This article explores the work of key neo-Marxists, from the 1970s to the present day, and summarises their thoughts on education.

**Base and superstructure**

Marx was interested in offering a general understanding of capitalist society. This was achieved through his base and superstructure argument. For Marx, society was divided into two substantive parts: the superstructure (top section) and the base or substructure (lower section).

The base is economic in nature and is comprised of the means of production and the relations of production. The means of production refers to productive property such as land, factories and machinery. The relations of production are social classes and for Marx there are only two significant classes:

- The bourgeoisie own the means of production and sustain themselves through the appropriation of profit.
- The proletariat have only their labour to sell in order to survive and are referred to as wage slaves.

This enduring situation creates one wealthy, powerful class and one impoverished, subordinate class. Marx argued that everything else we see in society is shaped by the inequality found in these economic relations. So, the superstructure reflects the economic base by prioritising the interests of the wealthy via institutions such as education, media, religion, the state, family, criminal justice and the dominant culture. See Box 1 for more on why Marxists see this situation as so entrenched.

This base and superstructure argument is often criticised as being economically deterministic — everything is reduced to economics. For Marxists, the education system is biased against the working class because it is a product of the unequal class relations found in the economic base. Marx and Engels (1845–46) writing in *German Ideology* famously said, 'the ideas of the
Box 1 The Marxist view of human nature

Marxism is a conflict structuralist perspective. This means that Marxists see the basic feature of capitalist societies as a struggle for power and resources. It also means that they see the behaviour of individuals in a society as governed and constrained by structures, in particular the class structure.

This perspective supports the view that human nature is somewhat passive, with identity and behaviour largely determined by external structures rather than individual agency. Understanding this particular view of human nature is necessary as it explains why Marxists view the structure of social class as so important to their social analysis.

Middle range theory

Yet, if we are to understand the Marxist perspective on education in any detail, we need to move away from classical Marxism and focus on what is called the middle range theory of neo-Marxists. Middle range theory does not seek to change or reinvent general sociological perspectives, but it aims to apply existing theories to particular aspects of society, such as education.

Education and capitalist values

The neo-Marxist Louis Althusser (1971) argued that the capitalist education system promotes the values which are most valuable to capitalism. Unlike functionalists, who claim that the education system is benign in that it merely promotes common values, for Althusser the education system legitimises economic and political inequality. For him, the education system is a facet of the ideological state apparatus.

Social control is maintained in society through a mixture of the use of repressive force and ideological manipulation. This ideological manipulation socialises working-class people to accept inequality as inevitable and desirable. The working-class student, for example, learns to conform to authority and to expect educational failure.

Furthermore, Althusser argues that unlike in conditions of slavery or serfdom where skills or knowledge could be passed on wherever the work was taking place, the social reproduction of capitalism occurs in educational institutions. He notes that some children succeed and some children do not but that they all learn skills and knowledge which are useful to capitalist employers. They all learn to read and write, and some also learn scientific, technical or management skills.

Education and conformity

Like other neo-Marxists, Althusser argues that all children learn the rules and morality of capitalist society. They are socialised to conform and to accept the social/technical division of labour. If we were to place that view in a relevant context today it would mean that the manual workers ‘knew their place’ and respected technical workers; that technical workers ‘knew their place’ and respected the managers; and the managers ‘knew their place’ and respected the owners.

Therefore, education not only reproduces the skills necessary in the capitalist workforce but it is also the site for the reproduction of submission. According to Althusser, no matter where you fit in capitalist society, the education system ensures through its mastery of words the transmission of a capitalist ruling-class ideology.

This view might be illustrated by saying that professional teachers typically value the views of one dominant class over another and that they propagate the truism that inequality is both natural and just. After a period of years, the child has soaked up this conformist ‘way of doing and thinking’ from the educational ideological state apparatus and has become useful and subservient to the capitalist system — and, of course, to a specific employer.

Cultural capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1989) also draws on the base and superstructure argument but he argues that the education system is inherently biased in favour of a dominant culture.

A child from a middle-class or wealthy background soaks up ‘cultural capital’ from both home and the school. This cultural capital includes a broad vocabulary, an ability to use standard English, an experience
of galleries, museums, and perhaps foreign travel, and certain norms and values which, when taken in their totality, afford these students an advantage over their working-class peers.

This form of cultural capital is valued by the education system and is rewarded through positive reinforcement in the classroom and high grades in examinations. The high-status qualifications secured by this privileged group are referred to as educational capital. When used in the marketplace, educational capital secures economic capital. So the process is cyclical: middle-class children are rewarded, not for their intelligence, but for their possession of cultural capital which they then use to secure educational and economic capital.

The socialised worker

In their early work, the famous American Marxist theorists Bowles and Gintis (1976) also argued that education performs a class-based function. Their key concepts are the hidden curriculum and the correspondence principle, each of which helps perpetuate the production of a docile and obedient workforce.

The hidden curriculum

The hidden curriculum is a type of learning which is not on any scheme of work and is not apparent to the learners. This 'covert' curriculum is transmitted by teachers and is learnt by students without either being particularly aware of it. Teachers impose the normality of time keeping, rules, inequality and obedience to authority as part of the daily school regime. Teachers are expected to promote the hidden curriculum with enthusiasm and students are expected to adjust their behaviour and attitudes accordingly.

After a period of years, students become socialised to be on time and to accept instructions without question. Passivity, compliance and obedience are the traits required by capitalist employers. However, Paul Willis (1977) famously showed that Bowles and Gintis had an 'over-socialised view of working-class youth'. Willis employed an anti-positivist methodology through observation and 'generally hanging about' in a school in the Midlands. He was able to show both a rejection of authority and an opposition to the conformist model among working-class boys (Willis 1977).

Using largely unstructured interviews, Willis was able to access an oppositional counter culture where the self-styled 'lads' such as 'Joey' offered a critique of the education system and of the teachers in particular:

"Joey" says that, 'they are able to punish us. They are bigger than us, they stand for a bigger establishment than we do, like, we're just little and they stand for bigger things, and you try to get your own back. It's uh, resenting authority I suppose' (Willis 1977, p. 11).

Such comments illustrate how working-class students colluded in their own educational failure by breaking rules and challenging the functionalities of capitalism (teachers). In this sense, Willis demonstrated how the notion of agency,
or freedom and self-determination, is not given enough weight by Marxists.

While the power of the hidden curriculum might be in question, the correspondence principle offered by Bowles and Gintis is perhaps more compelling.

The correspondence principle

The correspondence principle is a form of reward and punishment that fosters socialisation and creates character traits and behavioural norms which benefit employers. One learns to be motivated by grades as one learns to be motivated by wages. One learns to accept compartmentalised knowledge in school as one does in the factory. One is socialised to be broken up into year groups, classes and ability sets, just as one is broken up into differentiated and specialised functions in the factory.

In an article written 25 years after the initial publication of their work, Bowles and Gintis (2002) continued to argue that one is not being prepared in school for parenthood or for active citizenship, but to be a socialised worker who is ready to contribute towards capitalist accumulation and the notion of profit. Students in school are never really taught opposing views or the connections between subjects, and all knowledge is compartmentalised.

This method of delivering knowledge ensures that, when young people end up in work they do not expect to understand the whole production process. Students or future workers are far easier to control when they are divided up into small groups and can never set up in competition with the employer because they do not understand the whole production process.

However, while Bowles' and Gintis' thesis might appear a good fit for modern industrial mass production methods, the nature of the economic base has changed radically since the mid-1970s. Today, the employer is more influenced by the notion of human capital theory — that is, seeking to benefit from the stock of knowledge and transferable skills possessed by the employee.

In short, in the developed service economy of today where mental labour and non-manual work generates the majority of GDP (and therefore profit), a worker who is an unthinking automaton is unlikely to be an attractive prospect for exploitation. Therefore, both the hidden curriculum and the correspondence principle may have been convincing elements of Marxist theory for earlier capitalist industrial societies, but do they carry the same weight today?

A revival of Marxist accounts of education?

More recently, Glenn Rikowski (2012) has argued that the development of educational systems can still be best understood within a Marxist framework. Marx claimed that in more developed forms of capitalism, institutions of the superstructure such as education, health and other social services become increasingly capitalised. In other words, they are transformed into commodities with the aim of producing profit.

According to this view, education becomes like any other commodity — a product to be bought and sold in an increasingly global marketplace. Thus, the movement away from a state system of university funding towards a more business-like focus constitutes a movement towards 'teaching factories'. Think here about 'choice', league tables and university admission fees. In higher education today, students 'shop' for the best deal and universities compete to attract high-end 'customers'. Is the driving force behind these educational institutions quality of education — or the generation of profit?

Côté (2014) also argues that Bowles' and Gintis' correspondence principle remains important but requires some urgent updating for the new service economy. The recent mass expansions of university systems means that the focus has shifted to how universities now produce a surplus of white-collar workers who can operate as needed in advanced capitalist societies, but who still exhibit false consciousness.

They constitute a new reserve army of more educated white-collar labour, but the competition between them for jobs keeps wages down and labour cheap. This educational smoke screen of chasing qualifications still sustains the illusion (false consciousness) that success is determined by merit (referred by universities) and not by socioeconomic background.

Conclusion

Marxist perspectives on education may seem rather less compelling today than they were at the height of the neo-Marxist critique in the mid-1970s. But arguably Marxism still has much to offer. Education still seems firmly located in the cultural superiority of the dominant economic class. Oxbridge graduates dominate key positions and no school seeks to pass on 'working-class' values or working-class knowledge or character traits.

To be a product of bourgeois socialisation and bourgeois opportunities is to have a head start in the education race towards valuable credentials. Bourdieu's views on the importance of cultural capital seem highly relevant today. Success in education still seems tied to high-status language skills and the cultural experiences of the better off.

The base and superstructure argument is limited: no individual is a prisoner of class or any other structure, and educational inequalities around 'race' and gender have also come to the fore. And yet the logic that the values of the dominant economic class still infuse the UK education system is difficult to argue against, and university education today seems increasingly commodified.

References


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