

**MARXIST  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN THE  
SOCIOLOGY OF  
EDUCATION**

*Maurice Levitas*

# Marxist perspectives in the sociology of education

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# Preface

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At no time has there been so widespread an interest in Marxism as during this decade. Sociologists everywhere acknowledge its importance and it would be hard to find a social issue of importance where Marxist thought is irrelevant. Education is no exception. It inspires sustained activity in teachers' organisations, in educational practice and in political pressure for a range of working class children's interests. In addition, it has provided new insights into education's history and into educational psychology.

There has been, however, no thoroughgoing application of Marxist thought to the sociology of education. This deficiency is due in part to the character of teacher education where this element of educational theory has had its main reason for growth and in part to an assumption that what is of value in Marxism is incorporated in the existing literature.

But another explanation is that Marxists have welcomed support from sociology in the debate with the intelligence testers and have failed to criticise support for selection from apparent allies. It is for this reason that the major theories explored in the book are those explaining social mobility and those which derive from a relativist position in sociology. The first inform us that the easier it is for working class children to achieve high status, the more democratic is the education system; the second would persuade us of the need to tailor education to fit children for living in their various communities. These two conceptual frameworks come together in the proposition that education is primarily a distributor of life chances in a stratified society.

Exploitation more accurately defines the social relationship upon

which rests the division of society into classes. The educational implications of this relationship, therefore, are what require sociological analysis. But exploitation, when it is understood by the proletariat, impels that class to strive for a classless society. In that effort goals are created which have nothing to do with social climbing. They converge in the universalistic demand for social revolution wherein education is an essential process of enlightenment and enablement.

With this orientation the book attempts five purposes: to define some key areas in the sociology of education; to give access to some important concepts of Marx and Engels; to strengthen sociological starting points by adding to them a Marxist element; to discriminate between radically different directions in education; to map the main features of an educational endeavour true to working-class long-term objectives. The intention is thus to provide a compass by which place and direction in the sociology of education can be discovered by teachers, students and parents.

My many thanks are due to Joyce Fitton for her comments on the readability of final drafts. For any mistakes, inconsistencies, and other faults, only I am to blame.

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## **Marxist perspectives in the sociology of education**

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## Chapter 1

# Marxism and the culture concept

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### Culture and socialisation

In 1846 in *The German Ideology* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote as follows (1938 edn, p.14):

we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.

In 1859 this way of looking at human beings was expressed in a more developed way by Marx in the *Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy*: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness' (1918 edn, p.12).

The success of that theory and its pervasiveness in present day thought is evident in the enormous importance attached to the culture concept in modern sociological thought. For social existence exactly states what anthropologists and sociologists mean when they talk about culture. And that its determining influence on the consciousness of men is not left to chance may be seen in the study of child upbringing in any society.

Because we often refer to education in its wider sense of all the pressures upon a child to understand his environment in the way adults understand it, the culture concept is a topic of primary importance in the sociology of education. This means of course that schools and teachers are not the only educators but that parents,



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older siblings, other relatives, neighbours, other children, the houses they live in, the things they see and touch, the sounds they hear—all social beings and social products—make up the experience of the child. These are the forces and influences to which he has to adapt, these are the forces and influences he has to learn to use for his own purposes. And his purposes express both assimilation of and accommodation to the social context within which he interacts with others. These ends manifest the meanings he derives from his environment, meanings continually tested in his experience with people and with things. A meaning is seen to be valid if it is shared—if the inference drawn from an action, a gesture, a word, a response is what is implied by the actor, speaker, respondent.

To become educated in this total way means to be socialised and it would be better to retain the term socialisation for this all-in process. Socialisation is not something peculiar to a child and it is not a process which is complete once adulthood is attained. A child is a child member of society, although, no doubt, there is a comparatively short period when an infant may be regarded as an asocial being: accorded responses by those who have anything to do with him, but, as yet, on his own part, not sharing a significant proportion of their meanings.

Children of three—or even less—rapidly reach a stage where they understand that there are meanings shared among adults in respect of children, that they themselves share meanings concerning adults, and that they share meanings about childhood with adult members of society. But childhood is not the same in every society. It differs from one culture to another, and even within a culture there can be different modes of childhood. Nothing illustrates this better than the different attitudes towards childhood in the nineteenth century. The Latey Report explains that during the last century offspring of the propertied classes were accorded childhood status up to twenty-one as a protective device against a variety of swindlers. Marx, on the other hand, discussing the Factory Act of 1833, had this to say (1926 edn, p.307):

capital now began a noisy agitation that went on for several years. It turned chiefly on the age of those who under the name of children, were limited to eight hours of work and were subject to a certain amount of compulsory education. According to capitalist anthropology the age of childhood ended at ten or at the most at eleven. . . . They managed in fact to intimidate the

government . . . to lower the limit of the age of childhood from thirteen to twelve.

That socialisation during which a child learns to be a child becomes the process whereby he learns to be an adolescent and, eventually, to be an adult. Socialisation then continues during every stage of adulthood into old age and ceases only in death. Even then, that there are ways of dying which are culturally apt is commonly accepted. Socialisation works because currently shared meanings are proven over and over again and because the new meanings that are learnt as life goes on, are appropriate. This is not only true of a society like ours where change is so rapid, it is true also of slowly changing societies. The reason for this is that in any society, its members, in their interaction with each other, have to reach a basis of stable expectation from day to day. That stability depends upon the same expectations being constantly realised despite changes in personnel.

Socialisation itself, as a process, depends ultimately upon the nature of mankind as a species. At whatever society we look, pre-literate, feudal, slave, industrial, the same process will be observed to be in force. What will be different will be the content of that process. Every child in every society has to learn from adults the meanings given to life by his society; but every society possesses, with a greater or lesser degree of difference, meanings to be learned. In short, every society has a culture to be learned though cultures are different.

### Culture and nature

Culture is a natural product and yet there is a difference in quality between nature and culture, which has to be investigated. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1968) develops the view that whatever can be found to be variable in human life is of culture, whereas whatever can be found to be universal is of nature. Further, what characterises culture is that it is a world of rules (p.8).

wherever there are rules we know for certain that the cultural stage has been reached. Likewise, it is easy to recognise universality as the criterion in nature, for what is constant in man falls necessarily beyond the scope of customs, techniques and institutions whereby his groups are differentiated and contrasted

We need not agree with Lévi-Strauss about the unique importance

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of the incest prohibition in the leap from nature to culture, but the definition of that leap as one 'where nature transcends itself' is highly acceptable. The union between nature and culture (p.25)

is less a union than a transformation or a transition. Before it, culture is still non-existent; with it nature's sovereignty over man is ended. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself. It sparks the formation of a new and more complex type of structure and is superimposed upon the simpler structures of physical life. . . . It brings about and is in itself the advent of a new order.

For Marxists the link between nature and culture lies less in the rules which characterise the latter than in that element of human kind which creates, defines and constantly re-defines the rules: that is, human consciousness. Thus Engels in his essay on Ludwig Feuerbach (1958 edn, p.252):

In nature . . . there are only blind unconscious agencies acting upon one another, out of whose interplay the general law comes into operation. Nothing of all that happens . . . happens as a consciously desired aim. In the history of society, on the contrary, the actors are all endowed with consciousness, are men acting with deliberation or passion, working towards definite goals; nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended aim.

Nevertheless, the intentions, as well as the force and the intelligence behind them are framed by the actors' social existences, by their cultures.

Discussion on any culture takes in its ethical, aesthetic and intellectual activities besides those elements obviously social like work and kinship. It is obvious that sociology must describe and analyse all these and their inter-relationships. But two problems immediately arise: since every person must be a carrier of his own culture with its values, (i) can he arrive at 'value free' assessment of any social action or group, (ii) can he arrive at an estimate which does not in some way or other prescribe a line of action.

Now freedom arises from knowledge without which a man is in bondage, and since he cannot be omniscient he cannot be altogether free. What freedom he has therefore depends upon what knowledge he has. Knowledge, however—and therefore freedom—is recognition of what must happen, i.e. of necessity. What follows from this is that the degree of value freedom we can achieve depends upon the extent

of our knowledge of the values we hold, and of those pressures demanding that we hold them. Second, no analysis of a culture is sufficient if it does not take into account its necessary constant change. In that it must show what is dying and what is emergent. But social trends thus described are realised through striving for goals, goals which embody current value priorities.

It follows that a combination of the utmost value freedom and the fullest analysis amounts to a knowledge of those trends which are withering or which are flourishing. Prescription is inherent in the prognosis and, if knowledge can be tested for truth only in practice, commitment does not impair the scientific quality of the action advised and assisted.

Culture has been defined as a total way of life. Not the total way of life of an individual, or a *type* of individual, but the whole way of life of an entire society is embraced by this term. In the sociology of education great importance is placed on the culture concept in order to correct possible misconceptions about the so-called 'nature of the child'. The idea that children of a given nation or ethnic group or colour are, because of their descent, innately clever, dull, musical, brave, skilful, is no longer accepted. On the other hand, the idea that children are born with a given unchangeable intellectual endowment, that this endowment can be measured accurately at various stages of their lives and may be expressed as an intelligence quotient, and, moreover, that this endowment is the key factor to be seized upon in explaining the level of performance of a child in a range of activities, still commands considerable though waning support among teachers and educationists. In a sense we are returning to the old nature versus nurture argument in which the question of whether heredity or environment played the biggest part in a child's development was debated. But we are saying that environment must be reinterpreted to yield a more subtle and refined notion of the circumstances in which a child has to build his identity, and the culture more accurately expresses the kind of setting in which the process of socialisation goes on.

Just as the term environment with its connotation of mainly material elements has to give way to the term culture with its additional elements of values, beliefs, knowledge, mutual expectation, interaction within and between institutions, so the idea of fixed-at-birth propensity for action has to give way to another view. It is characteristic of human beings that their drives are unspecialised and

that they are, as a consequence, capable of coping with a wide and changing range of activities. These two concepts taken together, that of a high human capacity for variation in response, and the culture concept, should help teachers to take a constructively optimistic standpoint in regard to the educability of children. This close interdependence of biologically inherited potentiality for action and culture transmission agencies responsible for the development of young human beings is expressed in the Plowden Report (DES, 1968), paragraph 23: 'For the cognitive stage to emerge, brain maturation is probably necessary though not of course sufficient. Without at least some degree of social stimulus the latent abilities may never be exercised and indeed the requisite cells may go undeveloped.'

One conclusion to be derived from the importance of culture is that learning is a dominant characteristic of human behaviour. This is not to say that other animals do not learn. But the scope, depth and levels of thought that typify humans are such as to render it impossible to understand the behaviour of persons without reference to learning as an activity, to the source of that learning and its accumulation in the groups and in the societies to which they belong. The charioteer and the bus driver represent cultures as radically different as their occupational behaviours. But the possibility that they can be so different derives from a specifically human quality: the vastness of the range of possible human institutions and patterns of interaction that human beings can engage in. As Ruth Benedict observes in *Patterns of Culture* (1971 edn, p.171):

The great arc along which all possible human behaviours are distributed is far too immense, too full of contradictions for any one culture to utilise even any considerable portion of it.

People choose what to do. But choices are limited to workable alternatives arising from the conditions of life in society. Whatever the complex of expectations in a given society may be, they represent, as expectations in conscious minds, the actual modes of action and interaction as the only ways in which life is possible.

### **Culture and education**

Another conclusion to be derived from the culture concept is that children are, and have to be, highly educable if they are to participate in and give continuity to the society in which they are destined to

interact as adults. Children will learn even if what they learn is not always what their mentors would prefer them to learn.

What is transmitted to children, deliberately and unconsciously, by people, by their surroundings, by events, and what is acquired by them, is their culture. Having all become carriers of the culture of their society, they consolidate for each other, in their play and other forms of peer group interaction, that culture. Thus it follows that teaching, to be effective, must have regard for culture already acquired.

Just how important a formative force culture is, is brought out by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967, p.66):

If one looks at the matter in terms of organismic development it is possible to say that the foetal period in the human being extends through about the first year after birth. . . . At this time however, the human infant is not only in the outside world, but is interrelating with it in a number of complex ways . . . the developing human being not only interrelates with a particular natural environment but with a specific cultural and social order, which is mediated to him by the significant others who have charge of him.

There are many studies by anthropologists, easily available to us these days, of the cultures of pre-literate societies. From these one can become aware of the variety of patterns of culture which can arise on the basis of very limited technological development. Then again comparisons may be made between cultures situated in different parts of the world. It is this comparative method which makes available to us, directly, evidence concerning the variability of possible human behaviours, and reduces reliance on human nature for an explanation of how people act.

Historians make comparisons in another way. Their studies make us aware that comparisons between cultures in one region can also be made in terms of time. Thus England in 1801 with a population of about ten millions was very different from England in 1901 with a population of thirty-seven millions. But however we discover the diversity of cultures we should eventually be brought to understand that we are ourselves part of a culture and that this culture is as analysable as any other.

From this understanding should follow a realisation on the part of the teacher, that for himself, as much as for his pupils, beliefs, values,

assumptions, knowledge, style of living, expectations, purposes, all form expressions of a culture which can be subjected to description and analysis. Without the application of such criticism there can be no proper understanding of what is going on in a teacher's practice.

### **The materialist conception of history**

What Marxism adds to what has been said so far is that cultures are to be understood not only in their diversity but in the pattern of that diversity. One element in that pattern is that each culture represents a stage in social development. The experience of humanity is cumulative. The accumulations are realised in tools, weapons, techniques, which considerably affect institutional arrangements and the meanings and purposes and intentions arising therefrom. But if each culture is part of a development, development itself is of major importance. What a society is likely to become demands priority of attention. From this point of view the central enquiry is always into those forces within a culture which promote or obstruct further development.

Stages and development are associated with the idea of progress and there are not a few, who, though they cultivate the culture concept, will not admit that progress—a continuous movement towards a better order of society—is to be discerned in social development. Marxists are not alone, of course, in holding the more optimistic view, but they are probably alone in being able to account for the disfavour into which the idea of progress has fallen. Identification with progress suited the innovatory rule of the capitalist class all over Europe for well over a century. Now that capitalism is to be progressed from, the idea of progress is less comfortably held—except by those who see in the working class the makers of the next stage and commit themselves to its achievement.

That perspective insists that what has been is the source of what is to be. There are of course goals and intentions which stand opposed to inevitable change. These purposes must delay and distort progress but they must ultimately vanish as they become less and less relevant. But because Marxists direct attention to processes, and relate things, and what is immediately apparent, to processes, society and the succession of cultures and of stages are summed up in the term 'history'. Hegel's contribution to this is acknowledged by Engels in

his essay on Ludwig Feuerbach, section iv and is summed up as being (1958 edn, p.248),

The great basic thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes in which the things, apparently stable, no less than their mind-images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away, in which, in spite of all seeming accidentality and of all temporary retrogression, a progressive development asserts itself in the end.

To this concept of history Marx and Engels brought a conviction that the material requirements of life determines ideas. That is, in contrast with Hegel, they had a materialist and not an idealist outlook. Thus comes into being their distinctive 'materialist conception of history'.

It is held here that this way of looking at educational institutions and problems of education in general is a necessary one for teachers whose view of professional life is not restricted to classroom interaction as it presently occurs, and whose interest extends to the force that education might exert in society as a whole. It cannot be doubted that education has progressed. Equally certain is that this progress has not been uninterrupted. But progressive development is easily discovered. As for the present, there is no dearth of issues where further progress is deemed to be urgent. And we can be sure that whatever improvements are brought into effect they will ultimately provide grounds for yet more innovation of a progressive sort. To the extent that thinking about education is related to the forces for progressive change in the wider society, to that extent will it employ, not only the culture concept but also the more inclusive and the more forward looking materialist conception of history.



## Chapter 2

# Social structure

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### **The unity of subcultures**

In introducing the culture concept we stressed that there are good reasons for teachers to master this idea. First, the culture concept places its emphasis upon the human being as a learning animal and therefore upon the educability of children. Second, if understanding of this concept is strengthened by analyses of cultures other than our own we may be brought to examine our own culture and therefore to know better what we are doing as teachers when we engage in its transmission and continuation. Third, if cultures are compared on a time scale, that is, if the culture of a group analysed at one time is compared with the culture of its descendant group at a later time, it will be seen that whilst continuity is inevitable a culture is not eternal. Continuity always partners change. And since cultures do change the teacher may be brought to think about what is obsolescent and what is developing—what is likely to have a greater future in our society. Fourth, since we select the kinds of knowledge, the orders of belief, the range of opinions, the variety of skills, the media of aesthetic expression to be organised into a timetable or into an integrated day of learning at school, and since all these are but elements of our culture, the culture concept is essential to a proper view of the curriculum of the schools. Any worthwhile innovatory approach to the curriculum must take into account appropriateness for a changing society and for the growing members of society, of what is to be learned or studied.

A fifth reason has to be elaborated. We start here from the principle that no individual can be familiar with the entirety of his culture. At its simplest there is always a division of labour in society no matter