Reproducing Gender? Essays on Educational Theory and Feminist Politics. Madeleine Arnot. London: Routledge Falmer, 2002. 288 pp.

DIANE R. WOOD

University of South Maine

drwood@maine.edu

This collection of essays takes the reader on a stimulating, highly readable journey through Arnot's feminist perspective on education. It traces her twenty-plus years of scholarship in the field, which has exposed the multiple blind spots of masculinist educational theories. Throughout, Arnot makes a persuasive case as to why feminist modes of analyses are so badly needed in the struggle to democratize education. To make sense of educational practices, she argues, "educationalists" must view practices not only through the lenses of the larger social and economic order, as critical social theorists have done, but also through the lenses of the domestic and the familial, realms frequently sequestered from the public sphere. Throughout, her penetrating insights demonstrate why feminist modes of analysis, including her own gender code theory, are essential to make sense of educational practices that inhibit social, political, and economic equity.

Although Arnot draws from theories of social and cultural reproduction, she also takes both to task. Because of their exclusive focus on the oppressive forces of capitalism, she claims, these theories fail to recognize the equally devastating constraints of patriarchy. In doing so, they trivialize, totalize, and omit the diverse experiences of women. Arnot particularly spotlights the theories of Bourdieu and Bernstein, which she explicates and then appropriates brilliantly as departure points for more elaborate feminist analyses. Moreover, Arnot challenges feminist scholarship to make better use of class and race as lenses for interpreting educational landscapes.

In one essay toward the end of the book, Arnot offers a paean to her mentor Bernstein. Calling on the perspectives of other feminists drawn to his work, she elucidates the generative possibilities contained in "transgressive" theoretical approaches that break down categories, refuse dualisms, and "blur distinctions." I found this chapter particularly moving. She writes of Bernstein's work:

. . . the transgression itself represents a dangerous pollution, a weakening of the borders between the sacred and the profane. However, the effect is power, which generates instability but also its own processes of resolution. There is the potential either to transform the power base or to encourage a reinstatement of its force. The effect can be exciting, filled as it is with creative possibilities. [p. 228]

Although Arnot is no naïve optimist, she gestures toward exactly these sorts of possibilities. While she clearly sees and frequently reiterates the inescapable influences of capitalism and patriarchy (male hegemony) to shape and constrain identities, she also recognizes the potential of human agency and social change. She reminds us that schools and families are sites that not only reflect but also produce gender relations. Hope may lie, she argues, in the contradictions and conflicts generated by the intersections of family and schools, the press for equality in education colliding with unequal opportunities for work, the differences of gender roles and expectations falling across class lines. And she makes this case particularly compellingly in a last chapter, which features the attitudes and beliefs of young women as current students and future workers.

Arnot's use of theory is both generative and generous. It should appeal to scholars interested in feminist theory and education, to teacher educators, and to practitioners who want to make better sense of the gendered nature of schooling. While her insightful critiques are thorough and devastating, she somehow manages to open hopeful horizons for future practices and scholarship.