
A Study On How Marxism Has Influenced Our Grasping Of Education's Place

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the contribution of Marxism to our understanding of the role of education

Marxism is a top-down macro approach and a conflict theory that sees society as based on class division and capitalist exploitation of the working class. Karl Marx founded Marxism, and he described capitalism as being made up of the capitalist class or bourgeoisie and the working class or proletariat. The bourgeoisie own land, factories and businesses, and they make their money by exploiting the working class. The proletariat have to sell their labour to the bourgeoisie as they don't own any land or businesses, meaning that they earn little money. Marxists argue that the role of education is to fail working class students so that they have no choice but to work for the capitalists for low wages.

The Marxist Althusser (1971) argues that the state is made up of two apparatuses – repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses. Their purpose is to keep the bourgeoisie in power and the proletariat subordinate. Repressive state apparatuses, including the police and the army, maintain the capitalists' power through force or threatening to use force, while ideological state apparatuses, for example religion, the media and the education system, do this through controlling people's beliefs and values. Althusser argues that education has two functions; to reproduce and legitimate class inequality, as mentioned in item A. Education reproduces class inequality by failing each generation of the working class, and it legitimates class inequality by persuading the working class to believe that inequality is unavoidable and that they are always inferior to the capitalists.

Other Marxists, Bowles and Gintis, believe that the role of education is to produce an obedient workforce that will accept low pay from the bourgeoisie. From their studies, they conclude that in school submissive and obedient personality traits such as punctuality will be rewarded. This means that schooling produces workers who will take orders from the ruling class. Bowles and Gintis also argue that school is very similar to the workplace, in that they are both hierarchies with head teachers or bosses at the top who give orders, and students or workers at the bottom who have to obey them. They call this the 'correspondence principle', which operates through a hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum, as referred to in item A, teaches students lessons indirectly, such as punctuality, manners and meeting deadlines. This prepares working class students for work in the future and maintains the class divide. However, some sociologists criticise Bowles and Gintis' view that indoctrination in schools always works, since some students rebel and resist capitalists' attempts to teach them the hidden curriculum. Bowles and Gintis also argue that the education system legitimates class inequality through the 'myth of meritocracy'. A meritocracy means that everyone has equal opportunities, and rewards are given on the basis of ability and effort put in. Bowles and Gintis believe that this is a myth, unlike Functionalists, as most of the time rewards are given based on their parents' occupations and class background, not their abilities. Since the bourgeoisie make people believe that education is a meritocracy, it seems like people from the higher classes gain their opportunities and privileges fairly.

Another Marxist, Willis (1977), studied a group of 12 working class boys and found that, contrary to what Bowles and Gintis believe, working class students are able to resist the attempts of the bourgeoisie to indoctrinate them. These boys are nicknamed 'the lads' and form a counter-culture who find school boring and pointless. Willis states that there is a similarity between 'the lads' and the shop floor culture of male manual workers; both see manual work as superior and intellectual work as inferior. This explains why 'the lads' eventually end up in these low-paid, manual occupations – ironically the jobs that the capitalists want them to do. This study can be criticised, however, as Willis only studied 12 boys, which isn't very representative and so we can't generalise his findings. Also, he didn't study girls, so we can't be sure what would happen if working class females resisted indoctrination, or if they even would.

Marxists argue that the main role of schools is to fail the working class students and keep the ruling class in power. However, feminists would criticise this as Marxists do not take into account the sexist and patriarchal nature of schools, which aims to keep all men in power, not just the bourgeoisie. Other sociologists would criticise Marxists as they don't consider ethnic differences in education, they solely focus on class differences. Postmodernists argue that social class is outdated and irrelevant, and that society is more diverse now, so they criticise Marxists for focusing on class.

In conclusion, Marxists argue that the main role of education is to fail the working class so that they gain no qualifications and are forced to work for the bourgeoisie, or ruling class. Education teaches working class students to be obedient, submissive and hardworking, while making them think that inequality between the classes is inevitable.