

## Reflection on Jean Anyon

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Jean Anyon authored numerous important works on the limits of educational reform, including *Ghetto Schooling* (1997), *Radical Possibilities* (2005; 2014) and *Marx and Education* (2011). Jean spent the first 25 years of her academic career at Rutgers University-Newark and the last 12 years at the CUNY Graduate Center's Urban Education Program. At Rutgers- Newark, she chaired the Education Department for over a dozen years and connected it to the Newark Public Schools and other urban districts. At the CUNY Graduate Center she taught doctoral courses in urban educational policy and was a beloved mentor and dissertation advisor to many doctoral students.

Jean was a close friend and colleague of mine. Her outstanding scholarship influenced my own since the early 80s, when her work on social class and curriculum was directly responsible for my own work on social class and pedagogic practices. Her early work provided empirical evidence for Bowles and Gintis' correspondence theory by demonstrating how differences in curricula and pedagogic practices between working class and middle class districts prepared students for different places in the occupational stratification system. *Ghetto Schooling* included an in-depth history of Newark and its public schools and through participant observations analyzed the ways in which teaching methods in one of the district's low performing schools reproduced

race and class inequalities. She concluded that liberal educational reforms such as New Jersey's historic *Abbott v. Burke* school finance decision had the potential for reducing these inequalities; however, without systemic political-economic reforms to reduce poverty they would have limited success.

In *Radical Possibilities*, she developed more fully her argument that liberal educational reforms were doomed to failure without large scale economic reform, including higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations, increasing the minimum wage, and other progressive redistributive policies. She argued that these policies would only be achieved through political organization and progressive social movements, including community and parent organizing. It is here that Jean the scholar and Jean the activist became one, with her recommendations anticipating the Occupy Wall Street movement, years before. Throughout her career, Jean criticized most educational research for being atheoretical. Although her work was neo-Marxist and mine Weberian and Bernsteinian, we both used sociological theory to inform our research and I would like to think we influenced each other's work.

Sometimes she did not take criticism easily. Susan Semel and I gave *Ghetto Schooling* a mostly positive review in *Educational Researcher*, but criticized it for using one Newark School as representative of all

Newark Schools rather than placing it in the context of aggregate and disaggregate data for the district. In addition, we argued that she failed to place her critique of the authoritarian practices of many Newark teachers in the context of the literature on the history of African American teacher pedagogy, where authority was often related to caring in a complex manner. Jean called us to express her displeasure; we agreed to disagree, and remained close friends. Sometimes, she sometimes took criticism more positively. When she asked me to read the draft of *Radical Possibilities*, I once again gave her positive feedback, but recommended that she needed to add more about schools and schooling. In this case, she thanked me for my suggestions and indeed added more in the book. Finally, we continued over the years to debate the merits of charter schools. Jean was a staunch opponent, seeing them as a threat to public education. Although I shared her concerns, I was more supportive given the dismal student performance in a majority of urban schools. I think that we moved each other closer to each other's position over the years.

Over the last decade, we continued to have lively discussions about the limits and possibilities of neo-liberal reforms in the city. In 2000, Jean was instrumental in bringing me to Rutgers-Newark to replace her as the chair of the Education department. She spent 25 years at Rutgers and over a decade chairing the small, underfunded teacher education program. I was amazed that she produced such significant and original work at Rutgers, while running a department, teaching among other things science methods and supervising student teachers. In the late 90s she almost

single handedly defeated the attempt by the Dean of Arts and Sciences to close the department.

In 2002, Jean informed me that she received an offer from the CUNY Graduate Center Program in Urban Education, but she was undecided whether or not to accept it. On the one hand, she stated that she would be teaching only doctoral students at the Graduate Center; on the other hand, she stated that she was reluctant to leave Rutgers after 25 mostly excellent years. I told her that as her department chair, I hoped she would stay, but as her friend I urged her to go. I said that after 25 years, she deserved to be in a doctoral program where she could devote more time to her scholarship and closely mentor students. When I visited the Graduate Center days after her death and talked with her students and faculty, I was sure she made the right decision. The love expressed by them demonstrated the important effect she had on the Graduate Center community.

One of the last times I saw Jean was when we were on the same panel at our doctoral-student-run Urban Systems conference in 2012. As always, she presented a macro analysis of New York City style reform in Newark and provided an important radical voice. Jean spoke afterward with my students, who had read her work in my classes. They were excited to meet her and discuss her theoretical perspective. They are planning a mini-conference at Rutgers-Newark in the Spring to honor her scholarship and work at Rutgers. In addition, the Urban Education Department is planning to name one of its conference rooms after her.

My wife, City College of New York Professor Susan Semel, who also teaches in the Graduate Center Urban Education Program, and I communicated by email to Jean over the past year. When our final email in July was not answered, we knew she was not responding to treatment and was gravely ill. We talked about calling her daughter Jessie to arrange a visit, but did not want to invade Jean's privacy. In retrospect we regret this, as we never had the chance to say good-bye. Nonetheless, we hope Jean knew how much we loved and respected her.

Jean was a life-long radical political analyst and activist. Her scholarship, mentoring, and activism all were aimed at reducing economic inequality. Her work kept us all on our toes and ensured that we did not forget that economic, political and social structures were at the heart of educational inequality, and without larger societal reforms liberal educational reforms were doomed to failure. I will miss her as a friend, colleague and scholar.

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## References

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