SCHOOL AND SOCIETY

WALTER FEINBERG
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THINKING ABOUT EDUCATION SERIES

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A Note to the Instructor

This book was designed so that it could be used in a number of ways to suit the purposes and style of the instructor. All or any lesser combination of the five texts in this series can be used together in a basic foundations course. This book or any of the others in this series can also be used singly as the primary text for a full course on its topic, as supplemental reading, or as a source for cases and dialogues to stimulate class discussions.

If used as a text in a full course, a number of pedagogical options are available.

1. The first seven chapters can be treated as you would any text, and then the cases and disputes in chapter 8 can be used to provide materials for class discussions for the remainder of the term. We have found that a case or a dispute can easily produce a good discussion that lasts thirty or more minutes. They raise ethical as well as intellectual issues.
2. We have found that doing a chapter and spending one or two sessions discussing related cases and dialogues is a very effective way to mix the theoretical with the practical. At the beginning of the last chapter, in table 1, we have offered suggestions for specific cases, dialogues, and issues to be discussed as you proceed. We have also made specific suggestions in the text itself.
3. To either of the above approaches could be added class-invented cases, dialogues, or debates that apply theory to practice and raise issues of personal concern about the relationship of school to society.
4. Of course, any creative approach to the use of these materials that you can invent will be as good or better than any of our suggestions.

If this book is to be used to treat school and society as part of a course, then the following options–as well as any you can invent–are available.

1. Spend one session discussing each of the six substantive chapters and the cases imbedded in it, or spend one session on each of the three major parts.

2. Have students read the first seven chapters in preparation for discussion of arguments and issues selected by you from chapter 8 for as many sessions as you allot to the study of school and society.
3. Have students read the text without discussing any of the cases, dialogues, or arguments. This option misses a great opportunity to stimulate student thinking by using the case method approach.

If you have not taught using the case method before, the following suggestions may be of some help.

1. It is important to establish a good climate for discussion, one in which individuals feel free to express their views openly without fear of ridicule and free to challenge the honest views of others with reasonable arguments and genuine alternatives.
2. Good group discussions are facilitated by asking students to read cases and sketch their answers to case problems before class so a discussion can start with some forethought and direction.
3. Some of our cases appear in more than one book in this series. Using them will allow you to demonstrate the multidimensionality of real life situations in which different issues come to light when different questions are asked.
4. Pedagogically, as a discussion leader it is useful to summarize along the way, to help students see the ideas at issue, to bring in relevant theoretical knowledge, and to guide discussions to some reasonable conclusion, however firm or tentative.
5. And remember, students can learn worthwhile things even when their instructor is not talking.

We trust you will find this book to be a versatile pedagogical tool useful in getting students not only to learn about basic theories of school and society but also to think with and about these theories as they make practical applications and face basic issues.

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Part I

THE RELATION OF SCHOOL TO SOCIETY

Chapter 1

What This Book Is About

This is a book about the relationship between school and society. In it we want to invite you to think about what schools do besides teach the three Rs and the other school subjects. As you will see, schools communicate implicit as well as explicit messages to their students. To begin, we will ask you to imagine yourself in a school that is probably quite different from the ones you have attended. It will be an imaginary school, but it is not an impossible kind of school to have in a society like ours, even though we do not think any like it really exist. As you read about it in the paragraphs that follow, ask yourself what else is being taught and learned at Factory Prep besides the school subjects. You might also pause and think about your own schooling. Did its organization and practices reflect how your own society works? What did you learn in school?

Factory Prep

Imagine a school where there is never any homework. Work is only done in school, because that is where the machines are. Students punch a time card when they arrive in each classroom. They work at their studies only until the bell rings and then punch out. At the end of each week, every student receives a paycheck. Each student has a computer terminal and works at his or her own pace. There is a meter on each terminal, and the teacher can read off how much the student has accomplished during the week. This allows the school to reward students in relation to their productivity.

Courses are chosen on an elective system. Of course, the study of some subjects pays more than the study of others. If there is a shortage of scientists, courses in science offer a very high rate of pay. Because math is "harder" than English literature and mastery of math requires more "skill" than mastery of history, each hour of school work in math pays twice that devoted to literature and one-and-one-half times that given to history.

At the end of the week, each student's time on various subjects is computed at the appropriate rate, and a check for the amount earned is

issued. A portion of each high school student's pay is withheld and goes to the elementary school to be used to pay younger, inexperienced students at a cheaper rate for their work. The high school is funded by withholdings from students in postsecondary technical schools and colleges. These, in turn, are funded by business and industry, which promise jobs and commensurate pay to students who successfully complete a secondary or postsecondary education. The workers' withholdings in business and industry pay for postsecondary schools.

Student checks at Factory Prep are cashed only at the school shopping mall, where students buy records and clothes, go to movies and play arcade games, or just socialize between classes or after school. When the cost of such things goes up, students tend to choose more difficult courses and work harder to keep up. But eventually their accustomed standard of leisure living declines, and they band together and demand higher rates. Student representatives bargain with the principal and faculty and usually reach an agreement. When they do not, the students strike. Because the principal and teachers are paid by the Board of Education with a percentage of the profits from the school shopping mall (and nonworking students are buying less), they have less income. These economic pressures on both sides usually produce an acceptable agreement fairly quickly.

With a little imagination, we are sure you could go on describing aspects of Factory Prep. It should be clear that besides learning subjects, these students are learning how to be workers in a society that recognizes the legitimacy of organized labor. But they are also learning other things about consumption, leisure, money, civic responsibility, and more. No doubt you could identify other things learned in this imaginary case, as well as some things besides subjects that you learned in your own schooling. In the last chapter of this book, called "Cases and Disputes," we have provided a number of realistic cases of school practices and imaginary disputes for you to use to extend your thinking about issues and ideas raised in each chapter. Throughout the text, we will suggest relevant cases and disputes for your consideration. Here we suggest a case from chapter 8 called "Student Government," which deals with the learning of good citizenship. It presents a more realistic situation than our imaginary Factory Prep and raises some interesting issues about what is learned in school besides subjects.

An Imaginary Society

Let's try to view the relation between school and society from another perspective. Instead of the industrial, high-tech, Western society presup-

posed in the first example, imagine an agricultural society with common ownership of gardens and animals and the communal sharing of work and food. In this society there are no permanent or elected leaders and no paid public servants. Instead, on a rotating basis for one month each year, all adults serve as teachers in the school, judges in the court, council members, police, and in other such necessary social service capacities. Except for this public service, most adults spend their lives tending the gardens and the animals.

There is always time for celebration and festivals, however, and the people thoroughly enjoy this major diversion from their workaday world. Song, dance, and storytelling are the central activities at festival time, and while the colorful design of costumes is important, there is not much other effort at visual art in this society. Song seems to be the dominant art form of public expression, even in the work place. Weeders and planters go down the rows chanting and planting and pulling in unison. Almost every activity has a song to be sung with it. The storytelling at festival time is predominantly "historical"; that is, the stories tell of heroes and happenings in the life of the society. Standard stories are also told and retold in the daily lives of the people and serve as the bearers of their moral code and the justification of social practices. It is a peaceful society isolated from the outside world and without warring neighbors.

Even with such a brief sketch, it should be possible to imagine what schooling might be like in this society. You might want to pause for a few moments to think about it yourself before considering our guesses on the matter. What subjects might be taught? What kinds of things might the children be asked to do? What might a typical day or month look like in a school in this society?

We speculate that in this society's schools students might take turns once a month being a class leader responsible for such things as feeding the fish, leading the morning rituals, delivering messages, and tidying up the room. They would probably be encouraged to help each other with their lessons and to work together in the classroom. Each day, class might begin with a song and with a fable and a discussion of its "moral." The history of the group, not the history of the world, would probably be a core subject, along with some version of the "theory and principles of agriculture." Years ago, when it was an even simpler society than it is today, the traditional songs and dances of the festivals would have been taught at home; now these songs and dances, along with storytelling, are taught in school. There would probably be no lessons in the visual arts. The children would work each day in the school garden and learn the appropriate songs for each gardening activity.

We could go on, but the point should be clear. We expect schools and

societies to reflect each other, not just in terms of the subjects taught, but also with respect to how the school is organized and functions. These two examples show that, in different situations, society is reflected in different ways and to different degrees. Industrialized nations do not have schools like Factory Prep, but clearly their schools do reflect some aspects of an industrialized society—such as mass production, bureaucratic organization, and impersonalized, hierarchical decision making.

Three Schools of Thought

This book is about the ways in which we try to explain and understand the relationship between school and society. In the contemporary world, there are a number of competing kinds of explanations with a number of different labels. For convenience, we have chosen to group these explanations under the three umbrella terms *functionalism, conflict theory,* and *the interpretivist approach.* These are complex and sometimes overlapping schools of thought that we will explore more fully in the chapters that follow. To help you get a feeling for the idea that similar events can be explained in different ways, we will look back at the Factory Prep example, first through the eyes of an imaginary functionalist and then through the eyes of an imaginary conflict theorist.

The *functionalist* generally sees schools as serving to socialize students to adapt to the economic, political, and social institutions of that society. In the Factory Prep case, students were learning how to be workers, consumers, taxpayers, and union members. They were also learning the traditional school subjects, of course. Learning these subjects is often called the "manifest function" of schools by functionalists. The manifest function refers to the clear and obvious intellectual purpose of schooling in society. However, the functionalist also sees schools serving a "latent" or not so visible function of producing people who share the basic economic, political, and cultural practices and norms of the society. Moreover, the functionalist sees the school as an integral, functioning part of society, vital to its continuation and survival. To convey this basic idea, functionalists often suggest that we view social institutions as analogous to parts of the body. Each functions to serve the needs and purposes of the whole. Thus a functionalist would see Factory Prep serving one of the most important institutional tasks in any society, socialization. For the functionalist, socialization means the effective molding of individuals to fit existing social practices and requirements.

A *conflict theorist* would generally view schooling as a social practice supported and utilized by those in power to maintain their dominance in

the social order. In the social world of Factory Prep, there are clearly workers on the one hand and bosses and owners of businesses and industries on the other. Students in Factory Prep are learning to be workers, not bosses. They are also learning to be consumers, who are necessary for the maintenance of the "boss" class. Without the excessive consumption of nonnecessities, extensive profits could not be realized by the owners of big business and consumer industries. Financing the schools out of taxes on wages, rather than out of profits, may give workers the sense that they are supporting their schools; but what it really does, the conflict theorist would argue, is keep profits intact while forcing workers to pay for their own training. It should be clear that the conflict with which the conflict theorist is concerned is between classes, between the rich and poor, the workers and the capitalists, the powerful and the powerless. Many conflict theorists are Marxists, and in our treatment of conflict theory, we concentrate on its Marxist form. Marxists see social institutions functioning to preserve inequitable class relations in society, and they urge us to do something about it.

Obviously, functionalism and conflict theory are two very different ways of looking at the same social world and at the relation of school to society. One sees the school as an "organ" of society, like a heart or a lung, functioning properly to keep the "body politic" going. The other sees the school as an instrument of class domination serving to reproduce the workforce and maintain class relationships. Each offers different ways to explain what social forces are operating in the school.

A third way to look at the social world and the school we have called the interpretivist approach. It is better illustrated by our imaginary agricultural society, but it can be applied to the Factory Prep example as well. The *interpretivist* sees the social world as a world made up of purposeful actors who acquire, share, and interpret a set of meanings, rules, and norms that make social interaction possible. The social forces at work are shared meanings and interpreting individuals who interact in particular social contexts. In the school of the agricultural society, the children were acquiring a sense of their society's way of life by learning its traditional songs, its fables, its history, and its norms of cooperation and public service. They were also learning how to do things in that social setting. To understand and explain why a particular student or teacher did a particular thing in such a school, interpretivists would argue that we need to understand the way of life in that society and the ways of doing things in that school. They would also remind us that we need to learn the purposes of the individual actors and the social meanings that they share with others. How individuals interpret and understand their social situations is a central concern of the interpretivist.

Frequently interpretivists will use the analogy of a game to explain their view of the social world of meanings, rules, and purposes. One cannot play a game or engage in certain social activities without understanding what they are about and what is expected or allowed. Thus an interpretivist might look at Factory Prep and say the students have learned the rules of the "game of school," which include, among other things, how to increase or decrease their income from classroom work, how to satisfy their desire for leisure time, and what is allowed in terms of confrontation with the administration. They then decide whether it is worth the extra effort to increase their income by taking hard classes. They also decide which things to spend their money on, and, in case of a grievance, they decide whether to go on strike. They do these things as individuals with some degree of freedom, but always within the constraints of their shared understanding of the "game of school" and their willingness to play it. Some drop out, of course, refusing to play the game.

Clearly there is some overlap in our general descriptions of these three approaches to explaining the relation of school to society. This is not only because they deal with the same phenomenon of people learning to be members of a social group, but also because in reality our three categories contain much similarity as well as much variation. In the world of contemporary research and scholarship, there are functionalists who recognize conflict and deal with it functionally; there are conflict theorists who are not Marxists; and there are interpretivists who are very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish from either conflict theorists or functionalists. Even so, we think that for the novice the three-approach scheme of this book will do more good than harm in providing a framework in which to see how modern scholars and researchers have been thinking about the relation of school to society. We merely caution you at the outset not to take these labels too strictly. They are heuristic devices. The point of this book is to help you think about school and society by seeing how others have thought about it, not by learning how to apply one label or another to the thinkers or to school situations.

The Form of the Book

Part II will treat functionalism in depth, showing its strengths and some of its limitations. Functionalism is the dominant form of sociological explanation in our industrial-technical-scientific society. It claims for itself the status of scientific explanation. In Part III we will seek the roots of conflict theory in Marx and examine contemporary Marxist studies of