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## CRITICAL EDUCATION; SPEAKING THE TRUTH, AND ACTING BACK

EDUCACIÓN CRÍTICA: HISTORIA DE UNA  
RESISTENCIA EN PALABRA Y ACCIÓN

EDUCATION CRITIQUE: HISTOIRE D'UNE  
RESISTENCE EN PAROLE ET ACTION

EDUCAÇÃO CRÍTICA: HISTÓRIA DUMA  
RESISTÊNCIA EM PALABRA E AÇÃO.

Michael W. Apple

## Resumen

El profesor Apple cuenta la experiencia que vivió hace unos años en Corea del Sur, para destacar la importancia y los riesgos de tomar en serio el ser educador crítico, y para señalar que si la teoría y la práctica de la educación crítica se entienden simplemente como un área académica especializada, ampliamente utilizada para efectos de conversión, para ganar movilidad en el campo social del poder académico (Bourdieu, 1984), pierden su valor y su poder, pues ellas crecen cuando están íntimamente conectadas con los movimientos sociales y las luchas que les dan vida.

**Palabras clave:** Educación, Educación crítica, Conocimiento-poder.

## Abstract

Professor Apple describes his past experiences in South Korea, in order to highlight the importance and risks of being a critical educator. He also points out that if the theory and practice of critical education are simply understood as a specialized academic area, widely used for purposes of conversion in order to gain mobility in the social field of the academic power (Bourdieu, 1984), they lose their value and power. On the contrary, their power and potential are magnified when they are intimately connected with the social movements and struggles that give life to them.

**Key words:** Education, critical education, power-knowledge.

## Résumé

Le professeur Apple raconte l'expérience qu'il a vécue il y a des années en Corée du Sud, pour relever l'importance et les risques de prendre au sérieux l'être éducateur critique, et pour signaler que si la théorie et la pratique de l'éducation critique sont considérées simplement comme un domaine académique spécialisée, largement utilisées pour des effets de conversion, pour gagner de la mobilité dans le secteur social du pouvoir académique (Bourdieu, 1984), elles

perdent leur valeur et leur pouvoir, puisqu'elles augmentent quand elles sont intimement liées avec les mouvements sociaux et les luttes qui les maintiennent vivantes.

Mots clés : Education, Education critique, Connaissance-pouvoir

## Resumem

O professor Apple propõe que a experiência que viveu há varios anos em Corea do Sur, para ressaltar a importância e os riscos de assumir con seriedade o ser educador crítico, e para assinalar que sem a teoria e a prática da educação crítica entendem-se simplesmente como uma área acadêmica especializada amplamente utilizada para efeitos de conversión, para ganhar movilidad o campo social do poder académico (Bourdieu, 1984), perdem seu valor y seu poder pois elas crescem quando estão íntimamente conectadas com os movimentos sociais e com as lutas que lhe dão vida.

Palavras centrais: Educação, Educação crítica, conhecimento – poder.

## Resumen

Let me begin this chapter with a story, an account of one of my experiences that speaks to the importance—and the dangers—of taking our role as critical educators seriously. The narrative I tell relates my experiences on my first trip to South Korea a number of years ago. Memory, and especially memory under stress, is an imperfect vehicle. But, I want to reconstruct what happened and get as close to the reality of this experience as possible.

I had traveled to Seoul for a specific reason. Protests against the repressive military government of South Korea that was then in power had been going on for years and had intensified. A broad coalition of people that at the time cut across the landscape of class relations constantly went into the streets. The military regime responded in multiple ways: arresting protesters; often with considerable violence; branding them as traitors and communists; placing them in jail for years; harassing activists and closing down publications that criticized the regime; censoring curricula and teachers; making it illegal for teachers to form independent unions; and many more small and big actions in every sphere of society. Anger against the government

continued to grow and the dialectic between repression and acts of resistance was visible. Even with the very real dangers associated with organized action against the authorities, huge numbers of people simply refused to accept the right of the government to exercise authority.

The government could not totally control the political and cultural terrain and the movement to reoccupy that terrain by progressive forces. It was forced to provide what were at first small openings, ones that later on became bigger and bigger, ultimately leading to the creation of spaces that could not be controlled no matter how hard the regime tried. One of these openings involved me. In order to try to maintain whatever remained of its legitimacy, and in an attempt to dampen down the ever-growing mobilizations of students who were acting as “the conscience of the nation,” the government had allowed a major university to invite a critical scholar to publicly discuss the theoretical, historical, and political basis of critical sociology of education and its concern with the complex relationships involving knowledge and power—as long as the speaker talked *academically*. I was the speaker.

There are times when something that an author writes comes out at exactly the correct historical moment and has an impact that would have been much less if it had appeared a few years earlier or later. This was the case for some of my work and the ways in which it was used by Korean activists in their own struggles. *Ideology and Curriculum* (Apple, 1979/2004) and *Education and Power* (Apple, 1982/1995) had been translated into Korean by radical educators and published by one of the most progressive presses there. The former had been banned and both had been taken up as movement books, as books that were seen as crucial tools in the struggle against the illegitimate government. Paradoxically, the very best thing that can happen to any book in some situations is to have it banned by repressive forces. Thus, the military government’s attempts to prevent people from reading my and other people’s work on the relationship between knowledge and power made such work seem even more significant, a lesson that repressive regimes have yet to learn.

After a brief rest after the long plane journey, my friends from the university and from dissident groups, all of whom were activists in the anti-military government movement, picked me up and took me to the university. You need to imagine the scene visually in all its power. It was noisy. Every space was filled with crowds. Armored vehicles equipped with attachments that could spew forth tear-gas or that had powerful water canons seemed to be everywhere. The

campus was surrounded by the police. One gate was left open for people to enter, but only with the approval of the police guards. From the time I was teenager, I had been involved in anti-racist actions and other kinds of protests and had spoken at politicized events multiple times. But this felt different. The tension level was ratcheted up in what felt like the continuing steps toward a massive uprising.<sup>1</sup>

There was an honor-guard that met me at the gate. It was composed of a group of students who had vowed—against great risk to themselves—to continue their protests against the repressive politics of the military government until it stepped down. Many of them had been arrested, beaten, charged with being “agents of the North,” and were constantly subjected to measures that were meant to prove to them that resistance was not only futile but personally dangerous. A number as well had died.

Before entering the gate, I was presented with a wreath that I was to wear on my head, a wreath with a good deal of symbolic and personal meaning. It was crafted out of tear gas canisters, each one manufactured in such a way that it had a shape that bore a striking resemblance to an apple. Picture a “crown of thorns” made from the oppressor’s tools. The multiple meanings were clear. I was to wear the symbol of the police attempts at repression and crowd control—and I, a person whose last name was indeed “Apple,” was to be honored by employing these symbols of repression as an ironic badge of honor. The meaning of the “apple clusters” was to be disarticulated from its original value as a tool of control and rearticulated as a counter-hegemonic statement.<sup>2</sup>

As we walked though the campus toward the auditorium where I was to speak, we paused. I was asked to bow before an informal shrine made of flowers outside of the main auditorium. This was a shrine to honor one of the students who had recently died in the protests. Ultimate sacrifices such as these have an effect on everyone; and I am no exception. I tried to keep my emotions and anger in check. But I was near tears by now.

We then entered the building. The lecture hall was filled to more than capacity. The crowd overflowed into the aisles. People were sitting on the floor, on the stage, sometimes sitting two to a seat. The “honor guard” surrounded me, sitting at my feet in the ultimate symbol of

respect. The tension in the hall was palpable. There was electricity in the air and I felt it as much as anyone.

I was to speak on the history and current status of critical socio-economic and cultural/ideological analyses of education. I had been asked to send to the organizers the paper on which my address was to be based well ahead of time—both for translation and to make certain that possible censors would see that I did not overstep the bounds of “acceptability.” Thus, even though it pushed the boundaries of what the authorities considered acceptable, my lecture had been vetted and approved. As long as I stuck to my approved text, and kept my lecture to a purely academic analysis, there would supposedly not be serious repercussions.

I began my lecture by paying my respects to the courage of the people in the audience, and especially to the students in my “honor guard” who had risked so much. I spoke about the significance of seeing the world “relationally.” I argued that we needed to look beneath the surface of our institutions, policies, and practices and uncover their intimate connections to the relations of dominance and subordination, and to struggles against these relations, in the larger society. This was especially important in education, since most people saw education as an unalloyed “good.” Thus, it was imperative that we critically examine how this “good” works, who it actually benefits the most, and what the hidden connections were between schooling as it actually exists and the nature of power in their society and my own.

I then turned to my prepared lecture. The members of the audience all had a copy of my lecture both in Korean and English. Many of them silently read along as, at the outset, I rehearsed a number of the arguments I had made in *Ideology and Curriculum*. The text stated that rather than simply asking whether students have mastered a particular subject matter and have done well on the all too common tests that dominated so many nations—including their own—we should ask a different set of questions: Whose knowledge is this? How did it become “official”? What is the relationship between this knowledge and who has cultural, social, and economic capital in this society? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge and who does not? What can we do as critical educators and activists to change existing educational and social inequalities and to create curricula and teaching that are more socially just? So far so good.

To understand what happened next, one other physical attribute of that crowded auditorium needs to be pictured. One entire wall of the auditorium was made up of huge windows, making the outside almost seem like part of the inside. The continuing demonstrations and the police with their tear gas and water hoses were immediately visible to me and to most of the members of the audience. I looked at the scenes outside; I recognized the noise. I then departed from my prepared text. I spoke slowly so that everyone could understand exactly what I was saying and so that those who were not fluent in English could perhaps have my words translated to them by friends nearby. I said something like the following.

If you want to understand the real relationships among knowledge, education, and power, look outside these windows. Look at the police, the armored cars. Look again at the wreath of apple clusters that is on the podium next to me. Look again at the forty-nine students sitting around me. Each and every one of you is in danger of losing so much if this continues. This government knows that it must prevent you from critically understanding and acting on your reality. It wants to destroy your collective memory and yours dreams of a better society. It wants to stop you from relearning your history, to stop you from gaining the critical perspectives that might form the basis of fundamental criticisms of their own actions, to make certain that the Korean educational system at all levels is so tightly controlled ideologically that your children can see only what those in dominance want them to see. I know I am saying nothing now that hasn't been thought about and said by so many of the people here in this large hall. But it must be said. And it must be said over and over and over again, until the reasons for saying it are no longer there.

There was a hush as the audience took it all in. Then the leader of the forty-nine students came to microphone and he and one of my colleagues there again translated what I had just said. Very strong applause followed--and I have a feeling, so did some worries about what I had just said publicly. There were some men at the back of the hall whose "uniform" was recognizable to the Koreans, but not to me. They wore black leather jackets and dark sunglasses. And I had a feeling that the bulges under the jackets were probably not phones. I didn't see the glares at me from their direction, nor was I present when they undoubtedly immediately made contact with their bosses in the police and military authorities.

The results of those phone calls were not yet visible. What was there was a powerful sense of two things: that truth had been said publicly and that there was a space created by having someone whose work was respected say it openly at a forum like this. The students, the activists, and the critical academics quickly took me to a celebratory barbeque. We sang political songs, songs of protest, songs of sorrow and victory. I tried to learn Korean protest songs, mangling some of the words, but trying to get them right. But that didn't matter, since we all participated with great joy. I was asked to teach everyone a US song and I choose one quickly-- "We Shall Overcome." Many of the folks there already knew all or parts of it, a statement of the power of anti-racist movements as models for protests over oppressive power relations all over the world. Our voices rang out. The sense of freedom and what can only be called solidarity was palpable.

And then...As we left, a group of men in those same "uniforms" that I soon grew to recognize followed us. Everywhere I went, they were there. The cordon tightened. Soon all of our movements were controlled, especially mine. As one of my close friends and colleagues there said, "Now we are under arrest. Be very careful or we will soon be put in jail." I was taken to my hotel, exhausted—too exhausted to realize that there were now guards outside my room. But, it was clearer to me in the morning when I tried to leave my room for a walk. In order to not create an international incident involving the arrest of a professor from the United States, a behind the scenes decision had been made by the authorities to lock me in a hotel room with guards stationed at the door. Meals were delivered, but aside from that I was to have no connection with anyone but the guards, and especially not with the activists with whom I was working or with the "outside world" in general. The implications of this slightly "softer" form of arrest also became clearer later that morning.

That morning I was to speak at the major government research, policy, and curriculum development institute in Seoul. I was led to an official car, one in which my friends were waiting, and the only car of many cars that both led and followed us that wasn't occupied by the men in black jackets and sunglasses. As soon as I got in, my friends whispered quickly to me to say nothing. When I arrived at the institute, I was brought in to see the director. He was an appointee of the military government and a collaborator with the government in its efforts both to keep any "dangerous" knowledge out of the curriculum and to ensure that no dissident teachers kept their positions. One of the strangest conversation I have ever had ensued—about the weather,



about whether or not I liked Seoul, and finally about his apologies that my large lecture there had suddenly been canceled because the audience was not able to come. I was now to give the lecture in a nearly empty lecture hall to about 5-10 people; but these would be 5-10 people who “were indeed very interested in hearing what you have to say, Professor Apple.”

I was then placed in a windowless room with a few others to have another uncomfortable conversation about general educational issues—and again the weather--while the director supposedly made certain that the (nearly empty) lecture hall was ready. A large man stood outside the room to make certain that I stayed there and to “ensure that I was comfortable.” The conversation was again extraordinarily stilted. But it was constantly interrupted by sounds from outside. Yells of anger were heard. Sounds of protest came through the walls. The audience that supposedly could not attend my lecture was being forcibly prevented from entering the building to hear me. Leaders of the illegal independent teachers union, dissidents, student leaders, educators from universities and public schools, and even many members of the staff of the institute’s satellite offices tried to push their way in, but to no avail. It was clear to me and to my friends who were there that coercive means had been used to prevent my lecture. Undoubtedly there were more arrests.

After all this, I was again taken to the hotel and placed under guard in “my” room. But once again it is important to remember that a regime that attempts to control everything is often inefficient. The task is sometimes impossible. Early the next morning, my phone rang. This in itself was totally unexpected since the phone had been cut off so that there would be no communication between me and others. The call was from my friends and colleagues, telling me that because of what seemed to a mix-up, the guards had not been replaced that morning and my phone line had, inadvertently, been restored. It was clear that the military government was not the only group that had eyes and ears everywhere. Progressive movements had learned to put in place their own ways of knowing what was, and was not, happening. I quickly left my room and met my friends at a less-used exit at the hotel. We drove to a living museum of Korean culture outside of city. Getting out of the pouring rain, we met with other activists in a tea shop at the museum for hours to discuss and to plan strategies both for the immediate situation and for long-term actions.

This freedom was short-lived, however. Late in the afternoon, we returned to our car in the now empty parking lot of that rural museum. It was totally blocked in by three unmarked

police cars and by an official government car with the director of one of the government education agencies—another military government appointee--in it. “Wouldn’t we be more comfortable riding with him?” This was decidedly *not* a question, a fact that was made clear by the plain-clothes officers standing by. We got into his and another waiting car, with me sitting between two quite silent men whom I rightly took to be plain-clothes security officers.

“Aren’t you hungry, Professor Apple? Shouldn’t we have dinner now?” Another *non-question*. The officers and the government official took us to a restaurant where we ate in a private room, all silently, each of us surrounded by two non-eating men, so that no conversation was possible among us. Even on my trip to the toilet, I was accompanied by the two men who had been silently sitting next to me. My friends and I were then split up and I was returned to my now again guarded room with the again non-working phone.

Let me admit that this all was very cleverly done and I learned a good deal about how forms of power could be strategically mobilized by repressive forces. If somehow I had been able to make contact with and protest to the US Government, the Korean officials could easily say “How could he complain? He had meetings with educational personnel. He was invited to give speeches. But we were unable to accomplish all of the arrangements for his lectures for bureaucratic reasons. He was taken out to a nice restaurant and had a nice hotel room. We provided him with an official car for his transportation as well.” All of this is cynical. But it is not stupid in terms of dealing with whatever questions US embassy officials might ask. The fact that this all occurred during the time of a strongly right-wing US presidential administration, one that seemed to whole-heartedly support the military government of Korea, also meant that these issues might not get raised in the first place. The fact that the police had taken my passport made it impossible for me to even try to leave.

At the end of my stay, I was taken in an unmarked security police car to the airport. A few minutes before the scheduled departure of the flight, I was walked onto the tarmac—my arms held tightly by two more of those gentlemen with the leather jackets and the dark sunglasses--and led up the stairs. I was then roughly pushed through the door of plane. The mixture of relief and anger I felt was palpable.

## RETURNING TO KOREA

A few years later, I again went to Korea. Once more, I speak in Seoul—and I learn that the person who had been in charge of the national institute where my audience had been forcibly prevented from hearing me had been not only deposed but disgraced. But I also travel to speak in Kwangju, the site of an uprising against the military government. The army had murdered large numbers of people from all walks of life in quelling the protests there.

Before my lecture there and my meeting with dissidents and activists in Kwangju, I am honored by being taken to the cemetery where the martyrs were buried. I am to place flowers at the site to honor the hundreds who had been killed. As I am getting ready to place the flowers, 3 black cars come to a screeching halt near us. Out of them step a number of leather jacketed men, all with sunglasses and all clearly members of the “secret police.” My “friends” had returned. Three of them literally put their faces within 6 inches of mine. Intimidators-R-Us. But this time the situation was different. Aside from staring back at them, I simply ignored them. I and my friends and hosts walked to the memorial. The intimidators moved out of our way. Their power was evaporating in the now unstoppable process of democratization.

## COMING HOME AND ACTING BACK

I don't want to romanticize these experiences. Anyone who has come face to face with the power of the repressive state and whose fate is now out of one's personal control who is not frightened is not being honest. At the time that I and my colleagues and friends were arrested, to say we were “concerned” is to wildly understate the emotion. Yet, I do not want to overstate this. Fear and resolve are often two sides of the same coin. The latter led us to constantly think strategically about what was happening and how we might subvert it. The second trip documented the power of popular will, the ability of people to constantly fight back and to resist the loss of their humanity and to act on their right to control their own destinies.

Like many of you who are reading this essay I am sure, experiences such as this do not lead to quiescence. Just the opposite is often the case. Upon returning to the States after that

first trip to Seoul, all of my doctoral students—a number of whom were from Korea—and I redoubled our efforts to mobilize widespread support for the independent Korean teachers union and for critical educators and activists there. We worked with others nationally and then internationally to build a movement of teachers unions, critically oriented academics, “public intellectuals,” progressive organizations, and similar collectivities to publicize the repression against committed educators and others and to intensify the pressure on the Korean government to move toward democratization. We thus became even more clearly participants and active allies in these struggles, often taking leadership from activist educators and other movement leaders in Korea about what would be most useful in supporting their own efforts to challenge illegitimate authority inside and outside of education.

It is a mark of the collective efforts of social and educational activists in South Korea and of their supporters internationally that the originally illegal independent teachers union (the Korean Teachers Union) was finally recognized as fully legal by the Korean Supreme Court after years of struggle. Many of the generals and their supporters have been jailed and/or disgraced. But as the slogan goes, the struggles continue. The attempts to create and cement in place more critically democratic policies and practices of curricula, teaching, and assessment in Korea’s schools have not ended. Indeed, in the face of neoliberal and neoconservative gains and the ensuing attacks on critical understandings and practices in education by rightist groups in the state, in the economy, and in the media, they have had to be constantly defended and rebuilt (see, e.g., Kang, 2009). This is the nature of the fight for an education worthy of its name. It is never-ending.

I need to note one last thing before closing this personal narrative. The effects of those experiences in Korea were lasting in multiple ways not only in Korea but in Wisconsin as well. The kinds of political actions in which my students and I engaged took on an even more central place in the work of my students and myself over the years that followed. Indeed, the Friday Seminar—the group of graduate students, visiting scholars and activists, and others who meet with me every Friday afternoon—has been deeply involved not only in supporting each others’ “academic” work, but also in continuing what has become a constitutive part of the Friday Seminar’s efforts. Counter-hegemonic work on education through research and writing, through working with critical teachers in schools, and similar kinds of things have always been accompanied by concrete efforts to support progressive actions involving labor

rights, cultural autonomy, and the rights of oppressed people inside and outside of the United States (see Apple, 2000).

This has included such things as helping to form a national coalition to boycott Pepsi Cola and other US companies that continued to seek ever higher profits in Burma (Myanmar) by turning a blind eye to the murderous regime's actions there, supporting migrant farm workers in their campaign to gain better pay and living conditions for themselves and their children, providing support for the Turkish Teachers Union when the government of Turkey threatened to take action against the union for its support of “mother-tongue” teaching for minority populations in Turkey, and similar actions.

The list could on. But the point is that there is now a consistent and continuing *tradition* of combining the academic with the political—and not only at the rhetorical level as happens with too much of what has been called “critical pedagogy”—in the Friday Seminar. Activism becomes part of one's academic and social identity through action (see Apple, Au, and Gandin, 2009). If critical education theory and practice is discussed and dealt with as simply one more specialized academic area and is largely used for the purposes of conversion strategies to gain mobility within the social field of power of the academy (Bourdieu, 1984), we have failed to learn the lessons so powerfully brought home to me in Seoul and Kwangju. Critical ideas have power—and their power increases immensely when they are organically connected to the social movements and struggles that give them life (Apple, 2010). I thought that I knew this before I went to Korea. But relearning this lesson there continues to bring home to me what is at stake if we forget to take it seriously.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There indeed had been an uprising in Korea, in Kwangju. Large numbers of people had been killed when the Korean army reoccupied the city. Much to the enduring shame of the United States, the US Army supported the Korean army in this murderous act of repression by taking the place of the Korean army in Seoul when the Korean troops that had been based in Seoul were sent to Kwangju to put down the democratic protests. The blood of these martyrs is unfortunately also on the hands of the US government.

<sup>2</sup> For a richer discussion of the idea of disarticulation and rearticulation, Stuart Hall's work is crucial. See Morely and Chen (1996) and Apple (2006).

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