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Education and Political Thought

The relation between education and political thought has a long history. Early French sociological thinking regarding the development of a secular ‘modernist’ society focused on the importance of education, as in the work of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) who lectured in both pedagogy and sociology (Turner, 2006, p. 158). Much later, Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) would render education central to his view of social reconstruction and democratic planning. Many would argue that education is not a neutral enterprise. This conception, though generally associated with the work of Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and people he inspired, has been the mantra of several other movements.

Over the last 30 years, we have been exposed to thinking about education as strongly connected with the market ideology, commonly referred to as neoliberal (e.g. Chester Finn Jr. b.1944). Education is seen as a consumption rather than a public good with responsibility for learning being placed on the individual. This contrasts with notions of education as a democratic public good associated with a variety of thinkers. We refer, *noblesse oblige*, to John Dewey's (1859-1952) notion of a democratic education for the creation of a democratic society. Dewey’s notion, combined with insights from critical theory and other sources, has more recently been taken up by Henry A. Giroux (b. 1943) regarding the need to defend public spaces against the onslaught

of neoliberal commodification. He actually broadened the notion of education (Giroux, 2005) to include several sites of public pedagogy ranging from schools to cinemas and youth entertainment areas, as well as the consumer culture and military culture ideologies. He does this when analyzing the devastating effects and ‘terror’ of neoliberal policies and when arguing for universities, schools and other learning agencies serving as democratic public spheres. Michael Apple (b 1942) argued for the democratisation of the curriculum which he presents as a site of contestation mirroring other sites of struggle such as the state and the domain of textbook publishing. He has been detailing the economic, political, and ideological processes that enable specific groups' knowledge to become ‘official’ (Apple, 1993) while other groups' knowledge is ‘popular’. Over the past two decades, he has critically examined the social movements that internationally exercise leadership in educational reform. He has also analyzed progressive reforms that can provide models for critically democratic alternatives.

Antonia Darder (b. 1952) has engaged with issues of cultural democracy and consistently with notions of culture and power concerning conditions of schooling in disenfranchised and racialized communities (Darder, 2011). Most of these writers are exponents of *critical pedagogy*. One major exponent, Peter McLaren (b.1948) defines critical pedagogy as “fundamentally concerned with the centrality of politics and power in our understanding of” education and learning.

Critical pedagogy is very much inspired by Freire. There are however many others who stress the political nature of education, including Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) and his students at Barbiana (students ‘pushed out’ of the public school system). Their *Letter to a Teacher* is a classic concerning the relationship between social class and educational achievement. (Borg *et al*, 2009) Among other things, this narrative emphasizes the collective dimension of teaching and learning

and the class basis of social selection as manifest in selective public and private systems. This work anticipates writings associated with critical pedagogy and the 'new sociology of education', the latter born of a series of writings (Young, 1971) that signaled an approach indicating the ideological basis and class biases of schooling. Their demonstration of the affinities between the culture of middle class homes and that of the school and this institution's traditional rupture with working and peasant class cultures resonate with Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) writings concerning the school's 'cultural arbitrary' and the issues of 'habitus', and cultural and social capital as determinants of educational success or failure.

This kind of critique would normally be found in Marxist political thought, though Milani and Bourdieu were not Marxist. Neither was Basil Bernstein (1924-2000) who forged strong connections between pedagogical approaches (classification and framing of knowledge), linguistic codes and social class locations. Paula Allman (1944-2011) is one educational writer who did much to engage directly with Marx's own writing. Issues here concern ideology and the production of consciousness, dialectical thinking, education's role within the 'base-superstructure' relation, and education's role in the reproduction of the social conditions which enable the ruling class to retain and consolidate power. Marxist thinking on education featured in the work of the structuralist philosophers Louis Althusser (1918-1990) and Nicos Poulantzas (1936-1979) and provided explanatory power, concerning the socially reproductive function of education in Capitalist society, for Christian Baudelot (b.1938) and Roger Establet (b. 1938) in France and Samuel Bowles (b. 1939) and Herbert Gintis (b.1940) in the USA, the former concerning the schools' inculcation of the bourgeois ideology and the latter concerning the 'correspondence' between social relations in different school tracks/streams and in the different

types of work to which the tracks are likely to lead. Marxism also informed the work of people who engaged in ethnographic work regarding how students resist the dominant culture in schools, in a manner leading to working class jobs (Willis, 1977; Corrigan, 1979)

One Marxist writer who wielded much influence on the education field is Antonio Gramsci (1891 -1937). The concepts he elaborated and themes broached such as those of hegemony, the intellectuals' roles, the factory council theory and the integral state, have had a great impact on educational thought and have become central concepts in most discussions on the relationship between education and power. Education, from a Gramscian perspective, is viewed in its broadest context and not just in the context of the 'Unitarian school' (Gramsci's notes on schooling), therefore incorporating all elements of the hegemonic apparatus. Gramsci's major pedagogical philosophy would be the 'pedagogy of praxis,' inferred from his elaboration of the 'philosophy of praxis'. Other issues concern the role of education and the integral state, the latter encompassing the heuristic political/civil society divide.

There has been a whole debate concerning the role of education and the state. Roger Dale (b.1940) analyses the immensely complex relationships occurring between capitalism, state, and education. Drawing on Offe, he analyses the process whereby education is linked to both capitalism's legitimation function, by persuading us that inequality is not endemic to the system but a consequence of our different 'abilities', and to the production of necessary 'human capital' for national and global economic ends. Dale argues that the ways those tensions are felt and addressed through education are central to our understanding and experience of the world. Other authors have also analysed education in the context of the State's legitimation and accumulation functions (Carnoy & Levin, 1985), while Andy Green (1990) has analysed education within the context of State formations.

The politics and non-neutrality of education lie at the core of that long tradition of educational provision known as independent working class education (IWCE) as manifest, for example, in the work of the Plebs league and the labour colleges in Britain. They represented an attempt at a break with bourgeois culture. IWCE occurred through classes and schools, workmen's colleges, alternative libraries and sporting events. (Waugh, 2009)

The critique of capitalist education and more recently neoliberal education has come from various quarters. Feminist writings have served to expose the contribution that education makes to the consolidation of patriarchy as well as its potential to confront it both within and outside formal institutional settings. Sara Delamont (b. 1947), for instance, has argued that both sexes are diminished by institutional sexism in all sections of the education system so that the lack of women in engineering is no more serious than the lack of men training as infant teachers or nurses (Delamont, 2003). Jane Thompson (b. 1946) has applied the ideas and convictions of modern feminism to the curriculum and practice of women's education and adult education. She is concerned not simply with access issues but with politicising the significance of women's lived experiences (Thompson, 2000) and with developing theories to explain the changing conditions of women in global capitalism. She has exemplified the linking of women's activism to both educational change and wider social and political movements concerned with fighting inequalities. Similarly, Kathleen Lynch (b. 1951) contributed to feminist thinking in education through her work on the intersectionality of injustice. She has examined ways by which gendered problems of recognition are interwoven with issues of re/distribution and representation. She has also highlighted the importance of relationality and emotions for understanding the dynamics of injustice in education and has developed the concept of 'affective' equality to explain how

carelessness is a key equality problem for society and for educators. Angela Myles' (b.1946) main theoretical contribution is the concept of 'integrative feminisms' and 'multi-centred' (as opposed to de-centred) social movement (Myles, 1996). She draws on Adrienne Rich's (b.1929) integrative feminist perspective on education that recognizes the specificity of women's history, interests and value. The focus here is on women being able to recognize and name the world themselves very differently from the way men have done - rather than simply having equal access to male education .

Of particular importance here is the work of Mary Belenky *et al* (1986). They focused on how women learn and what is distinctive about their learning, drawing their insights from responses to questions posed to 135 female interviewees. In Italy, Anna Maria Piussi's (b. 1944) pedagogy refutes the paradigm of victimisation and feminine discrimination. The key idea is to value, also through education, women's difference and differences in general and to help gain awareness of oneself and discover one's voice as woman engaged in relationships with others.

bell hooks (b. 1952) brings an afro-American perspective into the debate on women and education. hooks foregrounds the issue of race and ethnicity in this context. A whole body of work, not least that found in the journal, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, addresses such concerns. Among the major sources is W.E. B. Dubois (1868 - 1963) who wrote extensively on the empowerment of black students and an education which enables them to see themselves through their own eyes rather than through the white perspectives provided by traditional education. (Kincheloe, 1993).

More recently, we come across the writings of George Sefa Dei (b.1954) who formulates an integrative anti-racism education - race, class, gender, sexuality and disability interactions through a race-centric lens (Dei, 1998) - and examines black youth disengagement from school

as a 'push out' problem . He also develops the concept of Africentric schooling as a counter-vision to conventional white-centric education, and promotes anti-colonial thinking in education, underscoring the importance of indigenous knowledge.

Closely related to this area is thought associated with postcolonial and decolonizing studies in education. The term 'postcolonialism' is mainly used in an all-embracing manner. It accounts for processes of domination that have their origin in European colonisation. These processes extend beyond the period of direct colonisation to take on new forms, notably those of neo-colonialism, dependency and the intensification of globalisation. As a site of struggle, education has constituted a key vehicle for the 'colonisation of the mind.'(Ngugi, 1981, p.16).

There is a body of literature on education connected with the disability movement. It eschews the medical/deficit model and adopts the social constructivist approach. Writing around this field, often directed at policy making, but not only, can be found in such outlets as the journal *Disability & Society*. Some writers such as Susan Peters (b. 1947) in the USA have drawn on Freire to explore empowering pedagogical insights in this context. The literature exposes forms of disabling environments and education and explores possibilities for an enabling education for all. In this view, the barriers are regarded as disabling, difference is valued and the strengths of individuals are emphasised. Contributors like Mike Oliver (1990) shift the emphasis from individual deficits to disabling environments when turning around a series of conventional 'deficit' questions regarding what is awry with the relationship between the individual and the environment.

The theme of inclusion is not simply confined to social relations. It extends to human-earth relations, often in the context of 'ecopedagogy.' This is a holistic approach to pedagogy that conceives of people as primarily relational beings acting in communion not only with human

others but with all other creative beings within the cosmos. The work of Edmund O'Sullivan (b. 1938), drawing on Thomas Berry, is instructive here (O'Sullivan, 1999).

Finally, there is a large body of work dealing with policy making in education and here the work of Stephen J Ball (b. 1950) has been significant. His major contribution has been the development of a 'method' of analysis - 'the policy cycle' - a combination of Foucauldian theory and ethnographic methods, which offers a set of starting points for theorising and researching policy processes. Ball's earlier work focused on the micropolitics of the school, using political theory to develop a conflict model of school organisation.

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