

BOOK REVIEW: TEACHERS AND CLASSES: Kevin Harris. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982)

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH A. DIORIO

In the preface to Teachers and Classes, Kevin Harris states that the book

... has been written essentially for those who are not deeply acquainted with Marxist theory or the methodology of Marxist analysis, and thus offers an elementary introduction to and application of certain aspects of the Marxist research programme. On the other hand it is also introductory in the sense that it offers the first sustained Marxist analysis of the role and function of teachers under contemporary corporate capitalism ... The overall aim has been to provide something which both sophisticated Marxists and those as yet unfamiliar with Marxism can take hold of and get their teeth into. (1)

This is a formidable objective for any author to set for himself, and fulfilling it even partially would constitute a significant achievement. It is worth considering what such an achievement would involve. First, there would have to be an elucidation of some of the foundations of Marxist thinking, and an application of this to schools and teachers. Second, this elucidation would have to be taken beyond an elementary reporting of basic Marxist thinking, to engage the interests of "sophisticated" Marxists either by pushing their understanding of capitalist schooling further, by expanding the Marxist position, or by justifying a stance on controversial matters within that position. Third, and ideally, there should be some engagement with the arguments of the opponents of Marxism, so that the beginning student will be made aware not only of the differences between Marxist and capitalist views of schooling, but of some of the reasons why Marxists believe their perspective to be superior.

This last requirement, to be sure, is not necessitated by Harris's own statement of goals. When confronted with the Marxist critique of capitalist schooling, however, school people ultimately must decide whether they should adopt the Marxist view. As Vinit Haksar recently has remarked:

If we are to rationally and knowledgeably decide whether a particular moral code is better than another we should not blindly make a choice just on the basis of which one we happen to like and commend for general acceptance. We must also examine how sound the relevant foundations are. (2)

Teachers and Classes does not provide a critical justification, in the face of contrary arguments, for the position which it describes. With a few exceptions it does pursue the first requirement - the elucidation of a Marxist perspective - effectively, and many readers be expected to learn much from the book on this count. With respect to the second requirement, the book's success appears to be mixed. For example, in identifying the class position of teachers, Harris draws upon the Marxist notion of the "new middle class". He tells us that "there have been many attempts to account for and analyse this class", but that he will "follow one particular line which we consider to be promising, and then consider what implications it throws up regarding teachers". (3) The "line" which Harris takes here is that of Guglielmo Carchedi, but we are given no indication of what other Marxist attempts to account for this class Harris has considered or of the grounds on which the adopted approach has been judged to be superior. (4) This is likely to disappoint those familiar with Harris's sources and interested in a critical Marxist assessment of Carchedi's views. On the other hand, much of

this material is likely to appear esoteric to the uninitiated, with the effect that in pursuing both sophisticates and novices among readers, the author risks losing the attention of both.

There is a general lack of justifying argument throughout much of the book, both in terms of the positions taken within Marxism and in terms of the Marxist stance itself. The author explicitly disclaims any need to argue in favour of the perspective which he employs, for he says that

... all investigations and analyses are made from the perspective of some particular theory or theories: they are theory dependent or theory-laden There can be no such thing as a neutral examination, or an examination which is objective (5)

He then asserts that

... certain 'hard core' propositions of [Marxism] ... regarding the nature of the State, the nature of classes, and the role of class struggle .. will form the basis of our investigation ... they themselves will not be argued for here (they are being accepted as viable starting points because a wealth of previous argument, along with practical outcomes, has established their value for investigations of social relations). (6)

This approach may be suitable for informed Marxists, but one wonders how intelligible it will be for those who are familiar neither with these previous arguments nor with the practical outcomes claimed for them. While argument in favour of the underlying framework of Marxism is eschewed, however, the tone of the work indicates that it is hoped that the reader will adopt the point of view presented. The description which Harris offers of the latent functions of capitalist schools seems to be taken to constitute a compelling argument on its own against the continuance of those functions.

Consider, for example, the distinction between "Education" and "socialisation" which stands at the heart of Harris's position. While capitalist schooling is supposed to be justified, in its own accounts, in terms of developing the individual, this only provides a cover for the true, socialising function of schools, which includes ensuring on the part of pupils

... their acceptance of their own economic exploitation and oppression, and their acceptance of the selection devices and mechanisms which have placed them where they are. [They learn] ... subordinating their labour to demands which have little if any correspondence to their special talents or the fulfillment of their inner needs. Significantly absent are visions of greatness, the drive for cultural improvement, people who have been led as deeply as philosophy and as high as art, manifestations of the achievement of the highest degree of individual development possible or the leading out of the true fulness of each person's nature (7)

This socialising function predominates because it is useful in maintaining the prevailing modes of production and associated forms of social relations, and because "Educated people are potentially subversive under capitalism". (8) What Harris does not indicate that he realises, however, is that an acceptance of the accuracy of the above description of schooling does not in itself entail its condemnation. One could agree that in schools children learn to accommodate to demands unrelated to their talents, but argue that the inescapable conditions of life make this learning a necessity. Likewise, one readily can find assertions that the deflection of the majority of persons from greatness, cultural

improvement, philosophy and art is an unavoidable condition of individual and social survival. At the end of the last century Emile Durkheim argued that different classes of persons necessarily had to have differential access to the pursuits Harris seeks for all. In his words

... too much idealism and moral elevation often deprives a man of the taste to fulfill his daily duties ... Too great an artistic sensibility is a sickly phenomenon which cannot become general without danger to society The workingman, if he is in harmony with his conditions of existence, is and must be closed to pleasures normal to the man of letters. (9)

More recently, the New Zealand Employers Federation has criticised schools for not equipping school-leavers with the kinds of attitudes needed in the labour market - to the detriment of both individual and society:

... by raising academic attainment, the education system has raised expectations and aspirations for jobs, careers, social status and opportunities for personal satisfaction and development. But the labour market ... has not developed a corresponding need for these higher levels of education and attainment ... the present standards adopted by the education system are quite inappropriate to today's environment (10)

Is the judgement of Harris self-evidently superior to that of Durkheim and the employers of New Zealand? However much we may favour the former and condemn the latter, as Haksar's comment quoted above indicates, proponents of neither side can rest content that the mere statement of their position, devoid of arguments accounting for extant counter-positions, will suffice.

It is not as if counter-positions are not available to be engaged by Marxist spokesmen. Surveying writers whom he has called the "new defenders of capitalism", Norman Podhoretz has noted that in the views of a number of

... intellectuals [who] ... are converts from one variety or another of Marxism ... socialism coexists more comfortably with tyranny and totalitarianism than with liberty and democracy ... because the more control the state exercises over the means by which people make a living, the more power it has over their lives and the less room there is for individual freedom ... [and] that even in realizing the value of equality - the central value of the political culture of socialism - capitalism does a better job. (11)

This is not to imply that the arguments of these defenders of capitalism must be accepted, but simply to suggest that they should not be ignored, even in introductory writings by Marxist spokesmen. Educators approaching these questions need to know not just how to construct a Marxist critique of capitalist schooling. They also ought to be helped to decide whether it makes sense, in the light of the best available arguments to the contrary, to advocate Marxist policies.

There is one aspect of Harris's explication of Marxist theory where a more thorough explanation would provide readers with a clearer insight into the foundations of the Marxist's moral antagonism to capitalism. This involves the notion of exploitation. Harris refers frequently to the exploitation of workers, and much of his case against schooling as socialisation rests on the claim that such schooling is a major source of the exploitability of the working class. In his discussion of teachers as part of the "new middle class", he seeks to

demonstrate how teachers share partially in the "global" functions of capital by undertaking the socialisation of children into the attitudes and behaviours necessary for them to be exploitable by other agents of capital. But he neglects to explain the meaning of "exploitation" or why it is evil. In discussing the difference between productive and unproductive labourers, for example, Harris states that

... a characteristic which most unproductive labourers have in common with productive labourers is that they are expropriated of surplus labour. With productive labourers this occurs indirectly through the production of surplus value (and here we speak of economic exploitation) whereas with unproductive labourers it occurs directly (and thus we speak of economic oppression). (12)

He then states that teachers

... while not being economically exploited since they do not produce surplus value directly, are nevertheless economically oppressed in that they are expropriated of surplus labour. (13)

It seems unlikely that readers not acquainted with the Marxist idiom will understand this, nor the notion of "surplus value" and the way in which the production of such value, since it is unpaid, lies at the heart of exploitation. Similarly, Harris does not clarify the distinction between "labour" and "labour power", which also is crucial to understanding exploitation. Workers are referred to as "bearers of labour power", (14) and we are told on one hand that "some ... people exchange their labour power against capital ... while some exchange their labour power against revenue", but on the other hand that "some ... people engage in the production of commodities such that their labour valorises or increases the value of capital ... while some ... do not produce commodities and therefore provide the capitalist with no surplus value by means of their labour". (15) The significance of this terminological shift is likely to be missed by the novice, and with it the reasons for the Marxist condemnation of the production of surplus value as exploitative. As explained by one writer:

Marx invites us to conceive of the wage-laborer's working day as divided into two parts. During the first part the worker works for himself in the sense that he produces commodities whose value is equivalent to the wages he receives. During the remainder of the working day, the wage-laborer works for the capitalist in the sense that what he produces is appropriated by the capitalist and not returned to the worker in the form of wages. Since the product of surplus wage-labor is not returned to the worker, Marx calls surplus labor 'unpaid labor'. (16)

The capitalist is able to extract unpaid labour from the worker because he has purchased from that worker his capacity to labour. According to Gary Young

... to purchase labor power, the capitalist must pay its owner, the worker, its value ... But the value of labor power is just the quantity of labor required to maintain the worker for the duration of the employment contract and to contribute proportionately to the raising of future workers. In return for this payment, in the form of wages, the capitalist acquires the right to use the worker's labor power for the duration He uses it to the point at which its use has created value equal to that paid its owner in wages, and then he uses it some more. (17)

It is this additional, unpaid use of the worker's labour power which is the source of surplus value for the capitalist, and it is the withholding of this value from the worker who produces it which constitutes exploitation. Since capitalism demands this withholding of surplus value from workers, as a system it is inherently exploitative according to Marxist analysis. (18)

Another possible source of confusion for the reader is to be found in the way the author discusses the conflict between being Educated and being willing to labour in certain ways. Much of the work done under capitalism is unpleasant, and the Marxist claim that true Education is subversive of capitalism is based on the idea that the reason why people are willing to labour under poor conditions is that they have been convinced falsely (i.e., socialised) that it is in their interests to do so. Educated people who had not been socialised in this way would not share this willingness, and would compel the agents of capital either to resort to force to get this work done or else to abandon their system. Harris asks

... how could we possibly integrate whole new generations of Educated people into a system of social relations which requires the vast majority of its participants ... to spend the greater portion of their lives engaging in alienating, routine, dull, mindless and meaningless labour How could we induce these Educated people to sweep the streets, work on production lines, and operate check outs at super-markets let alone clean floors and toilets in office blocks, especially while these jobs are given low social status and relatively low financial remuneration? (19)

The implication here seems to be that if a person is Educated he or she should be unwilling to do such lowly tasks. But why should this be the case? Leaving aside the problem of the validity of paying the performers of such jobs low wages, to hold that the Educated should not do jobs such as these is to hold that in a society of Educated people these jobs either no longer will need doing or else will go undone. Consider the characteristics of such labour as defined by Harris: it is "alienating, routine, dull, mindless and meaningless". If we consider sweeping the streets and cleaning the toilets, we can agree that these jobs are routine, dull and perhaps mindless in their performance. In themselves, these characteristics do not necessarily add up to a sufficient reason for not performing them. Are they meaningless? Surely there is meaning in cleaning the toilets - the meaning being the avoidance of the unpleasantness associated with not cleaning them.

A lot will depend here, of course, on whose toilet it is, the circumstances under which it gets dirty, the means by which the cleaner is selected, and the degree of exploitation or oppression which he or she suffers. Perhaps in a Marxist society there would be fewer toilets to clean, and perhaps people would be more willing to clean them themselves when they used them. This last point, however, simply emphasizes the fact that it cannot be the act of cleaning the toilet, sweeping the street, or whatever, which is the source of objections to the job. Here Harris gives the impression, however inadvertently, that it is proper for Educated people to object to certain types of labour. By doing so, he implies that a Marxist society would continue - and universalize - the snobbish aversion to nasty jobs exhibited by many educated people in capitalist society.

A more serious problem arises in Harris's discussion of the special expertise of teachers. On his analysis, the teacher possesses two types of expertise: content knowledge which, however commonplace it may be in society at large, usually is esoteric vis-à-vis the pupil; and process knowledge which

Harris describes as

... a body of expert and esoteric teaching knowledge which has been developed largely by educational psychologists over the last century and which teachers ... are introduced to as part of their pre-service training. (20)

This process knowledge can be divided into two kinds. The first

... is directed only at facilitating [the pupil's] learning of [content], and thus focuses on the particular problems of the pupil and the means by which the content can be most effectively transmitted. (21)

The second kind of process knowledge, on the other hand,

... is directed mainly toward establishing conducive conditions whereby the former type might be employed effectively. Included here would be motivation techniques, ensuring that pupils are not distracted, and even gaining and maintaining pupil attention. (22)

The second kind of process knowledge is taken to be obviously manipulative, and Harris rejects it as a legitimate part of teaching, defining a combination of content knowledge and the first kind of process knowledge together as constituting necessary and sufficient conditions for teaching. (23)

Consider the first form of process knowledge more closely. Harris acknowledges that many people

... would argue variously that this expert esoteric knowledge is nothing more than common sense dressed up in scientific jargon, that it does more harm than good, or that it is irrelevant in that 'teachers are born, not made'. (24)

Despite this, he tells us that we "must at least admit of its existence and of its place in the armoury of professional teachers". (25) Here we have another expression of a tendency to acknowledge a controversy and then to proceed as though that controversy did not exist. Harris in fact does more than admit the existence of this teaching process knowledge; he enshrines it in the society to be constructed after the overthrow of the capitalist system when

... teachers, as possessors of expert content knowledge along with expertise ... in transmitting this, but no longer serving capital, no longer performing the function of control and surveillance, and no longer bearing relations of political and ideological domination over pupils, can carry out their instruction function in a context devoid of the antagonisms accompanying class relationships - that is, in an Educative context and towards the Education of all... (26)

Misgivings about the validity of teaching process knowledge cannot be dismissed as readily as Harris would have us believe, however. As one source notes,

... there have been hundreds of studies comparing one general teaching method with another, and the overwhelming proportion of these studies ... show few if any differences [in success] among approaches. (27)

It is unlikely that "approaches" like these can be accepted as expert process knowledge. Harris, who has noted that under capitalism numerous institutions are

... instrumental in disguising what interests are being served ... [with the result that] the interests of capital become represented as the interests of all, and the service of capital becomes undertaken by ostensibly impartial bodies for ostensibly common ends. (28)

has failed to consider the possibility that the assumption of the validity of teaching process knowledge itself might be a disguise perpetrated, however unwittingly, by school personnel to further their own interests.

The preceding comments have focused primarily on specific aspects of Teachers and Classes. It also is worth considering, however, what the likely impact of the work as a whole would be on the student of education or the teacher-to-be. Many such people view the school systems of industrialized societies as quite unproblematical. Schools are seen simply as part of the given structure of the world, as necessary and obviously desirable institutions clearly pursuing the compatible best interests of children and society. True, some students are aware of unpleasant practices in some schools, perhaps as a result of their own experiences, but these practices often are seen as shortfalls from the intended, proper substance of schooling. Such undesirable practices within some schools may require changing, in the views of these students, but by and large the institution of school is seen as indispensable.

This is, of course, one instance which Marxist theorists can cite as evidence for the great success of the capitalist system in promulgating bourgeois ideology. Whatever the reasons for it, however, most tertiary teachers of critical courses in educational theory will have encountered the considerable acceptance and naiveté with which many students view schools. Teacher trainees, perhaps, are especially prone to this innocent approach to schooling. Such trainees are engaged in programmes purporting to teach them how to function as school personnel. They have an immediate practical interest in learning how schools operate and how they will be expected to operate within them. This sort of attitude, when brought into the training institution by the student, is not likely to be shaken unless challenged directly by those responsible for the training programme. Since many people do not readily engage in radical criticism of institutions which support them, it unfortunately is the case that many-training institutions do not provide such a challenge. (29) The result is that quite a few students complete their studies ignorant of alternative views which are systematically critical of the institution of schooling, of the role which schools can play in manipulating whole populations, and of the presumption of "niceness" under which schools operate.

Students such as these are likely to be somewhat shocked by reading a work such as Teachers and Classes. Many no doubt would dismiss the viewpoint expressed in the book as obviously false. Yet Harris has built his argument through the use of many examples of schooling practices which even those uncritically enamoured of the school can recognize as more-or-less frequent abuses of school power. Likewise, the biographical introduction which begins the book will provide a perspective with which many intending and practising teachers will be able to identify. By presenting situations which even uncritical advocates of current schooling can recognize as negative aspects of many schools as counter-educational institutions, Harris is likely to induce at least some students to look at schools with a more quizzical eye.

If students can be led to see the institution of the school, and not just the minutiae of what goes on within it, as a variable product of human policy, they will be in a position to query the worth of that policy. School itself must be made problematical in the mind of the student. In pursuing this goal, the smaller-scale problems found above in Teachers and Classes appear less

significant. What is needed, and what Harris provides, is a generally coherent and systematic alternative account of the school that can challenge the student - and readers generally - to reconsider a previously unthinking commitment to that institution. Once this challenge has been accepted by the reader, the way will be opened for a critical examination of the intricacies of Marxism and other analyses of schooling. Harris's close contact with schools has enabled him to address both practising and intending teachers in terms which should facilitate opening their thinking to significant ideas which many of them otherwise would be likely to dismiss as foolish.

Correspondence to: Joseph A. Diorio,
University of Otago,
Box 56, Dunedin,
NEW ZEALAND.

References

1. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982)
2. Equality, Liberty and Perfectionism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1979), p.13
3. Teachers and Classes, p.29
4. See Carchedi's long article "On the Economic Identification of the New Middle Class", Economy and Society, 4 (1975), pp. 1-86.
5. Teachers and Classes, p.29
6. ibid., pp. 29-30
7. ibid., p.23
8. ibid., p.24
9. The Division of Labour in Society, trans. by George Simpson, (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press of Glencoe, 1933), pp. 239-40.
10. "Education Unsuitable", Otago Daily Times, March 14, 1979.
11. "The New Defenders of Capitalism", Harvard Business Review, March-April, 1981, pp. 97-100.
12. Teachers and Classes, p.58
13. ibid., p.64
14. ibid., p.81
15. ibid., p.56
16. Allen Buchanan, "Exploitation, Alienation and Injustice", Canadian Journal of Philosophy, IX (March 1979), p.123.
17. "Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology", Canadian Journal of Philosophy, VIII (September 1978), p.425.
18. See also Nancy Holmstrom, "Exploitation", Canadian Journal of Philosophy, VII (June 1977), pp. 356-58.
19. Teachers and Classes, pp. 14-15
20. ibid., pp. 118-19
21. ibid., p. 119
22. ibid., p. 119
23. ibid., p. 122
24. ibid., p. 119
25. ibid., p.119
26. ibid., p.140
27. Bruce Joyce, Marsha Weil and Rhoada Wald, "The Training of Educators: A Structure for Pluralism", Teachers College Record, 73 (1972), p.373.
28. Teachers and Classes, p.103.
29. It has been argued that members of the education "establishment", including trainee teachers, share exaggeratedly conservative, institution supporting,

and hence uncritical values. See Harmon Zeigler and Wayne Peak, "The Political Functions of the Educational System", in Readings in the Theory of Educational Systems, edited by Earl Hopper (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1971), esp. pp. 233ff.