culturally rich and vital—such a perspective constitutes an erasure of historical memory. For some groups came in chains and were subjected to state-sanctioned slavery and apartheid for hundreds of years. Others suffered what can only be called bodily, linguistic, and cultural destruction.

This said, however, it does point to the fact that while the neoconservative goals of national curricula and national testing are pressed for, they are strongly mediated by the necessity of compromise. Because of this, even the strongest supporters of neoconservative educational programs and policies have had to also support the creation of curricula that at least partly recognize “the contributions of the other.” This is partly due to the fact that there is an absence of an overt and strong national department of educa-
tion and a tradition of state and local control of schooling. The “solution” has been to have national standards developed “voluntarily” in each subject area.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, the example I gave above about history is one of the results of such voluntary standards.

Since the national professional organizations in these subject areas—such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics—are developing such national standards, the standards themselves are compromises and thus are often more flexible than those wished for by neoconservatives. This very process acts to provide a check on conservative policies over knowledge. However, this should not lead to an exaggerated romantic picture of the overall tendencies emerging in educational policy. Since leadership in school “reform” is increasingly dominated by conservative discourses surrounding “standards,” “excellence,” “accountability,” and so on, and since the more flexible parts of the standards have proven to be too expensive to implement, standards talk ultimately functions to give more rhetorical weight to the neoconservative movement to enhance central control over “official knowledge” and to “raise the bar” for achievement. The social implications of this in terms of creating even more differential school results are increasingly worrisome.\textsuperscript{46}

Yet it is not only in such things as the control over legitimate knowledge where neoconservative impulses are seen. The idea of a strong state is also visible in the growth of the regulatory state as it concerns teachers. There has been a steadily growing change from “licensed autonomy” to “regulated autonomy” as teachers’ work is more highly standardized, rationalized, and “policed.”\textsuperscript{47} Under conditions of licensed autonomy, once teachers are given the appropriate professional certification they are basically free—within limits—to act in their classrooms according to their judgment. Such a regime is based on trust in “professional discretion.” Under the growing conditions of regulated autonomy, teachers’ actions are now subjected to much greater scrutiny in terms of process and outcomes. Indeed, some U.S. states not only have specified the content that teachers are to teach but also have regulated the only appropriate methods of teaching. Not following these specified “appropriate” methods puts the teacher at risk of administrative sanctions. Such a regime of control is based not on trust, but on a deep suspicion of the motives and competence of teachers. For neoconservatives it is the equivalent of the notion of “producer capture” so powerful among neoliberals. For the former, however, the market
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will not solve this problem; rather a strong and interventionist state will see to it that only “legitimate” content and methods are taught. And this will be policed by statewide and national tests of both students and teachers.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, such policies lead to the “de-skilling” of teachers, the “intensification” of their work, and the loss of autonomy and respect. This is not surprising, since behind much of this conservative impulse is a clear distrust of teachers and an attack both on teachers’ claims to competence and especially on teachers’ unions.

The mistrust of teachers, the concern over a supposed loss of cultural control, and the sense of dangerous “pollution” are among the many cultural and social fears that drive neoconservative policies. However, as I noted earlier, underpinning these positions as well is often an ethnocentric, and even racialized, understanding of the world. Perhaps this can be best illuminated through the example of Herrnstein and Murray’s volume, *The Bell Curve.* In a book that sold hundreds of thousands of copies, the authors argue for a genetic determinism based on race (and to some extent gender). For them, it is romantic to assume that educational and social policies can ultimately lead to more equal results, since differences in intelligence and achievement are basically genetically driven. Policymakers would be wise to accept this and plan for a society that recognizes these biological differences and does not provide “false hopes” to the poor and the less intelligent, most of whom will be black. Obviously, this book has reinforced racist stereotypes that have long played a considerable part in educational and social policies in the West.

Rather than seeing race as it is—as a fully social category that is mobilized and used in different ways by different groups at different times—positions such as those argued by Herrnstein and Murray provide a veneer of seeming scientific legitimacy for policy discourses that have been discredited intellectually many times before. The sponsored mobility given to this book, in which it is reported that the authors received large sums of money from neoconservative foundations to write and publicize the volume, speaks clearly not only to the racial underpinnings of important parts of the neoconservative agenda but also to the power of conservative groups to bring their case before the public.

The consequences of such positions are not only found in educational policies but also in the intersection of such policies with broader social and economic policies, where they have been quite influential. Here too we can
find claims that what the poor lack is not money, but both an “appropriate” biological inheritance and a decided lack of values regarding discipline, hard work, and morality. Prime examples here include programs such as “Learnfare” and “Workfare,” where parents lose a portion of their welfare benefits if their children miss a significant number of school days, or where no benefits are paid if a person does not accept low-paid work, no matter how demeaning, or even if child care or health care are not provided by the state. Such policies reinstall earlier “workhouse” policies that were so popular—and so utterly damaging—in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Because of the complexity of educational politics in a global context, I have devoted most of this chapter to an analysis of the conservative social movements that are having a powerful impact on debates over policy and practice in education and in the larger social arena. I have suggested that the conservative restoration is guided by a tense coalition of forces, some of whose aims partly contradict others.

The very nature of this coalition is crucial. It is more than possible that the conservative modernization implied in this alliance can overcome its own internal contradictions and can succeed in radically transforming educational policy and practice. Thus, while neoliberals call for a weak state and neoconservatives demand a strong state, these apparently contradictory impulses can come together in creative ways. The emerging focus on centralized standards, content, and tighter control paradoxically can be the first and most essential step on the path to marketization through voucher and choice plans.

Once statewide or national curricula and tests are put in place, comparative school-by-school data will be available and will be published in a manner similar to the “league tables” on school achievement published in England. Only when there is standardized content and assessment can the market be set free, since the “consumer” can then have “objective” data concerning which schools are “succeeding” and which schools are not. Market rationality, based on “consumer choice,” will insure that the supposedly good schools will gain students and the bad schools will disappear.
When the poor "choose" to keep their children in underfunded and decaying schools in the inner cities or in rural areas (given the decline and expense of urban mass transportation, poor information, the absence of time, and their decaying economic conditions, to name but a few of the realities), they (the poor) will be blamed individually and collectively for making bad "consumer choices." Reprivatizing discourses and arithmetical particularism will justify the structural inequalities that will be (re)produced here. In this way, as odd as it may seem, neoliberal and neoconservative policies that are seemingly contradictory may mutually reinforce each other in the long run.56

Yet, while I have argued that the overall leadership in educational policy is exercised by this alliance, I do not want to give the impression that the elements under the hegemonic umbrella of this coalition are uncontested or are always victorious. This is simply not the case. As a number of people have demonstrated, at the local level throughout the United States and elsewhere there are scores of counterhegemonic programs and possibilities. It is crucial to remember, for example, that the processes and conflicts involved in globalization also constantly generate possibilities for other, more critical, engagements. On a larger level, these have included mobilizations around environmental issues, around international labor standards (Nike factories, for instance), around the repressive politics that often accompany global competition, and so on.57 On an educational level, these realities also can and have been used to stimulate students and teachers to take such issues seriously as objects of critical inquiry in the curriculum. Indeed, the integration of these kinds of social issues has a long history in critical education in schools at all levels.58 Many schools in many nations have shown remarkable resiliency in the face of the concerted ideological attacks and pressures from conservative restorational groups. And many teachers, community activists, and others have created and defended educational programs that are both pedagogically and politically emancipatory.59

Having said this, however, it is important to note the obstacles in creating the conditions for large-scale movements to defend and build progressive policies. We need to remember that there is no powerful central ministry of education in the United States. Teachers' unions are relatively weak at a national level (nor is there any guarantee that teachers' unions always act progressively). There is no consensus about an "appropriate" progressive agenda in educational policy here, since there is a vast multiplicity of
compelling (and, unfortunately, at times competing) agendas involving race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, “ability,” and so on. Thus, it is structurally difficult to sustain long-term national movements for more progressive policies and practices.

Because of this, most counterhegemonic work is organized locally or regionally. However, there currently are growing attempts at building national coalitions around what might best be called a “decentered unity.”60 Organizations in the United States such as the National Coalition of Educational Activists and the Rethinking Schools collective are becoming more visible nationally.61 None of these movements have the financial and organizational backing that stands behind neoliberal and neoconservative groups. None have the ability to bring their case before the “public” through the media and through foundations in the ways that conservative groups have been able to do. And none have the capacity or the resources to mobilize quickly a large base of nationally directed membership to challenge or promote specific policies in the ways that the members of the conservative alliance can. Effective global or transnational coalitions around progressive educational concerns have proven even more elusive.

Yet, in the face of all of these structural, financial, and political dilemmas, the fact that so many groups of people have not been integrated under the conservative alliance’s hegemonic umbrella, and have created scores of local examples of the very possibility of difference, shows us in the most eloquent and lived ways that educational policies and practices are not unidimensional. Even more important, these multiple examples demonstrate that the success of conservative policies is never guaranteed. This is crucial in a time when it is easy to lose sight of what is necessary for an education worthy of its name.

Notes

1996).
7. Given the current emphasis on this by neoliberals, it may be the case that while Bowles and Gintis’s book, Schooling in Capitalist America, was reductive, economistic, and essentializing when it first appeared in 1976, oddly it may be more accurate today. See Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America (New York: Basic Books, 1976). For criticisms of their position, see Michael W. Apple, Teachers and Texts (New York: Routledge, 1988); Michael W. Apple, Education and Power, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Mike Cole, ed. Bowles and Gintis Revisited (New York: Falmer Press, 1988).
10. See Apple, Education and Power. It is important to note as well that neoliberalism rests on a number of patriarchal assumptions. It is often based on an assumption that important social needs that are now met by the state in the areas of child care and caring for the elderly, health, and welfare will be taken up in the “domestic sphere.” In essence, neoliberalism is dependent on both increasing the exploitation of the unpaid labor of women in the home and in communities and on the revivification of important aspects of the separation between the public and private spheres. For more on the ideological effects of this separation, see Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
13. For further critical discussion of these plans, see Amy Stuart Wells, Time to Choose (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Kevin Smith and Kenneth Meier, eds. The Case against School Choice (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); and Jeffrey Henig, Rethinking School Choice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
17. I have discussed this at greater length in Apple, Cultural Politics and Education.
19. Ibid.
20. Henig, Rethinking School Choice, 222.
21. See Apple, Cultural Politics and Education; and Whitty et al., Devolution and Choice in Education.
22. Many times, however, these initiatives are actually “unfunded mandates.” That is,
requirements such as these are made mandatory, but no additional funding is provided to accomplish them. The intensification of teachers’ labor at all levels of the education system that results from this situation is very visible.


25. Ibid. See also Greider, *One World, Ready or Not*, for a rich set of descriptions of the international implications of this.

26. See, for example, Apple, *Official Knowledge*; and Greider, *One World, Ready or Not*.

27. Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 168.


33. See, for example, E. D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Want and Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).


36. See Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, for further analysis of the history and current status of these positions.


38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.


43. See Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education*, 17.

44. This is often done through a process of “mentioning,” where texts and curricula include material on the contributions of women and “minority” groups, but never allow the reader to see the world through the eyes of oppressed groups. Or, as is the case in the discourse of “we are all immigrants,” compromises are made so that the myth of historical similarity is constructed at the same time as economic divides among groups grow worse and worse. See Apple, *Official Knowledge*, especially
chap. 3.


47. Dale, *The State and Education Policy*.


49. On the relationship between this and gender, see Acker, “Gender and Teachers’ Work.”


51. See, for example, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

52. Ibid.


55. Whitty et al., *Devolution and Choice in Education*.

56. For further discussion of this, see Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education*, 22-41.

57. See, for example, the discussion of the Free Burma Campaign and the Coalition for Socially Responsible Investing in Zar Ni and Michael W. Apple, “Countering Capital on Campus,” in *Campus Inc.*, ed. Geoffrey White (New York: Prometheus Books, in press).


60. I have discussed the concept of “decentered unity,” along with its companion concept “nonreformist reforms,” in Apple, *Education and Power*; and especially, Apple, *Cultural Politics and Education*.

61. See, for example, the journal *Rethinking Schools*. It is one of the very best indicators of progressive struggles, policies, and practices in education. Information can be obtained from Rethinking Schools, 1001 E. Keefe Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 53212, U.S.A.