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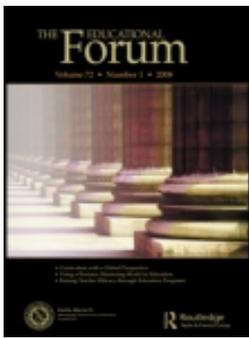
Political Economy and the NCLB Regime: Accountability Standards and High Stakes Testing

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Political Economy and the NCLB Regime: Accountability, Standards, and High- Stakes Testing

by Paul Parkison

Abstract

Focus and institutional policy under the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] (U.S. Department of Education 2001) has prioritized the individualistic, market-driven agenda. The NCLB regime has gained hegemony over the political space of public education, and the value and effectiveness of the educational process has become subject to the fetishism of standardized test scores. Utilizing the political economy of the sign described by Jean Baudrillard (1981), the political economy of the NCLB regime and the development of test score fetishism is presented.

The No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] (U.S. Department of Education 2001) marked a significant shift in the political economy of education in the United States. By establishing the predominance of the standards-driven curriculum framework within America's public schools, NCLB established the interpretive paradigm through which educational successes and failures are determined. This paradigm is referred to here as the *NCLB regime* to denote the systemic and, to some degree, epistemic closure of discourse regarding the purpose and structure of public education (Gore 1993). The premises and consequences of the NCLB regime contribute to the social, economic, and political hierarchies of American society. Michael Apple (2006, 30) asserted:

Education is a site of struggle and compromise. It serves as a proxy as well for larger battles over what our institutions should do, whom they should serve, and who should make these decisions. And, yet, by itself it is one of the major arenas in which resources, power, and ideology specific to policy, finance, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation in education are worked through. Thus, education is both cause and effect, determining and determined.

Political economy provides an analytical framework that generates informative insight into the significance of this hegemonic struggle. *Political economy*, throughout this essay, refers to the area of social science research and theory that concerns the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services and their management. In this case, the goods and services are curriculum and education. Political economy represents a method of analysis that rejects the differentiation of agency and institutional structure. Within a cultural politics and identity framework, political economy provides an important critical perspective on how the taken-for-granted in our conception of actors and institutions are shaped by broader political ideologies and events.

This essay presents a discussion of political economy as a tool for understanding the foundations of American education, demonstrating that the NCLB regime establishes a commodity fetishism that influences every relationship and interpenetrating event that constitutes U.S. public education. Relationships between and among academic standards, standardized tests, test scores, and accountability measures provide an indication of the audit culture that frames the NCLB regime.

NCLB Regime: Hierarchies in America's Public Spaces

NCLB provides a structural paradigm (ideology) through which the priorities of public education are defined and institutionalized. The language of NCLB provides a great deal of room for semiotic and linguistic analysis. However, the political positioning institutionalized by the NCLB regime guides the present inquiry. Essentially, the political dialogue the NCLB regime has captured, promoting a hegemonic position similar to the unipolar international position of the George W. Bush administration (Chomsky 2006; Fukuyama 2006), focuses on the following set of dichotomies:

- public goods versus private goods;
- social responsibility vs. free market;
- equity vs. imperatives of the marketplace;
- justice vs. skill-based learning; and
- critical learning vs. test preparation.

Focus and institutional policy under the NCLB regime has prioritized the individualistic, market-driven agenda. The NCLB regime has developed a political economy based on individual needs, the free market, and caste differentiation and competition through standardization and skill-based learning (Apple 2006).

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A wide spectrum of voices has come to realize and critique the consequences of this paradigm, as expressed in the domestic arena and the international arena (Metcalf 2002; Giroux 2003; Alexander, Anderson, and Gallegos 2004; Beadie 2004; Cuban 2004; Noguera 2004; Oakes, Blasi, and Rogers 2004; Siegel 2004; Soder 2004). Henry Giroux (2003, 76) described the development and consequences of the NCLB regime:

Throughout the twentieth century, American public education was viewed by many prominent educational leaders such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Lawrence Cremin as a major force for preparing young people to be socially responsible, critically engaged citizens in a democratic society. But after two decades of orchestrated educational reform efforts, conservatives and business leaders have managed to rewrite the meaning and purpose of public education in terms that are both narrowly instrumental and ideologically suspect.

As the NCLB regime gained hegemony over the public space of public education, the organic political economy that provides the structure for interpreting the value and effectiveness of the educational process has become subject to the fetishism of standardized test scores.

Political Economy: Methodology

Following the methodology of Karl Marx, political economy seeks to use dialectical perspective to determine the manner in which specific events, or in some instances entire regimes, have their origin and meaning. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1978b, 242) explained the premise of political economy through a discussion of the categories of analysis used to consider the bourgeois economy and social system:

[I]t must not be forgotten that their subject—here, modern bourgeois society—is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore this society by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such; this holds for science as well.

What counts as legitimate subjects of analysis, data for decision making, and educational experiences depend on the “form of being” that establishes the foundation on which the system or paradigm rests. Common sense relies on a contextual framework. The taken-for-granted is embedded within a set of assumptions that depend on a specific ideological perspective.

Dialectical perspective encourages the consideration of the complex interrelationship of events and relationships within a given system. By strategically opposing the categories that symbolize a specific form of being with the naïve self-acceptance of those categories as legitimate (Gore 1993), political economy provides a means to deconstruct the system and problematize the taken-for-granted assumptions on which the system rests. Categories become mutually legitimating by deferring credibility to other categories within the system. Reification occurs when one category is supported by another, which then supports the original category. In this manner, the categories can be mutually incompatible

without creating a crisis in reasoning. Commitment lies with the relationships between categories, with the system; not with the categories themselves. By problematizing the reification of categories through the dialectical perspective, it becomes possible to create a dialogue concerning the function of the system under consideration (Gore 1993).

Dialogue is created when significant, taken-for-granted assumptions are drawn into question. Charles Barone (2004, 5–6) asserted:

The dialectical approach also embraces a particular epistemology. Knowledge is produced dialectically in this view by the act of inquiry in shaping reality as well as discovering knowledge. The process of theorizing is shaped by other social processes and shapes them in turn. Doing and thinking are fundamentally related to each other, forming a praxis. The production of knowledge is itself then a dynamic force influenced by the world as well as changing it.

Discursive practice facilitates the dialogue. Through dialogue and other discursive practices such as reflection, conferences, critical research, and textual analysis, taken-for-granted categories become subject to political debate and analyses, thus opening the space for change (Apple 2006).

Drawing into question, or problematizing, the taken-for-granted assumptions and categories of the NCLB regime will demonstrate the manner in which test scores have become a fetishized commodity. As commodities become fetishes, the *use value* and *exchange value* that initially provided legitimacy to the political economy become alienated. When the use value (the natural characteristic of a commodity to fulfill a need) and the exchange-value (the relationship between multiple commodities) are lost, fetishism exists. The reification that characterizes the relationship between use value and exchange value becomes lost. Alienation of value, and the sources or foundations of value, result in purely symbolic exchange that is distinct and separate from the organic political economy that created the symbols in the first place. This separation closes the public space necessary for the negotiation of alternative values and signs.

Political Economy: An Educational Framework

Following the example of Jean Baudrillard (1981), the taken-for-granted will be drawn into the dialectical approach described. Baudrillard offers a model for the consideration of the power of the sign. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard develops a strategy for demonstrating the relationships that are created within systems of meaning and meaning signification.

A set of categories is used here to demonstrate the NCLB regime and to draw into question the taken-for-granted assumptions that are reified within the system. Several significant categories form the foundation for this analysis:

- Academic standards, following a functional logic of use value within the political economy of education;
- Standardized testing, following an economic logic of exchange within the political economy of education;

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- Test scores, following a differential logic of sign value within the political economy of education; and
- Accountability, following the logic of symbolic exchange within the political economy of education.

The relationships among these categories illustrate the manner in which the NCLB regime has privileged a particular ideological view of public education's role, not by participating in political dialogue but by establishing the commodity of exchange: test scores.

Commodity fetishism results in possibly irrational commitment to a differential logic. Test scores represent a fetishized commodity or sign that occupies a dominant position within the political economy of public education. Successes, failures, best practices, legitimacy of knowledge, proficiency, and efficacy are all determined by the test score commodity. Test scores have become the objective of education within the NCLB regime. Resistance to this fetishism and the NCLB regime becomes significant and legitimized when placed within this dialogue.

Functional Logic of Use Value: Academic Standards

To appreciate the role of academic standards within the NCLB regime, it is important to recognize the relationships of academic standards to the other categories used within the ideology. Use value within political economy designates a fundamental commodity. Commodities have use value in relation to their ability to practically address a need within the system. Commodities obtain significance only within the regime that is defining the system. Marx (1978a, 303), in *Capital, Volume One*, described use value as follows:

The use-values of commodities furnish the material for a special study, that of the commercial knowledge of commodities. Use-values become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth.

Academic standards present a body of concepts and skills that comprise the raw material of education. It is important to understand that the set of concepts and skills, like all commodities, have value only within the exchange system in which value is being determined. Their value is derived from their utility.

Use value's relationship to the economic exchange value can be described as productive consumption. In other words, the commodities (academic standards) are consumed in the production of the economy of exchange (standardized testing). Because the economy of exchange is founded on a process of production that takes the form of standardized testing, academic standards obtain a utility within the system. Academic standards are transformed through the process of production. They are translated into standardized test instruments. In themselves, academic standards hold no value. It is only when transformed into standardized test items within an economy of exchange that value is created.

In November 2005, the U.S. Department of Education released *No Child Left Behind: A Road Map to State Implementation*. This document provides clarification and guidance to

state educational agencies as they attempt to implement the NCLB legislation and become aligned with the NCLB regime. After outlining Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings's "bright lines" for implementing NCLB, the road map points to emphasizing the alignment between academic standards and standardized test items. A system for the peer review of state standards and assessment systems is described (U.S. Department of Education 2001; 2005). The relationship between use value and exchange value is demonstrated in the following passage from *No Child Left Behind: A Road Map to State Implementation* (5):

The critical components of standards and assessments are developed, designed, and determined by states. In designing standards and assessments, states must ensure that the tests measure the content they want their students to know (i.e., alignment). States must examine the rigor of their standards and tests—how high they set the bar for achievement. States must consider how well students must master material to be successful in school, in college, and in their lives and careers.

This alignment facilitates the commodification of academic standards by demonstrating their utility within the logic of exchange or standardized tests.

Further use value is created within the differential logic of sign value. Academic standards become differentiated into "power standards" and "others" as test items are generated and selected for inclusion on the standardized tests. Some academic standards obtain greater significance as they are translated into test items. This process divorces, or separates, the utility of the academic standard from its exchange value. The academic standard becomes a sign for test items—the greater number of test items an academic standard can represent, the more substantial its sign value. Baudrillard (1981, 124) described a related process as follows:

Here technique and knowledge are divorced from their objective practice and recovered by the "cultural" system of differentiation. It is thus the extended field of consumption, in the sense we have given it of production, systems and interplay of signs.

It is this extension of the field of consumption that provides academic standards access to the system of exchange value. They move beyond mere commodities to becoming symbols of exchange value. Teachers across the United States are asked, and in many cases required, to link their daily lesson plans to specific state academic standards to demonstrate alignment with material that will be assessed (Craig 2004).

Economic Logic of Exchange Value: Standardized Tests

Exchange value presents a more familiar logical paradigm. As capitalists, familiarity with the process of supply-and-demand as a mechanism to establish price provides a working understanding. Again, Marx (1978a, 305), in *Capital, Volume One*, provided an explanation of the function of exchange value within the political economy:

[O]ne use-value is just as good as another, provided only it be present in sufficient quantity. Or, as old Barbon says, "one sort of wares are as good as another, if the values be equal. There is no difference or distinction in things of equal value. ... An hundred

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pounds' worth of lead or iron, is of as great value as one hundred pounds' worth of silver or gold." As use-values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities, but as exchange-values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use-value.

Standardized tests, or more precisely standardized test items, become exchange values as they transform academic standards through the production process.

The consumption of academic standards in the process of producing standardized test items represents the legitimization of the standardized tests. Standardized tests move beyond a random academic task to be a useful commodity when they become linked to academic standards. This legitimization forms a dialectic relationship. Mitchell Yell and Erik Drasgow (2005, 22) described this relationship as follows:

The NCLB requires that states implement a statewide assessment system that is aligned to the state standards in reading–language arts, math, and eventually science. The purpose of the statewide testing is to measure how successfully students are learning what is expected of them and how they are progressing toward meeting these important academic standards.

Standardized tests move beyond a random academic task to be a useful commodity when they become linked to academic standards.

Several important points of reification arise within this passage: (a) Assessment is equated to testing, (b) testing is viewed as a measure of student learning, and (c) the academic standards are assumed to be important learning goals.

As the use value of academic standards are consumed in the process of producing standardized tests, the exchange value of the standardized test gains

legitimacy, and vice versa. There is a reification of value. The standardized test, through this process, becomes an object of consumption within the system.

Interaction and dialectic between standardized tests and test scores produce a distinct economy of exchange. The relationship created as the economic exchange value of standardized tests gets consumed in the political economy of the exchange value of the test scores and represents a significant aspect of the NCLB regime. Baudrillard (1981, 124) asserted the significance of the transformation that occurs within the political economy:

[W]e have the ascension of the commodity form into the sign form, the transfiguration of the economic into sign systems and the transmutation of economic power into domination and social caste privilege.

Although NCLB asserts the noble objective of equity of educational opportunity, the reality of differentiation and stratification is hard to ignore (Apple 2006). Test scores

become signifiers of status and are linked to the allocation of resources within the system (Craig 2004). As these test scores become fetishes of status and privilege, the connection to the use value of academic standards and the exchange value of standardized tests gets lost (Beadie 2004; Siegel 2004).

As test scores are transfigured into sign value—symbols of status and privilege—both use value and exchange value become submerged within the system. Again, Baudrillard (1981, 125) demonstrated the significance of this transition:

There is not articulation between these three forms (which describe general political economy) and symbolic exchange. There is only symbolic "exchange," which defines itself precisely as something distinct from, and beyond, value and code. All forms of value (object, commodity or sign) must be negated in order to inaugurate symbolic exchange. This is the radical rupture of the field of value.

Fundamental value relationships between concepts and skills, academic standards, and standardized tests become lost in the symbolic exchange of test scores.

Public education becomes accountable within the symbolic exchange of the NCLB regime (McGill-Franzen and Allington 2006). Test scores are the symbols that are exchanged for status and privilege. The value (proficiency and knowledge of academic skills and concepts as identified in academic standards) that the test scores are meant to signify becomes lost or inconsequential. The U.S. Department of Education (2001, 4) asserted:

Under NCLB, the statewide assessment system will be the primary means for determining whether schools and school districts are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward educating students to high standards. In determining the progress of schools, states must include scores of all students enrolled in the school for at least a full academic year.

Student, school, and district success are determined by test scores. Numeric representations in the form of normal curve equivalencies and criterion raw scores take the place of student knowledge and skill.

The Differential Logic of Sign Value: Test Scores

Test scores within the NCLB regime become the key symbol, or currency, of the political economy. Sign exchange value begins with a relationship based on the use value of the sign. As a commodity, test scores fulfill a need, or desire, to have a mechanism

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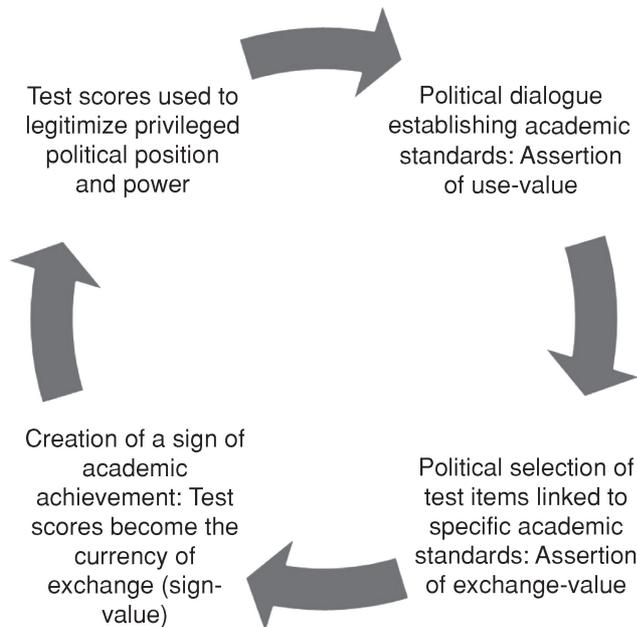


Figure 1. Cycle of political economy in the No Child Left Behind regime.

of differentiation. Academic standards are translated into standardized test items, which then allow for the differentiation of individuals and organizations based on test scores (Noguera 2004; Siegel 2004; Apple 2006). As signs of academic accomplishment, test scores are linked to this political economy and help to legitimize the system.

As test scores interact within the economy of exchange value, standardized testing and a reification of the system is put in place. Baudrillard (1981, 125) called this the “cycle of political economy.” Figure 1 illustrates this cycle and identifies the relationships on which the cycle is based.

The individuals and groups that

perform well on the standardized tests and possess the currency of high test scores gain power within the political dialogue that produces academic standards. Power comes from producing high test scores. The cultural capital that places individuals in a position to produce these high test scores gets reinforced as academic standards are produced by those who have high test scores (Ranson 1995; Apple 2006).

Signs, as currencies of exchange, develop both use value and exchange value. Signs are commodities. The use value of signs derives from the status and privilege the sign carries with it as an object. The exchange value of signs develops as the cycle of political economy re-enforces the economic, social, and cultural hierarchies that result from political dialogue (Giroux 2003; Apple 2006). Test scores, as sign values, separate from the processes that establish their use value and exchange value, allowing the system to devolve into mere symbolic exchange—fetishism.

The NCLB Regime: Test Score Fetishism

Michael Taussig (1980), in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, provided a discussion of the social consequences of the relationships among commodity as object, as use value, and as exchange value and the failure to recognize and maintain the relationship. Taussig considered the reaction of peasant workers to the growth of a proletariat class as capitalism emerged in South American economies. The “devil” becomes the dominant symbol of alienation that occurs as the peasants’ conflict with and transition to a capitalist economic system. For Taussig, this process produced fetishism toward profit that left many classifying the accumulation of wealth as evil, or the work of the devil.

Commodity fetishism develops as a result of the particular political economy that defines the social relations of a community. Marx explained this process by considering the metaphysical qualities of commodities. In *Capital, Volume One*, Marx (1978a, 320–21) asserted:

A commodity is ... a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of the labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor. This is the reason why the products of labor become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.

The character of the social relation that produces the commodity influences the perception of the commodity. The greater the level of alienation, or abstraction from the processes that create use value and exchange value in commodities experienced within the social relations, the greater the likelihood that fetishism will result.

Test scores produce a great deal of alienation for students, teachers, and parents. The hard work of learning is reduced to a numerical expression that does not resemble in any way the process that produced it. Test scores as commodities are transformed into signs of exchange. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1978b, 292) explained the change in emphasis:

The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being objectified, but on the state of being alienated, dispossessed, sold; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital. To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the immediate labour capacity—that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession for the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour for the standpoint of capital—to that extent, this twisting and inversion is a real [phenomenon], not a merely supposed one existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists.

Test scores, in the realm of economic exchange, provide an indication of the comprehension of academic standards. There is an organic connection between the raw materials of education, academic standards, and the product of a test score. Standardized tests form the production phase in this organic system. However, test scores get co-opted through the symbolic exchange that differentiates proficient from non-proficient.

As signs of status and prestige, test scores transcend their exchange value and place within the political economy. Baudrillard (1981, 146–47) was cautious to assert that in its role as sign, symbols are neither alienated nor alienating:

Like the sign form, the commodity is a code managing the exchange of values. It makes little difference whether the contents of material production or the immaterial contents of signification are involved; it is the code that is determinant: the rules of the interplay of signifiers and exchange value. Generalized in the system of political

Recognizing that test scores do perform a function within the political economy is important. The difficulty comes when test scores become separated from the economy of exchange and become commodities in symbolic exchange only.

economy, it is the code which, in both cases, reduces all symbolic ambivalence in order to ground the "rational" circulation of values and their play of exchange in the regulated equivalence of values.

Recognizing that test scores do perform a function within the political economy is important. The difficulty comes when test scores become separated from the economy of exchange and become commodities in symbolic exchange only.

Where does this symbolic exchange take place? As test scores are used for purposes separate from their use value, they are used to signify a value other than student comprehension of academic standards. The use value of test scores derives from the need to differentiate performance on standardized tests, which are transformations of academic standards. Within this political economy, test scores remain useful. Once transformed into signs, test scores become separated from this political economy.

Symbolic exchange of test scores is best illustrated by looking at the accountability measures instituted by the NCLB regime. Students, teachers, administrators, school boards, and school districts are held accountable to the public based on test scores. The critique of the standards-based paradigm and the standardized testing practices of the NCLB regime have been well developed (Alexander et al. 2004; Yell and Drasgow 2005). Harvey Siegel (2004, 58) demonstrated the challenge of the symbolic exchange of test scores:

The rationale for the test is also importantly political: We require students to take the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) because we want to hold schools and teachers accountable, and we want to make sure that our tax dollars are well spent—that we taxpayers are getting our money's worth. But this political rationale is itself understood ultimately in economic terms. We hold schools accountable in accordance with our standards: Our schools are doing well enough when enough of our students pass the FCAT and other tests, because we think that passing the tests ensures that they have a reasonable chance of succeeding, or at least surviving, economically.

Within this framework, students become producers of the sign that will indicate the future potential of economic growth or, at minimum, stability. The students' abilities and knowledge drop out of the dialogue.

Politics and the dialogue to consider the purpose of the public education system disappear from the public space. Test scores become the currency of exchange. Similar to the view most individuals hold toward the dollar, it is not important to know what the currency symbolizes,

only that it can be used as a mechanism for differential exchange. As test scores become the currency of symbolic exchange, students, teachers, and other significant stakeholders within public education become, as Marx (1978b, 292) stated, “*alienated, dispossessed, sold; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production*”—that is, to test scores. This becomes evident when AYP is considered, as stated by Yell and Drasgow (2005, 35):

States are responsible for determining their own system of sanctions and rewards to hold all public schools and school districts responsible for meeting AYP. The state may set aside 5% of the Title I funds to provide rewards for the schools and teachers in the schools that (a) substantially close the achievement gap between lowest and highest performing students, and (b) made outstanding yearly progress for 2 consecutive years. Although each state determines what the rewards will be, rewards often include some form of public recognition and monetary reward.

Test scores, like capital, become a fetish rather than a commodity.

Taussig’s (1980) description of economic growth helped to demonstrate this alienating transfiguration of a sign value into fetish. Within Taussig’s analysis, devil beliefs are linked to profits and the accumulation of capital. If we consider profits and the accumulation of capital as analogous to test scores and AYP measures, the fetishism of test scores become evident. Taussig (1980, 17) wrote:

Instead of reducing the devil-beliefs to the desire for material gain, anxiety, “limited good,” and so on, why not see them in their own right with all their vividness and detail as the response of people to what they see as an evil and destructive way of ordering economic life? Let us explore this notion that they are collective representations of a way of life losing its life, that they are intricate manifestations that are permeated with historical meaning and that register in the symbols of history, what it means to lose control over the means of production and to be controlled by them.

Understanding that resistance, as well as feelings of oppression and helplessness, represent authentic demonstrations of a sense of alienation from the educational process helps to create the necessary space for political dialogue. Like the devil beliefs in South America in response to the growth of capitalism, resistance to the NCLB regime represents a response by significant stakeholders to the destructive way of ordering public education that NCLB represents.

Conclusion

By returning to the basic political economy of exchange that academic standards, standardized tests, and test scores comprise, it becomes possible to open the public space necessary to hold serious dialogue concerning the state and purpose of America’s public education. The necessity of this dialogue cannot be ignored (Giroux 2003; Apple 2006). As long as the symbolic exchange of test scores remains the hegemonic regime, it is not possible to enter an authentic political dialogue. The NCLB regime establishes and maintains an economic dialogue devoid of politics. Michael Apple (2006, 13) stated this position clearly:

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The public had to be convinced that the unregulated marketplace of the neoliberals was not only the truest expression of individual freedom, but the marketplace must be expanded into every sphere of public life. Only through market competition can “people [get] what they want.” Why should a marketized society keep schools out of such a market? They must be “freed” as well.

As the market becomes the dominant paradigm, with test scores as the currency within that market, the political space is closed. Faith in the free market displaces social responsibility as a guiding principle.

Critique of the market paradigm that prioritizes private goods over public goods, the free market over social responsibility, the imperatives of the market over equity, skill-based learning over social justice, and test preparation over critical learning is varied and extensive. Henry Giroux (2003, 73) provided an explicit and pointed critique of the NCLB regime:

The overt message here is clear: treat schools like a pseudo-marketplace, bribe superintendents into turning schools into test factories, and punish them if they do not succeed in raising test scores. The hidden curriculum is that testing is used as a ploy to ensure that teachers are de-skilled as they are reduced to mere technicians, that students be treated as customers in the marketplace rather than as engaged, critical learners, and that public schools fail so that they can eventually [be] privatized.

If the political nature of this critique is recognized and not treated as the backward glance of an individual coming to grips with a more modern and progressive paradigm, true dialogue becomes possible. If, like the cases Taussig (1980) described, these positions are treated as articulations of divergent modes of political engagement and beliefs regarding the role of public education, it will be possible to return to a consideration of what constitutes “good education.”

Regime change has become an important paradigm through which to view political objectives in international relations (Fukuyama 2006). A comparison of the Bush administration’s educational paradigm and its international relations paradigm can be made by considering Fukuyama’s *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* and Chomsky’s (2006) *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*. Both texts offer insight into the political agenda that characterizes the Bush administration and help to shed light on the educational agenda as well.

As the political economy of the NCLB regime devolves into a symbolic exchange of test scores, it becomes evident that a similar dialogue is necessary in the space of public education. Serious dialogue regarding the purpose and function of public education needs to resume free of the symbolic exchange of test scores. By recognizing the use value and exchange value of test scores, the relationships that establish these values within the political economy of public education opens the space for this dialogue. Regime change requires openness to alternate and divergent views. The first step requires recognition that opposition to the NCLB regime is not opposition to rigorous academic schooling; rather, it represents opposition to the hegemony of the NCLB regime’s definition of both rigor and the role of public schooling.

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