SOCIETY, STATE AND SCHOOLING
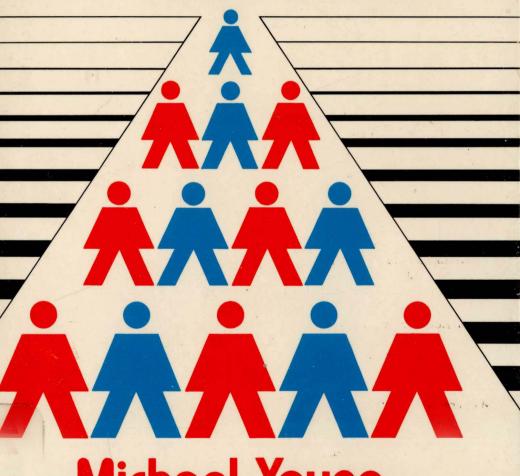
Michael Young and Geoff Whitty

SOCIETY, STATE AND SCHOOLING

Readings on the Possibilities for Radical Education

**Edited and introduced by
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Introduction: Perspectives on Education and Society

Michael Young and Geoff Whitty

One of the most striking features of the world of
education in the 1970s, compared with that of only ten
years ago, is the sudden disappearance of the overwhelm-
ing assumption that schooling is a 'good thing'. Even
more striking is the way in which many of those who
consider themselves to be on the Left in politics have
begun to take seriously - in larger numbers than at any
time since the 1870 Education Act - the suggestion that
compulsory schooling for all children may not be a 'good
thing', and indeed may be counter-productive for the
realization of their political ideals. A hundred years
ago there were substantial doubts amongst those on the
Right about the wisdom of compulsory education, (on the
ground that too much knowledge might breed revolution),
but most of these doubts were soon allayed by the recog-
nition of the role schooling could play in 'gentling the
masses'. In other words, the Right were rather quicker
than the Left in realizing that the so-called 'education'
which was granted to the working classes could be as
much a process of domestication as of liberation. For
many years the reformist wing in British politics,
whether liberal, socialist or even Marxist in inclina-
tion, has tended to blur any distinctions between
education and schooling, and treat the extension of com-
pulsory state education as unambiguously offering the
potential for a just society.

The prevailing faith in the school system amongst
many who would regard themselves as radicals, resulted
partly from a failure to analyse critically the concepts
of 'education' and 'society' with which they were oper-
ating. In a context where there was so much obviously
wrong with the educational system in terms of its un-
fairness to working-class children, there was little

incentive to look beyond the reform of its surface
features for a solution. Thus policy-makers - partic-
ularly those in Labour administrations - and their
academic advisers, have been obsessed during the past
thirty years or so with the problem of working-class
failure at school. Deficiencies in the system of educa-
tion have been seen to lie in its failure to provide
'equality of opportunity' and sufficient paths to upward
social mobility. When, during the fifties and sixties,
a whole variety of statistical studies made it clear
that, in this respect, the 1944 Education Act was not
working as 'fairly' as had been hoped, their main con-
cern was (not unnaturally) to discover ways of enabling
more working-class children to succeed at school, i.e.
to obtain access to grammar school-type education,
institutions of higher education and ultimately high-
status occupations.

The 'functional' necessity of a society stratified
into occupations of different status and rewards was a
subject of considerable debate by sociological
'theorists' in the 1960s, though these debates were
firmly restricted to a highly general and abstract con-
ception of theory. Sociologists of education remained
content to accept the necessity of a hierarchy of occ-
upations, and to concentrate on questions about the ex-
tent of social mobility within such stratified societies.
The more conservative features of functional analysis
were alleviated by the conscience of Fabian socialism,
but essentially the quest for 'equality of educational
opportunity' seemed designed not to create a more egal-
itarian society, merely to facilitate the 'rise of the
meritocracy'. This 'social democratic' view of equality
conceived of the possibility of replacing a society in
which parental occupation played a dominant part in a
child's educational or occupational destiny, with one
in which such destinies were decided on some idea of
individual merit and talent. Halsey (1975), a sociolo-
gist most of whose work has been concerned with iden-
tifying and overcoming inequalities, put it this way:

> Institutions of scholarly elitism can only be recon-
> ciled to an egalitarian age if teachers and students
> enter exclusively on the test of academic merit ...
> selection of the elite would ... be substantively as
> well as formally open to all the classes, all the
> races and all the sexes.

It is not, in this view, a question of abolishing classes,
but of making access to classes more genuinely 'open' to
each generation of competitors.

Few social scientists seem to have considered the suggestion that prevailing definitions of 'merit' were sufficiently class-biased to ensure that 'equality of opportunity' would remain a sham, while even fewer were prepared to entertain any more radical concept of equality. Existing definitions of education were treated equally uncritically - it was both a 'good' in itself, and a means towards that other unquestioned 'good', social mobility. The predominantly Fabian outlook of the researchers found a receptive audience amongst politicians concerned to feed our ailing economy with more skilled manpower. Thus, the primary obsession of educational policy for over twenty years was with finding ways of reorganizing the system in such a way as to provide access and opportunity for upward social mobility for those denied it hitherto. Though it was never expressed as crudely as by the American educationists described by Callahan (1962), talent, from the Crowther Report of 1959 onwards, was viewed as an untapped natural resource to be exploited and converted into a productive force of skilled labour. Social justice and economic growth were seen as inseparable, and education was regarded, by sociologists and politicians alike, as the major route to personal and national salvation.

It nevertheless became increasingly clear that the number of upwardly mobile working-class children remained small, and that the educational success rates of working-class children were not rising significantly. Beginning with Early Leaving (C.A.C.E.,1954), report after report documented the failure of educational reforms to have more than a marginal effect on the distribution of educational success between different social class groups. Not surprisingly, sociologists focused their attention on social class, and it became almost the hallmark of sociology of education in both teaching and research, that social class was treated as the crucial explanatory category. However, class was not seen as a relation, pointing to conflicts and contradictions between classes, which might be expressed, in the context of education, in the varieties of resistance to school by working-class children (non-cooperation, truancy and destruction of material goods). Certainly 'low' social class was rarely treated as a source of desirable cultural identity. Rather, class was seen as a position on a hierarchical scale of attributes, measured in terms of parental occupation, usually simplified into a distinction between manual and non-manual work. The researchers then set out to show which measurable attributes of those lowest on the scale, the children of unskilled manual workers, had a 'detrimental' effect on school

performance. The problem became to identify correla-
tions between cultural features of working-class life
and failure at school - factors which then became
'deficiencies' for which educational policy-makers
attempted to devise programmes of compensation. Nursery
education, language enrichment programmes, comprehensive
schooling, ROSLA and non-streaming can all be seen as
policies which attempt to remedy deficiencies in home
background by exposing children to more education and
more 'desirable' influences. The organizational struc-
ture of education has been changed in successive attempts
to provide more people with the education which reform-
ist researchers and politicians regarded as, without
question, a 'good thing'. The weakness of this position
has only slowly become apparent as one organizational
innovation, along with its inevitable sloganizing, has
swiftly followed another. Neither the American exper-
ience, nor our own, has so far suggested that any of
these innovations have made much impact on the figures
which relate school achievement to social class back-
ground. The correlations have remained remarkably
consistent over time.

The failures of these policies have provided a golden
opportunity for the political Right to return to their
beloved themes of elitism, standards and tradition. In
the USA, the crude and ethnocentric explanations of the
failure of educational reform expressed in the work of
Jensen, Herrnstein and Shockley (see Kamin, 1974), and
paralleled to some extent in Eysenck's work here, have
generated renewed support for racist educational poli-
cies. Of more significance in this country has been
the call for a return to traditional standards of moral-
ity and excellence, an emphasis on didactic teaching
and public accountability of schools and the preserva-
tion of selective and independent schools. This view
is best articulated in the Black Paper critiques of con-
temporary educational trends (e.g. Cox and Dyson, 1971).
These arguments are presented, plausibly enough, not as
the protecting of the interests of the few (which they
are), but as the only basis of a just society for all.
Their appeal has a far deeper significance than as an
expression of the political rhetoric of the far-Right
which has been largely missed by those unable to stand
outside the increasingly unreal liberal consensus that
characterizes most academic theorizing about education.
The plausibility of the 'return to old standards' is
easy enough for educational 'theorists' to dismiss with
their well intentioned progressiveness. But to teachers
and parents confronted with little understood 'new
methods' and secondary reorganization, often imposed

without their active cooperation, and without the re-
sources that might make the new arrangements viable,
such pleas have the merit of appearing to offer a solu-
tion to the gradual breakdown of what they had generally
recognized school to be about. Yet, what is surprising,
in a way that points to the failure of the Left to
develop any coherent critique of education in contemp-
orary capitalist society, is that a number of these
views are espoused and defended by those with radically
different political commitments. Even for the Marxists
of the British Communist Party the problem, as with
Halsey's 'egalitarian elitism', is one of access, not
ideology. The problem of class in British education is
for them that working-class children are denied what
'our best schools offer'. In other words, like the
'social democratic' ideology that goes back to Tawney,
class injustice is seen purely in terms of unequal
opportunities, and the practical problem of how you ab-
stract out socialist 'elements' from what have historic-
ally been created as bourgeois institutions is hardly
considered. This view is optimistic about what 'good
teaching' (conventionally conceived) can do, and it
presents an emphasis on standards, hierarchies and es-
tablished procedures as politically 'radical' in that it
is seen as enhancing the opportunities of working-class
children to succeed. Thus, the superficially unlikely
alignments between conservative educationalists, such as
Rhodes Boyson, and the Communist leadership within the
National Union of Teachers become less surprising. For
those on the Right, the potential embarrassment of having
such allies in their assault on alternative conceptions
of education must be far outweighed by their recognition
of who will benefit if their campaign succeeds.

   It is clear from what has been said so far, that many
of those committed to some form of social change, as
well as those consciously committed to preserving the
status quo, have adopted modes of social analysis and
social policy which, by their narrowness of vision, have
concentrated on tinkering with what 'is'. The social
democratic policy of increasing 'equality of opportunity'
by changing the organizational structures of education
has, we have suggested, had the support of old-Left
communists who envisage that a better 'educated' pro-
letariat would have a better chance of transforming the
nature of society. In practice, however, the few
working-class pupils who succeed in schools are put
under considerable pressure to embrace the cultural and
political values of existing elites, while organizational
changes, designed to promote more efficient 'schooling',
sometimes seem more likely to educate the population

into accepting a class society than to enable the work-
ing-class to transform it. Neither the old-Left, nor
the Fabian social democrats, seem to take seriously the
suggestion that the educational policies they support
merely provide more efficient means of maintaining the
status quo. Certainly neither group seems to have rec-
ognized that we need to examine 'what counts as educa-
tion', and thus the way in which prevailing definitions
of it sustain just that form of society which those on
the Left, albeit in varying degrees, wish to change.

   This is not just a problem for radical or socialist
theorizing about education; it raises, we think, more
fundamental questions about the ways in which Marxist
and social democratic traditions of theorizing have
developed. The adherence of both groups to positivistic
modes of analysis has, as Arblaster (1975) has suggested,
limited the possibilities for both envisaging and realiz-
ing alternatives. He argues that:

> It is necessary that ... criticism should be extended
> even to such apparently neutral, common ground as the
> concepts of science, fact, objectivity and rational-
> ity. The willingness of both revolutionary Marxists
> and social democrats simply to inherit the bourgeois
> forms of these concepts and incorporate them into
> their own thinking has done great damage to socialism.
> Hence the effort to develop new and radical ways of
> thought in this area is a political as well as a
> philosophical necessity.

What is equally urgent is that such criticism should be
extended to the concept of 'education', and what is sur-
prising is the extent to which the Left has been
uncritical of the ideological import of the schooling to
which they have looked for major contributions to social
change.

   Outside the mainstream organizations of the political
Left, this tendency to accept the institutionalized
categories of education and science has come in for con-
siderable criticism in recent years. The new-Left and
the student movements of the sixties re-emphasized the
importance of criticizing the ideological dimensions of
education, though their hopes of transforming the cul-
tural climate of the universities and of society at
large proved premature. Their ideas and their example
nevertheless have had a considerable influence upon the
way in which relationships between school and society
have been conceptualized, and many theorists, including
some whose work is considered in this volume, have come

to look for obstacles to social change not so much in
terms of the extent of 'access' to schooling, as in
terms of its ideological dimensions. This is not to
deny that the inequalities and injustices that the em-
phasis on 'access' highlight do not persist and remain
important. The recent attempts to explore regional
differences in the allocation of resources (Byrne and
Williamson, 1975) are likely to be more rather than
less significant as overall resources are reduced.
What we would argue is that to separate out questions
of access and distribution from consideration of what
access is to, what is distributed, and who are involved
in these processes, is to limit both sociological analy-
sis and possible alternative practices to questions of
administration. In neglecting the cultural signific-
ance of the content of education, such studies lay
themselves open to the criticism that there is a sense
in which they are not about education at all.

It is interesting that theorists of the political
Right in this country have recognized the importance of
the cultural content of education for much longer than
those of the Left, with the notable exception of Raymond
Williams (1961). Thus, in an article otherwise critical
of recent work in the sociology of education, Bantock
(1973) writes that 'after so much of the organizational
nonsense which has been preached during the last fifteen
years' it is a relief 'that at long last there seems to
be a chance we shall come to see that the basic educa-
tional dilemma of our time is a cultural one and affects
the nature of the meanings to be transmitted by the
school'. Here Bantock is referring to developments
within the sociology of education in which the tendency
to attribute the class differentials in educational
achievement to the 'detrimental' effects of working-class
culture has come in for some critical scrutiny. Analy-
sis has shifted away from the supposed deficiencies in
children's home backgrounds to a consideration of the
very nature of the 'education' as carried out in schools
(Keddie, 1973). Studies of what happens to pupils in
school and the nature of the curriculum to which they
are exposed are beginning to be given more significance
than the sort of input-output analyses which until rec-
ently constituted the bulk of work within this field.
Unfortunately, however, many of these studies about the
minutiae of classroom interaction, or analyses of the
assumptions underlying prevailing definitions of curr-
icular knowledge, seem to present education as being
carried on in a social vacuum, and whilst they often
tell us a great deal about 'how' schools perpetuate

social inequalities, their failure to discuss 'why' this
may be so helps to obscure the difficulties of change.
In other words, while the sociology of education has
increasingly focused upon 'cultural' aspects of school-
ing, it has failed to locate them in their broader
historical and political contexts. Thus we can see
certain parallels between the theoretical and political
'radicalism' of the 'new' sociologists, and the theor-
etical and political conservatism of Bantock. Both
display the typically 'idealist' educationist's tendency
to separate out cultural meanings from their material
base, and thereby give them some kind of autonomous life
of their own. Whilst agreeing that our educational dil-
emmas are about culture and meanings, we would argue
that these dilemmas are not separable from the political
and economic struggles of which such meanings are an
expression. It is the failure to recognize this that
makes the recent debate concerning cultural 'deficit'
and cultural 'difference' theories of educational fail-
ure little more than a scholastic exercise - for
'differences' only take on their hierarchical signific-
ance in specific historical and political contexts.
Nevertheless, this focus on the cultural content of
education as part of a more adequate theory of ideology
will be a crucial element in any understanding of the
relationship between school and society.

EDUCATION AS DETERMINED OR DETERMINING?

The recognition that there is an ideological dimen-
sion to the way in which schooling helps to reproduce
society, important as it is, does not necessarily help
us to clarify the nature of the relationship between
school and society, or to decide upon strategically
appropriate contexts for action. The traditions of rad-
ical theorizing discussed in the papers of section one
of this book - which (with inevitable over-simplifica-
tions) we shall call the 'new' sociology of education,
'deschooling' and Althusserian Marxism - illustrate this
clearly. All point valuably to some of the basic weak-
nesses in the social-democratic or Fabian model of
'access' to which we referred earlier, and all are
critical of most contemporary educational theory and
practice as, in different ways, ideological and mystify-
ing. At the same time, each of them by emphasizing a
particular aspect of the relationship between schooling
and society ends up either by obscuring any possibility
of alternative educational practice, or by seeming to
elevate a particular strategy of change to an absolute.

Thus, Althusser's characterization of schools as part
of the Ideological State Apparatus is often taken to
suggest that any teacher working for radical change
within the school system faces overwhelming odds, whilst
a number of exponents of the so-called 'new' sociology
of education have argued that a recognition that the
curriculum is a social construction could initiate
change in schools with wide-ranging social consequences.
Illich seems to share some of Althusser's pessimism ab-
out the possibilities for change within schools whilst
being optimistic about the possibility that education
can be deschooled and a non-elitist form of social or-
ganization developed. The readings in this volume
have been selected for the contribution they make to a
critical examination of the common ground between these
various perspectives and to the development of theories
on which more realistic strategies of educational and
social change might be based.

Educational theories of the kind considered in sec-
tion one have gained considerable influence within the
sociology of education as the limitations of earlier
traditions of theorizing have been exposed. However,
if, as is often argued, the mainstream or traditional
sociology of education which we discussed earlier in
this introduction bore a close affinity to the concerns
of administrators and policy-makers, these more recent
developments have remained largely within the confines of
the academy. Although 'in theory' often challenging the
ideas of policy-makers and classroom teachers (and, in
the case of the 'new' sociology, claiming 'relevance'
to teachers), these theories have probably been most
influential amongst academic sociologists or education-
ists and their students. It is therefore scarcely sur-
prising that these sociological accounts of the relation-
ship between school and society are often attacked by
others as simplistic and irrelevant to the 'real'
world of education. Thus, for instance, Max Morris
(1975), the Communist ex-President of the NUT, recently
attacked 'trendy sociologists' for taking up one of two
diametrically opposed positions - either that 'education
reflects society' and schools are 'cogs in a capitalist
machine' simply confirming the status quo; or, alter-
natively, that schools could be revolutionary agents,
'main media for changing society'. While it is diffic-
ult to agree that sociological theories are quite as
simplistic as that, the criticism is a telling one and
one which is echoed in the contributions to section one.
At the same time, we would argue that, however miscon-
ceived, the dichotomous views of the school determined

by society and schools determining society are not just
aberrations of sociologists but a pervasive force
throughout educational theory and practice.

Discussions of the relationship between schooling
and the wider society seem to oscillate violently be-
tween positions which characterize education as either
'determined' or 'determining'. In the first of these
models, schools are presented as nothing but the reflec-
tion of the wider society, responding to the demands
of social structure, the economy and its associated
technology. Education is the dependent variable and
teachers but puppets of the social system. The function
of the school is to reproduce individuals in the form
most suited to the wider demands of society, and the
determining forces in such a model imply that any att-
empt to deviate from such demands is virtually imposs-
ible and certainly bound to be short lived. Though
somewhat of an oversimplification this is, in essence,
the account of Althusser's theory presented in the paper
by Erben and Gleeson.

In the opposite model, in which education is viewed
as 'determining', it is suggested that social structure,
being made up of people, can only be sustained in a
particular form as long as people continue to act in a
manner which gives it that form. Social structure is
changed by those who make it up, and hence education
and the curriculum, as powerful socializing influences
on the young, can change the wider society. Rather
than educational change being seen as the mere product
of wider social changes, changes in school practice,
e.g. the introduction of non-competitive modes of working,
produce changes of consciousness in the young which ul-
timately have wider social consequences.

Certainly, these dichotomous modes of theorizing have
been significant features of recent work in the sociol-
ogy of education, but they are also a common feature of
the way teachers and others think about education. The
tendency to theorize in a non-dialectical manner, and
the problems of specifying the nature of the linkages
between school and society, is perhaps a feature of the
non-relational mode of thinking which Hextall and Sarup
discuss in their paper, and which Ollman (1971) has
identified as a prevailing feature of modern western
thought. Thus, although Morris makes an important crit-
icism, his attempt to dismiss the problem as the crea-
tion of 'trendy sociologists', which would disappear if
teachers were left to get on with their job, is equally
simplistic.

An unquestioning faith in the power of education to change society has over many years motivated radicals to enter teaching. On the other hand, few large comprehensive schools can be without their staffroom equivalent of Skates in James Herndon's The Way It Spozed To Be who tells Herndon:

> You've got to wait, Jim! You got to wait for the revolution! Socialism! This isn't a school! It's a place where those kids can find out once and for all what they're up against, where the ruling class says in no uncertain terms to them, 'Forget you! You ain't going nowhere! Go on and learn to tap-dance or be a jitney girl, because you ain't going nowhere!'
> But you, Jim, you got to live. You got your wife - your wife, Jim, who makes that soup on those cold evenings, that beautiful kid. You got to put those paragraphs on the board for them to copy as long as they'll still do it. You've got no real union here, you're alone in there, between the victims and the exploiters ...

While this position - that schools will only be different after the Revolution has wrought changes in the reorganization of society - has an academic equivalent in a crude mechanistic Marxism, it is probably a stance which emerged from the situation in which Skates found himself:

> I could never tell if Skates was serious about the revolution or not. In the end I thought he had believed in it once, didn't see any chance for it now, but continued talking in terms of it anyway. It was, in a sense, a useful way of interpreting things...

It seems likely, then, that rather than being merely 'webs' spun by educational theorists, these dichotomous theories are different responses to the contradictions which constitute the social context of schooling. Like other dichotomies, such as that between individual and society, this is not just a feature of academic social theorizing but of the theorizing of teachers and educational policy-makers as well, and therefore of the circumstances those concerned with change must confront. What is needed is an attempt to locate this dichotomous thinking as a form of consciousness which is an expression of particular historical sets of social relations. In the specific case of school and society, we

can view their separation as based in the institutional
separation of work from education, a separation the
interdependence of which we can only understand in terms
of the historical development of monopoly capitalism.
Only in society in which 'theory' is institutionalized
as separate from practice, and in which thought itself
is separated from action, can abstract categories such
as 'determined' and 'determining' counterpose each other
as opposites. In accepting them as such, rather than
trying to formulate them relationally, we accept an
ideology, in the sense that they present an appearance
`(or a particular experience of educationists) as reality.
A relational approach would involve seeking the condi-
tions in which such abstract opposites can be trans-
cended as the real separations of the material world are
transcended.

Equally, it is in the attempt to analyse and trans-
form the contradictory character of educational practice
that we discover both the possibilities of change in
schools and the limits to them. As the contributors to
section two make clear, the many contradictions which
confront teachers and pupils can also provide the
'space' for practical action for change. But change does
not just happen as evolutionary (and many revolutionary)
theorists suppose, it is made by people and, in relation
to the concerns of this book, by teachers and pupils
who recognize that their actions can only become radical
when they realize the interrelations of what they do
with wider political and economic struggles. However,
to recognize the dual character of the relationship be-
tween school and society is only an advance if it can
be exposed in the context of particular concrete strug-
gles. It does not necessarily take us very far to argue
that the relationship is a dialectical one unless we
explore further the nature of that dialectic. Morris
(1975) himself argued that the true relationship was one
in which education had to reflect in its structure and
content the society of which it was a part. The key
point, for Morris, was that social needs were never
static and so new demands were constantly being placed
by society on the schools. 'There is a constant process
of interaction between schools and people in the social
context' and 'to deny totally the effect of schooling is
to know little about either children or society'. The
problem with arguments like Morris's is that beyond a
superficial reasonableness, they are little more than
a rather naive kind of social Darwinism or evolutionism,
in which 'society', which is never specified, has needs
which are constantly changing, for no apparent reason,
and to which schools harmoniously 'adapt' (though we