

COMMENT

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Marxism and Education: A Brief Survey

Marxism was invented in Paris and Brussels in the eighteen forties by an erudite young German of pronounced authoritarian tendencies.¹ Original primarily in its combination of elements — Hegelian and Young-Hegelian philosophy, French utopian socialism, English classical economics, the revolutionary wistfulness of the time — and a bookish construction, its basic antinomian robustness nevertheless soon became apparent. When compared with established intellectual doctrine, however, it still amounted to little more than a point of view; and Marx spent the rest of his life on the task of substantiation. The results were ambiguous. Marx was a brilliant polemicist; but his notorious dilatoriness when it came to analytical writing may well be explicable in straightforward intellectual terms, as a wrestling with intractable problems of evidence, justification, and internal consistency.² Indeed, Marxism as a fully-fledged creed did not come into being until after his death, when, in what may be called 'the first revision', his collaborator, the coarser-minded autodidact Engels, as his final gift to Marx, converted what had been a conjectural social philosophy into a *Weltanschauung*, thus paving the way for many twentieth-century evils.

Politically speaking, this new and superficially coherent Marxism — 'scientific socialism' — had its first successes in Central Europe, where it was adopted as official doctrine by the new working-class parties (its revolutionary message suffering some dilution, however). Of more significance in the long run was the embrace by some members of a unique grouping, the dissident intelligentsia of Tsarist Russia, with its special tradition of 'voluntarism', direct action, and revolutionary elitism.³ The combination of this tradition with 'Western' Marxism, as accomplished by Lenin ('the second revision'), led to the first seizure of power by a Marxist political group, in Petrograd in 1917. Against all odds, the Soviet Union came into being (but the expected revolutions elsewhere in Europe either did not materialize or were crushed). A tremendous victory for Marxism, one might say; but also a pyrrhic one; whatever democratic content Marxism possessed, as originally a 'Western' product, was gradually eliminated as nativist ideas took hold, with Stalin (although a Georgian by extraction, a thoroughly 'Russian' figure) their representative. Having disposed of the Leninists, with the temporary exception of the exiled Trotsky, Stalin was able to impose his own version of Marxism ('the third revision') not only on the Soviet Union, but, through the agency of the Comintern, on Communist Parties abroad as well. It was grossly simplified and ultra-dogmatic, a plebeian Marxism, but it proved to have considerable staying power.⁴ Indeed, wherever Marxists have taken over the state subsequently, they have adopted as official philosophy what amounts to Stalinism with footnotes (thus Maoism, for instance, is best seen as the Chinese form of Stalinism).⁵

The intellectual virtue of Marxism, in any of its varieties, is less obvious than its zealots would have us believe. Had it not been for the *coup de main* in Petrograd, and thereafter the powerful backing of the Soviet Union, there is every likelihood that Marxism would now be an historical curiosity, and Marx himself remembered only as one among many Victorian worthies. Propped up

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by its victories in backward countries, however, Marxism has intermittently prospered in the West (although finding, until recently, Britain and the United States fairly inhospitable territory). There has remained a vexing problem, which may be described as follows: the philosophical justification of the revolutionary program in a way that captures the loyalties of a significant portion of the intelligentsia. The attempt to solve this problem has created 'Western Marxism', and an extraordinary intellectual stew with something to suit every taste — a Hegelianized Marx, a de-Hegelianized Marx; Marx-with-Kant, Marx-with-Spinoza, Marx-with-Freud; Marx romanticized ('the young Marx'), Marx de-mystified, Marx re-mystified; emancipatory Marxism, cultural Marxism, Marxism as 'method'. A sceptical observer might easily conclude that this protracted ferment is less a testimony to intellectual vigour than a massive effort to 'save the appearances'. In the last analysis, however, what matters to dedicated Communists is not intellectual considerations, but political power; and the new Marxist palimpsest, with its widely varied appeal, offers a powerful tactical advantage in the political struggle, always provided that communication between 'intellectuals' and 'workers' is kept under close watch, in the interests of preserving basic teachings unimpaired.

Some critics of Marxism are inclined to attribute its continuing success in the West to human gullibility, particularly as this appears among the 'educated'.⁶ While such an interpretation is certainly persuasive, it fails to take sufficiently into account the extent to which Marxist propagandists have been able, without much opposition, to represent themselves as 'scientific', as 'ethical', and as 'modern' — as, in fact, what many people have wished to be. But these claims amount to sleight of hand. Marxism has no scientific status whatsoever; it is a secular theodicy within which particulars are of value only when they may be said to confirm assertions about the whole; and it has notably failed to come to grips with the twentieth-century philosophy of science (which Marxists deal with, as indeed they deal with other modern intellectual achievements that they find distasteful, abusively).⁷ Although its ethical status is less clear (this depending on how its eventual goals are understood), its path to these goals requires enormous sacrifices by very large numbers of people, including the sacrifice of ordinary ethical relationships; this is well appreciated by professional revolutionaries, but seldom discussed in public.⁸ And, so far from being modern, it is now a deeply reactionary creed, forever unsurprising, suspicious of new ideas even from within its own ranks; its militant monism is completely at odds with the most distinctive feature of the modern world, the realization (admittedly uncomfortable, and still a tender growth) that persons of equal rationality may hold, and are intellectually entitled to hold, sharply different views about the nature of reality (among which there is no authoritative means of choosing). In other words, the age of the *Weltanschauung* is passing, and Marxism is in a race; either it succeeds in 'stopping the conversation', as it has done so effectively in its centres of power, or it dwindles to become the ignored or despised possession of a tiny cognitive minority.⁹

Within the last decade or so Marxist ideas have been steadily pressed in education, at least one reason being its vulnerability to propagandist takeover bids. Many other spheres of intellectual activity — philosophy, economics, and literature, for example — are elaborately defended against penetration, so that Marxists are forced to take part in real intellectual struggle merely to hold their ground. Education, on the other hand, is intellectually disorganized, being held together mainly by hopes and aspirations; its participation in the 'conversation' is stumbling and episodic; its associations with modern thought are tenuous; its varieties of expression are vacuous and cliché-ridden; it has accumulated an altogether remarkable twentieth-century history of failure and an ineptitude ('bourgeois society' would have collapsed long ago had its other institutions been so weak); it contains large numbers of disgruntled and dissatisfied people; and within living memory it has already demonstrated a persistent tendency to yield to all-or-nothing principles. From the point of view of a Marxist who wishes to get real mileage from his efforts, then, there is much to be said for

working in education (the closest 'backward country'), particularly at the university level, where one has time for writing, the protection of 'academic freedom', and access to the impressionable student masses.

While education is reasonably easy to penetrate, Marxists have been handicapped here by a lack of the usual stock of more or less plausible generalizations. Marx himself had little to say directly about education, although something can be inferred from his pronouncements on other matters.¹⁰ A case can be made for Lenin's interest, but it seems to have derived more from a wish to block the advocates of proletarian culture than from any concern over details.¹¹ And, while Gramsci is mentioned often enough by modern educational Marxists, analytical discussions are rare, perhaps understandably so, since the most thorough account of him available in English clearly demonstrates his respect for certain bourgeois virtues.¹² Until very recently, then, what typical Marxist ideas in education in the West amounted to was no more than this: there had been educational progress under capitalism, owing largely to working-class struggle; since education was still unequally provided, the struggle to obtain access for working-class children had to continue; intelligence testing was a device designed to maintain existing inequalities, and therefore had to be opposed; a properly Marxist education would seek to combine education and work. As a basic position for Communist Parties with predominantly proletarian memberships, primarily interested in the industrial conflict, and suspicious of 'abstract' intellectual formulations, this suited well enough. To the 'Western Marxists' who first impressed themselves on the popular consciousness in the 'sixties, however, it appeared radically insufficient: it greatly underestimated the strength of bourgeois culture, which had to be challenged in every detail if revolution was ever to come in the West; and it certainly could not serve as a set of principles around which to rally 'progressive' educational opinion, since it left so much of what was done in education uncriticized.

A new Marxist critique of education had to be developed, then; and the matter was one of urgency, since the expansion of higher education had brought into being a changed student body, less self-confident, less intellectually competent, more suspicious, easily infected with fantasies of liberation, detached from work, *more easily reachable*. There was much casting around; obviously, Gramsci's idea of hegemony (the idea that the capitalist order defends itself by the saturation of all mental categories (even including 'common sense') with bourgeois ideology) was to prove useful; by coincidence, however, what was to turn out most helpful was a 'bourgeois' initiative, the 'new sociology of education', based mainly on phenomenology and ethnomethodology, which, in the hands of educationists, made, for the first time, every aspect of school life — curriculum, examinations, administration and organization, teacher-pupil interchange — problematic. In spite of its 'relativist' implications, this was too promising — and, in its pedagogical uses, too interesting — to be disregarded. In the last few years, then, Marxists have in effect taken over 'the new sociology of education', reinterpreting it as the study of the 'bourgeois control of school knowledge', and even using it as the basis for a revisionist history of education. When combined as necessary with certain other originally non-Marxist notions — Bernstein's ideas on language and curriculum, Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' — it has come to be rhetorically formidable, a Marxist therapy for teachers and students.^{13, 14}

In the United States progress has been less systematic. There has been, if anything, *more* criticism of education than, say, in Britain, but it has been cruder, degenerating frequently into straightforward abuse, conspiratorial interpretation, and cynicism. For that reason, it is sometimes difficult to place writers (Is he a Marxist or not?), a task that is not aided by the grumbling presence of the American Marxist tradition of 'economism'. Within the last five years or so, however, two books that are clearly of Marxist inspiration have appeared, and have found their way on to many reading

lists: Bowles and Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* and Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum*.¹⁵ To say that they are of Marxist inspiration is not to say that they have much in common; indeed, they appear to be written for different revolutionary constituencies (this may be sheer accident, or it may suggest a certain sectarianism within American Marxism). In a sense, *Schooling in Capitalist America* is the more original, if only because it takes a line that is regarded by the dominant school of cultural Marxists as distinctly 'mechanical': the school system is a true mirror, reflecting 'directly' the hierarchical division of labour in the American workplace. There are no 'mediations' to speak of, and nothing left to explain; 'Western Marxism', the writings of Gramsci and Williams, might as well not exist.¹⁶ The trouble is that this is far too 'tidy', likely to be convincing only to the simple-minded or the fanatical; most of us find certain relationships opaque and explanations hard to come by, and conventional explanatory systems less useful the closer we get to particulars.¹⁷

The tone of the book also deserves some comment. There is no denying that for Marxists academic work is a form of praxis, a type of political activity, with the explicit purpose of undermining capitalism, and, more recently, conventional educational understandings as well — *en route*, as it were. Bowles and Gintis are particularly explicit about this, referring proudly to their antecedents as 'men of '68'¹⁸, and quoting approvingly Rudi Dutschke's remark about the necessity for 'the long march through the institutions'.¹⁹ Karabel and Halsey are kind enough to take their assertions as evidence of commitment to the working class²⁰; in fact there is no evidence that Bowles and Gintis have ever thought about working-class people except as creatures drained of individuality ('a bourgeois concept') and filled with 'false consciousness', not fully human and hence fit subjects for manipulation; the commitment is to 'Marxism' and 'revolution', a rather different matter. That was to be expected; what is more irritating is their attempt to have it both ways; according to themselves, they set out 'to bring the total theoretical, empirical, and historical evidence of the social sciences to bear on the problem of rendering education a potent instrument of progressive social reform'²¹; and they have shown that 'modern mainstream economics, sociology, and political science' are wrong.²² These claims are ridiculous; *Schooling in Capitalist America* is an extended polemic, interesting primarily as an example of Marxist techniques of argument, and should be read as such; indeed, someone interested in demonstrating the intellectual *weaknesses* of Marxism to university classes might well choose it as a text.²³

Ideology and Curriculum is rather different. Whereas Bowles and Gintis simplify, Apple, very much in the manner of his British counterparts, tries to incorporate, and is particularly dependent on Gramsci and Williams, with the full range of whose work, unfortunately, he seems to be much less familiar than he is with American curriculum studies.²⁴ A writer so intent on showing how the capitalist order is mediated should have read William's *Marxism and Literature*; the treatment of mediation there is highly illuminating, in spite of occasional outbursts of dogmatism, and of interest not only to Marxists.²⁵ Perhaps, then, because the effort to incorporate does not go much beyond the use of special terms as ideological counters, the book is disappointing. Apple establishes his position, distinguishing it from that of the 'mechanical Marxists', in the first chapter; he is attempting to reach a more thorough understanding of how 'institutions of cultural preservation and distribution like schools create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of demotion'.²⁶ But thereafter little progress is made; Apple repeats his original formulations in different ways; he tells us that he is dealing with complex questions, and that his judgments are tentative; he juggles constantly with the question of intention, assuring us that what he has just said should not be taken to mean that he is referring to conscious ruling-class imposition (although he makes a curious return to intention in his discussion of 'the hidden curriculum' in nineteenth-century schools); and his idealism — society is unjust and unequal — sometimes overpowers his Marxism.

Although he makes some good, if not original, points in a discussion of the views of science current among educators, on the whole the book amounts, by the most friendly interpretation, to no more than a sketch (by another less friendly, to an understated polemic lacking the usual polemical quality — rhetorical force).

At the level of general interpretation Marxism in Canadian education still — as so typically — depends on the importation of ideas from abroad, although two books of readings drawn from local sources can be found in university libraries — Martell's *The Politics of the Canadian Public School* (published under the auspices of *This Magazine*) and Nelsen and Nock's *Reading, Writing and Riches*.²⁷ The first is of little theoretical interest, being written in that militant, atheoretical, oppositional style that one has come to associate with contemporary Trotskyism. *Reading, Writing and Riches* is more of a puzzle; it is probably best regarded as a sub-Marxist tract with strong radical-populist undertones. Although the blurb asserts that some contributions are theoretical, I was unable to find any; what I did find was a consistent lack of originality, obsessional anti-Americanism, and a diffused paranoia.²⁸

The study of Marxism is ultimately a wearisome, even depressing, activity. This paradoxical doctrine, that masquerades as the final liberator of mankind in order to manage and manipulate it, that claims to represent the pinnacle of human achievement while fearing and hating free human thought, remains, after many defeats, more formidable than ever. While a Ted Hughes can still write, however,

There is the inner life, which is the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence, and natural common sense, and which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heartbeat. There is also the thinking process by which we break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it. That process of raid, or persuasion, or ambush, or dogged hunt, or surrender, is the kind of thinking we have to learn and if we do not somehow learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.

There may be more left to depend on in the West than a borrowed Gramscian 'optimism of the will'. Marxists do not wish people to learn to fish; but many have learned, and are then beyond their reach.³⁰

Notes

¹ Useful accounts of Marx's early years may be found in David McLellan, *Marx before Marxism* (London: Macmillan, 1970), and *Karl Marx, His Life and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

² The steady flow of publication of Marx's manuscripts in this century has generated a talmudic literature of reconciliation.

³ This tradition is well examined in Adam B. Ulam, *In the Name of The People* (New York: Viking, 1977).

⁴ Stalin's services to Marxism were in fact considerable, although they are now rarely mentioned.

⁵ Chinese Communism has had a remarkably favourable hearing in the West. See, however, Jacques Guillermaz, *A History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-49* (New York: Random House, 1972), and *The Chinese Communist Party in Power, 1949-76* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1976); and also 'Simon Leys' (Pierre Ryckmans), *Chinese Shadows* (New York: Viking, 1977), *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), and *Broken Images: Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics* (London: Allison and Busby, 1979).

⁶ The failure of Marxists to win the battle for proletarian support in the most advanced societies has been explained in many ways (including a 'Marxist' way); but, as Gramsci was well aware, 'common sense' may constitute a more formidable barrier to Marxist penetration than schooled conceptualizations.

⁷ I have noticed, in the last year or two, timid attempts to absorb Kuhn and Lakatos. Popper and Feyerabend (who is very scoffing about 'Marxist fairy tales') are still beyond the pale.

⁸ It is, however, laid bare by one of the most honest of Marxists, Raymond Williams. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: NLB, 1979), *passim*.

⁹ The reference here is to Michael Oakeshott's metaphor for progress in civility: the continuing conversation.

¹⁰ Brian Simon has done what he can to pull things together in his lecture, 'Karl Marx and Education' (included as pp. 177-199 in Brian Simon, *Intelligence, Psychology and Education* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978)).

¹¹ For an account of Lenin's manoeuvrings against *proletkul't*, see the interesting Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970).

¹² See Harold Entwistle, *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

¹³ Useful brief accounts of these developments are included in the Introduction to Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and Ideology in Education* (New York: OUP, 1977); and in Olive Banks, "The Sociology of Education, 1952-1982", *British Journal of Educational Studies* XXX, 1 (February 1982), pp. 18-31. The fear of 'relativism' in some academic circles is so pronounced that Banks actually welcomes the Marxist upsurge.

¹⁴ This paragraph refers in the main to events in Britain.

¹⁵ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); M.W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

¹⁶ By comparison, Williams's statement of his fundamental position is: 'We have to give a very complex account of hegemony if we are talking about any real social formation'.

¹⁷ The 'tidiness' is not un-Marxist, however. It is an abiding tradition in Marxism that particulars are mere instances of the general. For the non-Marxist who is at all philosophically inclined this raises a serious problem of how far Marxist 'evidence' is to be taken at face value.

¹⁸ Bowles and Gintis, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁰ Karabel and Halsey, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²¹ Bowles and Gintis, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 269.

²³ This necessarily brief discussion by no means exhausts the faults of *Schooling in Capitalist America* (see for instance, Diane Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1978)). One obvious flaw is the readiness of Bowles and Gintis to interpret the contemporary world in nineteenth-century terms (perhaps I should say in terms of *their* nineteenth century), thus confirming Williams's criticism of his fellow-Marxists: that they are, on the whole, bad at history because of their love of 'epochs'.

²⁴ In his somewhat featureless review of Entwistle's book on Gramsci, he nevertheless says, 'Readers would be strongly advised to turn immediately to other works that are more effective in placing . . . Gramsci's . . . efforts in the context of the real conditions into which he was intervening (sic).' (*Comparative Education Review*, 24, 3 (October 1980), p. 438). In other words, Gramsci belongs to us. It seems to me only poetic justice that he should himself be harassed in turn by Gene Grabiner, who complains of *Ideology and Curriculum* that 'the trendy activity of intellectuals ignores labour, productive relations, and the struggle to overcome racism and sexism . . . avoids Marxist emphasis and revolutionary social transformation' (*Harvard Educational Review*, 51, 3 (1981), p. 452).

²⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977).

²⁶ Apple, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁷ George Martell (Ed.), *The Politics of the Canadian Public School* (Toronto: Lewis and Samuel, 1974); Randle W. Nelsen and David A. Nock (Eds.), *Reading, Writing and Riches* (Kitchener: Between the Lines, 1978).

²⁸ In their riposte to the reviews of their book, Nelsen and Nock beat an ingenious tactical retreat ("Science, Ideology, and *Reading, Writing, and Riches* ", *Journal of Educational Thought*, 16, 2 (August 1982), pp. 73-88. Their tone is one of beguiling, almost Heepian, moderation — very different from that of RAW, *but very characteristic of Marxists in popular-front costume*. The riposte, then, seems to me more Marxist than the book. A close reading reveals that the enemies are still the same: the old bogies; capitalism, liberalism, the bourgeoisie, idealism, etc.

²⁹ Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*.

³⁰ One should remember also, however, some lines from Cavafy's well-known poem, *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

Why should this uneasiness begin all of a sudden?
 And confusion? How serious people's faces have become?

 Because night has fallen and the Barbarians have not come,
 And some people have arrived from the frontier;
 They said there are no Barbarians any more.
 And now what will become of us without Barbarians?
 Those people were some sort of a solution.