

Power and Ideology in Education

Power and Ideology in Education, edited by Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. 670 pp.

In 1961 there appeared a volume called *Education, Economy and Society: A Reader in the Sociology of Education* edited by A.H. Halsey, Jean Floud and C. Arnold Anderson. This book included sections on education and economic change; social mobility; the selection process; educational achievement; the social functions of schools and universities; and teachers. The book was something of a landmark in sociology of education, well within the tradition of structural/functionalist sociology. Its theme and object was to present analyses of the functional links between educational institutions and social structures mediated by the economy. The book by Karabel and Halsey which I shall discuss in the rest of this review is in this tradition: it is mainstream sociology of education, drawing upon some of the work done since the Halsey, Floud and Anderson book appeared. As such it provides a picture of the state of the art as it appears from the educational establishments of Harvard and Oxford, bastions of the "best" that is old and the "best" that is new.

In a brief preface the authors provide a picture of their intellectual heritage and commitment: Halsey is characterized as seeking "the Christian pragmatic, piecemeal, and democratic road to socialism" in the British radical tradition, while Karabel "has been deeply influenced by both the American New Left and continental Marxism"; Halsey claims as his intellectual forebears R.H. Tawney and Richard Titmuss, and Karabel claims C. Wright Mills and Antonio Gramsci. According to the authors it is necessary for us to know this in order to better understand how they interpret the field of sociology of education and choose its significant theories and relevant methods to present to us in this book. I think such an admission is both admirable, and relevant to the few things which I have to say about the merits and demerits of this book. It is admirable in that it explicitly recognizes the subjective nature of sociological knowledge. It is relevant in that it raises the question: if the authors recognize the subjective nature of sociological knowledge then why does their book explicitly exclude from its pages all of the most important work in sociology that speaks to this question?

The answer to this question can be found in the author's lengthy introduction. In their discussion of the "new" sociology of education the authors never come to grips with the growing body of research in interaction, eg. in sociolinguistics, in ethnomethodology and in semiotics. Curiously they refer to Keddie's (1971) paper on "Classroom Knowledge" as "an excellent expression of the interests of the "new" sociology of education" (p. 53), but don't include it among the selections of their book. They also omit from their choices any of the papers from Cicourel's *Language Use and School Performance* (1974) which they dismiss as frequently banal.

As someone who is familiar with most of the work in this new area of interest in sociology and in sociology of education, my impression is that Karabel and Halsey are not at all familiar with it and that that which they do know they do not understand. How else is one to understand their lip service to the importance of biography and context in explaining their own book yet ignoring the essence of this insight in the choice of articles and in their introductory remarks?

An introduction reviews the state of the art in sociology and education in the areas of functionalist theory, human capital formation, methodological empiricism, conflict theory and the "new" sociology. This essay presents an accurate description of where sociology of education has been and how it has tried to study social problems in order to contribute to social policy concerns. In a final introductory point the authors make a rather curious suggestion. They suggest that although "secondary analysis" is frowned upon by today's social scientists, there are rich data in libraries which might be studied with more profit than the continued accumulation of primary data, producing studies with "neither empirical nor theoretical significance." (p. 75) This argument further convinces me that they do not understand what the "new" sociology is all about. The authors obviously believe that data gathered from questionnaire survey research and computer analysis are primary data. They also believe that we can learn about the social world by going to libraries and analyzing other's data. I think Douglas (1971) and Cicourel (1964) have offered compelling arguments as to why, in most cases, this is impossible. It is clear to me that sociologists need to pay more attention, not less, to studying that which is the object of inquiry rather than indicators or substitutes for it.

The essays in this book generally reflect the divergent schools of thought in sociology of education, but as the title of the book suggests these differences seem to be mainly ideological rather than epistemological. In general the studies range from the historical to functionalist; most are macro-cosmic. Few of them question the social facts approach advocated by Durkheim. The essays are interesting in that they present a wide range of interests and topics, but in my opinion, they are remarkably

undistinguished in terms of new insights into understanding the social world of education. Few come to grips with the problems sociology of education has had in speaking to the concerns of the practice of education. Most discuss education at a level of abstraction that makes it impossible for us to recover from their arguments the everyday life of the school. If the sources of these abstractions were analyses of this everyday life, the lived phenomena of interest, I would have had an easier time understanding what in fact was being discussed. However, there is little evidence that the source of these papers' arguments is anything beyond the standard results of *quasi* objective data gathering. My principal criticism of these data derives from what Douglas (1971) calls the "fallacy of abstractionism" i.e. the belief that one can know in the abstract what one does not know in particular.

If this book is a representative survey of the work in sociology of education since Halsey, Floud and Anderson then I would quip, the more things change the more they stay the same. Of the important work that has appeared, primarily contributions to educational studies from ethnomethodology and sociolinguistics, the former is not even represented in this volume and the latter only by Bernstein.

I see little merit in this book beyond the authors' introductory survey. Those articles in the collection which are worth reprinting could just as easily be read in their original place of publication.¹

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Notes

¹The notable exception is Ray Rist's paper which makes its first appearance here.

References

- Cicourel, Aaron. *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press) 1964.
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Douglas, Jack D. *Understanding Everyday Life* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) 1971.
Keddie, Nell. "Classroom Knowledge" in M.F.D. Young (ed.) *Knowledge and Control* (London: Collier-Macmillan) 1971.