

BOOKS

Canadian Education: a Sociological Analysis

Martin, Wilfred B. and Allan J. Macdonell. Canadian Education: a Sociological Analysis, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1978, 354 pages.

This text, one of a number of recent books on the Sociology of Education in Canada, is written to provide "...students of education...a sociological interpretation of the structure and process of education", and to provide a source for "...sociology students who see various dimensions of education as areas of study in their sociological endeavor" (preface). Although this statement of purpose does not reflect it, the authors' explicit focus is on education in Canada, and as such the book must be considered an attempt at a sociological analysis of Canadian society and Canadian education.

This book is divided into four sections: sociology of education, the social organization of the school, education and social structure, and education and social change. In addition there are three appendices: the first reviews the history of sociology of education, the second provides three theoretical orientations to the topic of education (functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction theory), and the third consists of some of the educationally relevant sections from the British North America Act. When one considers that these sections all consist almost solely of description and research reports, and that almost all of the research reported is on Canada, and that almost all of the description of educational structures relate solely to Canada, it is apparent that the book could well have been titled "An Encyclopedia of Canadian Education," or perhaps "The Canadian Education Almanac".

Unfortunately, the book was apparently not intended to be primarily a source book of Canadian education facts. If it had been, perhaps the few cases in which American research is reported as if it were Canadian (e.g. Cicourel and Kitsuse, and Rist, on p. 236) would have been eliminated; the very weak development of social theory would have been omitted, and other sections would have been expanded or clarified to more adequately portray the Canadian education system. There are many examples of problems in this last area. For example, the B.N.A. Act reference to Indians (Section 91.24) is the constitutional explanation of federal Indian schools; the existence of such schools is noted in passing in the text but this section is not referred to and it is omitted from the appendix on the B.N.A. Act. Likewise, the discussion of the Canadian "government" treats Alberta and Saskatchewan as "additions" to Canada, similar to the addition of Newfoundland in 1949, rather than recognizing their prior inclusion in Canada as part of the Northwest Territories. This particular section also omits the similar formation of the Yukon Territories in 1898, and refers to gold mining activity in Canada in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which is not quite accurate, to put it mildly. There are *many* such errors, errors which likely would have been eliminated if the book had been planned as a collection of facts rather than a "sociological analysis of Canadian education".

Given that one recognizes the problem of factual errors, this book might otherwise be considered a fair source book for facts on Canadian education. What it is *not*, is a good introduction to the sociology of education, to a sociological understanding of Canadian society, or to social theory. The authors' attempts to define the domain of education, the nature of Canadian society, and the nature of social theory, all founder and founder badly. I will deal with each of these aspects of the book in turn in the following remarks.

Education is defined initially in the text as "...everything that involves teaching and learning" (p. 2) and secondly as "...that which takes place in the formally differentiated system of the institution" (p. 3). The reader might be forgiven for thinking that these two definitions range from a totally encompassing and therefore rather meaningless, common-sense definition, to an apparently technically specific but totally incomprehensible specialist's definition. The text never does make these definitions clearer; never does confront the problematic relation between education, socialization, and resocialization or "acculturation", or the problematic relation between knowledge and ideology as the substance of the school curriculum. Given the complexity of these issues, the authors might have avoided them by defining the "educational institution" in the society, but this also is not done. They in fact rely totally on the student, as a member of the Canadian "culture" to know what education is, and

therefore to know what the sociology of education is about. It is a poor beginning for a sociological analysis!

Society, or Canadian society, as the second core concept, is not defined or treated as a sociological concept. The section called "The Canadian Scene" is introduced with the following quite meaningless statement: "Canadian society is a product of its past and the continuing process of people interacting with the social, political, and economic environment" (p. 6). Although there is passing reference to society as social institutions, description of Canada throughout the text makes it apparent that, to the authors, Canadian society "is" a bounded social organization, territorially based, and structured primarily as the Canadian state, or "government". Although this collapsing of the notion of the state and the society, as the nation/state, is a common practise in sociology at least since Talcott Parson's work in the 1940's, it should be explicitly recognized in sociological writing about society. But whether implicit or explicit, this practise makes it very difficult to view the state as one of a number of social institutions, to make analytical distinctions between the state and the society. It also makes it difficult to describe and explain a state which, ostensibly, incorporates many societies (or cultures, or "nations"). It is not even possible to debate the unicultural, bicultural, or multicultural nature of Canada, for they become confounded with the state's (or government's) cultural policies.

This fusion of the concepts of state and society contributes to the book's very weak description of the Canadian "dual" state. The British North America Act is described as addressing itself to three constitutional powers, executive, legislative, and judicial. Such a description fits very well the American constitution, as does the notion of balance of powers between the three areas, but it does not catch the essence of the Canadian "constitution". Surely, educators must recognize the B.N.A. act as a document which first of all distributes powers between two levels of government, the federal and provincial levels, and which does not deal in any way with individual or "citizen" rights *vis a vis* the state; as secondly a document which contains no amending formula outside the normal functioning of the British parliament; and as a document which incorporates British unwritten constitutional practises. It is these aspects of the Canadian constitution, plus specific references to language, denominationalism, Indians, education, and perhaps taxation powers and immigration which have influenced the development of the specifically Canadian educational system.

Finally, not recognizing the state as one of many social institutions in Canadian society, makes it impossible to ask such simple theoretical questions as "on behalf of which sectors of society, if any, does the state act?" The significant question which follows, which class or category of students benefit most from the institution of schooling, and what are the relations between the educational institution and the state institution, simply cannot be, and is not, addressed in a text which so confuses these analytic levels. There is, of course, extensive discussion of legislative and fiscal policies, but this treats as concrete that which should be treated conceptually.

Martin and Macdonell do note that "macro-level" sociological analysis treats the relation of the educational institution to other social societal institutions (p. 3), but their own macro-level description at no point recognizes this. This is not only apparent in their discussion of the "government", or the state, discussed above but in their treatment of the church, the school board, and the family. Although each of these is touched on in various descriptive sections of the text, they receive explicit focus only as "interest groups". The phrase interest group is not defined; its usage is clearly not that of any recognized social or political theorist (see, for example, Dahrendorf, 1959; or Gamson, 1968). Apparently to these authors an interest group is any organization or association with an "interest" in education. Granted that school trustees, parent groups, and church groups may function as pressure groups *vis a vis* education, but that does not mean the school board, as the local legislative body for schools, can be treated as an "interest group". Neither is "the church" an interest group; it is a social institution. The Home and School Association may function as an interest group, but as this represents the only place in the text where the relation between the family as a social institution and the educational system might have been discussed (and it is not), describing the Home and School association as an organization "between the school and its larger environment" (p. 153) suggests at best a highly school-centered analysis of society/education interaction.

There are of course problems with treating a society as "simply" a set of interacting institutions; in particular other aspects of the social structure such as class relations or relations between other types of socially defined groups (linguistic, ethnic, etc.) may be ignored. However, this book could have been much improved if it had even used such a basic sociological concept as "institution" and interinstitutional relations as an organizing principle.

Given that the development of the concept of education and of society or Canadian society is so weak, one would expect problems with the author's use of social theory. This, in fact, is the case. If the intent of the text is to provide students with "...a sociological interpretation of the structure and process of education" then the theoretical and methodological basis of the book must be very clear, as a

first step in a sociological interpretation. This basis is not clear, and it is particularly confounded by three aspects of the book.

In the first place the text is riddled with explanations which are not recognized as theoretical statements (generally, naive functionalist statements), but are presented as fact. Thus "larger schools and larger school boards...better serve the needs of contemporary society" (p. 167) and "the complexities of the labour market are such that fewer and fewer positions are available to the high school graduate without further education or training" (p. 245). These are *not* facts, they are propositions which ostensibly explain why larger school boards have been developed in Canada and why a student gets a lower return on money invested in education that he received in the past in Canada. It is precisely such distinctions (between theory and fact) which the student must learn to recognize if he is to obtain a sociological understanding of education.

In the second place, the attempt to use functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interaction to "interpret" the data presented is haphazard and contributes neither to the reader's understanding of theory nor to his understanding of education. One might quarrel with the authors' particular version of conflict theory, clearly a Coser-like "functions of conflict" approach in spite of the reference to Dahrendorf and Marx in the appendix, but in fact the use of all three theoretical orientations is so inadequate that such a specific quarrel seems a minor point. Perhaps it is understandable that authors whose theoretical interest is symbolic interaction would use theories only to "interpret" and not to "explain" data and research findings, but when they freely conclude that educational equality is "inevitable" as part of their discussion of functionalism (p.f. 218), one would like to see them at least recognize the sociological concept of explanation.

In the third place, providing students with a sociological interpretation of education surely demands that one use sociological concepts not only with some rigour and discipline, but also at least reasonably close to their conventional usage within one or another sociological theory. This book abounds with word usage which is simply *not* within sociological tradition(s): the above reference to the problem of interest groups, the state, and the church is intended to convey this point but there are many other examples. As just one more particularly irritating example, "inequality of condition" becomes differences in the availability of pencils and paper (and overhead projectors?) in schools (p. 184). Surely such usage is a travesty on the work of Gilbert and Roberts, and it merely adds insult to injury that Gilbert and Roberts are cited in the footnote.

In conclusion, in spite of many specific errors of fact, this book is most useful to educators and sociologists, whether students or practitioners, as a source-book of Canadian facts in education. It is not useful as a "sociological analysis of education in Canada". The most it will do in this regard is to confirm many students' ideological beliefs about the nature of societal/school interactions and leave them totally confused about either the "real" nature of those relations, or the nature of social theory which attempts to interpret and explain those relations. Far better sources exist for theoretical understanding; in particular the careful working out of concepts in all of the introductions in the Carlton et al (1975) reader, Murphy's (1979) fine attempt to relate social theory to Canadian education, and a variety of recent sociology of education books from other countries (for example, Hurn, 1978; Karabel and Halsey, 1977).

Marilyn I. Assheton-Smith

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