



A critical look at the theories of sociology of education

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Abstract

This paper sets out to discuss major theories of sociology of education in an attempt to reveal why we need to extend analysis beyond their current forms. It provides both a brief historical account for each theory and fundamental critiques directed towards them. Sociology of education has taken a historical turn by breaking away from the dominant understandings of functionalist theories of 1950s. The matters of history, social class, race and gender and their intimate links to the education began to occupy a prestigious position in sociological analysis of education. However, the new sociology of education also could not escape from creating its own field specific orthodoxies

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Introduction

This paper looks at the shifts the field of sociology of education has undergone and continues to experience through the interventions of critique that advances discussions to levels that have been previously under-researched and even ignored. To achieve this end, I will firstly revisit education as functionalist analysis, as well as the line of thought and research that generated as response to the latter –critical theory. The criticism I will attempt to develop in this paper is configured along two levels of analysis: phenomenological and conceptual. For this end, I will examine relevant literature and the various theoretical and ideological stances that currently persist in the field of sociology of education. I will also shed some light on the absences, in other words gaps, one comes to observe in the many entanglements with critical questions such as outcomes of educational processes.

It is useful to point out that this task of critique is far from easy or straightforward which echoes Michael Apple's (2000) statement in an article: "I trust that it comes as no surprise that answering the question 'What is the state of sociology of education in the US?' is not an easy task." (p.125) He believes that surveying a field is itself an act of cultural production. This is because every field circumscribes "multiple dynamics, multiple and partly overlapping histories, and is in constant motion" (p.125) On the other hand, he continues, the legitimacy of "sociology of education" is a construction in its own turn. What counts as legitimate subject of sociological inquiry depends on the academic boundaries which are culturally produced and are usually the outcomes of complex power-games. What critical theory has managed to prove in deconstructing and displacing several fixations of functionalism should be highlighted in my attempt to read critical issues in the sociology of education in surpassing of the current theorizations brought about by critical theories. In other words, critical theory helped show that functionalism is not finality when approaching pressing issues in education; thus it is legitimate to view critical theory through similar lenses where it may not necessarily establish itself as our final destination.

I will first start by presenting the two main schools of theorization in the sociology of education, functionalist and critical theories, and how the theoretical contributions of the two shaped our understanding of educational issues differently. I will, then, move to the main component of this paper, which is my own attempt to extend analysis beyond the present configurations of critical theory.

Major Theories Of Sociology Of Education

Functionalist Theories of Education

Emile Durkheim, allegedly the founding father of sociology of education, sees education as a social fact “external to individual and constraining his/her behavior” (King, 1983, 16). While examining their usefulness to society rather than individuals, social facts also have to find an appropriate way to serve “the general needs of social organism”. The major functions of education, therefore, are to provide necessary social glue in order to maintain solidarity; to supply necessary technical knowledge and skills in accordance with the needs of work-place and changing technological conditions; to socialize and humanize people “by providing the normative and cognitive frameworks they lack” (Blackedge & Hunt, 1985, 10).

Functionalist approaches have been described by applying the famous analogy between human body and society, an analogy supposing that society like a human body has particular organs with specific functions. In the body, lungs take oxygen, heart pumps blood, veins carry blood etc. interdependently. Any kind of malfunction in one of these will affect the whole system’s harmony. Similarly, education as a social institution and part of social organism, for example, is connected in various ways to the economy, the family, and the political and religious systems. It has its own functions to perform within an organized whole. In other words, working in a harmony and for specific functions to perform in “perfect whole” are central to this approach (Karabel & Halsey, 1977; King, 1983; Meighan, 1981, Blackedge & Hunt, 1985; Majoribank, 1985). In this regard, knowledge that will be included in curriculum is justifiable and legitimate only if it is part of a common culture, that is, it must work towards solidarity and integration rather than pluralism and differentiation. Needs of the society are always paramount to those of individuals. Thus teachers as agents of this legitimate knowledge transmission, as well as moral models and moral beings for next generations, should constrain themselves with teaching only for societal goods. In Durkheim’s own words: “...The teacher must therefore be committed to presenting (the rule), not as own personal doing, but as a moral power superior to him, and of which he is an instrument, not the author” (Durkheim, 1961, quoted in Meighan, 1981, 209). Here, students are seen as blank sheets, *tabula rasa*, passive beings ready to be filled with common social goods by the agents (teachers) of the society.

Another form of the functionalist approach has been introduced by Talcott Parsons during the 1950s as refined basic ideas of Durkheim and an extension of structuralism (Meighan, 1981). Parsons' *Structural Functionalism* was a dominant sociological perspective in analyzing society until the 1960s (Majoribank, 1985). According to Karabel & Halsey (1977), after the Second World War, and as a preemption to increasing "Soviet threat," embodied in the war of technological development and competition grounded on the belief that "technological superiority could be converted into military dominance" (p.8), structural-functionalist theory came into prominence by remarking the "importance of educating potential talent and attack[ing] traditionally entrenched conceptions of a limited pool of educability" (p.9).

Parson argues that school, as a major agency of socialization, is a true reflection of society because of its uniqueness of being the only institutional place that teaches skills and roles (Selakovich, 1984). Parsons sees the schools as neutral places organized to provide students with necessary skills and knowledge they will need to function in the wider society. He also looks at schools as venues that pave the way to equal opportunity that facilitates the promotion of students' standing in the social hierarchy (Giroux, 1983). This equal opportunity, however, brings some differences in attainment. These differences are theorized to originate from ability, family orientations, and individual motivations or level of interest in education. Differences in educational attainment are acceptable because, even though students are born into unequal cultural or material conditions, education has the ability to erase these differentiations, based on the proposition that those who do well in school are highly rewarded (Parsons, 1961). These "natural" outcomes do not change the fact that schools are organized to disseminate opportunity to all members of society equally and that every society has such "common culture" (Blackedge & Hunt, 1985).

In modern societies, the major link between social structure and education is the economy. Therefore, schools need to respond to economic changes by "carrying out the functions of selection and training of manpower," (Meighan, 1981, 214) as well as stimulating economic change through research.

Functionalist theories of education have been criticized in various ways and replaced by radical theories of educations, as well as some mainstream approaches such as human capital theory. First, they have been criticized for neglecting the role of ideology and conflict in society (Karabel & Halsey, 1977). School is never defined independently and the idealized

functionalist description of schools has been seen as totalitarian and inadequate due to the lack of solid explication of what qualifies certain schools to be deemed “successful” or how these can be this much responsive without posing any problematic to the needs of society and the work-force (King, 1983). Especially in the second half of the 1960s, the main legacy of structural functionalism, “schools are neutral places,” has been challenged by many studies, mainly Coleman’s 1966 report. While being cognizant about the pitfalls of overgeneralization about the break points in a certain field, it is safe to argue that the Coleman’s research in 1966 about educational opportunity and its relation to students’ backgrounds has set a different agenda for sociology of education for many years to come. Much effort has been given to social stratification and status attainment problematic, as well as to uncovering to what extent students’ social background influences access to schooling experiences and how success and failure in school impact later life opportunities (Coleman, 1968).

Critical Theories of Education

A group of intellectuals whose roots can be traced to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and to Marxist and neo-Marxist theoreticians has appropriated the concept of “critical perspectives” in the field of education (Pinar and Bowers, 1992).

Critical theory came out during 1920s in Germany with the foundation of Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt. The works of the Institute have been emerged primarily as a Marxist critique of capitalist society, as well as challenging the traditions of modernity as the major product of capitalism. In this sense, they developed theories of consumerism and culture, science and technology as new forms of social control and by products of modernity.

The term “critical theory” has been coined by Horkheimer who became the director of institute at 1930 in order to define the theoretical agenda of Frankfurt School. On the other hand, while recognizing historical contribution of Frankfurt School, we should aware the wider tradition of critical philosophy, “stretching back to Kant and Hegel, and in sociology to Weber, and also the ways in which the term has recently been appropriated to apply aspects of contemporary thought...structuralism, semiotics, and poststructuralism”. (Peters, 2003, 5) What makes critical theory different than other mainstream theories according to Kellner (1989) “Critical theory is distinguished from traditional mainstream social science

through its multidisciplinary perspectives and its attempts to develop a dialectical and material social theory (Kellner, 1989, quoted in Peters, et al, 8)”

Critical theories have three major concerns: mapping injustices in education, tracing those injustices to their source, seeking and proposing remedies to those injustices. They began to work by defining inequalities in education. Working class kids or certain minority groups have been stayed at the center of discussions because of their relatively low performance in education in comparison to their white middle or upper class counterparts. (Gibson, 1986)

During 1960s fueled with the social movements, in the form of “Marxist conflict” theories, they challenge the liberal theorizations of structural-functionalist approach in education, later on they evolved through reproduction to resistance theories in following years (Karabel & Halsey, 1977) A group of educational researchers in England in 1970s claimed that the relationship among social structures, power, and schooling practices should be central to the work of sociology of education. The earliest manifestation of this understanding has been thrown up in Michael F.D. Youngs’ edited book *Knowledge and Control*. (Karabel & Halsey, 1977; Sarup, 1978) Young argued that it has not been questioned by sociology of education that “what counts as educational knowledge” (Ladwig,1996, 16). In this regard, they criticized structural-functionalist view of education and promoted necessity of “phenomenological” agenda what has later been named as “interpretivist” view in sociology of education. (Karabel and Halsey, 1977; Ladwig, 1996; Davies, 1995) Jean Anyon, Michael Apple and Henry Giroux in the United States marked the beginning of new sociology of education. Young’s (1971) book is considered as the germinal book in the field of the sociology of curriculum.

After, according to Apple (2000, 75) most of critical analysis in education focused on three major issues; “the debate over functionalism and economic reductionism or over what is called the base/superstructure issue; secondly closely related arguments between structuralists and culturalists in education; finally class reductionism.”

Reproduction and Correspondence Theories

In his famous article *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (1972) challenges the bourgeois notion that the social whole is but fragmented into segments, some of which are immune from the influence of ideology. For him, education, as well as other

aspects of the socio-cultural whole, is but an integral part of the practice of ideology and its primary disseminator, i.e., the State. Education is not a domain of neutrality where outcomes and inputs happen due to the course of nature, not a function of natural immanence, so to speak, but the field of operation for the transcendence of the State and the exertion of its multiple ideological apparatuses. Through this external practice of influence, education, Althusser continues to argue, becomes but one of the many venues where the power of the State Apparatuses come to confront those to whom it is disseminated in the form of the reproduction of its very relations.

Drawing on the contributions of French structuralists Althusser and Bourdieu, reproduction or correspondence theories -as developed and presented by the work of Bowles & Gintis (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America*- “emphasized the macro and structural dimensions of educational institutions” within society (Sultana, 1989, 287). Departing from Marx’s definition of class; that is, class is a group of people who find themselves in the same socio-political and economic conditions, Bowles and Gintis (1976) say that schools are training young people for their future economic and occupational position according to their current social class position. Students of working-class origin are trained to take orders, to be obedient, and are subject to more discipline whereas children of professionals are trained using more progressive methods, which gives them internal discipline and self-presentation skill. People have no choice because their futures are determined for them by the economic structure and their position within it. Many scholars like Jean Anyon adopted reproduction theory during 1970s. For Anyon (1981), schools serving working class communities and affluent professional communities produce and reproduce the social and cultural norms of those communities through the differential distribution of knowledge. Thus, this creates sort of reproduction process. Both the working class and affluent professional school expose students to the knowledge needed to stay within the social class they are born.

Mainstream liberal educational theorists usually espouse the egalitarian democratic rhetoric that schools are neutral agencies which provide the necessary tools for individual development and upward mobility, particularly for the underprivileged (Parsons, 1961). As opposed to this outlook, reproduction theorists have considered schools as agencies of dominant class or culture functioning to reinforce the existing power relations, set of behaviors, and patterns serving to ideological and economic interests of people in power (Demaine, 2003). These were achieved by fueling existing social asymmetries through

different ways such as transmitting particular forms of knowledge (differential distribution of knowledge) in accordance with social stratification –for instance, putting different classes and/or social groups into different “academic tracks” (Oakes, 1985). This is also argued to have been achieved by legitimating economic and ideological interests of political power (Giroux, 1983). Here, students or “working class youth” have been portrayed as “passive victims of schools’ sorting mechanisms and manipulative socialization” (Davies, 1995, 1450). In the traditional view of reproduction theory, the significance of human agency in constructing meaning and appropriating it to students’ own life conditions has been denied (Pinar & Bowers, 1992).

It is noteworthy here to mention that there is not one form of reproduction (Willis, 1981). In this sense, although many aspects of reproduction theories have been largely criticized by several scholars (Apple, 2000, Wexler, 1987, Giroux, 1983), they are nonetheless developed and widely used in the interpretations of social inequalities enforced through schooling, as well as the production and distribution of knowledge (Anyon, 1980; Weis, 1990; McLeod, 2004). It, therefore, would be a misconception to use haphazardly different forms of reproduction on different levels of analysis and/or theorizations interchangeably without being aware of the distinction among them. Social reproduction, for example, that “works through *cultural production* is quite open –not closed as pessimistic as other theories of reproduction are (correctly) held to be. It has elements of challenge, change and liberation built into it” (Willis, 1981, .66). This definition of *social reproduction* has dimensions different from and more than what Bowles and Gintis (1976) have developed and exemplified in their work. Following Willis’s (1981) conceptualization, *social reproduction* is an outcome of class relations and capitalist division of labor whereas *cultural reproduction*, hinging on complex cultural and ideological processes exists in a society, emerges from some other mechanisms such as gender, race, and ethnicity. These two forms of reproduction, however, usually go hand in hand to maintain the status quo. We have witnessed how social reproduction theories with regards to cultural production outlived Willis’s (1977) long lasting book *Learning to Labour*.

For schools are not merely institutions of reproduction, institutions where the overt and covert knowledge that is taught inexorably mold students into passive beings who are able and eager to fit into an unequal society (Apple, 1986). Because of its consideration of

students as passive internalizers, the critics of reproduction theory prepared a base for “resistance” approach.

Resistance Theories

Resistance theory originated within British Cultural Studies by scholars at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Starting with the seminal study of Willis (1977), resistance theory has received theoretical development by Giroux (1983), and has flourished in sociological books and journals. The last fifteen years have witnessed a generation of ethnographic studies that explore process of schooling through qualitative field methods in this neo-Marxist framework. Spawning a now-voluminous literature since its bold entrance, resistance theory has been the object of much theorization, discussion, modification and critique. (Giroux 1983, Apple, 1976) and has informed numerous empirical studies of classrooms and youth (Anyon, 1981).

The concept of resistance is used in educational research in order to explain the existing tensions between students and schooling processes. Resistance studies mainly focused on oppositional behaviors that lead students, consequently, academic failure (Apple, 1982, Giroux, 1983). The other focus of these studies is rebellious student behaviors that pass beyond passive political stance against educational practices.

Resistance as a political stance (Giroux, 1983), emanates from the perception of schooling as a reproduction process rather than an equalization process. Resistance theories introduce the active role of human agency in the institutional context that reproduces social inequality.

Simply put, working class students are said to condemn themselves to working class futures because they develop oppositional cultural responses to school, the essential irony being that it is in contesting their subordination. They reproduce themselves as a class (Willis, 1977). Resistance theory is currently a renowned ethnographic approach in the sociology of education. This neo-Marxist theory, currently among the predominant cultural explanations of class inequalities in education, contains the claim that these disparities occur in part through a working class cultural resistance to schooling (Davies, 1995).

Davies (1995) argues that Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977) became a sociological classic soon after its 1977 publication. Though the book’s influence in Britain

may have waned in recent years, it continues to enjoy great prominence across the Atlantic. North American sociologists invariably cite Willis as not only the quintessential depiction of rebellious students in Britain, but also as an authoritative account of working-class responses to capitalist schooling in general. Though his landmark ideas were originally developed from research in very different context –the English Midlands in the mid 1970s – have inspired a generation of classroom ethnographies across Canada and the - and a spate of theoretical treatises and debates. Resistance studies also emphasize overt acts of students' behaviors, and this, according to Giroux (1983), is one of their weaknesses.

Extending analysis beyond: outline of the arguments

This part of the paper seeks to respond to the question “why we need to extend analysis beyond the current form of critical theories in education” on two different levels: phenomenological and conceptual. In each level of discussion, I will support my arguments with relevant literature, as well as counter arguments that I think need to be mentioned.

On the phenomenological level of my discussion, I shall argue that the current state of critical theories of education have been mostly compartmentalized within the walls of academies and is lacking the capability to explain some phenomena of schooling processes emerged mostly in relation to educational practices and changing social, economic, and ideological conditions of society. I use the term phenomenological because I will depart from phenomena just as an example, to narrow down the discussion, and to situate it within a broader schema, given my belief that these phenomena have been poorly explained by critical theories of education. Further, I shall argue that as opposed to allegations from the critical “camp,” critical theories have created their own orthodoxy by chronically inheriting past theorizations, which leads to establishing ideologically limited educational agendas that give little significance to “low topics” or “under-prestigious topics” that have been pushed to the periphery of critical analysis but which still have great influence on the lives of students.

In the second segment of my discussion, in which I problematize the conceptualizations of current critical theories of education, I shall argue that some concepts that have been adopted or appropriated from early theorizations need to be re-thought and extended. Again, as a point of departure, I use one set of concepts, particularly social class, to examine its failures to illuminate what it has intended to demystify, and then to try to respond to the problematic

whether there exists a need to displace or extend this set. Further, I shall argue that the ambiguity of concepts (social class as structure) necessarily sheds questioning concerns over what emerges from these concepts (structure versus agency) when they are approached as unambiguous constructs.

I should also mention that my literature review is not exhaustive, that is to say that there might be some other studies which I did not include that deal with similar kinds of problematics. However, I have tried to find theoretical and methodological claims that match my concerns and critiques. Thus making generalizations out of my analysis is not central to my arguments.

The Phenomenological Level

It has been argued that critical theories of education could not catch transforming material and ideological conditions surrounding schooling and became what Michael Apple (2000) calls "romantic possibilitarian" rhetoric, "in which the language of possibility substitutes for a consistent tactical analysis of what the balance of forces actually is and what is necessary to change it" (p.225) Thus theory and research agenda set by critical theorist remained within their own paradigms which usually cannot pass beyond the walls of academia (Davies, 1995; Ladwig, 1996).

It is possible to observe that, while critical theories helped create new perspectives to look at educational and social phenomena (Young, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977), they are sometimes not immune from the tendency to instating new orthodoxies and fixations (Ladwig, 1996). The overwhelming presence of concepts of racial and gender inequalities in critical readings in education may point us towards assuming that a minoritarian approach is adopted, whereby the focus seems to shift away from "low level" phenomena that explain underachievement, for example. It is legitimate to ask whether functionalist essentialisms have not been replaced by novel essentialisms that assume the facet of radicalism: thus by canonizing minority as primary category and narrative, one runs the risk of boiling down the influence of fundamental and basic issues such as the poor performance of students in the US in the areas of reading, writing, and math, for instance, across minority/majority divisions and in comparison with the performance of students in other parts of the world. Minority, as manifestation of the periphery, seems to have been made to occupy a prestigious status on the agendas of critical theories up to the extent that other arguments that may recuperate

“pre-critical” notions, such as questioning basic reading and writing literacy, can easily fall out of favor for critical theorists whose main terrain is more or less academia, even when the subject of investigation still overwhelmingly exists outside of it. Thus too much celebration of the periphery as almost exclusive referentiality for educational research can, one may propose, amount to what may be called a new orthodoxy, critical nonetheless, whose fodder seems to come mainly from high prestigious concepts and phenomena like racial and gender gaps (Ogbu, 1983; Haney, 1993; Fraizer & Sadker, 1973) – in turn a conscious response to earlier high level associations like hard work and innate characteristics (Parsons, 1961).

Let me extend discussion to phenomenological level and clear my argument about how “low level” topics influence the lives of students and how current form of critical theories pushed them to their periphery. Take for example scores of ACT one of the America’s most widely accepted college entrance exam as a phenomenon. According to *2005 ACT National and State Scores* statistics released in August 2005, the average national scores for each subject test included in the ACT in 2005 were: English, 20.4; Math, 20.7; Reading, 21.3; and Science, 20.9 (ACT, 2005). In other words, 49 percent of the high school graduates of the United States do not have adequate reading skills required to be successful at college level education. When it comes to science such as biology and math, situation is even worse, only 26 percent of the test-takers achieved 24 or higher (%74 could not) on the ACT science test, indicating they are likely to succeed in college biology. Among ethnic/racial groups, Asian American students again earned the highest average composite score at 22.1, followed by Caucasian students with 21.9. American Indian/Alaskan Native students averaged 18.7, followed by Hispanic students at 18.6 and African American students at 17.0. It should be noted that the ACT is not an aptitude or an IQ test. Instead, the questions on the ACT are directly related to what students have learned in high school courses in English, mathematics, and science.

By looking at this tableau, critical theorists would tend to interpret situation from the point of view of their educational agenda in which the situation of minorities or subordinated groups would occupy the central debate. By no surprise, critical educators would argue that tests are biased against minorities. Haney (1993), for example, in the article he discusses impacts of tests on minority students, SAT in particular, rightfully argues that “standardized tests have often been used to the disadvantage of minorities and that charges of cultural bias and unfairness have often been leveled at standardized tests” (p.56). But, while focusing on discrepancies between minority groups and “white” Americans, he does not pay attention to

overall message of the SAT scores and does not discuss general situation of American students. SAT scores that he discusses present almost same achievement hierarchy that ACT scores indicate among racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, one can find many other studies proving this common knowledge, that is, minority or subordinated groups are not as successful as their white-male (or Asian-male) counterparts do. (Sacks, 2000; McFadden, 1995; Oakes, 1985; Anyon, 1980, 1981; Rist, 1970) This situation is not true only for standardized tests but also various different practices of educational processes. While I am not by any means critical about these outstanding studies and rather agree most of the times, I shall argue that these studies ignore the fact that overall achievements, as well as learning levels of American students are extremely low. This is because although there is a gap between top quarter schools –in which upper or middle class students, including Cookson and Persel’s (1987) elite kids, are educated- and low quarter schools –in which McLeod’s (2004) low income neighborhood kids attend- test scores do not differ as much as they are thought to be. This basically means that students in the United States, no matter which school they attend to, have been suffering from ill-learning problems.

Leaving aside all discussions on testing practices such as ‘what causes test score discrepancies among different social classes/groups/ethnic minorities etc.?', ‘Are standardized tests fair and legitimate?’, ‘How testing practices give damage to education?’, these statistics show us that students do not learn their curriculum materials appropriately. In this regard, I believe that talking about nothing else than ideologically constructed knowledge, resistance, reproduction, or hidden curriculum would just disconnects critical theory of education from educational practice as a lived experience and daily life realities of millions of school kids. It is true that the purpose of sociology of education as a field is not to develop instruction methods to establish better learning environments. But, when failure reaches this massive characteristic, then one should look at the social implications of the incident as a social fact or phenomenon.

Colleges, we like it or not, accept students according to their ACT or SAT scores. Moreover, there is no other valid method developed to assess students’ ability or skills for college level education other than some suggestions to provide equality (Haney, 1993). If %49 of students cannot read college level texts and %74 do not know basic principles of science and math, given the high predictability level of these tests, they would not be successful in college level education. Fostering dialogue or learning to think critically about the material or knowledge would not work if one does not know and has nothing to say about it (Burbules, 2000). Thus

“transforming society through education” legacy would even pass beyond Michael Apple’s “possibilitarian rhetoric” critique.

We cannot justify this picture with power relations, minority or gender issues, and other theorizations such as social/cultural reproduction and resistance. This is because it would be very wrong to argue that %74 of the students of the US are subordinated one or another way and by resisting schooling practices they reproduce their social backgrounds. Nobody can claim that these tests are biased against %74 of the students while affirmative of %26. It is true that advanced capitalist societies, if not wholly repressed, do not foster critical thinking or are not in favor of emancipatory knowledge production, but on the other hand, in order to hang on highly competitive global economy, (Carnoy, 1982) they have to promote technical knowledge and science education to provide highly skilled workers and professionals for their work-forces and to keep status quo of capital accumulation (Apple, 1976, 1982; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Apple (1982) argues “schools also act as one of the primary modes of production of cultural commodities needed by a corporate society.” (p.45)

To sum up, despite many outstanding attempts to cover problems circumscribing educational achievement, it seems to me that we still are in lack of convincing explanations of these massive failures particularly in science and math. As I argued before, highly politicized agenda of critical theories of education sometimes cannot recognize even basic phenomena encompassing educational processes. This, however, does not mean to say that educational agenda should be depoliticized in order to understand some phenomenon; I rather argue that departing from political agenda instead of data sets may cause “orthodoxy” blindness in every field of science.

The Conceptual Level

The concept of “social class” is one of the most ambiguous yet frequent terms used in social sciences, and education is no exception. Although conceptualizations of “social class” issues are usually accompanied by ideological stances, very few of them were able to produce significant contributions so that to illuminate what “social class” may exactly be (Stearns, 1979).

Sociology of education literature presents fundamentally different conceptions of social class. While one group of scholars argue that social class represents a category of people with similar standards of living, tastes, opportunities to reach social institutions, and similar power and prestige position, (Bourdieu, 1990; Apple, 1982; Bernstein, 1971; Anyon, 1980)

others ascribe to delineations of political economy where social class is necessarily the ongoing product of relations of production, conditions of capitalist power and exploitation of labor, as well as the division of social labor (Rist, 1970; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977).

Class issue occupies distinct place in critical theories of education. This is because it has been argued that if working-class students are successful in their education, they can find a way to escape the negative conditions that their class backgrounds set for them in what may amount to total transformation of their social class identification away from their original working class (McLaren, 2000). This is because the definition of these students' identities is closely linked to their life chances, opportunities and consciousness (Giroux, 1983). Thus in one sense, a well educated, successful working-class kid whose habits and life chances do not reflect the definition of working class is not considered working class anymore. But on the other hand, the situation is completely different for subordinated or marginalized groups, who are also located at the center of critical educational agenda. Women, for example, no matter how well educated are or how far liberated they are from social and patriarchal oppression, they still cannot cease to be women. In other words, when gender is a stable category that engrains unchangeability in its definition, "working class" can abandon the effects of their class backgrounds through education and cease to be a working class. The same can hold true for African-Americans, another marginalized group and the subject of major debates in sociology of education: they would remain "black" and there is no way to change the definition of being black, because color is an unchangeable characteristic of identity, unless medical intervention has been implemented. However, this should not be taken as totalization that alienates the considerably large body of research that approximates race, gender and ethnicity as social constructions. My point is rather to highlight that; while the fluidity of these notions, argued to be socially constructed, may be more observable in areas such as social class through mobility that education can provide; gender, on the other hand, appears to be more fixed. A woman, across class and cultural division lines, remains a woman, a fixation that would not easily change through subjective agency, whether this takes the shape of (staged and repeated) performativity or otherwise – a condition parallel to the potentials of displacing class fixity through education.

Jean Anyon (1980) defines social classes according to three main criteria; ownership relations, relationships between people, and relations between people and their work. However, it seems to me that criteria she employed to define schools as working class,

middle class, affluent professionals, and executive elite schools are the families' income levels and settlement patterns. We do not understand, for example, anything about their relations with work and people. And, I argue that it is nearly impossible to understand the relationships that she defines only by observing and getting statistical data. Thus her analysis of social class again stayed in the realm of geographical location. McLaren (1995) writes that many forms of systemic race, class, and gender oppression define the urban neighborhoods. Additionally, in urban communities, school practices and lives of students reflect the nature of race, gender and class inequalities because the bigness of gap make them much more visible than suburban settings. Carey (2003) talks about the diversity in new urban classroom settings and notes that socioeconomic and ethnic diversity of the students makes for an engaging, enlightening, and controversial classroom. This situation also leads another practice in the urban school settings that if there is an oppression than there must be resistance. In this sense, whenever somebody wants to work resistance or reproduction they usually prefer to go urban neighborhoods to locate "working class kids". In practical level, there is, to my knowledge, not any research departing from gender, race, or other class characteristics to locate target population. We rather witness that after locating people in certain places –urban, suburban, inner city etc. - which are now very predictable, educational researchers tend to define class characteristics after they begin their studies.

From the same vein, one major criticism that could be directed against many ethnographic studies on education in relation to social class is the conflation of what constitutes the working class with geographical boundedness. Here we are not only talking about socio-economic indicators, but mainly about cultural affiliations that may disturb clear-cut boundaries that are based on income divisions. Rich white kids, for example, might very well assume identities, through clothing and other cultural choices, which have been historically identified as qualities of underclasses: what comes to mind here is the hip hop industry and how it has managed to domesticate, almost neutralize, the rapidly changing political tags that gave rise to this phenomenon in the first place (Dimitriadis, 2001). This presents us with the question of why the notions of flexibility and hybridity that apply to youth culture should not be expanded to the realm of working class configurations and why the analysis of the latter should be restricted to the rigidity of geographical delimitations. If we argue that cultural borders are necessarily porous, why can't we give weight to the claim that working class boundaries are looser than to be delimited by the narrative of locale?

This certain attitudes creating appropriation of class characteristics may result in different outcomes from researches, although researchers define similar class characteristics in different research areas. For example, McLeod (2004) “hallway hangers” have different characteristics than Willis’ (1977) “lads”. Fine (1991) finds completely different behavioral patterns among African-Americans towards schooling than Ogbu (1987, 1989). Weis (2004) challenges Willis’ (1977) working class definition by adding gender and race as two major components of class identity and her work exhibits different working class patterns. But why all these studies show differentiations in their results even though they focus on same population, that is, working class.

The first reason is because the understanding of the working class is bound to the historical experience that gave rise to the contemporary working class conditions and determiners, that is the New Deal as result of compromise after the Second World War. Weis (2004) is one of the few researchers who realize the importance of collective history in making “working class”.

Arguing that we can not write off working class simply because white men no longer have access to well paying laboring jobs in the primary labor market jobs, that spawned a distinctive place for labor in the capital-labor accord, I track and theorize the remaking of this group as a distinct class fraction, both discursively and behaviorally inside radical, globally-based economic restructuring. (Weis, 2004, 2)

The rise of unions, as well as the considerably good benefits that workers in the US experienced before the 1980s, shapes researchers’ approaches as how to confirm today’s working class conditions as either partial continuation of previous conditions or departure from them. The second reason seems to emerge from some researchers’ collectivization of different factions and trends of labor to the singular unit of “working class.” This leads to assigning the historical experiences of non-unionized labor, mostly groups of color and illegal immigrants, to a secondary position, while still prioritizing the historical experience of welfare labor.

One other explanation may be that when educational researchers approach issues of working class, their technique might be influenced by an understanding of labor as exclusively a division constructed in socio-economic, as well as cultural factors, for example, the income of student families and their location of residence, inner city, urban, suburban etc. While these delineations are true and do impact working class dynamics in a way or another, I am arguing that these by themselves do not constitute a complete historical diagnosis of whom

we can call “working class.” Necessary is the incorporation of transnational histories of the in-groups of labor. In other words, we can not claim that the political history of the black working class in the US is identical with that of white laborers (Herton et al. 2000). In the same vein, today’s experiences of Mexican underpaid agrarian workers in the US shift considerably from the conditions of black workers. This may explain the antagonism one can trace within what is usually identified as working class: while some workers may blame their economic crisis on outsourcing, others might find the answer in illegal immigration. What this means is that the reason for the lack of replicability of milestone research studies like Willis’s (1977) in contexts outside the UK should be further problematized and extended to arguments within the working class of a single country like the US. (Weis, 2004; Davies 1995) Thus applying the welfare labor parameters, both negatively and affirmatively, to all different experiences of working class in the US not only subjects these differentiations to a singular historicization, but also sidelines historical departures that deem universal portrayal of working class almost impossible.

The difficult encounter of defining working class does not only impact the coherent understanding of what constitutes this formation, but it also casts shadows of doubt over what emerges in critical theory from structural approximation of the working class. Of specific relevance here is resistance as qualification that has been theorized to be the byproduct of class belongingness. In other words, resistance is taken for granted as the ultimate result of a structure whose configuration and constitution is assumed to have been stabilized and exhausted, while at the same time, the reality of the difficulty of defining working class as a structure of theorization is almost always relegated to the margins of research and interest. Thus it is legitimate to question how when the structure itself is in lack of clear delimitation, the consequences of this structure –in-doubt can be treated as notions stably defined.

The other problem with class conceptualizations is the focus on men’s position in the occupational system. Women in these conceptualizations are either ignored or classified in dependence on the category their male partners occupy. In this regard, one can argue that even when certain class characteristics of women, such as tastes, habits etc., designate them to the realm of middle class, these women might be very well relegated to a lower class formation, mainly because of the gendering of class referentiality in society which takes the male to be the focal point of reference (Baxter, 1994). This is not the only feminist critic directed critical sociology of education from feminist wing. Whereas critical theorists have

constructed their critique upon class and capitalism, feminists have recognized the importance of identity, a more discursive critique of private and public divides and categories and the importance of social and cultural basis for gendered and sexual oppression (Ellsworth, 1989).

The concept of social class initially has been taken up from Marxist theorizations and undergone many changes throughout the century. Discussion concerning the components of class and their relation to identity problematic are carried on today's educational agenda. But, it seems that conceptualizations of social class, working class in particular, are still far away from solid descriptions.

Conclusion

The act of going beyond the current forms of critical theories of education is very important to carry our discussion on different levels. On the other hand, maintaining Gramsci's recommendation of 'pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will' may be a necessary stance in the circumstances for educators committed to social justice, but requires sound analysis of social and political contingencies of daily life and the identification of possibilities for progressive action which may open up as sites of struggle. In this paper my critics towards critical theories of education have been directed towards this core point.

On the other hand, it is very important to mention that one should extend the analysis by asking very questions of critical theories again: What is working class, who is subordinated, who is at the margins of society, what is dialogue and what is its the role in education, why feminist are very critical about notions of critical theory, what is the role of structure and agency in identity construction, is there any relevancy problem, which approaches are more helpful etc. But, it is also very important to think outside the main conceptualizations and theorizations in order to take one more step in understanding what is really going on inside the schools and how they are related to wider structures of societies.

All in all, I have no claim that I have covered all the relevant literature dealing with the issues that I concern, but, escaping from overgeneralizations, I believe that it is legitimate to deconstruct every field by finding even small phenomenon that poorly explained and needs to be extended by existing theories. This understanding was my stand point when I was constructing this paper. Because, I believe that sometimes asking right questions would be much more helpful than finding remedies or alternatives to existing problems.

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