

Appraise the contention that education largely serves to reproduce social inequalities

‘Above all, we must fight against the power of the dominant neoliberal ideology that keeps on offending and attacking the human nature while reproducing itself socially and historically, threatening dreams, utopias and hopes’ Paulo Freire 1998

Neoliberalisation has altered the conditions for knowledge production, along with the spaces and sites of education. The predominance of Reaganite free-market ideologies has compelled governments to restructure and retreat from a commitment to funding education. Under these decentralised conditions, the education system now serves, by in large, to reproduce social inequalities. Drawing evidence from the structuralist theories of Bourdieu, Althusser and Bowles, one argues that imperceptible hierarchies within the education system reproduce the capitalist relations of production necessary for wealth accumulation. Empirical evidence is particularly drawn from Jeffery’s and Sen’s research of education in the Indian Subcontinent. At the core of this essay, however, is an appraisal and acknowledgement that whilst education can reproduce social inequalities, it can dually act in their reduction. One identifies the structuralist discourse as overtly pessimistic, that whilst appearing universal and infallible, it is in fact reductionistic and fails to account for ‘human agency’ and the anomalous spaces of resistance in which education is emancipatory and allows the individual to develop a dissimilar personal trajectory, independent from the strictures of class (Sen, 2000). Education, in this sense becomes a ‘heterogeneous social practice, a lived experience...with shifting meanings for various persons and contexts.’ (Jeffery, 2004). Coupling Bourdieu’s focus on structure with Sen’s on agency, education emerges as a contradictory resource, on the one hand providing social opportunities for youth whilst with the other, feeding them more tightly into a system of inequality. Whilst education largely serves to reproduce social inequalities, it too serves in their reduction. The causal-effect relationship is less pre-determined and more tenuous than the structuralists would have us believe.

Althusser postulates that education is ‘one of the most important institutions by which the ruling class establish and maintain their hegemony and reproduce the conditions of capitalist production.’ (Althusser, 1971). Education has become the dominant Ideological State Apparatus in developed capitalist societies, replacing the church in importance, precisely because it ‘has the obligatory audience of the totality of children...eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven.’ As such, school systems - intimately involved in the process of sorting and selection - slot students neatly into a hierarchy that is a homologous reflection of the workplace, such that by the time they reach the age of sixteen, students are ‘ejected into production’. The ‘scholastically adapted’ youth are then sent into positions of power and privilege (managers, business owners, professionals), while the vast majority, the ‘huge mass’, are sent into more exploited positions (labourers, minimum wage workers). Althusser’s theory is strongly evidenced in Brazil, a country that whilst promoting the expansion of basic education, has also deepened its structures of social exclusion. The school system within urban Brazil is increasingly heterogenous between the favelah and upper classes. Individuals are processed differentially in schools according to class in order to fit positions in the occupational structure. Whilst children from the upper class are socialised to be independent and autonomous, their counterparts from the lower classes receive a type of education focused on uncritical obedience and the repetition and memorization of information. These unequal experiences of education often then persist temporally as men and women with similar levels of education are more likely to marry one another, reinforcing the reproduction of social inequality. Brazil’s educational policies are occurring at a time of contradictory politics in which education ‘must adapt to the needs of business and at the same time state

expenditure, to those very ends, be reduced. Hirtt suggests these inherent contradictions in government rhetoric are resolved by the polarisation of the labour market, and the selective economising thereafter, such that manual and service workers receive a cheap, inferior education limited to transferable skills and elite workers receive a more expensive, superior one. This phenomenon is becoming more apparent as schools and universities, aligned closely to national and regional economies, are universally mandated to efficiently and effectively create the new breed of entrepreneurs and innovators. Inequality manifests itself in society, rooted in the polarisation of educational attainment between the classes.

Furthering Althusser's structuralism, the 'correspondence principle' theorised by Bowles, posits the existence of a homology between the workplace and the school, where social relations are implicitly indoctrinated. Through the hierarchical division of labour that exists between teachers and students, the alienated nature of student school work itself and the competition that exists among students, youth are prepared to accept their role in the hierarchical structures of the labour market. These social experiences of education, notably competition and intensive testing, have proliferated in the UK and USA under the neoliberal policies of Thatcher and Bush; developments such as the 1988 Education Reform Act and the Bush 'No Child Left Behind Act' of 2001, nationalising and intensifying patterns of control, conformity and hierarchy. Bush's 'underperforming' schools are often forced to prioritize the 'intensive monitoring of students' achievement over opportunities for genuine educational improvement' (Potter et al. 2008). Furthermore the systematic parallels between education and the labour market have deepened as education becomes commercialised. In England and Wales, many public comprehensive, all-intake all-ability, secondary schools have been replaced and sold off to individuals via the Academies scheme.

As Potter contends, this transformation is not endemic in the UK, but occurs throughout the world as 'a motley assortment of non-state agents [enter] the vacuum left by the state: international organizations promising development through education, institutions with overt religious or political agendas, and diverse profit-seeking educational entrepreneurs' (Potter et al. 2008). Where there is a market and youth who are selectively chosen upon 'academic achievement' or ability to pay, the result is often increasing 'raced' and gendered social class differentiation. The middle classes rapidly colonise the 'best' institutes, crowding out the working classes. In England and Wales, university education has become highly tiered - entry conditioned by one's wealth and social class background - since New Labour introduced variable fees for different universities. Indeed, as McCulloch suggests, the very nature of the school, once 'safe, domesticated, and progressive' has shifted under neoliberalism to become 'threatening, estranged and regressive', determined by the demands of markets and 'clients' (McCulloch, 1997). There is increasing evidence that marketisation is further consolidating the position of a handful of prestigious institutions - globally, nationally, and regionally - at the expense of government-funded schools and colleges that provide for the poor. Jeffery elicits the widening gap in India between the standards of education within a tiny stratum of elite institutions such as the University of Delhi and the plethora of poorly resourced government and private educational institutions.

While Bowles' correspondence theory places emphasis on economic capital, Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction privileges symbolic capital in the form of cultural and social capital (Walker, 2003). For Bourdieu, domination is not only a reflection of economic power but is, rather, constituted by a more subtle, symbolic power, imposed by the ruling class. According to Bourdieu, the social space constitutes the arena for social distinction, within which the individual

internalises the schemas of perception and judgement to refine his preferences and taste. Bourdieu refers to this as one's 'habitus'. An individual's 'habitus' is determined mostly by his position in the social space, it is the internalization and naturalization of the attitudes he is exposed to. Education serves to reproduce inequalities because the dominant groups perpetuate their privilege by drawing upon their cultural and social capital, which is much greater than that possessed by underprivileged groups (Shirley, 1986). As a consequence, dominant classes are able to exercise symbolic violence by transforming their cultural arbitrariness into universal forms of meaning, such that the lower classes idealise them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu shows how this system of stratification produced and reproduced what he termed a 'state nobility' – a self-perpetuating concentration of symbolic capital: 'When the process of social rupture and segregation that takes a set of carefully selected chosen people and forms them into a separate group is known and recognized as a legitimate form of election, it gives rise in and of itself to symbolic capital that increases with the degree of restriction and exclusivity of the group so established. The monopoly, when recognized, is converted into a nobility.

Bourdieu basing his theory on the French education system, revealed that universities functioned 'like an immense cognitive machine, operating classifications that, although apparently completely neutral, reproduce pre-existing social classifications.' As such, and through the interaction of 'habitus' and the historically constituted structures of the university, social inequalities are reproduced. That potential students are sorted both by their prior levels of educational attainment, itself conditioned by their economic circumstances, and by social circumstance, is evidenced in the UK by the stark differences in admissions between state and fee-paying independent schools of equal academic merit, and in the equally stark disadvantages of applicants from state schools located in the most deprived areas of the country. In 2008, the thirty most highly selective universities took 48% of applicants from independent schools and selective state schools, but only 18% of applicants from non-selective state schools. Furthermore state pupils in Reading, Hammersmith and Fulham were more than fifty times more likely to be accepted at Oxford or Cambridge than pupils in Hackney, Rochdale, Knowsley, or Sandwell. For the working-class applicants, their internalised conceptions to higher education, their habitus, were 'characterised by doubt, ambivalence, shame and deliberative decision-making...choice for a majority involving either a process of finding out what you cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion' (Sutton Trust Education Report, 2008) As such, the cultural capital hierarchies inherent in the education system serve to reproduce social inequalities.

Disillusionments, such as those elicited in the 'habitus' of lower class British students, are particularly prominent when the 'practices of education articulate with other structural forces,' occurring external to the institution (Ansell, 2008). Research in Lesotho revealed that the combined influence of a schooling regime ill-equipped to cater for threatened young people and an HIV/AIDS crisis led to decisions, predominantly by the lower class youth and those of single parent families, to remove themselves from education. Furthermore Jones' and Chant's research on The Gambia and Ghana concluded that a coalescence of forces in 2008 - the state's failure to invest in formal education, economic crisis, and a shortage of jobs for school matriculates - compelled many young people, especially girls, to leave school to obtain paid employment. Even in California, the ninth largest world economy, the shift of responsibility for social reproduction from the state to households 'intersected with the neoliberalisation of education to disrupt the schooling of working-class young men in California'. (Crotty et al. 2008) Alienation thus appears intrinsic in the education system, Jeffery studying the educational lives of young Dalit men in Uttar Pradesh documented a 'reproductive crisis' and a growing

culture of masculine resentment. As Jeffery elucidates: ‘increased formal education [gave] these men a sense of dignity and confidence at the village level’ However, all dignity was dissipated once these men entered the wider labour market and were ‘unable to convert the ‘cultural capital’ into secure employment.’ Education, thus served to reproduce distinctive social inequalities of employment and unemployment.

The structuralist focus on reproductive spaces and systems of inequality fails to account for pockets of resistance¹. Amartya Sen, a strong advocate of ‘critical agency’, posits that education provides autonomy to the individual. In his words, education is not just ‘an arrangement for training to develop skills; but also a recognition of the nature of the world, with its diversity and richness, and an appreciation of the importance of freedom and reasoning as well as friendship.’ (Sen; Edinburgh speech, 2005) In India, Sen noted the emancipatory effects of education, which far from determining class and, in particular, gendered hierarchies, served to reduce them. Sen evidenced that the lower fertility rates in Kerala corresponded with an educated female workforce, thus concluding that education reduces inter-generational inequalities by reducing the family to a sustainable size. Bourdieu and his hierarchy of cultural capital, does not account for the useage of symbolic capital by the lower stratas. Women educated in Uttaranchal province, India used the symbolic power of being educated as a basis for contesting aspects of patriarchy and negotiating structural and gendered contradictions in their lives. Furthermore Jeffery writes of the young educated Muslim and Dalit men who, reacting to their exclusion from secure white-collar occupations, have embraced education as a form of embodied cultural distinction and identity. In both these narratives, education encounters agency to reduce social inequality. Education not only provides the cultural capital that confers advantage in social situations (Bourdieu 1986), but has also come to define what it means to be civilized. Thus whilst failing to immediately provide white-collar employment, education provides a cultural basis for challenging entrenched hierarchies and forms of power. As such education has become a type of discursive “scaffold” upon which people display their ideas about morality, development, and respect, a scaffold from which social inequalities are redefined and rebuilt.

Neoliberal education largely serves to reproduce social inequalities. Education institutions not only mirror and extend neoliberal, individualistic principles of privatisation, competition and the proliferation of markets, but also perpetuate and contribute to their very reproductions. One agrees with the structuralist notion that neoliberal rhetoric, education as the ‘great equaliser’, is riddled with false assumptions, inconsistencies and half truths, that rather than serving as equalisers educational institutions play a key role in reproducing inequalities. However, whilst education may indeed largely serve to reproduce social inequalities, it too serves in their reduction, offering emancipation and liberation to many. Education thus remains a contradictory resource, on the one hand providing social opportunities for youth whilst with the other, feeding them more tightly into a system of inequality.

¹ Paul Willis’s (1981) famous ethnographic study of British lads in *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, revealed how students resist school authority and hegemonic practices through conflict.

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