

Class theory, education and the challenge of postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism offers important theoretical insights into the social and educational worlds, and therefore warrants serious consideration. Yet, because of its spirited critique of marxism, the response of marxists to postmodernism has been dismissive. It is the opinion of this paper that rather than write off postmodernism, and the educational implications which flow from it, in peremptory fashion, marxists, together with those interested in class theory in general, would benefit from a serious engagement with this literature. This is the case even though, in overall terms, postmodernism is deeply theoretically flawed.

Postmodernism is now establishing itself as a major current within social theory internationally as it attracts support from a growing number of social scientists. Although coming to terms with the elusive nature of postmodernism is not easy - there is also substantial overlap with poststructuralism to contend with - its most distinctive features are identifiable and are, by now, relatively well known. The thrust of the postmodernist case is to undermine the claims of conventional social science by means of a direct attack on the basic principles of the Enlightenment. Thus, notions about universal reason, the autonomy of the individual subject, totality and historical progress are all rejected as metanarratives which disqualify other forms of knowledge. The alternative to modernism is seen to lie in a perspective that emphasises particularity, celebrates difference and promotes relativism.

In more specific terms, the influence of postmodernism on the theoretical literature on education has also been growing. It is the view of Green (1994:67), for example, that debates in the sociology of education have assumed an increasingly postmodern tone. Within comparative education, Paulston and Liebman (1994: 216) have been urging their colleagues to move towards a postmodernist integration, while one area that already draws comprehensively on postmodernism is feminist writing on education. Indeed, according to Nicholson (1990), the status of postmodernism is exceptionally high within feminist scholarship as a whole.

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The postmodernist critique

The starting point of all postmodernist analyses of marxism is the identification of marxism as a metanarrative which makes totalising and essentialist claims about the world, i.e. asserting an exclusive grasp of the true essence of modern reality. Indeed, Lyotard (1984: XXIV) defines postmodernism as incredulity to "metanarratives". Postmodernists like Foucault (1980), for example, also object to metanarratives because of the power relations inherent in them - they are seen to conceal the investment in a particular view of the world of those who promote them. They oppose difference and suppress otherness, but fortunately, argues Foucault (1980: 81), these "totalitarian theories" are now proving vulnerable to the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges". More specifically, postmodernists object to marxism because of its universalising account of history based around class struggle. In their view, the privileged status attached to social class and the vanguardist role attributed to the Proletariat result in a total neglect of other types of causation and the delegitimation of other forms of oppression. Thus Foucault (1979) rejects the concept of class because of marxism's dualistic structure of a ruling class and subordinate (working) class. In contrast to an overarching class struggle, he stresses the importance of localised or specific conflicts. This is consistent with his definition of power which, potentially, is present everywhere. Postmodernists are also deeply distrustful of the political implications of marxism. For Lyotard (1984), for example, they lead inevitably to the Gulag.

The case against marxism is also closely linked to the claims of postmodernists that the world has entered a new era. As a result of a techno-scientific information revolution industrial capitalism, based on production, is viewed as having been supplanted by consumptionism (Bauman, 1992). In fact, Lyotard (1984) attributed the demise of modernity to computerisation. Within the world of consumptionism, designer-labelled commodities acquire a much desired sign value (Baudrillard, 1981). The advent of the information revolution is also seen to have resulted in accelerated internationalisation - particularly economic globalisation. This has, in turn, not only reduced the influence of the local market but also eroded the power of the nation-state. Under these postmodern conditions, it is argued, the working class has lost any significance which it might have held. For Touraine (1981) the necessary response to those changed circumstances is the promotion of a post-materialist politics of new social movements.

The abandonment of class, the assertion of other social antagonisms and the argument that we live in a fundamentally different epoch are the hallmarks also of post-marxist theory. Those most responsible for staking out this theoretical terrain - Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) - also reject the material world and focus their attention firmly on ideas and diverse discourses. They also proclaim a major interest in advancing our understanding of radical democracy because of the glaring absence of interest in representative democracy within classical marxism. Other examples of post-marxist thinking include the work of Bowles and Gintis (1986) who have in the past been closely identified with the development of a neomarxist theory of education. Indeed, their *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), in which they introduced the concept of a correspondence between capitalism and education, had an enormous influence on educational theory. More recently, the aim of Bowles and Gintis has been to promote a post-marxist radical democracy based on political discourse. Like "guns and money", they argue, discourse is a "social force with a character of its own" (1986: 155).

Postmodernism and education

Before examining postmodernist analyses of marxist/neo-marxist views of education, it is necessary to identify the core features of postmodernism's general view of education. This is by no means an easy task given the absence of any sustained interest in education on the part of leading postmodernist theorists. However, others have sought to draw out the significance for education of various postmodernist ideas. Probably, the greatest interest has been displayed in the writings of

Foucault. For example, the contributors to Ball (1990) seek to explain the distribution of power within education in terms of a Foucaultian characterisation of power relations which involve techniques of discipline and surveillance. The focus is on the micro-level as a site of the political, and power is seen to be most effectively exercised when it is non-coercive and enjoys legitimacy.

The influence of the information revolution and changes in the production of knowledge, as articulated by Lyotard, are also major concerns of the emerging educational literature. Lyotard (1984) had claimed that skill training had become more important than the socialisation and social selection capacities of education. Consequently, we find Hinkson (1991, 46) arguing that knowledge is being produced to be sold, has lost its use-value, and has become the "principal force of production". The assertions of Lyotard and Foucault - the latter also argued that no one group ever controls the process of schooling (Roth, 1992: 690) - indirectly challenge the correspondence thesis of Bowles and Gintis and later examples of what became known as social reproduction theory: namely the principal function of education is to reproduce class relations.

More recently, Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) have drawn freely on postmodernist ideas to criticise the absence of cultural and subjective elements in reproduction theory. Likewise, feminists have utilised postmodernist writings to refute all forms of marxist analysis. According to Armaline, Farber and Nelson-Rowe (1994: 199), much feminist scholarship now focuses on the idea that the 'master narratives' of class theory obscure the lives and histories of "others". In this vein, Ellsworth (1989) and Lather (1991) accuse marxism of being ensnared in sexist assumptions.

What also has a bearing on the debate on marxism and education are postmodernist conceptualisations of the political and pedagogical roles of intellectuals. The work of Foucault has been central in this regard for it was he who rejected the notion of the universal left intellectual constituting a self-appointed revolutionary vanguard as an idea "transposed from a faded marxism" (1979, 12). The only feasible option for critical intellectuals is to carry on working as "specific intellectuals" in a localised field of activity without any form of "overweening intellectual presumption" (Norris, 1990: 29).

The relevance of the postmodernist case

The two major theoretical contributions of the postmodernist critique relate to the questions of science and of power. Postmodernists are right to be critical of those who seek to make a science out of marxism and who dogmatically assert a monopoly on truth on its behalf. The teleological structure of marxism, especially the singular attention given to the working class as the revolutionary subject and to those intellectuals who claim to speak in its name, is highly problematic. The issue of class is also closely related to that of power, which, as postmodernists have underlined, is far more ambiguous than marxists have assumed. Postmodernists have correctly stressed the authenticity of multiple forms of power relations. Consequently, counter-hegemonic struggles such as anti-racism, anti-sexism, sexual liberation and so forth, should neither be viewed as epiphenomena nor as reducible to the class struggle. Postmodernism recognises that radical social movements cannot be assimilated to one another without, as Rosenthal (1992: 95) puts it, "smothering and denying their differences and uniqueness". To take one of these examples a stage further, theorisations which reduce racial oppression to a functional need of capitalism fail to understand the specificity of racial oppression. And they are unable to grasp the extent to which racially-oppressed people usually view their environment through the prism of racial rather than class consciousness.

It is also the case that micro-physical analyses of power and an emphasis on subjectivity and human agency offer useful correctives to those reductionist and instrumentalist positions which define the social world exclusively in terms of the structural tendencies of the capitalist mode of production and conceive of the state as a unified purposeful entity at the disposal of the ruling class. What is more, it is the one-sidedness that orthodox marxism attaches to economic forces which has

prevented the development of political strategies which give due recognition to democratic principles. As for postmodernism's characterisation of a new epoch, internationalisation is a dominant trend which is not only undermining state sovereignty, but is de-territorialising class structures. As a consequence of accelerated capital flight, factory closings and de-industrialisation in the advanced economies, the traditional working class is declining in absolute numbers and the strength of organised labour is clearly much diminished (McGuire & McQuarie, 1994: 25).

As far as the postmodernist-based critique of neo-marxist theories of education is concerned, it is the questioning of the thesis that education can be defined primarily in terms of the reproductive requirements of capitalism that is useful. Education is very much an arena of diverse conflicts. Furthermore, postmodernism alerts us to the importance of the cultural context of education and to the relationships between education, knowledge-production and power.

To sum up, postmodernism at its best offers a genuinely radical intellectual counterweight to the most theoretically conservative aspects of marxism and social reproduction theory. As David Harvey (1989: 353) has written:

A mode of thought that is anti-authoritarian and iconoclastic ... that celebrates difference, decentralization and democratisation of taste, as well as the power of imagination over materiality, has to have a radical cutting edge even when indiscriminately used.

At the same time, however, there is a distinctively negative theoretical cast to the postmodernist critique which warrants trenchant criticism. In addition, the political implications which flow from postmodernist conceptions of social change are positively injurious and also need to be exposed.

The critique of postmodernism

While postmodernism is right to repudiate the notion of a dichotomy between truth and ideology, many postmodernists situate themselves at the most extreme end of epistemological analysis and reject all validity claims. Even the more restrained practitioners regard all knowledge as contextual. For Craib (1992: 249) the uncompromising assertion that because knowledge is not absolute there is no knowledge only interpretation, is one of the most dangerous trends in contemporary social theory. The social construction view of knowledge is also self-refuting. All knowledge has a constructive dimension, but if all knowledge, (as postmodernists claim,) is simply a construction of particular groups and there are no criteria for judging among the knowledge claims of particular groups, then there can be no reason for assessing the postmodern view of knowledge as superior to any alternative view (Bailin, 1992: 65). Pauline Rosenau (1992: 168) has extended this criticism.

She questions the appropriateness of postmodernism for social theory and social science given its emergence within the humanities and its assertion that there is no distinction between science and literature. In her view:

Modern time, space and history can be dispensed within post-modern literature, and the results are entertaining. But this is not always the case in the social sciences. The social sciences often enough confront problems that do not permit a retreat into agnosticism, nihilism, linguistic relativism or a stance holding human communication impossible.

Although it would be quite wrong to characterise postmodernism as conservative, the political ramifications of postmodernist theories are far from radical. Simons and Billig (1994: 6), for example have argued convincingly that by treating all definitions of reality as conjecture, the "genie of critique" has been allowed to escape its bottle and is now "running rampant without political direction" within postmodernism. In this regard, the postmodernist theory of power has also to be taken to task. If power has no focal point, as Foucault (1980) claims, and is ubiquitous and fragmented then this conception lacks explanatory force. Foucault has been rightly reproved for under-emphasising the 'macro' features of power. For example, he was so busy deconstructing the state as a meaningful object of analysis that he seriously understated the capacity of state power as

reflected in oppressive laws, the monopoly over the use of physical violence and the employment of surveillance techniques (Layder, 1994: 108). Foucault's difficulties also extend to his notion of resistance. According to Foucault, the existence of power relations presupposes forms of resistance, but he does not say more than this. The concept of resistance remains undeveloped (Sarup, 1987: 90). Similar criticisms have been voiced against Lyotard. For advocating the abandonment of human emancipation in favour of "activating the differences", he is seen as representing the depoliticisation of resistance (Callinicos, 1990: 114).

Given this crippling political aspect, it is surprising that so many feminists and anti-racists have endorsed postmodernist strategies. Their obvious attraction to postmodernism lies in its affirmation of 'new social movements' and marginalised 'Others'. In the case of feminists postmodernist ideas have been useful also in deconstructing sexist ideologies. Yet, as Fraser and Nicholson (1990: 26) have argued, the meagre critical resources provided by postmodernism (for they do not include social-theoretical and empirical analyses of macrostructures and institutions) simply do not allow a phenomenon as pervasive and multifaceted as male dominance to be adequately understood. The rejection by postmodernists of concepts of equality and of emancipatory strategies undermines any mobilising projects amongst women. As Lovibond (1990: 172) asks: "if there can be no systematic approach to questions of wealth and power, how can there be any effective challenge to a social order which distributes its benefits and burdens in a systematically unequal way between the sexes?"

This kind of criticism has also been directed against attempts to apply postmodernist approaches to the analysis of racism. In the opinion of the editors of *The Black Scholars* (1993, 23: 48), for example, eloquent decontextualised discussions about racial identity are unhelpful in the struggle for racial equality in the United States. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (1993: 52) asks African Americans how they can "ground a politics in such a slippery world view?" It is possible, also, to learn a great deal about the inherent political limitations built into postmodernist thinking by evaluating the conception of apartheid articulated by Jacques Derrida (translated in *Critical Inquiry*, 1985). His characterisation of white domination is utterly incomprehensible because he is fixated on the word apartheid itself and his overriding concern is to deconstruct it. Russell Berman (1990: 13) is worth repeating at length on Derrida's approach:

By isolating being apart in some sort of essence of hypostasis, the word corrupts it into a quasi-ontological segregation. The real practices of apartheid are then, apparently, not the result of interest or ideology, but the consequences of a linguistic form, in particular the capacity for abstraction in ... Western language. In other words, it is not the case that 'apartheid' is a name given to a set of social practices that ensure social hierarchy, exploitation, and racial separation. Instead, Derrida gets it backwards: the linguistic practice of forming terms that indicate abstract essences, exemplified by 'apartheid' (but presumably also by 'emancipation', 'freedom', or 'equality') generates the social practice.

The failure of postmodernists to give sufficient weight to questions of oppression and exploitation is even more pronounced with regard to social class since they refuse to acknowledge its existence in the post-modern world. Yet, notwithstanding the impressive changes in the world economy, it is still the search for profit which remains the basis of the global economic system. What is more, in the industrialised countries, the gap between rich and poor has actually widened in recent years. As the highly influential, pro-business, *The Economist* (5 November 1994) concedes, it is no coincidence that the biggest increases in income inequalities have occurred in economies such as those of the United States, Britain and New Zealand. These are the territories wherein market-driven policies have been pursued the most zealously to the point where, in Britain for example, the wealthiest ten percent of the population now owns fifty three percent of total wealth. On the other hand, the poorest twenty percent of households share a mere four percent of that country's total net income. Meanwhile, in the United States, the richest half a percent of Americans control over thirty percent of total wealth. This is a situation which, far from suggesting the disappearance of class, points instead to its continued significance (McGuire and McQuarie, 1994: 25).

For all their declared interest in economic globalism, postmodernists have, in practice, paid scant attention to economic forces and how these forces constrain our freedom. They are simply unable to grasp the magnitude of the power wielded by corporate interests. As for the emergence of economic liberalism, the theorists of postmodernism have not recognised - or ignored the fact - that policies adopted to cut taxes, increase wage differentials, dismantle the welfare state and generally redistribute wealth to the already affluent are in some way class-driven. Some theorists, (Lyotard stands out in this regard) seem incapable of penetrating the social world because their conception of a new society, dominated by technical knowledge workers, is hopelessly deterministic. It is a conception which appears to have been derived, at least in part, from Daniel Bell's (1974) flawed cold war classic about the rise of a technical-professional elite. It was Bell (1988) who also proclaimed the end of history, by which he meant the end of ideology and the elimination of classes.

At root, the failure of postmodernists to confront the inequalities of contemporary capitalist society is due in no small measure to a crudely culturalist view of politics to which reference has already been made. Interestingly, the politics of postmodernism with its focus on 'difference' and 'identity', has many similarities with the pluralist theories of mainstream political science. For pluralists, power is radically dispersed throughout society so therefore there is no political elite or ruling class, only a multiplicity of groups all enjoying a little power. However, by denying the existence of a directing centre, political pluralism robs "radical politics of its object" (Walzer, 1986: 54).

Postmodernism and the 'masses'

In accounting for the political stance of postmodernism, attention needs to be directed to the reaction of certain French intellectuals to 'May 1968'. During this political upheaval in Paris, the French Communist Party was seen to have betrayed its revolutionary principles by divorcing itself from the street protests mounted by students and workers. Disillusioned, these intellectuals attached the blame for the failure of the May 1968 struggle not only to the party's thoroughly Stalinist orientation but to marxism per se. The outcomes were antisocialist, a refocusing of attention on the discursive plane and an announcement that heralded the death of the traditional intellectual. This personage, as noted previously, would be replaced by one of the "specific intellectuals" whose activities would be restricted to the local level. This theoretical shift, although promoted as an assault on universalism and vanguardism, has subsequently been interpreted as an implicit encouragement of academicisation and depoliticisation. It is the opinion of Christopher Norris (1990: 44), for example, that postmodernist theory has served as a pretext for "avoiding any serious engagement with real world historical events".

The retreat from pressing political questions is exemplified by postmodernist approaches to the working class. The clue to the social distancing of middle class intellectuals from this class is provided by their ultra-jargonistic and pretentious vocabulary. What matters is not the persuasiveness of an argument but its presentation. Thus, Carlo Mongardini (1992: 65) has catalogued the "stylistic pedantry" of Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard, while Barbara Epstein (1991: 29) has concluded that:

... too often the obscurity of poststructural/ postmodern language appears to be valued precisely for its incomprehensibility, for its ability to create a self-contained circle of insiders.

Clearly, the construction of hierarchical language games is meant to render dialogue with the popular classes impossible. In other words, what "Not speaking for the masses" means in practice is "Not speaking with the masses". Stuart Hall (quoted in Best & Kellner, 1992: 294) goes further, for what is particularly objectionable about Baudrillard and other postmodern theorists to him is their cynical manipulation of the 'masses' in order to

underpin their own intellectual positions. Now that intellectuals have renounced critical thought, they feel no inhibition in renouncing it on behalf of the masses -whose destinies they have only shared abstractly.

Education, class and the problems of postmodernism

Inevitably, the peculiarities and theoretical errors of postmodernists present fundamental problems for their understanding of the role of education. Traditionally, educational institutions offer decidedly unequal educational opportunities and, despite postmodernist claims of epochal change, they continue to do so. Indeed, educational inequalities accelerated during the 1980s as New Right reforms made their presence felt within the educational arena. However, because of postmodernism's overriding emphasis on metaphysics, micro-analysis and localised interests, it continually fails to comprehend the socio-political dimension of educational developments. Consequently, class-related issues involving access to education, the allocative role of education and the learning process itself are glossed over. As for interpreting the struggles waged over education or conceptualising the relationship between the education system and the state, an insipid pluralist-type approach has proved to be hopelessly inadequate for these tasks.

The limitations of the postmodernist approach to education is exemplified, in particular, by the works of Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) and Giroux (1991 & 1992), which have increasingly espoused a postmodernist perspective. However, despite the grandiose claims which they make on behalf of postmodernist ideas, they display little interest in tackling the difficult educational questions of the day and, according to Andy Green (1994: 75), do "little more than fashion model the latest theoretical costumes". The principal feature of the writing of Giroux, in particular, is its impenetrable prose which is reminiscent of Derrida and others. As Erica McWilliam (1993: 201) has observed, Giroux's offerings are legendary in achieving the status of unreadability. She offers a passage from Giroux (1991: 5) as an example.

Simply put, in some instances theory directly informs practice, while in others practice restructures theory as a primary force for change, and in some cases theory ... provides the refuge to think beyond current forms of practice so as to envisage that which is 'not yet'. Privileging practice without due consideration of the complex interactions that mark the totality of theory - practice and language - meaning relationships is not simply reductionist but also a form of theoretical tyranny. Theory, in this sense, becomes a form of practice that ignores the political value of 'theoretical discourse' within a specific historical conjuncture, that is, ... (etc.)

As McWilliam (ibid.) concludes, it is definitely *not* as Giroux would have it, "simply put". At the same time, Giroux (1991) has made much of the obligation to attend to the 'voices' of marginalised Others. Yet, as Jean Anyon (1994, 127) has pointed out, Giroux's theorising is largely inaccessible to those "Others whose freedom it argues for". Aronowitz and Giroux proclaim the necessity to effect transformation, but it is highly questionable that any change can result from the deployment of what they ostentatiously label "the border pedagogy of post-modern resistance".

Postmodernism and post-Fordism

Any critique of postmodernism is incomplete without some discussion of post-Fordism. This is a variant of postmodernism but it is far less narrow in its conceptual range and more focused on questions of accumulation and class. Like postmodernism, post-Fordism is a theory of transition and an attempt to comprehend change in the contemporary world by going beyond marxism. Ritzer (1992: 313-314) has characterised Fordism (devised by Henry Ford) as a system of mass production, inflexible technologies, standardised work routines, unionisation and collective bargaining. The decline of Fordism (in the 1970s) and the rise of the post-Fordist period is seen as leading to more flexible production systems based on new technologies. This in turn transforms the labour process and stimulates the demand for flexibly specialised workers. It also produces greater social

differentiation and new patterns of consumption as well as massive cultural and lifestyle changes. Expanding on the question of social differentiation, post-Fordism posits a shrinking of the working class, a reduction in class practices and displacement of class consciousness. Post-Fordists also claim that the middle class is growing, while simultaneously, a vast underclass of low income communities are emerging.

From a critical angle, while it is the case that post-Fordism offers a more informed interpretation of social change than postmodernism, there is, nevertheless, a substantial overlap between the two perspectives. Post-Fordism also overstates the contrasts between two 'eras', for many features of so-called Fordist production - such as inflexible work routines and product homogenisation - persist today. In this connection Ash Amin (1994: 3) has referred to those commentators who call into question the appropriateness of the term "post-Fordism" and also criticise the idea of absolute turning points, preferring instead a more evolutionary interpretation of change which stresses a mixture of continuity and change.

Turning to post-Fordist views of class, what is ... valuable is a conceptualisation of a middle class fraction which exerts increasing influence through the possession of cultural capital in an age when mental labour has become more central to production. At the same time the power of this class fraction tends to be overestimated for it is a fraction which neither owns nor controls the production process (Buhle, 1989: 66). Michael Rustin (1989) also views the post-Fordist model of class as only partial because it seeks to push the working class to the margins of history. However, although the working class has lost a great deal of its capacity to generate solidarity it is far from obsolete. After all, it was the necessity to break the organised power of labour which precipitated the anti-statist projects launched by Thatcher and Reagan. It is Rustin's (1989: 69) opinion also, that the position of the underclass is similarly under-theorised and underweighted in the post-Fordist paradigm. As to post-Fordist policies helping to solve problems associated with capitalism, Ritzer (1992: 315) is one commentator who is highly sceptical. Quoting from Levidow, he describes post-Fordist workers as relentlessly pressurised to increase their productivity often in return for lower real wages. Thus it may be that post-Fordism is actually a more insidious phase of exploitation.

With the exception of two interesting studies by Bagguley (1991) and Brown and Lauder (1992) the post-Fordist literature on education is slight and fragmentary. There is a clearly articulated central argument, however, which is that post-Fordist economies require educational programmes that will provide multi-skilled and socially aware workers. The demands of 'flexible specialisation' require a breaking down of the dichotomy between academic and vocational forms of education and the development of an integrated curriculum for all students. This is seen as a positive trend and this projected curriculum is indeed much more progressive than the narrowly conceived vocational courses favoured by employer groups. What seems to have escaped the attention of post-Fordist theorists, however, is the danger that any post-Fordist reorganisation of the economy will likely benefit only the most skilled sector of the workforce. From this it follows that an integrated curriculum could form the basis of a new kind of educational differentiation which in turn would reinforce a new social division. In short, post-Fordist analyses have yet to identify the class implications which flow from potential post-Fordist educational reforms.

Contemporary class theory and marxism

In contemporary society, capitalism survives as a massive (totalising) force, the distribution of wealth remains grossly unequal, economic misery still occurs on an enormous scale and the abuse of power and privilege continues unabated. In other words, evidence of class is everywhere. As a consequence, postmodernism's rejection of class can be viewed as theoretically myopic and politically deplorable. It is clear also that marxist conceptions of class are far from having run their course. Marx's huge intellectual contribution is to have revealed the inner workings of capitalist development and marxist theoretical tools remain indispensable to the analysis of late twentieth

century capitalism. Nevertheless, the postmodernist critique cannot be easily discounted and marxists will do well to absorb certain lessons from postmodernism.

Marxism's immediate need, especially in the light of the collapse of authoritarian communism in Eastern Europe, is to reposition itself away from Bolshevism. The coupling of Marxism and Leninism has resulted in a significant degeneration of the corpus of marxist ideas because Leninism is inherently elitist and autocratic. Eastern Europe has not provided fertile ground for the advancement of theories of social class in the contemporary world and in order to restore its intellectual credentials marxism must quickly extricate itself.

Other troubling questions about the way in which marxists view social class which need to be addressed relate to the inflated importance attached to class relative to other groups and to the narrowness of their conceptual focus. Marxists have no choice but to come to terms with non-class patterns of structural social inequality, and to transcend their traditional preoccupation with the conflict between capital and labour at the point of production, for this is not the only class-determining social and historical force. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that Marx not only produced stark economic texts such as *Capital*, but also a political-historical work on class such as the *Eighteenth Brumaire* which is full of richness and subtlety (Hunt, 1992: 51). What is also significant about the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is that it neither claims that the working class is the subject of history nor argues for the inevitability of socialism.

Another critical area which marxists have failed to come to terms with is the expanding middle class. This is because the very presence of a class in the middle is deeply uncomfortable to ('two-class') marxist fundamentalists who also refuse to accept that class is not their sole property. Here, the theorisings of Weber and Bourdieu spring to mind. Weber's definition of class, as a reflection of differing "life chances" within the market, actually lends itself more readily to the analysis of a diverse middle class and relationships with other classes. The multidimensionality of Weber's class schema has been sufficiently attractive to influence neo-marxists, such as Erik Olin Wright, who have been concerned to explain the particular nature of the middle class from the point of view of a theory of exploitation which is not based on alienable productive assets. Thus, Wright (1993) now posits the view that the professional-technical middle class, like the working class, is exploited by capitalism, but, it - by virtue of its possession of scarce skills - in turn engages in the exploitation of the working class.

Like Wright, the focus of Bourdieu (1976; 1977) is on the cultural component of class and his well-known concept of cultural capital plays the central role in his theory of class (re)production. What makes this concept particularly relevant to this paper is that for Bourdieu, class is primarily reinforced through education. Clearly, this is an issue which requires attention, but it is first of all necessary to sum up both the postmodernist and marxist contributions to the study of the relationship between social class and education.

Class and education: Where to now?

Since it is unquestionably the case that education continues to be organised along class lines and given that the resurgence of economic liberalism is accentuating this differentiation, then the exclusion of class from postmodernist discourses is lamentable. This chronic failure of post modernism, however, does not absolve marxist analyses of their theoretical errors.

Within the marxist/neo-marxist school of educational scholarship, the danger of class reductionism, however, has long been recognised. Over a decade ago, a backlash began against what was seen as the determinism and pessimism of social reproduction theory, and so-called resistance theory was born. It was meant to re-affirm human agency and the emancipatory spirit but did little more than glorify acts of disobedience amongst students. Meanwhile, other theorists were embracing the concept of relative autonomy only to abandon it once its inherent functionalism became apparent. Subsequently, those most determined to escape the label of vulgar materialist

struck out either in a post modernist (like Aronowitz and Giroux) or 'radical democratic' direction (like Bowles and Gintis). Unlike the post modernists, the radical democrats do not reject class out of hand, but nor, for that matter, is class particularly visible within their writings.

Unfortunately, those who have remained orthodox in outlook and loyal to social reproduction theory, inevitably fail to realise that although society is capitalist, the schools themselves do not reproduce capitalist relations of production. This takes place beyond the schools. What schools do reproduce are social hierarchies and the social division of labour from which classes later emerge. What is significant about schools in advanced capitalist societies is that they are not dissimilar from those schools which used to operate in the then post-capitalist countries of Eastern Europe. Both systems are/were primarily in the business of legitimating mental labour and disqualifying manual labour. The really interesting question is whether a social division of labour reproduced through education acts as a springboard for the formation of classes which, although not based on relations of production, are nevertheless real.

This seems an appropriate point at which to resume the discussion on Bourdieu since he not only defines class culturally but claims that it is (re)produced educationally. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) it is the role of education to reward the cultural attributes possessed by the dominant class through the issue of formal qualifications. Unfortunately, despite the valuable addition of the concept of cultural capital to class theory, Bourdieu's class project is not without major shortcomings. Michael Apple (1992; 1993), who has noted similarities between the work of Bourdieu and that of Basil Bernstein on linguistic codes, is critical of both theorists. Specifically, Apple (1993: 324) suggests that they are far from clear about how class is constituted, what actually counts as class and how class relations are mobilised. It is also necessary to note that Bourdieu is far too indifferent to economic and political factors and holds to a rather weak conception of struggle between those possessing/not possessing cultural capital. Consequently, Bourdieu might profitably draw on the Weberian-derived notion of skill-exploitation as a way of strengthening his model of class. The direct connection with education can also be retained since it is educational competencies which are instrumental in the development and validation of 'skill'.

In conclusion, the point is that although the model of cultural capital is incomplete and neo-weberian theories have yet to be fully operationalised - at least in respect of education - it is feasible that within capitalist societies, different (loosely-defined) classes exist alongside marxist categories and all are engaged in conflicts which cut across one another. If it can be established categorically that class comes in multiple forms, then marxism will be compelled to accept a more modest theoretical role within the realm of class analysis. At the same time, as long as capitalism endures, a self-reflective and dynamic marxist scholarship will always remain critical to the study of class.

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