
To What Extent Do Marxist Ideas Help Us Address The Challenges Of 21st Century Education

Introduction

Marxist political theory began with Karl Marx in the mid-19th century. It was formed in direct opposition to the dominant capitalist ideology and rooted in the dissonance of societal classes. Marx argued this discord was caused by the ruling class, defined as the bourgeoisie, that own and control the means of production, and the working class, known as the proletariat, who are exploited by the ruling class for profit. Early Marxist theories were often grounded in the defiance of repression experienced by the proletariat and manifested as a collection of political and economic theories. Marx believed the dominant ideology of capitalism was largely unjust and overall damaging to the working class. They espoused the view that returning to a 'pure' communist ideology of socialism, incorporating ideas surrounding collectivisation and the shared ownership of the means of production, would benefit society, overall improving the lives of the majority of the population, rather than a smaller number of successful capitalists. The ideals of Marx remain contemporarily relevant, with theoretical frameworks from traditional Marxists still forming the basis for study today. This is evident in topics ranging from the more obvious political and economic subjects, to more nuanced fields, such as cultural studies and post-colonialism. As this essay will focus on Marxist ideas concerning alienation, hegemony and ideology, and their relevance in contemporary, 21st century, education, Marxism will be discussed, hereon in, from the perspective of an economic sociological approach. To fully understand and evaluate the significance of Marxist theorists that are relevant to contemporary education, it seems just to compare the views of functional structuralists and, furthermore, post-modernists that oppose theories of Marxism. This will allow for a critical evaluation of Marxist ideas and form the basis for a rounded argument.

Hegemony and Ideology

While Marx widely considered ideology one of the most important factors in creating a hegemonic discourse that allowed the ruling class to maintain power, it was Antonio Gramsci, in his seminal work *The Prison Notebooks* (1971), that began to develop the Marxist definition of the terms in to what they represent today. He, like Marx, considered the political and economic system of a capitalist society to be beneficial for only a handful of societies wealthiest elite. He argued that the capitalists, who controlled the means of production, were profiting hugely from the labour of the proletariat, who worked for a wage that barely covered their cost of living. Gramsci considered this a form of economic slavery, that was imposed by the dominant ruling classes through capitalist ideologies. In attempting to discover why this ideology was so readily acceptable to the subservient masses, he discovered that ideology could be enforced by convincing the proletariat that those in power had their own interests at heart, and that those interests, were the interests of all (1971, p. 59). Hegemony, in Gramsci's work, was considered the forming of an ideological cultural consensus among the two opposing class systems. This consensus was imposed by political and economic means, as well as through state control of the media and the education systems in society. Put simply, the identity of a society can be modified to fit the agenda of the dominant class, a concept often founded in essentialist thought.

A fitting analogy is that the power of the ruling classes, is held up by the two supporting pillars of ideology and cultural consensus, if the discourse is not maintained, and the ideology becomes questioned, the pillars will not be strong enough to hold up the power of the dominant hegemony. This can result in revolution and cause systemic change, which of course, the ruling classes would wish to avoid at all costs. Louis Althusser (1971) built on this theory, considering how a dominant ideology is maintained by those in power. He distinguished between two variations of state apparatus that enforce an ideology, in order to maintain power: repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ideological state apparatus (ISA). Repressive state apparatus, the most common method of maintaining power, is where the dominant ideology is enforced by violent means, either through policing or the military, and populations are coerced in to conforming with the threat of prison and punishment. Ideological state apparatus (ISA) on the other hand, are social institutions that can be utilised by the state to transmit a set of beliefs and values that support the hegemony of the ruling class, such institutions include the media, religion, the workplace, families, social groups and most pertinently schools, leading to a more subtle acceptance of the ideology. Althusser attributed these institutions to forming a cultural consensus, in this way the dominant ideology can be transmitted through consent, rather than coercion, reproducing the required ideology for maintaining the hegemonic dominance of the ruling class and effectively preparing the population for a capitalist future. As a result, we end up with the ruling class ideology and the creation of a false class consciousness, in which society is unaware of their exploitation. Althusser considered education an ISA, due to its repeated conveyance of the values of capitalism as a wholly fair and reasonable way of organising society, while simultaneously portraying any alternative socio-economic system, such as socialism or communism, as 'unreasonable or illogical' (1971, pp.125).

False consciousness in education, as a means to create hegemony among the ruling class ideology

Althusser strongly believed educational systems served the interests of the ruling classes and paved the way for students to passively accept their future job positions in capitalist societies. Marx's argument in Capital Volume Two (1885) posits that any capitalist society must necessitate a social formation in order to maintain the means of production. He referred to this process as a 'reproduction of the means of production' (1885 p. 36). Marxist theorists, such as Gramsci and Althusser, considered societal inequalities a purposeful dissonance resulting in the continuation of social stratification. This is exemplified in the Marxist approach to education and school system values as they view inequality among students a linear narrative, attributing the disparate experiences of students from differing class backgrounds as relative to the socio-economic processes that effect these individuals.

Traditional Marxists, Bowles and Gintis, concur with Althusser's earlier work. They believe that a main function of education in capitalist societies is to produce a subservient class of labourers that benefit the bourgeoisie, by creating a cultural hegemony and false class consciousness (1976). Furthermore, they question whether equality of opportunity in education even exists, and that the main function of schools is to indoctrinate children with norms and values through a hidden curriculum (1976, p. 15). Although widely regarded, Parsons disputes this argument, positing that school 'teaches us the value of working hard to achieve' (1959, pp. 318), yet Bowles and Gintis theorise we are not working for our own reward, but instead, we are forced to work hard so that we can be 'exploited by capitalism for profit' (1976, pp. 139). This idea of a hidden curriculum had been previously defined by Illich, in his work *Deschooling Society* (1973).

The hidden curriculum refers to any experiences learnt through the process of attending school, rather than the main curriculum subjects that are taught. Bowles and Gintis attach the hidden curriculum to an interlinked 'correspondence principle' (1976, pp. 131), wherein the experiences of adhering to rules, learning to behave in accordance with establishment rules and accepting hierarchical authority all correspond directly with the qualities required to perform menial labour jobs in later life. They posit that this subservience creates a docile, compliant workforce, instilling the belief that those who work hard and conform will be rewarded for their actions. Despite the merits of this idea, the research of both Althusser and Bowles and Gintis has proved highly contentious among academic scholars and caused much debate. Criticisms of this approach show too much emphasis is placed on the correlation between education and later work life, considering a lack of evidence to the Marxist theories. In recent times, both students and workers have proven themselves not to be a docile group, as neither often blindly accepts authority without questioning the motives of teachers or bosses respectively. Contemporary findings indicate that school leavers have been criticised for their work values, (BBC News, 2007) with employers believing schools and universities are not imparting the right skills for the workplace. This is one of the reasons that many jobs are going to people from different countries, as they are considered to have a better work ethic (Dawson et al. 2014). Clearly there is evidence that our school system does not produce the ideal workers for a capitalist workplace. Reynolds and Sullivan (1987), also posited that it was not the objective of the curriculum to develop an obedient workforce, rather pupils are taught critical thinking and to question social and political matters. Lessons are rarely directly linked to capitalism and the economy, and in universities students are taught to challenge the dominant ideology and highlight inequalities in society, thus teaching students to think critically and independently. Reynolds believed it impossible for capitalists to completely rule schools, as local authorities and teachers have more control over the curriculum than the government does. Despite this, Bowles and Gintis research, conducted in the 70s, may be more applicable today in the United Kingdom as local authorities and teachers have lost some of their freedom due to the establishment of grant-maintained schools and academies and enforcement of the national curriculum.

Further studies on hegemony in education

In response to findings, Giroux (1981) theorised that working-class students participated in designing their own education, without accepting everything they are taught. In taking advantage of their own culture, Giroux believed the working classes could find ways of responding to the education system often through opposition, as portrayed by the research of Willis (1977). Neo Marxist Willis criticises the traditional Marxist approach to education, posited by Althusser and Bowles and Gintis. His infamous study, *Learning to Labour* researched the behaviour of twelve working-class boys who rebelled against the education system and attached no value to academic work. He deduced from this study that the boys were not being indoctrinated and shaped by the education system at all, rather actively rebelling and denouncing it all together. He found the students felt superior to other pupils and teachers, looking forward to manual work when they left school and valuing all other non-school related activities much higher than gaining an education. Willis described their behaviour as a counter-school-culture as the boys rejected the education system altogether, rather he blamed it directly for creating a resistant subculture among the working-class. The boys did not believe that those from a working-class background could achieve good grades and better jobs by working hard, and that no matter what they did in school they would still end up in a similar career as their

fathers. Willis' research disagreed with the functionalist notion of a meritocracy, but also disagreed with traditional Marxist views of Bowles and Gintis. The school system failed to produce a docile work force through the hidden curriculum or prepare the boys for capitalism, instead producing a counter school culture. This study does however fundamentally agree with Marxism in that it continues the social stratification of society. The boys were preparing themselves for working-class jobs and continuing the process of creating a middle-class work force.

The boys believed they were resisting the system and rebelling against education, however, they were actually conforming to the capitalist ideology, put forward by traditional Marxist theorists by signing themselves up for low paid jobs. Willis' research was criticised for studying only twelve working-class white boys, yet a similar study of another small percentage of young girls carried out by Jackson more recently (2006), studied the behaviour of working-class girls and correlated Willis' findings in showing that working hard at school was not seen as 'cool' among the girls. (2006, pp. 79).

This depiction of educational institutions as often ineffective at socialising children in to the work habits of obedience, directly opposed the position of Bowles and Gintis (1976), however the research examined only a small minority of population, as well as being both gender and class specific. Despite this, studies of this kind remain relevant and are considered an important factor in understanding the effects of class and background on educational attainment, as well as explaining a resistant subculture that has resulted from a failure to emphasise the importance of education.

This importance of education has been studied and classified by Bourdieu under a broad umbrella of 'cultural capital' (1977). Bourdieu argues that middle class parents who have skills, knowledge and educational values themselves, both enable and encourage their children to do better academically.

Bourdieu argues that students from middle class families often perform better in the education system because they possess more economic capital or wealth. Evidence surrounding the idea that both wealth and class impact on educational attainment is vast. Lee (1989), posited the importance of material deprivation on school performance, citing key factors such as health, diet and quality of housing, as highly influential on educational attainment. He theorised that the most basic human needs of a student be fulfilled in order for them to achieve their maximum potential while in school. Undeniably, these requirements are vital, as children sent to school without breakfast are more tired than those with a healthy diet and educational performance suffers as a result. Children with a poor diet often suffer ill health from a lack of nutrition which can also affect their attendance at school.

Bourdieu (1977) also considers the significant influence of cultural advantages that can be used to achieve economic gains. He defined this as cultural capital, arguing that money alone does not reward an individual with educational success due to the nature of the education system. Academic tests, such as writing essays and passing examinations would only be possible if an individual possessed the correct cultural capital, as the standard for school achievement is set by the dominant culture in society. Bourdieu theorised that education simply maintained the existing class structure and therefore legitimised class inequality, giving an unfair advantage to those who already possessed a higher class of cultural background. He posits that middle-class families can convert their economic capital to educational capital as they are able to purchase

material advantages for their children. These could include paying for attendance of private schools or for private tutors that can further academic success. This is a luxury that the working-class are not able to access. Parents investing in private education in this manner utilise a form of social capital, defined by Bourdieu (1977) and Ball (2003) as a method of accumulative support networks. Social capital is more accessible to middle-class families, than to working-class families, exemplified through choices made in higher education and the planning of careers (Ball, 2003). Ball posits that working-class families have less knowledge of the routes to higher education, compared to middle-class families that already possess knowledge and can utilise connections between higher education and professional careers. Alongside this, an emphasis on the importance of education is generally experienced more in middle class families that possess a higher cultural capital. They are more likely to encourage their children to pursue academia to achieve a university education because they did so themselves. Working class children may have a similar process, with parents less likely to push them towards academia having never needed it themselves. Parents may always have been happy without requiring educational qualifications, and therefore see no need for their children to perform well academically. It is however important to consider that these views can be a generalisation as children do not always take their parents advice. Many children may also not have the opportunity to go to university despite their best intentions. Social mobility has however greatly improved for those from a lower-class background, with many universities offering incentives for the first child of any family to continue on to higher education. Society has seen a rise in students from working class backgrounds going on to further education, but this has been accompanied with a growth in vocational training. Vocational training is considered further education and contributes to government statistics; however, it also prepares students for manual labour jobs. The New Labour government of 1998, also implemented the Sure Start educational outreach program that offered compensatory education from a young age to families that could not afford to send their children to nursery. The program continues today and aims to give working class children equal opportunities, by offering mothers greater accessibility to services. Feinstein (2003) however, found that redistributive policies such as this, should carry on throughout a student's entire education rather than being restricted to pre-school years.

A final evaluation of Marxist and functionalist perspective shows that despite their respective differences, both views do share some similarities. Both consider the education system an agent of secondary socialisation, and see schools as shaping individuals for later life to serve the needs of society. Structural functionalists view education as an institute that meets the needs of society by asserting important values to students, while Traditional Marxists are concerned with the way the educational system transmits the ideology of the ruling class, rather than meeting the needs of all people equally. Both approaches also consider the education system an influential factor in justifying inequality. Functionalists Davis and Moore believe this inequality is essential for society to function harmoniously as a meritocracy, while neo Marxist Althusser posits modern schooling a tool of ISA in the continuation of class inequality. Both traditional and neo Marxists criticise the functionalist belief in educational meritocracy, attributing the combined effect of material and cultural deprivation as influential on educational attainment and believing key factors are overlooked in this functionalist approach to education.

In contemporary schooling however, it seems socio-economic factors carry less weight than they have done in the past. Many Marxist studies analysed in this essay were conducted in the late 1970s, when the wealth and class background of the family was inextricably linked to the cultural and social capital of a student. Middle class families had a wider access to resources

that could aid in educational attainment, however in recent times an increase in social mobility among the working-class populations has increased the equality of opportunities for students from all backgrounds. Despite this, Wilmott (1992), found that pupils in Liverpool and Manchester, who suffered the effects of material and cultural deprivation, were more likely to leave school without GCSE level qualifications.

In conclusion, traditional Marxists view educational systems as influential in maintaining and legitimising the hegemony of the dominant class. This forms the basis for continued social stratification and, according to Marxist theory, is cyclically reproduced forming material and cultural advantages of students from middle class families and allowing for higher educational attainment. Put simply, Marxists believe children of middle class families far more likely to achieve a better education, resulting in middle class jobs, while children from a working-class background receive a poorer standard of education, generally resulting in lower-paid, manual labour roles in later life.

Thus, the dominant ideology of hegemony

contemporary studies have shown that students still suffer from the deprivation that class inequalities provide, however, to argue that economic deprivation alone causes poor educational performance would be considered too deterministic as students from working class backgrounds often perform as well as middle class students academically. It could, however, be factual to say poverty disadvantages working-class students and makes it more difficult for them to succeed.

To effectively answer the question of whether the Marxist approach to education is still relevant in contemporary schooling, is to look at whether educational systems promote a push towards capitalist ideologies in later life. The eventual goal of the education system is still role allocation, and values of working hard and conforming still result in students being rewarded with a job that fits their ability. This is compliant with the sociological view of functionalist role allocation and, as a result, Marxists can still argue that the educational system remains an institution that serves the capitalist ideology.

Perhaps most importantly though, there is strong evidence from Marxist theorists that the functionalist belief in a meritocracy is unfounded, and one thing that is agreed by both functionalist and Marxist theorists, is that inequalities will always exist in all societies. While the gap between the lower, working classes becomes ever polarised with societies most affluent families, the struggle to find a balance in contemporary public education will continue to remain a challenge and Marxism will remain a relevant concept. Functionalists will always believe these inequalities are necessary for role allocation and for society to successfully function, while Marxist theorists will always argue that these unavoidable inequalities legitimise the dominant hegemony and serve the needs of the ruling class.