

# Marxism and Political Economy in Education: An Interpretation of Jean Anyon's Critical Pedagogy

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**Abstract:** Jean Anyon (1941-2013) is a critical pedagogical researcher and social activist in the United States. All her life, she devoted herself to taking education as a breakthrough, exposing the ugliness of capitalist countries and promoting the equality of society and education. She uses Marxist theory to analyze the relationship between social class and school knowledge, hidden curriculum; education and mainstream ideology; and conflicts and resistances in education, emphasizing the theoretical and practical significance of Marxism in today's education. In order to find the deepest problem of education, Jean Anyon demonstrates the relationship between school education and macroeconomic policy from the perspective of political economics; the dialectical relationship between education reform and economic reform; and explains the reasons for education failure by quoting David Harvey's concept of "deprivation accumulation". Facing the cruel situation, Jean Anyon did not lose confidence, but found the "radical possibility" and put forward the concept of social change centered on education reform.

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## 1 Introduction

Jean Anyon was born in a radical family. Under the influence of her family, she can always see the inequalities in production, reproduction and maintenance of government, social institutions and even schools. As a city school teacher and on the basis of her teaching experience, Anyon felt that the organization

and operating rules of the city schools always seem to deliberately give students and teachers problems and make their lives difficult. Like all scholars who are aware of the inequality in society and education, Anyon is full of anger and has been trying to find ways to change this situation. The main characteristics of Anyon's critical pedagogy are analyzing education issues from the perspectives of Marxism and political economy, and then delineating a way for reform.

## 2 Marxism in Education

### 2.1 Social class and knowledge

Marx believes that the social class is the basic social category. It is determined by the organization and distribution of the production methods of goods and services in the economy. Therefore, the economic relations and social background of the working class limit their ability to change their social status. In a capitalist society, one's success is not as valuable as it seems because it is limited by the social class background. In this society, men and women do enjoy freedom and life of organization, but they do not enjoy the kind of freedom that their democratic life (i.e. the capitalist society) promises to determine their opportunities for life. In Marx's view, people have created their own history, but it is not the history they are satisfied with. They cannot make history in the environment of their choice, but only in an existing environment that is given and connected with the past they can make the history.

From Anyon's perspective, the differences in social class as discussed by Marx are very obvious in the education of today's countries that practice capitalism. Max Weber's theory of social stratification has proposed that the knowledge provided to literati and

peasants, nobles and workers should have significantly different social significance. In today's era where all-round development and lifelong education are valued, the social class differences in knowledge should undoubtedly be abandoned. Recent research in the field of sociology of knowledge has pointed out that students of different social class backgrounds still receive different types of educational knowledge.

In order to prove the relationship between social class and knowledge in the capitalist society, Jean Anyon has been paying attention to the education and knowledge transfer of schools of different social classes from the 1970s to the end of her life. She inspected the differences in learning tasks and knowledge concepts between different students from working-class schools, middle-class schools, schools for the wealthy and elite schools, and compared these differences with the future work of the students from each type of school. In the process of observation and research, she found that "elite students may have the access to legal, medical or management knowledge, while students of working-class families will receive more pragmatic courses"<sup>[1]</sup>. Obviously, the social class differences shown in knowledge represent a distinct feature of modern society, which constantly reproduces the class structure of the society.

## 2.2 Social Class and Hidden Curriculum

Michael W. Apple, a critical educator, has discussed the importance of hidden curricula in schools in *Official Knowledge*. Like Apple, Anyon also noticed hidden curricula in schools. It is self-evident that schools in rich communities and societies are better than schools in poor communities and societies, or they can better prepare students for their ideal jobs. However, the real differences between schools are not manifested as differences in educational resources, but differences in educational methods used and educational philosophy adopted.

Through the observation of the abovementioned four different types of schools, Anyon found that the working-class schools focus on disciplinary training for students, because non-technical industrial workers, retail personnel, and other low-paying jobs require discipline standards; middle-class schools focus on the students' ability in selection and judgement, while it is apparent to compare middle class with the working class, police, intermediate managers, etc. need this ability more; schools for the wealthy encourage students to use creative symbols to better prepare the students for future positions such as senior computer

engineers, advertising directors, etc.; students in elite schools need to be responsible not only for themselves, but also for controlling others, and the entire system. This leadership is an indispensable characteristic of high-level government and high-income leaders.

According to Anyon, the consequence of the above phenomenon is the loss of the unified social identity of different social classes, which in turn leads to further differentiation and segregation of the society. She wrote in *Ghetto Schooling* that part of the reason for social distance is that people of different classes and ethnic backgrounds lack common experience and knowledge, which affects communication, trust, and the joint action of the reformers and academic staff, hindering the implementation of education reform projects as a consequence<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2.3 Education and Mainstream Ideology

Marx demonstrated in "*Capital: Critique of Political Economy*" that the classes (industrial and financial capital) that control the mode of material production also control the mode of spiritual production (that is schools, book printing, press, etc.)<sup>[3]</sup>. The mainstream ideology of a particular space-time dimension tends to legalize the economic relations of the society to which it belongs. In today's highly developed capitalist society, the ideology created by the government, the mass media, and the national education system is the idea of supporting and legalizing the interest system and its beneficiaries. In addition, this ideology is continuously conveyed and legalized in daily life and learning institutions (such as schools, courses).

Anyon regards textbooks as the starting point for studying the spread of mainstream ideology in education. She believes that the textbooks are a social product, which can objectively show the thought and ideology of a particular society<sup>[4]</sup>. The ruling class can legalize the ideology that fits that class through textbooks, making school curricula the foundation of social control.

Therefore, Anyon inspected 17 sets of history textbooks widely used in American middle schools. She mainly analyzed the descriptions of economic history and labor history from the American Civil War to the First World War in different textbooks, and published the research results in an article entitled "*Ideology and American History Textbook*". Obviously, the influence of the ruling class is omnipresent in different versions of textbooks. These textbooks reflect the same ideology, which serves the interests of specific groups of the

society while excluding other inferior groups. This ideology has led people to mistakenly believe that capitalism is the only form of economic organization. Everyone has equal opportunities to get rich and benefits, making everyone think that voting system under democracy can overcome economic inequality. It is obvious to say that textbooks have been controlled by the ideology of the ruling class. This reality reminds people of Marx's call for the rescue of education from the influence of the ruling class. Only by getting rid of this control can education in favor of the working class be achieved.

#### 2.4 Conflicts and resistance in education

From the relationship between social class and knowledge, hidden curriculum, and the spread of ideology in education, we can see that education cannot achieve the function of changing the class and life of students. On the contrary, it constantly reproduces class and differences in social class. Unlike Michael W. Apple's theory of reproduction in the early stage, in the process of observing students of different classes of schools, Anyon observed students' resistance and social class conflicts to schools, teachers, and rules.

In the book entitled "Marx and Education", Anyon stated that in the process of imposing the knowledge on working-class students, and in the student's resistance to the curriculum that reproduces differences in social class, one can see the conflicts between the classes<sup>[5]</sup>. This conflict is manifested as a contradiction between knowledge, ideology and personal values. Therefore, in her opinion, conflicts between classes in education is already a fact, and its results are very obvious. Anyon saw the possibility of resisting mainstream ideology from the conflicts between classes in education. She cited the concept of hegemony of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian revolutionary, to describe the rule of bourgeois ideology over social subordinate classes. Gramsci believes that capitalists and their spokespersons do not exercise hegemony in a defined form, but convey the concepts of hegemony through the media, schools, newspapers, and other capitalist cultural products. For the teachers and students who have critical consciousness, they need to use "insight" to resist the erosion of mainstream ideology. According to Gramsci, the educational field may reproduce ideology, but if the educator guides students to criticize the existing culture, a foundation to resist ideology can also be made

Anyon saw the importance of educational institutions' resistance to mainstream culture and social

organizations, but also realized the difficulty of trying to use education to fundamentally change the social environment. At the political conference in 1869, Marx once said "On the one hand, changes in the social environment require appropriate education, and on the other hand, proper education also requires changes in the social environment"<sup>[6]</sup>. This contradiction also plagues critical educators who, like Anyon, regard the classroom as a place of raising awareness and social movement. But Anyon believes that teachers and students have no choice but to start with each lesson and use various means to resist oppression and exploitation.

#### 2.5 Contemporary Values of Karl Marx

If you study Marx's classics carefully, you will find that Marx's social critical theory reveals the characteristics of capitalist society and can provide inspiration for understanding and solving the educational problems of current capitalist countries. Marx had predicted that the population in a capitalist society would be divided into two classes-the poor and the rich. From his point of view, the presence of social class is the most basic form of oppression, because it is the foundation of the exploitation of labor. In capitalist education, although there are also inequalities caused by the differences in gender and racial, they are generally a second layer of inferiority to class oppression. Therefore, given Karl Marx's prescient perspectives, in order to find the roots and solutions of the educational problems of contemporary capitalist society, one must always refer to the classics and values of Karl Marx.

According to Anyon, there is another reason why Marx is particularly important today, that is, scholars' favor for his theory has declined. The growth of Marxist studies in American universities and colleges began in the 1960s and declined in the early 1990s. There are many reasons for this phenomenon, such as the influence of postmodernism in academia and the influence of Soviet and East German communism. Under these influences, social inequalities in income, education and rights are taken for granted by many scholars. Marx's overall social perspective and a series of rich ideas for transforming society have been abandoned. This will have serious consequences for education and social reform. Therefore, Anyang hopes to emphasize the theoretical and practical significance of Marxism, integrate it into education, and contend with mainstream ideology and inequality in education.

### 3 Political Economy in Education

#### 3.1 Political Economic Analysis of Education Failure

In *Ghetto Schooling*, Anyon reveals the impact of federal and urban macro policies on schools and urban communities. Based on the decline of a century-old school, she analyzed the reasons for the failure of contemporary American urban school reform from the perspective of political economy.

Marcy Elementary School is a typical urban school located in Newark, New Jersey. At the beginning of the 20th century, the school was the pride of the country and was also recognized by many professional education magazines. At present, due to the changes in the entire social class and ethnic conditions, urban economic transformation, political isolation, etc., Newark, a once glorious industrial city, is gradually declining, and Marcy Elementary School has become a school for the poor. The government has tried to pass education reforms to rescue such schools. Education experts have tried to reverse the situation by improving test levels, improving teacher quality, and strengthening student control, but the results have been unsatisfactory. Therefore, Anyon believes that the historical, political, and economic reasons for Newark's problems in education reform cannot be solved by education reforms such as small classes and standardized tests. The key reason these education reforms are unsuccessful is that they do not have a deep understanding of the decades-old economic downturn in cities, and racial and social class issues. She once said, "trying to solve education issues without solving other problems is like wiping only one side of the glass door"<sup>[7]</sup>.

Historical and realistic political and economic practices have created a situation where any current education policy and reform cannot be reversed. From this perspective, the reasons for the underperforming achievements of urban schools are not only the failure of education policies, but also the dynamic problems of urban families pointed out by mainstream commentary and public policies. The failure of a city school is an inevitable consequence of the macroeconomic policy of the United States, as well as federal or regional policies and practices that support it. In fact, unequal political and economic policies create and maintain an educational obstacle that cannot be overcome by any teacher or principal or by any standardized test. Therefore, Anyon argued in her work entitled "Radical

Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement" that the reasons for failure of urban education policy and school reform should be analyzed from the perspective of political economy.

#### 3.2 Educational Reform and Economic Reform

From the above analysis, we can see that Anyon believes that the decline of industrial cities such as Newark and education failure are caused by historical, political and economic decisions. Therefore, to change this situation, fundamental political and economic reforms are needed. However, since economic reforms will limit the freedom of choice and commercial profits of large companies, they are reluctant to cooperate with the reforms. These reforms have been labeled "socialist" by conservatives to prevent the implementation of these reforms. Neither the government nor enterprises are willing to seek long-term benefits for low- and middle-income groups. Therefore, they strongly advocate that economic reform be replaced by education reform.

The reason why government attempts to replace economic reform with education reform is because companies and political elites consider education to be the number one factor determining the competitiveness of the economy in the United States. Although the emphasis is placed on the decisiveness of education for the social economy to improve the status of education, it must be clear that it is the economic factors, rather than education, that determine the economic competitiveness at the national level. Anyon believes that the idea of solving economic problems through education reform is a conservative response to economic problems. In other words, the economic problems are categorized as education problems, as if the depression in the Detroit automotive industry was caused by poor student performance. This is obviously untenable.

In order to prove that education reform cannot replace economic reform, Anyon continued to analyze two education bills of the United States in recent years, i.e. the "No Child Left Behind" and the "Striving for the First Class" from the perspective of political economy. Both bills are education reform policies that the government seeks to replace economic reforms, and they both promise that the higher the level of a person's education, the greater the chances of finding a good job. This would help with reducing poverty and getting rid of inequality. Obviously, this attempt will be futile, and then Anyon analyzes the reasons why educational reform cannot replace economic reform:

Firstly, the government did not realize that the people in

vocational and technical jobs that required a higher degree of education are no longer receiving generous wages and remuneration for decades. The productivity of modern workers has taken a huge leap from before, but most people's wages are decreasing. Secondly, according to the mistakes assumed by the two education reform bills in the foregoing (thinking that improving education and skills will enable most students to land on high-paying jobs), they are unaware of the current situation that there are not many jobs that come with high incomes and require high cognitive skills. Most jobs provided by capitalist society and economy are basically low-income jobs, and very few are high-income jobs. In addition, the decline in the number of high-paying jobs occurs almost simultaneously with the aging of the labor force and the increase in the average level of education. This has offset the benefits of high education. Therefore, the illusion that higher education and skills can help obtain high-paying jobs shatters. Thirdly, the education bills did not take the issue of racial discrimination into account. The young black and latino people have better technical skills than white workers, but their wages are far lower than white workers. Obviously, the effects of racial discrimination also offset the benefits of education, and the income of minorities at each academic level is lower than that of the white people at the same level. Fourthly, another reason why higher education cannot raise wages and job opportunities is gender discrimination. Gender discrimination can affect or even offset an individual's employment opportunities through education. Marx believes that gender and racial discrimination are secondary to the influence of social class and private ownership (whether a person is a worker or a property owner). Through the status of women in society, we can judge the fairness of a society. Obviously, this can be judged from the status of women in capitalist society that as women, higher education does not mean higher wages. Lastly, even if people of low income and people of color graduate from colleges, their colleges are usually public schools, while the wealthy white students graduate from private or elite schools. The only one reason for this stratification is that the studying in an elite school would cost \$92,000 per person in a year, while studying in a non-elite school costs approximately \$12,000 per person in a year. However, the prestige and connections gained in elite schools are invaluable for job hunting in the future.

Therefore, education is not the cause of widespread poverty and low-income work, and education reform alone cannot solve all these problems. Education reforms cannot raise wages for people who are

living on the poverty line. Only employers and the government can raise wages for them. According to Anyon, the solution to the problem is to create real job opportunities by incorporating more and better education. Meanwhile, the implementation of this measure requires economic reform.

### **3.3 Deprivative accumulation and problems of education**

In Marx's description of the termination of the feudal system, the British royal family only owned the land that was commonly used by farmers and nobles, so that they could raise sheep and sell wool in the market for profit. Due to the Enclosure Movement, farmers were forced to leave the land. Marx called the privatization of public land in this case "primitive accumulation" because it appeared centuries before the emergence of industrial production profits. Most theorists believe that this kind of primitive accumulation will only occur in the early days of capitalist society, but David Harvey, a Marxist theorist, put forward the concept of "deprivative accumulation" in 2005 which demonstrates the continuation and proliferation of the original accumulation of capitalism<sup>[8]</sup>. Primitive accumulation has never disappeared, it remains the core of capitalist value production. For Anyon, Harvey's contemporary interpretation of primitive accumulation has enhanced the effectiveness of Marxism in today's economic and educational issues.

In a developed capitalist society, the purchase of products and services by consumers and other industries still constitutes a large portion of profits. Through the privatization of public resources, however, profits can be further enhanced. The privatization of public resources transforms assets that were originally public possession (such as schools) into tools for private gain. As a result, taxpayers will no longer have public resources such as schools. This process of privatizing public property can be defined in Harvey's concept of derivative of accumulation.

Anyon analyzed the theory of derivative accumulation as follows: When large companies have a large amount of money that can be used for investment and profit, derivative accumulation begins. These large companies are unwilling to invest heavily in production and services, so they attempt to privatize public property. Compared with traditional production investment, derivative accumulation and privatization of public property do not increase social wealth. In

other words, when the social resources of schools and education are privatized, it will not result in an increase of schools and education budgets, nor will it bring higher education quality and better jobs.

Anyang considers that derivative accumulation makes Marxist theory more complete. This concept gives people insight into the economy and privatization. In addition, this political economy perspective provides a new direction for understanding and solving the failure of urban school education and reform.

#### **4 Radical possibilities**

Anyon, who had been a teacher, started with the urban schools that she was most concerned about, and subsequently exposed the inequality in capitalist society from the perspective of Marxism and political economy. The working class, which was economically and culturally unreliable, was constantly facing new economic and educational crises. However, Anyon is optimistic while confronting with this situation. She believes that the catastrophic state of today's capitalist education system can provide impetus for organizing new social movements. Anyon strongly convinced people to understand and tackle urban education issues from a new and comprehensive perspective, understand social movements and reform strategies, participate in the establishment of new social movements, challenge the status quo, and regain the democratic revolutionary spirit.

In order to strengthen the reformers' confidence in social movements, she argued in "Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement" that political and economic policies have created a situation that cannot be changed by any simple educational reform. Therefore, they must be replaced with more equitable and impartial policies so that school reforms can bring positive changes to students' lives. Historically, impartial public policies are usually engendered by political pressure that was caused by social movements. These constitutes the driving force for social and educational reform.

How to carry out social reform? From Anyon's analysis of Marxism and political economy in education, we can see the dialectical relationship between education reform and economic reform. Although education reform alone cannot solve the problems caused by differences in social class, and historical political and economic decisions, Anyon believes that social reform cannot be separated from education reform. Education reform can play a crucial role in

cooperation with other social movements and policies. Education reform can provide conditions and resources for the struggle for a fair society. Although economic equality is a prerequisite for equality in education, more impartial macroeconomic policies alone cannot create high-quality urban schools. Education reform can magnify the effect of macroeconomic policy reform. The restoration of schools requires the government to provide the community with sufficient economic opportunities and realistic hope. At the same time, the realization of these conditions requires fair and high-quality education. Therefore, she proposed an education-centered social movement and believed that such a social movement would address the wider issue of social inequality.

To achieve economic reform through education reform, school reform should be part of the broader social change strategy. In this broader strategy of social change, education reformers need to join the community and allow the schools to play a vital role in social movements. Governments and organizations need to create more jobs and better education. To effectively improve education, companies and other affluent administrations are required to pay taxes in order to provide sufficient school investment. In this way, with the cooperation of social and economic reforms, education reforms will have a noticeable effect, and it will be possible to truly improve the lives and educational standards of the people of working class.

After persuading people with hope and pointing out the possibility of radicality, Anyon did not play her activist role with slogans like other activists, but advocated transcending critical pedagogy of consciousness. She believes that critical pedagogy that can only enhance students' political awareness is not adequate, and advocates that classroom practice and political activities are truly related. Schools and students must play an important role in the struggle for fairness in society, which is important because the process of developing critical consciousness through information, reading and discussion does not induce them to participate in political activities although this provides an indispensable foundation for understanding, and more importantly, this activates people's creativity and motivates them in some kind of protests<sup>[9]</sup>.

In order to prove the impact of actively participating in actual activities on social progress, Anyon used historical facts to fight for civil rights to demonstrate that political struggles for a century have basically

fought for black people's right to vote and other civil rights. The results of the labor movement that persisted for more than fifty years was eight hours on each workday, minimum daily wages, and legal prohibition on child labor. This decades-long campaign also contributed to the realization of overtime pay, unemployment insurance, social security and freedom of trade union organization in the 1930s. The women's right to vote adopted in 1920 is also inseparable from the social movements of the previous 20 years. This shows that the actual protest movements and practices can promote social progress.

## 5 Evaluation of Jean Anyon's Critical Pedagogy

From Jean Anyon's critical pedagogy, we can see the applicability of Marxist class analysis and ideology theory in today's capitalist education, and the contemporary values of Marxist theory. Anyon's political economic analysis of education issues indicates the impact of political and economic decision-making on education and the dialectical relationship between education reform and economic reform, and then proposes social reform centered on education reform. Moreover, Anyon's social reform did not just stop with slogans and theoretical analysis, she advocates involving students in actual social movements to maximize the possibility of changing the society. These are all worthy aspects of Anyon's theory. However, as a Marxist, Anyon seemed too mild and abandoned Marx's revolutionary thinking.

From Anyon's works such as "Marx and Education" and "Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement", we can see that she believes that the achievement of social justice and freedom depends on seeking opportunities for reform in capitalist society and seeking radical possibilities. This is in sharp contrast to revolutionary critical pedagogy represented by McLaren, Cole, and others. Seeking opportunities for reform in a capitalist society seems to imply that revolution is outdated.

From Anyon's perspective, the left wing has adapted to capitalist hegemony and liberal democracy. They do not oppose capitalism itself, but fight over it following the rules of capitalist 'social democracy'<sup>[10]</sup>. The left-wing politicians have achieved this principle in many ways: accepting the inevitability of capitalism and resisting its exploitation in the voids of capital; accepting the uselessness of struggle, claiming that all

revolutionary struggles must lead to totalitarianism, while waiting for a sacred violent force to break the armor of Capitalism.

However, negating the revolutionary potential of Marxism and negating the possibility of realizing socialism deny the transformative and critical development goals of Marxism. Marxism can help alleviate suffering worldwide. We must not hesitate to completely accept different possibilities in life, and use new values and a non-capitalist worldview to get rid of the coercion and exploitation of labor by capitalism. This requires the imagination of the world after the reforms in which a small number of capitalists can no longer exploit labor through commoditization. With this, the unions will prosper, primitive capitalist accumulation and derivative accumulation will disappear, circular capitalist crisis and war will also disappear. In the world like this, people can freely create society according to their imagination, and they are no longer manipulated, restricted, and longer exploited by companies and policies.

On Anyon's "Marx and Education", Curry Malott commented that in order to eliminate capitalism and achieve a meaningful life, we must not be afraid of the radical changes that ever happen to us, and that is revolution, the challenge of Marxism<sup>[11]</sup>.

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