

Memories of Jean Anyon and her work: an English perspective

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Jean Anyon's work was known well beyond the United States, including in the United Kingdom. She and I first communicated by letter in 1979 when I was working at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She had sent me a sharp note about something she objected to in the work I had recently published on the sociology of education (Whitty and Young, 1976; Young and Whitty, 1977). It marked the beginning of an ongoing academic dialogue and an enduring, if occasionally stormy, friendship. We shared interests not only in the sociology of education, but also social studies teaching and teacher education.

By the time Jean came to England in 1982 to speak at the annual sociology of education conference in Birmingham, I was leading the urban education program at King's College London and I invited her to visit us. The work she was doing at that time on social class and school knowledge figured prominently in our program and it soon began to be read and discussed more widely in England. As a result, she jokingly referred to me as her 'British agent'.

There was a great deal of common ground in the sorts of analyses we offered of urban education at that time, but we had lively discussions whenever we met, often about the strengths and limitations of political economy or neo-Marxism as tools for the analysis of education. She took seriously

and responded to the critique I offered of her work in my 1985 book *Sociology and School Knowledge* (Whitty, 1985). I questioned the extent of correspondence between education and the economy, and we explored together the role and significance of contradiction and relative autonomy in our respective analyses. We continued to discuss issues in urban education over the years and met at various conferences and seminars. I recall one such meeting in Buffalo being prolonged by a snowstorm and another in Manchester transformed into a virtual meeting in the aftermath of 9/11. We regularly dined together at AERA - even though Jean told me each time that it was the last AERA she was going to bother to attend. She teased me when in 2000 I became Director (or President in US terms) of the Institute of Education at London University, but in view of her own role as a Department Chair at Rutgers I like to think that her saying it was 'important work' was not meant entirely ironically!

Her book *Ghetto Schooling* (Anyon, 1997) was more influential in England than its empirical focus on New Jersey might have suggested. This was probably because her characterization of the relationship between race and class gave the book more resonance with the English situation than that of many other US writers on race and education. Her message about the need to link educational reform to economic and political transformation was also more widely

accepted over here.

Neither of us really took the 'culturalist turn' in the sociology of education, but Jean stuck more firmly than I did to political economy. In many ways she was vindicated by the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath. However, by that time her book *Radical Possibilities* (Anyon, 2005) and her work with students at the CUNY Graduate Center (Anyon et al, 2009) demonstrated an appreciation of the range of social movements and change strategies that might need to be involved in building a new social movement to challenge the status quo and recapture the revolutionary spirit of democracy.

Her work was probably at its most influential when she died. So when, in recent years, younger colleagues and students asked whether I knew Jean Anyon's work, I took some considerable pride in saying that I had known it – and her - for over 30 years. In September 2013 I came to New York to spend a month at Teachers College. Sadly, Jean died a few days after I arrived and before our planned meeting could take place. It was some small comfort to be included in the acknowledgements of the new edition of *Radical Possibilities* completed shortly before she died. That book will take forward her legacy to future generations of students of urban education.

education whose main areas of work have been urban education, education policy and teacher education.

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