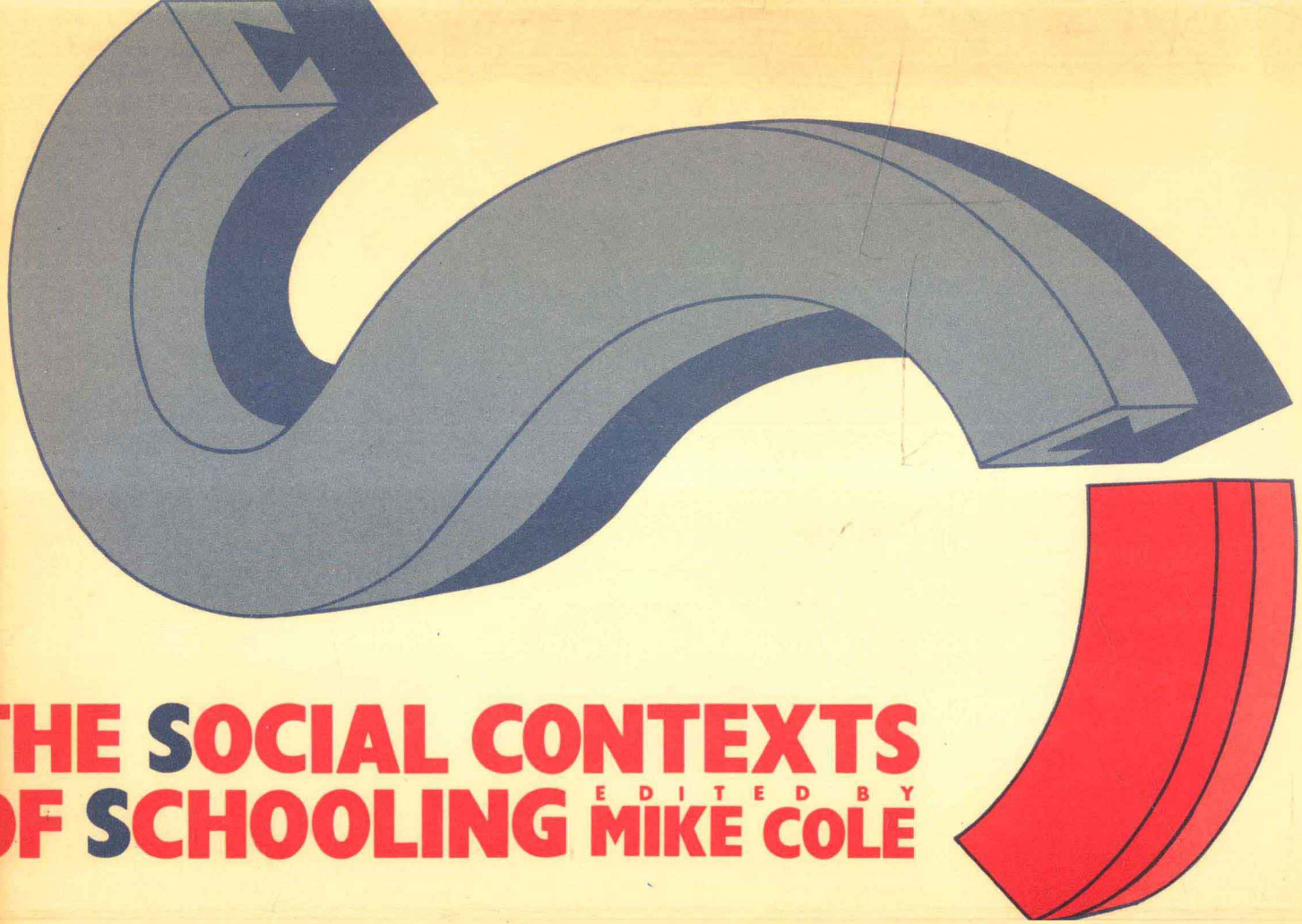

THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF SCHOOLING

EDITED BY MIKE COLE

The Falmer Press

The Social Contexts of Schooling

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The Social Contexts of Schooling

Introduction

Mike Cole

This collection has arisen out of my work at Brighton Polytechnic. Apart from two years' absence on exchange to Canada and Australia, I have been teaching sociology to BEd (Bachelor of Education) students there for the last thirteen years and to BA (Social Administration) students for the last eight years. The book aims to fill what I perceive to be a gap in the literature. Its purpose is to enable readers to undertake a comprehensive introductory analysis of class, 'race'[1] and gender and their relation to schooling *in a single source* rather than having to sift through the diversity of texts which characterize that literature. As such, it should prove to be of interest not only to students, but to all those interested in the social contexts in which schooling takes place.

The term 'schooling' is used both here and in the title of the book to distinguish it from education. By schooling I refer to a narrow process in which young people are socialized into their perceived future roles in society, perceived that is by those who control the education system. As Kenneth Baker put it at the 1987 Conservative Party Conference, 'Our first national priority must be to educate the young of today for the jobs they'll have tomorrow'.[2] The contributors to this volume argue that the society in which we live, including the occupational structure, is rigidly stratified on lines of class, 'race' and gender. Because of this, 'schooling for jobs' necessarily entails the reproduction of the social inequalities of the labour market on account of its focus and the reproduction of social inequality elsewhere because of its exclusive concern with jobs.

By education I mean a wider more all-embracing and liberating process which centralizes both excellence and equality. As Michael Stoten has argued:

> The fundamental aims of educational progress and improvement must always be the same: to raise standards, attainment and life chances. In other words, to promote excellence ... Without equality excellence can only be partial and the divide between

> those who have success and those who don't will become greater. Without excellence those who suffer from inequality will not be able to play a full part themselves in combating and redressing discrimination and disadvantage ... All learners are of equal value and have unlimited potential for development ...[3]

Such an approach will necessarily involve attempts to undermine class, 'race' and gender inequalities and to promote equality. It is not the primary purpose of this book to suggest guidelines for such attempts but rather to shed light on the process in which inequalities are reproduced and hence to inform practice. A companion volume,[4] however, deals specifically with *practical* advice on education for equality from pre-school to higher education.[5]

This introduction is, of necessity, brief since the proceeding chapters are introductions in their own right. Chapter 1 is a much requested introduction to sociology and to the sociology of education which makes use of 'the sociological imagination' to attempt to understand current crises and responses. This is followed in chapters 2 and 3 with a comprehensive history of mass schooling from the early days to the 1980s. Next, in response to student demand, chapters have been provided which deal with class, 'race' and gender per se before relating them to schooling (Chapters 4–9). The rationale for this is the difficulty in looking at say, social class and schooling, before examining the meaning of social class in the context of British society. Similarly without an understanding of 'race' or gender the manifestations of racism and sexism in schools are more difficult to comprehend and therefore to combat.

No book would be complete, in the present political climate, without a chapter on testing and this is the content of Chapter 10. The book concludes with a comparative analysis of schooling in Australia (Chapter 11).

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Tara Jungkunz for her very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this Introduction.

Notes

1 While the term racism clearly has substance, 'race' as a concept is problematic and for this reason is in inverted commas. Robert Miles argues against the notion that there exist distinct 'races' since: (a) the extent of genetic variation within any population is usually greater than the average difference between populations; (b) although the frequency of occurrence of different alleles (possible forms taken by genes) does vary from one 'race' to another, any particular genetic combination can be found in almost any 'race'; and (c) owing to inter-breeding and large scale

migrations, the distinctions between 'races' indentified in terms of polymorphic (dominant gene) frequencies are often blurred (MILES, R. (1982) *Racism and Migrant Labour*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 16). A good example of Miles' last point can be demonstrated in the black population of the United States (HERSKOVITS, M. (1958) *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press) (see also McKellar's discussion in chapter 6).

2 BAKER, K. (1987) Speech to the Conservative Party Conference, 7 October, Conservative Central Office.

3 STOTEN, M. (1987) *Equality and Excellence — A Framework for the Development of the Education Service in Brent*, Brent Education Department, 25 June.

4 COLE, M. (Ed) (1989) *Education for Equality: Some Guidelines for Good Practice*, London, Routledge.

5 It is not by any means suggested in that book that education per se can create equality. The relationship between schooling's role as a reproducer of inequality and the potential of education to resist such reproduction and promote equality is problematic. See COLE, M. (1989) 'Class, gender and "race": From theory to practice' in COLE M. (Ed) *ibid* for a discussion.

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Part 1

Analytical Framework

Chapter 1

What is Sociology? What is the Sociology of Education?

Peter MacDonald

Introduction

I am staring out the window as I sit in front of my computer wondering what on earth I am going to say to you. It is very cold outside, transforming the snow into a crunchy, frozen mass. I live in New Brunswick, a small Canadian province located on the East coast. I am terribly aware of the sheer impossibility of the task confronting me. I am to tell you of sociology; when I have managed that, I am to tell you of the sociology of education — all within the space of a single chapter. When you realize that there are at least two broad schools of sociological thought — consensus (functionalism) and conflict (including Marxism), and that there are two levels of analysis — macro and micro — you see that their combination gives at least four varieties of sociology. And each variety propogates its own sociology of education. Clearly this chapter cannot be a survey of the discipline.

What is to be done? Clearly I shall have to make some hard choices, hopefully on your behalf. I propose to teach you one sociology and to teach you more about schools than about the sociology of education. Let me elaborate.

Beginning with the one sociology, I shall explain the notion of the sociological imagination as advocated by C. Wright Mills (1959). Since its publication thirty years ago it has acquired something of a cult status. I shall speak more about this later; for now, note that it represents more of an ideal to be approached than a specific programme of analysis or a specific sociology, though it does imply conflict sociology conducted at the macro level. This will be covered in the section 'What is sociology?'.

Turning now to the sociology of education, I stated above that I wish to deal with some of the current issues confronting schools from the perspective of sociology rather than with the sociology of education *per se*. Instead of attempting to survey the discipline to give you some sense of it, I believe that it is more useful in these circumstances to talk about schools

themselves. So the focus is not to be on the discipline but instead on schools. By the end of this chapter, I would like you to be able to think about schools together with some of their fundamental problems just as a sociologist would. I believe that readers, many of whom will be teachers or student teachers, will find this strategy more useful than a review of the discipline.

As I am sure you are aware, there has been and are hints of crisis surrounding education. Much has been made of the recent 'failures' of education; much is being proposed (and implemented) to counter these supposed failures. We are living in interesting times. I would like to provide an account of these interesting times as a focus for our sociological discussion of schools. Some themes I consider to be important include the organization of, and conflict over, the utilization of time, the closely related theme of schools as jails (and jails as schools), and the question of the commodification/privatization of schools both as places and as sets of social relationships. Though these may be puzzling to you now, I shall explain what I mean, drawing from newspaper accounts and similar sources. Though these may seem disparate to you now, I do think there is an underlying unity to these themes in that they are expressions of the single crisis that I mentioned above. More on this to follow; for now, let me say that they have something to do with the current transformation of the welfare state within the context of neoconservativism.

Let me conclude this introduction by giving you a highly selective list of books you may wish to consult; needless to say, they are my favourities. For sociology as a discipline, look at Lee and Newby (1983), Collins (1982), and Giddens (1982). For the sociology of education, any of the materials published by the Faculty of Educational Studies of the Open University rank at the top. Finally, books that are good to read because they themselves are so good (even though they have little to do with the concerns at hand) that they serve as exemplars: Hall *et al.* (1978) and Stanley Cohen (1985). Enjoy reading them.

What is Sociology?

As I mentioned above, I wish to base my explanation of sociology on Mills' exposition of what he calls the sociological imagination. Again, as I mentioned above, this exposition has acquired something of a cult or quasi-religious status. In practice, this means that all sociologists of all proclivities pay homage to it, but they do so by imposing on it their own particular predispositions and biases. Varieties of interpretation of a single statement are the result. I am no different; I shall impose my predispositions in producing my particular variety of explanation. You are entitled to know that my particular bias, expressed in terms of the four

varieties of sociology mentioned in the introduction, is towards macro conflict theory.

Let me begin with a deceptively simple statement. Sociology is the study of society. Society is comprised of a configuration of institutions each impinging on others. Depending on one's theoretical stance, some of these institutions are thought to be more central than others in that they do most of the impinging. For instance, the state is central to the understanding of schools for it secures their existence by means of compulsory attendance laws.

Institutions are configurations of social relations independent of the specific individuals who are inserted in them. For example at a very prosaic level, students are expected to appear at a certain place at a certain time. At a less prosaic level, students are expected to produce a demeanor of deference to the teacher. Further, this deference extends to the knowledge embodied in the school curriculum. More subtly still, students are expected to pass and to fail, to be good and to be bad, to require and not to require counselling, and the like. These too are components of the social relations of schools which, in a sense, produce through their everyday operations passing and failing, goodness and badness, and so on.

Now to the tricky bit. Though the social relations mentioned above are independent of particular individuals, individuals are not simply objects inserted into them. Rather, it is the confrontation of individuals with social relations that produces the daily social activity of schooling. Individuals try to 'make do' on a daily basis, but do so not simply as they please. They do so in the context of the pattern of social relations which defines the nature of schools.

To understand the social activities of people in schools requires us to see how individuals cope with this institution. To understand this institution requires us to locate schools within the institutional configuration of society. So what appeared as a relatively simple point of departure (sociology is the study of society) is in reality rather more complex. The sociological imagination is a means of dealing systematically with this complexity. Mills tells us that this imagination '. . . enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (p. 5). This is the genuine purpose of sociology — to enable those who utilize its perspective to make sense of their fates by seeing these fates within the framework of the history of their society. In light of this goal, one realizes it by grasping '. . . history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (p. 6). So we have three components to deal with: society, history and biography. Moreover, we must concern ourselves with the connections among the three.

Let us begin with society. As I mentioned above, society is con-

stituted by a configuration of interrelated institutions. It follows that one must identify these institutions and determine the nature of their interrelationships. One is, of course, schools. Given this, others include the state as I noted above. And, given my own bias, I want to include the economy by which I mean the organization of the production of goods and services. I will make much more of this in the next section of this chapter.

Now on to history. For our purposes, history is not a narrative of events or a record of great figures and their accomplishments. Rather, it is the study of changes in the social structure – the institutional configuration – of society. Important questions here include when and why a particular institution first appears (for example, state schooling), how the structure of that institution has been transformed, and how its relations have changed with other central institutions of the society. As you can see, we have already related two of the components of the sociological imagination — society and history. We have done so in order to try to understand where an institution is in terms of its pattern of development. By examining the past, by identifying the developmental pattern, one may be able to make some sense of the future by projecting this developmental pattern.

On to biography — another tricky bit I am afraid. Mills speaks of varieties of people, of human nature, '... selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted ...' (p. 8) by society. Mills is suggesting here that the sorts of individuals that exist have much to do with the social types provided for by society at a given stage in its history. For instance, one can no longer be a feudal noble, no matter how much one may wish to be. One can no longer be an owner of slaves no matter how much one may wish to be. Conversely, one can (perhaps) be an entrepreneur, an option not available to those who lived in preindustrial society (indeed, their social structure could not provide their even thinking of that option let alone attempting to pursue it). I think this is the sort of thing Mills is attempting to get at with his notion of individual biography — people trying to be (or not to be) one of the varieties of individuals provided for by a given social structure at a given point in history.

The trick is to comprehend our own destinies by utilizing all of the above, to try to make sense of our own lives through the use of the sociological imagination. This leads me to the final set of concepts proposed by Mills, the notions of personal troubles and public issues. Personal troubles are just that — difficulties that all of us face as a part of our daily lives. These may range from the abstract like a generalized sense of malaise to the concrete like being unemployed, or being subject to sexual or racial harrassment. Public issues, on the other hand, tend to be matters characteristic of society as a whole. Often they are aggregations of personal troubles (for example, a high unemployment rate, patriarchy, or institutional racism) but — and this is the point — they are brought about by structural difficulties in the larger historical society. Our private troubles

are, in a sense, delivered to us by the dilemmas or contradictions of our social structure. Thus individuals, caught up in their personal troubles, are only able to make sense and perhaps to do something about them by confronting the source of the public issue. The key is for individuals to be able to make the connection between their private troubles and public issues. Making this connection is the job of the sociological imagination — of being able to see how our personal biographies are shaped through the historical development of our society.

The sociological imagination provides us with an agenda for our discussion of schools. We must commence with schools as one of the institutions comprising society. We must locate schools as part of the institutional matrix; as I noted above, I think the most important are the economy and the state. We must locate schools (together with their connections with the economy and the state) within the historical pattern of development. Doing so should reveal the foundation of some of the public issues comprising what seems to be something of a crisis in current education. Doing so should reveal something of the nature of the biographies available to individuals in today's schools. Doing so should reveal something of the connection of the private troubles of today's pupils and students with the public issues of educational debate and conflict.

Let us try to follow this agenda.

What is the Sociology of Education?

I said earlier that education appears to have been in something of a crisis state for the past few years. Certainly there has been much complaining about the supposed failure of education and almost as much debate about what should be done. All this has been characterized as the 'noise' of crisis. I should like to begin by saying a little about this noise.

In the 1 February 1988 issue of *Time Magazine* the cover story deals with a black Principal of an essentially black school in New Jersey. The substance of the story discusses how he brought order and discipline to a drug-ridden, violence-prone inner city school. Noting that he was a former army sergeant, the article explains that he solved the discipline problems in a totally authoritarian way. Travelling the school's corridors with a baseball bat and a megaphone, he banned loitering, locked the doors against drug pushers, gave tardy students latrine and graffiti-scrubbing duties, much as one would find in an army boot camp.[1] But he did much more than this. He suspended 300 students in a single day for being tardy, and tossed out 'hundreds' more in the next five years. Teachers too are expected to toe the line. One hundred teachers have left in six years including a basketball coach '... who was hustled out by security guards for failing to stand at attention during the singing of the school alma mater'.

What is one to make of this? A point that I consider to be very important is this man's fame. Though I know that everyone is supposed to be famous for fifteen minutes, this seems to be pushing Warhol's epigram a bit far. Here is a man who has made the cover of *Time* (appropriately weilding a baseball bat, the model name of which is 'Big Stick'), has been offered a White House post as policy adviser, has appeared on TV talk shows, and has had the rights to his life story bought by Warner Bothers. The man's philosophy and behaviour should not be stuff from which fame is made. In the course of events, these verge on the trivial. I would like to suggest that the times (no pun intended) have made him famous. Yesterday he would never have been famous; tomorrow he may not be. But there is something about the current situation that has given to him this fame. A key question then becomes what is it about the current situation?

This fame is all the more bemusing given that he is a manifest failure. I submit that one ought to have an orderly school if one expels those students whose behaviour constitutes disorder. But one would also anticipate that if disorderly students tend to get lower marks, and if these students are systematically removed, the average mark would increase. However, whilst math scores are up 6 per cent, reading scores have 'barely budged' and remain in the bottom third of American high school seniors. Moreover, the dropout rate has increased from 13 to 21 per cent. So in terms of the most widely acceptable criterion of success — student achievement — the man and his school must be judged a failure. Yet he and his practices, his transformation of social relations among himself and teachers and students, have acquired fame. The foundation of his fame lies in his success in instilling discipline and order by means of transforming his school into a jail. Doing so has made him famous at this juncture in the historical development of American society. Why?

If schools ought to become like jails, perhaps it would be equally good for jails to become like schools. In the 7 January 1988 issue of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* one can read an account of alternative prisons in Georgia. Referred to in the article as shock centres, they are intended for youth (ages 17 to 25) without a prior record and without psychological problems. They live under highly regimented conditions and within very authoritarian social relations. The experience resembles an army boot camp and many of the prison guards are ex-military men. The centre is located adjacent to a regular prison replete with 'hardcore inmates' to which these youth can be transferred at the discretion of the guards. The fear of this in conjunction with the regimentation of their daily experiences in order to instill self-discipline is supposed to be responsible for the success of these shock centres. Again, success is a relative term. The failure rate is 20 per cent in spite of the care taken over selection (youth with no prior record) and release, where their return to society is supervised for 'an extended period'.

You will have noticed the parallels between the high school in New