

*Abstract*

This article examines how four major versions of neo-Marxism try to overcome the base-superstructure thesis of the political economists of education. The approach here is to search out the implicit philosophical assumptions in terms of social ontology and epistemology and the related theory of education of four major versions of neo-Marxism, and then to examine the internal coherence between those aspects within each theory. The analysis of these neo-Marxian theories reveals that though, with the exception of structuralism, they have been successful in providing a way out of the deterministic base-superstructure doctrine, they reveal several theoretical lacunae, especially in their attempt to link education to a radical political praxis.

*Résumé*

L'article examine comment quatre versions principales du néo-marxisme tentent de faire échec à la thèse de la superstructure que défendent les économistes politiques de l'éducation. L'approche consiste à découvrir d'abord les hypothèses philosophiques implicites sur le plan de l'ontologie et de l'épistémologie sociales et la théorie pertinente de l'éducation de quatre versions principales du néo-marxisme, et, ensuite, à étudier la cohérence intrinsèques entre ces aspects à l'intérieur de chacune des théories. L'analyse de ces théories néo-marxistes révèle que même si elles ont réussi à éviter la doctrine de la superstructure déterministe, exception faite du structuralisme, elles comportent elles-mêmes plusieurs lacunes théoriques, surtout lorsqu'il s'agit de relier l'éducation à une praxis politique radicale.

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### **A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT OF MARXIAN BASE-SUPERSTRUCTURE EXPLANATIONS OF THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIAL CHANGE**

The main purpose of this essay is to provide a mini-version of a comprehensive critique of the thesis of political economists of education that schooling in capitalist countries is nothing other than an epiphenomenon of the impersonal mechanism of monopoly capitalism. One possible way of attaining this is to analyze the theoretical possibilities and limitations of various versions of the neo-Marxian critique of this base-superstructure thesis.

These counterarguments, in contrast, tend to take education as the general cultural process dominant or central to social change. It is obvious, however, that such counterarguments with their professed emphasis on human liberation must not be accepted without critical reflection. A second, but closely related purpose of this study is therefore a critical assessment of the theoretical validity of the Marxist claim on the inseparable link between proper education and a radical political praxis.

For these purposes this study employs a typology of neo-Marxian theories in order to clarify some of the basic assumptions regarding the base-superstructure concept implicit in these theories. Four broad categories are identified. Specifically, they are Hegelian Marxism, the Frankfurt

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School, Phenomenological Marxism, and Structuralist Marxism. The categories are not mutually exclusive; the distinction is maintained because it calls attention to significant differences in emphasis among these versions of Marxism.

This study focuses very narrowly on their respective stances on the issue of base-superstructure with the following four questions in mind. What is the group's view on the ultimate nature of society? How does the group approach the study of society? How does the group resolve the Kantian antinomy between necessity and freedom, or between objective structure and voluntaristic subjectivity? What is the group's view on the role of education in social change?

The approach here is therefore to search out the implicit philosophical assumptions in terms of social ontology and epistemology and the related theory of education of each version of neo-Marxism, and then to examine the internal coherence between those aspects within each theory. Though the discussion cannot ignore an occasional examination of contemporary social significance, it is obvious that this is not a study about reality itself, but about theories about reality. It is, in short, a metacritique.

#### *Hegelian Marxism*

The term "Hegelian" in contemporary Marxology has a specific connotation. It refers to Hegel's attempt to unite theory and practice, necessity and freedom, being and thought, object and subject, and his theoretical effort to place consciousness at the center of the process of historical progress. We see this emphasis on the unity of the traditional dichotomies in the discourses of Hegelian Marxists.

The quintessence of Marx's conception of the ultimate reality of society, for Hegelian Marxists like Lukacs and Gramsci, is first of all the category of totality of the primacy of the whole over the abstract isolation of its parts.<sup>1</sup> Facts are not the final reality but are artificially isolated moments of the whole. Secondly, ultimate reality is neither unavoidable obedience to the necessity of objective laws nor subjective freedom. The former is characterized by a deterministic ontology, originating in Engels' dialectics of nature and uncritically adopted by the theoreticians of the "Marxist center" such as Plekhanov, Kautsky, and Bukharin, which culminated in its codification into orthodox Marxism-Leninism. The latter is, according to Lukacs, the social thought of neo-Kantian Marxists like Max Adler, Otto Bauer, Tugan-Baranowski among others — the idea forcefully expressed in the works of Hermann Cohen, the founder of the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism.<sup>2</sup> Against both objectivism and subjectivism, Lukacs and Gramsci argued that ultimate reality is neither an abstract, value-laden world of subjective freedom nor a world of necessity consisting of objectivity independent of human praxis. It is essentially contingent upon the historical efforts of human subjects. Finally, ultimate reality is not a fixed fact like Parmenides' Being, but an ongoing process of becoming like the Heraclitean flux.<sup>3</sup> Hence Lukacs and Gramsci had a firm belief in the ontological principle that the true reality is by no means identical with the empirical consciousness of the masses.

Given the ultimate reality as totality, as being contingent upon collective praxis, and as becoming, we then have to consider another issue of what true knowledge is, and the role of the active subject in the transformation of society.

As the capitalist system grows more complex, the mutual relation of producers, as Marx pointed out in *Capital*, takes the "phantasmagoric" form of a social relationship of things.<sup>4</sup> As economic

rationalization sees in things, not use-value, but only their exchange-value, it also reduces the worker simply to a function of his measurable labor power, which is also bought and sold as a commodity.

Lukacs' originality lies in the fact that he extended the category of commodity fetishism beyond merely economic relations by translating it in terms of Weber's notion of "iron cage" of rationalization and Simmel's "tragedy of culture" which they saw in all spheres of modern capitalism. Rationalization and bureaucratization, ubiquitous in mature capitalism in their view, by no means free man, but rather reify and alienate him. What deserves attention is their pessimistic view that human beings in advanced capitalism are enslaved by what often appears to be the most exalted of cultural products — the product of men's own labor.<sup>5</sup>

Hegel's dialectical concept of mediation is a key to Lukacs' constitution of reality which goes far beyond the stoic pessimism of both Weber and Simmel. The appearance of reified, alienated reality is first recognized as such, then detached from its immediate context, and finally related to the unified, dynamic totality of social reality that eventually comes to the class consciousness, the self-consciousness of society.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely in this sense that true knowledge, for Lukacs, is "the self-knowledge of society."

Lukacs' dialectical synthesis of objective reality and consciousness, culminating in his epistemological first principle that true knowledge is self-knowledge, is of great significance on the following two counts. Firstly, if Lukacs is right, then Bowles-Gintis' interpretation that "the education system neither adds nor subtracts from the degree of inequality and repression originating in the economic sphere,"<sup>7</sup> is not only erroneous but foreign to Marx's dialectics. Secondly, materialism and spiritualism, or infrastructure and superstructure are nothing other than the thesis and antithesis of a debate which has its origin in a failure to overcome the Kantian antinomy between necessity and freedom. Lukacs' synthesis of object and subject is indeed a possible answer to what Weber and Schutz regarded as the most serious sociological question of how the objective understanding of subjective meaning structure is possible. It is, in short, this constitution of reality and knowledge that strikes at the very nerve-center of contemporary philosophy, assailing both objectivist and subjectivist reductionism. In his recent publication, *The Politics of Education*, Paulo Freire echoes the Hegelian Constitution of reality, claiming that:

This question brings us to the very heart of a fundamental problem that has always preoccupied philosophy — especially modern philosophy. I refer to the question of the relationship between subject and object, consciousness and reality, thought and being, theory and practice. In breaking down the subject-object dialectical unity, the dualist vision implies the negation either of objectivity or of consciousness . . . In reality, consciousness is not just a copy of the real, nor is the real only a capricious constitution of consciousness. It is by way of an understanding of the dialectical unity, in which we find solidarity between subjectivity and objectivity."<sup>8</sup>

With this ontological and epistemological starting point, Lukacs and Gramsci develop respective theories of social change. Although much attention has been paid to the similarities between Lukacs and Gramsci, the critical difference between their views on consciousness-raising deserves special attention because it has far-reaching consequences for both Marxist strategy for social change and related educational theories.

Even though the class consciousness of the proletariat is a necessary, indispensable, integral part of the process of becoming, true reality, according to Lukacs, is by no means identical with the empirical consciousness of the masses. Since there is an "unbridgeable abyss" between true

and empirical consciousness,<sup>9</sup> a correct class consciousness, Lukacs argued, must be brought to the proletariat from the vanguard party as the surrogate for Hegelian Absolute Spirit. Furthermore, the vanguard party embodied a correct consciousness that must "constantly pay heed tactically to the level of consciousness of the largest retrograde section of the masses."<sup>10</sup>

Though Gramsci shares with Lukacs the view of reality as a complex process of becoming, Gramsci, in sharp contrast to Lukacs, does not seek an apodictic foundation upon which to construct the "philosophy of praxis." Rather, the beginning of the true consciousness must be sought in an attitude already existing, and not infused from the outside. In this respect Gramsci's epistemology is very close to Hegel's, who also proceeds by means of a critique of forms of existing consciousness.

If the above assessment is right, Lukacs' epistemology suffers a serious philosophical error not because it is elitist, but rather because his theory of knowledge as "the self-knowledge" is diametrically opposed to his own idea of the true knowledge which must be imputed from the outside.

Politically, Lukacs' is indeed a shrewd, highly sophisticated philosophical justification of Lenin's idea of the vanguard party, which he advanced in his *What is to be Done*, where Lenin repeatedly urged that it is better to "catch *ten wise men* than a hundred fools"<sup>11</sup> — the idea, *mutatis mutandis*, most seemingly echoed by his outstanding descendant Mikhail Gorbachev in his notion of "the *two great nations* on whom depends the very destiny of civilization."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Marx would certainly awake from his tomb to reaffirm that "what is certain is that I am not a Marxist" because he had never been interested either in human engineering by a vanguard party or in engineering nation-states by vanguard nations. In education Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, aimed at transcending the "culture of silence", is a response to the Lukacs' thesis that whether history is to take the revolutionary course depends on an act of developing consciousness and is not simply among the necessary consequences of the economic conditions of exploitation.

In the beginning section of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire acknowledges his indebtedness to Lukacs, saying that:

... no reality transforms itself, and the duty which Lukacs ascribes to the revolutionary party of "explaining to the masses their own action" coincides with our affirmation of the need for the critical intervention of the people in reality through the praxis. The pedagogy of the oppressed...has its roots here.<sup>13</sup>

Freire, of course, emphasizes that his own methodology for "conscientization" is different from that of Lukacs arguing that it is "not explaining to, but rather dialoguing with, the people." Freire's pedagogy is certainly of crucial significance not only in its emphasis on the necessary transcendence of the base-superstructure doctrine but also in its substantial democratization of the authoritarian pedagogical formulation originally developed by Lukacs.

Nevertheless, since the oppressed are in a state of false consciousness or what he variously calls a state of intransitive, semi-intransitive, or naive transitive consciousness, they are in no position to initiate their own liberation.<sup>14</sup> In short, it is obvious that the core concept of Freire's pedagogical formulation is the Lukacs' theory of exogenously initiated consciousness-raising, which is not coherent with, and indeed antithetical to, Freire's own ontologization of man as an active knowing subject. Such a contradictory view of man's nature is particularly the case when Freire depicts traditional schooling as the "banking" concept of education — the ontologization of man as an active knowing subject, and at the same time as a black-box in which everything can be "deposited"

by the oppressive teacher. The absurd concoction of Rousseau and Locke, or even Rousseau and Watson is a problem implicit in Freire's discourses on education. Freire's educational theory will be discussed in the section on phenomenological Marxism, but let it suffice to note at this point that in his attempt to link education to a radical political praxis Freire's epistemology collapses.

### *The Frankfurt School*

The main theses of Lukacs' Hegelianized Marxism can be broadly divided into two major components.<sup>15</sup> The first is the negative component, that is, the ideological critique of the reified social consciousness of capitalist society. The second is the positive component, viz., an affirmation of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. The Critical Theorists, particularly Horkheimer and Adorno, remained unimpressed by the positive aspects of Lukacs' reconstruction of Marxism. Their debt to Lukacs was limited to the negative level of ideological critique. Since they rejected the notion of totality, the idea of the proletariat as a metasubject, and the idea of the vanguard party as the surrogate for the Hegelian Absolute Spirit, the only possible course open to them was "negation" of the status quo.

Fundamental here is their philosophical rejection of the notion of the absolute identity between reality and concept, subject and object, and infrastructure and superstructure. They came to believe that philosophy has traditionally been dominated by the search for an absolute starting point and, in consequence, it has drifted into an erroneous search for some kind of primordial being to which all others were ultimately reducible, be this the Absolute Spirit, the material forces of production, or the solitary self.

Their stress on nonidentity however does not mean the absolute separation of subject and object. In his *Negative Dialectic* Adorno makes this point very clear when he says that, though the insistence upon the perfect correspondence of the thing to its concept is an overweening self-confidence, the ideal of identity must not simply be discarded.<sup>16</sup> He then argues that living in the rebuke that the thing is not identical with the concept is the concept's longing to become identical with the thing. This is precisely how the sense of nonidentity contains the ideal of scientific progress toward identity, because, even in the relationship between a physical phenomenon and a scientific concept about it, there is always a nonidentity or what Werner Heisenberg called the "uncertainty principle."

The implication is that a philosophy which continues in traditional fashion to strive to discover an absolute identity, in Adorno's and Horkheimer's view, is one of the root causes which actually strengthens totalitarian tendency. It is precisely this rejection of ontological, epistemological first principle and their willingness to remain in a perpetual state of suspended judgement which explains the Critical Theorists' resolute rejection of the nondialectical dismissal of the importance of cultural superstructures as the epiphenomena of the economic. Furthermore, neither the base nor the superstructure, neither essence nor appearance is manifestly primary, especially in advanced capitalist societies characterized by the rapid convergence of politics and economics which decisively erodes the Marxian doctrine of base-superstructure.

Given this philosophical rejection of identity theory, Adorno and Horkheimer do not hesitate to dismiss the Hegelian notion of "the true is the whole," the idea of the proletariat as the identical subject and object of history,<sup>17</sup> and the concept of the vanguard party as the surrogate for the Absolute Spirit. What is of immediate relevance to the concerns of this essay is their rejection of Lukacs' emphasis on the identity between theory and political praxis. They rather claimed with

emphasis that it is indeed uncritical and pseudorevolutionary to attempt to politicize the universities without a critical reflection on the inhumane suppression and manipulation endemic in the "diamat" countries.<sup>18</sup>

Marcuse, on the other hand, offers a revision of Freudian psychoanalysis as a replacement for the now defective economic argument, and the concept of "instinctual repression" here plays for Marcuse the role similar to that of "economic exploitation" in Marx.<sup>19</sup> Though the majority of the people acquiesced under the manipulation of "repressive desublimation" the advanced capitalism had made for them, the latent revolutionary consciousness, according to Marcuse, can become awakened by group psychotherapy.

Marcuse's search for the political radicalization of Critical Theory has nevertheless little theoretical grounding in the sense that the radical students as the group psychotherapists are replaced, without any theoretical explanation, by the ghetto population of urban centers, and by the alienated minority group, and sometimes by the working class of the Third World as the new group psychotherapists.<sup>20</sup> Marcuse's epistemology here collapses by his failure to explain why these and only these specific segments of society must be the loci of critical consciousness as the possible substitutes for the Lukacsian concept of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history.

As a response to this apparent failure to unite theory and practice, Habermas attempts to demonstrate that theory and practice can be unified at least epistemologically. The core concept of his theory of education with its emphasis on epistemology is the idea of "a self-reflection of the science," which refers to metatheoretical discussion of the utility of an analytic framework, the fruitfulness of hypothesis, the choice of methods of investigations, and the interpretation of the results of research — all in terms of their impact on quality of human life. He argued that only in this dimension of education for critical self-reflection can schooling promote for students the critical intelligence of self-reflection.<sup>21</sup> Habermas' emphasis that "the translation of scientific material into educational processes of students" with its emphasis on philosophizing shows "the crossover points between theory and practice" provides a possible way out of the Kantian antinomy in education.

Giroux's indiscriminating expulsion of empiricism and positivism from the new sociology of education then is by no means justified by Critical Theory. The first generation of the Frankfurt School did make a distinction between the critical potential of the philosophical doubting of Humean empiricism on the one hand and the positivism of Comte and the earlier Vienna circle on the other.<sup>22</sup> Habermas in fact attempts to show a possible way of unifying positivism or what he calls the "empirical-analytic science" and the "historical-hermeneutic science," which culminates in his Critical Theory of education.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, what is disregarded in Giroux's radical critique of positivism as "an ideological prop of the status quo" is his failure to recognize that the positivistic approach of Bowles-Gintis was probably not to support the existing capitalist system, but to attempt to prove the Marxian thesis that capitalism changes itself by its own internal contradiction, even if schooling cannot change it. Giroux's "Critical Theory of Education," which is characterized by what he calls "the counter-logic" that "pulls students away from schools into the street, the bars, and the shopfloor"<sup>24</sup> is not only foreign to Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, but also defective by its failure to develop any systematic theory by which the radical activism might be justified.

### Phenomenological Marxism

Phenomenology means different things to different scholars. But a careful investigation leads us to a tentative conclusion that there are at least four basic concepts common to all post-Husserlian phenomenologists. Specifically, they are the emphasis on concrete existence, the intentionality of consciousness, an attempt to go beyond the natural attitude of life-world and, with the exception of Sartre, the intersubjectivity of social life.

Paulo Freire's pedagogy for consciousness-raising, which is, for Michael Young and Henry Giroux among others, a model par excellence for a radical pedagogy, adopts the phenomenological starting point of Husserl and Sartre who claim that the primal fact is the intentionality of consciousness. Man's ontological vocation, according to Freire, is to be a Subject, which stresses both the intentionality of consciousness of the concrete world in which we find ourselves, and the conspicuous awareness of the possibility of transforming the world.<sup>25</sup>

Following Husserl and Sartre, Freire emphasizes a need to examine taken-for-granted perceptions of everyday reality, through the "codification" of alienating aspects extracted from the learners' immediate and intersubjective experiences, and a need to make "problematic" the nature of our commonsense perception. What Freire actually emphasizes is not Husserlian transcendental subjectivity of pure intuition, but rather a radical turn to the concrete existence. In this respect Freire's phenomenology is very close to Sartre's who, following Heidegger, emphasizes concrete existence over transcendental essence. The starting point of organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the masses.<sup>26</sup>

The importance of this stage of "conscientization," for Freire, is that the deeper the act of knowing goes the more reality the learners unveil for what it is, discarding the myths that envelop it. It is at this crucial stage that the existing code is broken down, "decoded," and reconstructed more realistically in relation to its global structure of domination.

Despite Freire's intention for, and commitment to, the liberation of the oppressed, there are several decisive theoretical incoherences in his discourses on education. First of all, Freire juxtaposes uncritically ideas from both Buber and Sartre, whose ontological assumptions are indeed contradictory. The ontology Sartre presents is essentially dualistic and Cartesian. "Being" here is divided into what, following Hegel, he called objective "being-in-itself" and subjective "being-for-itself." Sartre rejected any dialectical overcoming of Cartesian opposition between consciousness and the world, and hence denied the Hegelian *Aufhebung* of opposites arguing that "while the for-itself lacks the in-itself, the in-itself does not lack the for-itself."<sup>27</sup> Hence, for Sartre, there is no reciprocity in the opposition between in-itself and for-itself. Very much in the spirit of Kierkegaard, ultimate reality, for Sartre, is confined to what Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* had seen as merely transitional, that of the "unhappy consciousness." As Sartre himself puts it, "human reality is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state."<sup>28</sup> The underlying ontological assumption is that we are thrown into the world in the face of the Other, or the hostile gazers. Each, by existing, limits the possibility of attaining the being-for-itself. Hence, conflict and struggle, for Sartre, is the ultimate reality of all human relations. Especially hopeless in Sartrean ontology is what Martin Buber called the authentic communion between I and Thou. Freire fails to provide any explanation of how Sartrean asocial ontology and Buberian concept of authentic communion between I and Thou could be reconciled enough to be sublated into the pedagogy of the oppressed.

Second, the asocial ontology in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* grounded in an extreme individualism and the idea of absolute freedom remains unchanged even after his embrace of Marxism. The alleged synthesis of objective condition and subjective consciousness in terms of what Sartre called the "progressive-regressive method," does not really go beyond the absolute primacy of subjective, individual praxis.<sup>29</sup> Thus, his epistemology to be able to overcome the Kantian antinomy between subject and object remains invalidated, and it is not totally consistent with Freire's emphasis on the necessary transcendence of what he called the pre-Hegelian idealism.

Finally, the reason why the phenomenologists recommend us to radically suspend the taken-for-granted knowledge of the commonsense world is not because of different abilities of men's cognition, but rather because of the lack of the apodicticity of man's natural perception of the everyday life-world. Though Freire mentions the phenomenology of Husserl and Sartre in his development of the concept of conscientization, neither Sartre nor Husserl assumed the hierarchically different cognitive abilities among human beings that Freire and Lukacs assumed.

All these theoretical inconsistencies in Freire's theory of education however do not detract from his contribution to the substantial democratization of the authoritarian pedagogical formulation originally developed by Lukacs and Lenin.

Both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were influenced by Marx's *Paris Manuscript*. Unlike Sartre, who finds in it Marx's emphasis on man's alienation in the social relations of production, Merleau-Ponty considers Marx's conception of man as having an inherent social dimension to be the central concept of it. For Merleau-Ponty, ultimate reality is the life-world of intersubjective experiences. In his own phrase, "the world is nothing but the field of our experiences; and we are nothing but a certain perspective of it."<sup>30</sup> Hence the phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty tends to engender a new problem of taming an excessively relativist, subjectivist theory, notwithstanding its alleged transcendence of the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. It is Schutz who, synthesizing Husserl's ideal of life-world and Weberian elements of objectivity, attempts to account for one of the most serious sociological questions of how the objective interpretation of subjective meaning structures is possible.<sup>31</sup> Ultimate reality, for Schutz as for Merleau-Ponty, is the life-world of intersubjective experiences. Life-world consists of the conscious perception of the world we experience, which is the result of an active intentional process of subjective constitution. Therefore, scientific inquiry, according to Schutz, cannot be based on the blind acceptance of the empirically observable world. In order to uncover the 'real' world of subjective experiences, we are recommended to radically suspend taken-for-granted belief in the outerworld and typify the various structures of intersubjective experiences. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, whose epistemology is characterized by an extreme relativism, Schutz emphasizes that in the process of systematic study of the second order constructs or what he calls the typifications of intersubjective reality, we must assume the attitude of "disinterested observers."

One of the major tasks of Young's theory of education is the interrogation of the taken-for-granted categories in everyday practice in educational institutions. He calls for a radical suspension of the blind acceptance of the taken-for-granted categories such as what counts as school knowledge, because they are, in his view, nothing other than the ruling class ideology. Young is following here the phenomenologist claim that since knowledge is socially constituted, it can be changed through human intention. The role of education in social change is clear in Young's claim that all acting is "acting at risk" and the academic spectator who is just reviewing the commitments of others is guilty of "bad faith."<sup>32</sup> Apart from value-judgments, the idea of

“acting at risk,”<sup>33</sup> is not only alien to Marx’s view of reality that men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, it fails to move his theory of education beyond the Kantian antinomy between freedom and necessity. Though Young, much like Giroux, emphasizes that theoretical orientation of the new sociology of education is typically Freirian,<sup>34</sup> the subjectivist voluntarism characterized by “acting at risk” is indeed one which even Freire observed sneeringly as being “pre-Hegelian or undialectical.”

It is worth reminding ourselves at this stage that the Marxist phenomenology of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Young, and Freire, is characterized by its relative unconcern with the economic thesis of Marxism, by its emphasis on the concept of conscious praxis, and by its radical political commitment, notwithstanding its emphasis on a dialectical unity of necessity and freedom. It is therefore not surprising to note Althusser’s radical counterattack on what he called the “consciousness-raising tea group.”<sup>35</sup> It is the structuralist approach to education that will be the focus of the following section.

### *Structuralist Marxism*

According to Althusser, the Hegelian concept of “expressive causality,” originating in Leibniz and adopted by Hegel, in which all of the “moments” are interpreted as expressing the essential genetic principle underlying the whole, viz. the Absolute Spirit, does not allow for the possibility of grasping the “unevenness” of development among the various moments of social formation.<sup>36</sup> Althusser regards the influence of Hegel and German idealism on Marx as an “unfortunate ideological baggage” supposedly jettisoned by Marx after the epistemological break with Hegel.

The cardinal concept of Althusserian structuralism is the “structural causality,” which is essentially a secularized version of Spinoza’s God as “a cause immanent in its effect,” if the transposition from God to the mode of production is carried out.<sup>37</sup> Althusser then uses the concept of structural causality to show how the mode of production functions as the “absent cause” behind the world of appearances, like the Freudian unconscious. At least four corollary arguments can be drawn from the concept of “structure as a cause immanent in its effects.”

The first is his distinction in terms of dominance and determinance. In different stages, the economy is determinant in that it determines which of the “instances” of social formation occupies the dominant place.<sup>38</sup> For example, the feudal mode of production in the Middle Ages largely determined the dominance of religion; and the capitalist mode of production determines that education should be dominant. The second is the concept of “overdetermination,” which for Freud refers to the representation of the dream-thoughts in images privileged by their condensation of a number of thoughts in a single image.<sup>39</sup> Following Freud, Althusser argued that the forces and the relations of production do not automatically initiate social change. There must be an accumulation of other contradictions which fuse into a *ruptural* unity. The third is his notion of “the de-centering of the subject,” which is essentially the product of the union of three forms of his God, namely, Marx, Freud, and Spinoza. Althusser finds warrant for his theoretical antihumanism in Marx’s claim that “the characters who appear on the economic stage are but the personification of the economic relations that exist between them.”<sup>40</sup> He finds another justification from Freud’s idea that the ego is not even master in its own house but subject to deeper unconscious drives of which the mind remains unaware.<sup>41</sup> If, with such constraints imposed upon the individuals by the structural imperative as an “absent cause,” we hope to be still free to do acts as we consciously choose, then we have to faithfully follow Spinoza’s dictum

that freedom is the recognition of necessity prescribed by the divine nature. Finally, Althusser's theory of ideology is another corollary of the concept of structure as being immanent in its effects. He insists on the rigid distinction between the primarily "practical interests" of ideology and the rigorously "theoretical interests" of science. The implication is that ideology is governed by interests beyond the necessity of scientific knowledge alone.<sup>42</sup>

Then, the paramount reality, for Althusser, is the hidden, but objective structure of material production behind the world of appearances. This unconscious field of the invisible is the root cause of the empirical structure of the visible. If he is right, then there is a decisive limitation in the positivistic approach to educational inquiry because reality is beyond the world of empirically collected facts. Just as the ego is not even master in its own house but subject to deeper unconscious drives of which the mind remains unaware, so the allegedly intentional activities of human actors, in Althusser's view, are nothing other than the effects of the absent cause, the hidden structure of the economic.

Althusserian structuralism does not transcend (or more precisely it rejects) the Kantian antinomy between necessity and freedom, object and subject, being and consciousness, and theory and practice. Despite the acute analysis, the rich polemic, and the passionate commitment to transcend both mechanistic economism and the phenomenological approaches of what he calls the "consciousness-raising tea group," Althusser ultimately faces an impasse, where he discovers nothing other than a sophisticated reaffirmation of the classical model of the social topology of base-superstructure, though he has been highly successful in combatting the subjectivist determinism.

Unlike Bowles and Gintis, who are themselves practitioners of the techniques of positivistic social sciences, Althusser as a French structuralist wants to extricate Marxism from any association with a positivistic approach, while he underlines the scientificity of Marxian analysis of the hidden, but real, structure of the economic. Despite the real difference in their respective epistemologies, there certainly is a strong similarity between Althusser and Bowles-Gintis. This is particularly the case in their interpretations of the role of education in social change, namely the reproduction of the skills of labor power and the submission to the ruling ideology. Taking inspiration from Spinoza, Althusser could provide a much stronger justification than Bowles-Gintis.

Education, however it may try to overcome the culture of silence, is, in Althusser's view, primordially condemned to the role prescribed by the dispensation of the absent cause — the role of reproduction of the capitalist system of production. The reproduction, according to Althusser, is to be secured by the institutions of the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses, which in their concerted performance of the symphony orchestra — the ruling ideology — must be under the dominance of the conductor, the educational ISA in mature capitalist societies. The conductor, however, must faithfully follow the preordained music, written secretly by what Althusser calls the Spinozist God, the mode of production. There is indeed a cool and objective reason throughout Althusser's polemic against "Marxism as humanism," entailing a total reduction of human practices to an execution of the reified structure.

Foucault's argument that schooling, like other disciplinary social institutions, silences some discourses in favor of others in order to produce individuals with "docility and utility," and Poulantzas' thesis that education as an ideological state apparatus simply reproduces the relations of ideological, political domination and subordination,<sup>43</sup> together inform us that there is still a striking homology between Althusserian structuralism and post-structuralism, at least, in their interpretations of the role of education in social change. Consequently, the structuralists did not go

substantially beyond the interpretation presented by the political economists of education, notwithstanding their intention to conceptualize education as being dominant in the role of reproduction.

### *Conclusions*

What we, in short, arrive at in our examination are violently competing versions of the Marxian Rome.

To some it appears to be some sort of humanistic village populated by happy, "actualized" individuals. And even in this vision there is considerable disagreement over whether the citizens as a whole are smart enough to arrive at this destination under their power or whether they have to be led there by an omniscient vanguard elite.

To others it resembles some sort of scientific machine-like megalopolis with its dehumanized inhabitants living out their existence under, and by, deterministic structuralist mechanisms.

And while there does seem to be general agreement that the way is paved by education, the crucial issues of what to teach, how to teach, and who to teach seem to be marked by equally conflicting and contradictory road signs.

One conclusion does seem inescapable, however, and it is that even in this vortex of sectarian conflicts such conscientious neo-Marxian scholars as Gramsci and Habermas try to show us a practicable model for critical thinking, which certainly transcends the myth that all educational roads must necessarily lead to the Marxian Rome. A conclusion, and a destination, that will, however, undoubtedly startle both gentlemen and their fellow travelers.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukacs. *History and Class Consciousness*. trans. R. Livingstone. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 151-152; Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. trans. Q. Hoare & G. Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 462.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Arato. "Reexamining the Second International". *Telos*. No. 18 (Winter 1973-1974), p. 37; Leszek Kolakowski. *Main Current of Marxism: The Golden Age*. trans. P. S. Falla. Oxford: (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> Lukacs. op. cit. p. 203; Gramsci. op. cit. p. 446.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital*. Vol. I. trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling. (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. trans. T. Parsons. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), pp. 24-26.

<sup>6</sup> Lukacs. op. cit. p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> S. Bowles, and H. Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire. *The Politics of Education*. trans. D. Macedo. (Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1985), pp. 153-154.

<sup>9</sup> Lukacs. op. cit., pp. 204-205.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 326-330.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *What is to be Done?* trans. S. V. and P. Utechin. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 143-148.

- <sup>12</sup> TIME. September 9, 1985, p. 29.
- <sup>13</sup> Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 1970), p. 39.
- <sup>14</sup> Freire. *Politics of Education*. 1985, pp. 71-80.
- <sup>15</sup> Susan Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. New York: The Free Press, 1977, p. 25.
- <sup>16</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. trans. E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 149.
- <sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. trans. E.F. Jephcott. London: New Left Books, 1974, p. 80; Horkheimer's "Forward," to Martin Jay's *Dialectical Imagination*. p. xii.
- <sup>18</sup> Max Horkheimer. *Critical Theory*. trans. M.J. O'Connell et al. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, pp. vi-ix; Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. p. 143.
- <sup>19</sup> Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 74-77; *Eros and Civilization*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 35.
- <sup>20</sup> Herbert Marcuse. *An Essay on Liberation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 53-56.
- <sup>21</sup> Jurgen Hebermas. *Toward a Rational Society*. trans. J.J. Shapiro. (Boston: Beacon Press 1972,c 1970), pp. 8-9.
- <sup>22</sup> Horkheimer. *Critical Theory*. pp. 146-147; Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 1972, pp. 3-42; Marcuse. *Negations*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 327.
- <sup>23</sup> Habermas. op. cit.; and *Knowledge and Human Interests*. trans. Shapiro. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 308-311.
- <sup>24</sup> Henry Giroux. "Theories of Production and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis." *Harvard Educational Review*. 1983, 53: 3. p. 292.
- <sup>25</sup> Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. pp. 70-71.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 85.
- <sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*. trans. H.E. Barnes. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 94.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 90.
- <sup>29</sup> Sartre. *Search For a Method*. trans. Barnes. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 85.
- <sup>30</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. trans. C. Smith. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 407.
- <sup>31</sup> Alfred Schutz. *Collected Papers* (I). (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), p. 407; *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. trans. G. Walsh and F. Lehnert. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 223.
- <sup>32</sup> Michael Young. "Taking Sides Against the Probable Problems of Relativism and Commitment in Teaching and the Sociology of Knowledge." *Education Review*. 1973, 25: 3, p. 220.
- <sup>33</sup> Giroux. *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition*. South Hadley: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1983, p. 242.
- <sup>34</sup> Young, op. cit. p. 216; Giroux's "Introduction" to Freire's *Politics of Education*. p. xiv.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Gorman. *Neo-Marxism: The Meanings of Modern Radicalism*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982, p. 138.
- <sup>36</sup> Louis Althusser. *For Marx*. trans. B. Brewster. London: Allen Lane, 1969, pp. 213-214.
- <sup>37</sup> Althusser. *Reading Capital*. trans. B. Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1970, pp. 188-189.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>39</sup> Althusser. *For Marx*. p. 252.

<sup>40</sup> Marx. op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> Althusser. *Reading Capital*. p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 137; Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. trans. R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1980, pp. 30-31; and Nicos Poulantzas. *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. trans. D. Fernbach. (London: New York Left Books, 1975), p. 31.