

## Introduction

In the previous lessons, we have examined functionalist perspectives on education. These theories have provided important insight into the relationship between education and the continuity of wider society. However, they are not without the criticisms; not least that they provide an overly positive view of the world. Functionalism portrays education as a universally beneficial, ignoring the stark inequalities present in the social system. Marxist theorists have taken up this criticism and attempted to illustrate how social institutions privilege particular social groups.

## Education and Ideology

Functionalist sociologists have provided us with some insight into the way in which education transmits the culture of society from one generation to another. For a functionalist this culture consists of the socially agreed set of values, and the acceptable ways of behaving that these values direct (norms). Functionalists, in line with their positive outlook on the social world, see this transmission as benefiting everybody - ensuring the **value consensus** necessary for the continuation of society.

The starting point for Marxist perspectives on education is a disagreement with the premise that there is a single shared set of values. Instead, Marxists see a number of competing sets of values, associated with different social groups. In this context, education can be seen as promoting and legitimising only those values that benefit the ruling class.

The French Marxist philosopher **Louis Althusser** (pronounced al-to-zare) has developed this premise. Althusser highlights that the financial power of the bourgeoisie gives them direct control over agencies, such as the police and army, which can physically quash dissent

and rebellion. In this way these institutions, which Althusser calls **repressive state apparatus**, can maintain the existing social order.

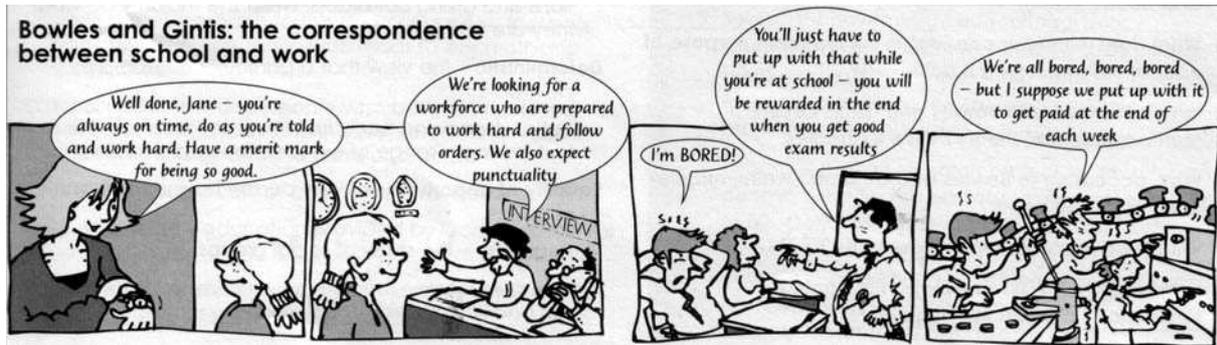
It is, however, difficult to do this maintain order in this way over an extended period of time - a more effective means is by winning "the battle for hearts and minds". By controlling the way in which people think, or instilling **false consciousness**, the bourgeoisie can avoid the necessity for physical oppression.

Althusser therefore argues that in order to control the way in which people think, a ruling class ideology is transmitted and legitimised by **ideological state apparatus**. In the past, religion was the primary method of achieving this (e.g. accepting one's station in life because it is God's will), however in contemporary society, education has become the most influential apparatus of ideological control.

Althusser illustrates his argument by highlighting some of the processes that occur within the school. Firstly, education transmits a general ideology which states that capitalism is just and reasonable - the natural, most appropriate and fair way of organizing society. Furthermore, schools prepare pupils for their roles in the workforce. Most are trained as workers - they are taught to accept their future exploitation, to conform to capitalist need and to accept a future of failure and inequality. They are provided with a set of qualifications that determines

### Key Terminology

**IDEOLOGY:** A framework of values and beliefs that shape the way in which we perceive the world. These beliefs are not necessarily "the truth" and may skew our perception of the world in a way that privileges certain social groups. Despite the social construction of ideologies, they are taken for granted as commonsense.



their future adult roles, and which the ideology of meritocracy portrays as earned – a product of talent and not social background. Some people become the managers and politicians in the future, and academic qualifications legitimise this power.

## Correspondence Theory

*Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) by Samuel Bowles<sup>1</sup> and Herbert Gintis is one of the classic Marxist studies of education. Within it, the authors examine the structure of the American School system and claim to identify the influence of “the long shadow of work” on the school. They argue that, in many ways, the school mirrors what is expected of students later in the workplace – there is a **correspondence** between social relationships within the classroom and those in the workplace. Their examples are particularly associated with the **hidden curriculum**.



**Think about correspondence theory...**

1. Draw the following table on a piece of paper:

Keyword	School	Workplace
Hierarchy		
Power		
Values		
Fragmentation		
Rewards		

2. Try to think of some ways in which the organisation of the school system mirrors the workplace (use the cartoon below to help you).

For Bowles and Gintis, this correspondence is essential in **social reproduction** – the reproduction of a new generation of workers appropriately schooled to accept their roles in capitalist society.

## The Myth of Meritocracy

Bowles and Gintis also focus on the **myth of meritocracy**, which they see as legitimising the inherent inequality of capitalist society (i.e. making unfairness seem fair). Education broadcasts the ideology that everybody has an equal chance, and therefore that those who gain high qualifications deserve them. Since high qualification lead to high status jobs, people how obtain these jobs have earned them through talent and effort.

However, Bowles and Gintis argue that the rewards in education and occupation are based on social background

rather than merit. The higher a person’s class of origin, the more likely they are to attain high educational qualifications and a top job. The class system tends to reproduce itself from generation to generation and this process is legitimised by the ideology of meritocracy. In Bowles and Gintis’s words, “*Education reproduces inequality by justifying privilege and attributing poverty to personal failure*”.

Therefore, not only have working-class pupils less opportunity to do well in school and at work, they are taught to believe that any failure is their fault – they had the same chance as everyone else and wasted it.

## Criticisms of Marxism

Marxism addresses many of the shortcomings of functionalism by arguing that education does not necessarily act as a positive force for everyone and highlighting the inequalities in the system. The notion of **ideology** has been particularly influential in sociology and has sensitised the discipline to the existence of the different values of social groups. The view that education privileges the rich also has firm supporting evidence in the many sociological studies on the underachievement of the working class. However, Marxism is not without criticism.

The Marxist perspective, like Functionalism, belongs to the structural school of sociology; which emphasises the role of social structures in determining the behaviour of individuals. Both sets of theory, therefore, are open to the criticism that they treat people as passive and uncritical. Thus, for Bowles and Gintis, teachers are the agents of capitalism and pupils are the victims – their situations shaped by factors out of their control. However, many teachers are radicals, who have chosen teaching in order to express their ideas. Furthermore, not all students passively take on the dominant ideology presented to them in schools. Both Althusser and Bowles and Gintis fail to acknowledge the degree of resistance by students to teachers and schools – some rebel and form subcultures or “counter school cultures”.

Marxists can also be criticised for assuming that pupils accept the dominant ideology. They offer little evidence, for example, that students actually believe that schools operate on a meritocratic basis. Furthermore, the assumption that those who “do well” in school only do so because they accept the ideology presented to them can be challenged. This underestimates individual intelligence, assuming that people can’t play within the “rules of the game” and retain the ability to think critically about how these rules might be unfair.

<sup>1</sup> Beware of writing this wrong, I have accidentally written Bowles and Gintis at several points in this text.

A further criticism of Marxist perspectives is its emphasis on the working-class, which ignores inequalities along gender and ethnicity; within which there are equally large educational divide.

Bowles and Gintis have also been criticised for overemphasising the correspondence between the school and the workplace. **Brown et al.** (1997) have argued that there is a basic mismatch between the examination system (which emphasises individual achievement) and the modern workplace (in which teamwork is often emphasised).



**Draw a mind-map of the criticisms of Marxist perspectives on education. Try to identify which criticisms might be shared by functionalism**

### Paul Willis – Learning to Labour

Another key study which has been heavily influenced by Marxist thought is Paul Willis' paper, "*Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*" (1977). Like Bowles and Gintis, Willis has focused on **social reproduction** - the way in which the education system tends to direct working class students into working class jobs. However, he does not take a straightforward structuralist approach – rather he examines the micro-scale interactions between students and the school environment and then related his findings to the wider social structure. In many ways, therefore, Willis could be seen as an **interactionist** rather than a structuralist.



**Which of the other theorists covered could be described as "an interactionist in the den of structuralism"?**

Willis adopted an **ethnographic** approach in which he tried to understand the world of a group of 12 working class boys ("the lads") during their last year and a half at school and their first few months at work. He observed the lads in a number of situations and then tried to relate his data to the wider social structure.

Willis did not find a simple correspondence between school and work – and his initial findings seem to contradict the general Marxist perspective on education. He concluded that the education system did not directly shape the lads in his study; rather they rejected the school and created their own counter-school culture.



- **How does this contradict accepted Marxist doctrine on education?**
- **What do you think the effect of the "counter school culture" might have been?**

Paradoxically, it was this very rejection of school prepared the lads for low skilled, low status jobs they were to take. The lads rejected educational success as defined by the school. They saw the conformist behaviour of hardworking pupils (who they called the 'ear 'oles) – as a matter for amusement and mockery. School was good for a laugh and not much else. Boredom was relieved by mucking around and breaking rules. The actively created a counter school culture based on a fierce opposition to authority (see the activity). In some respects this behaviour made sense.

They were destined for low skilled jobs so why bother to work hard.

Despite this rejection of school, Willis found a number of similarities between the attitudes and behaviour developed by the lads in school and those of the shop floor at school.

- Having a laugh was important in both situations as a means of dealing with monotony, boredom and authority.
- At work, as at school, having a bunch of mates to mess around with and support you in an "us and them" situation remained important.
- Casual racism and sexism was the norm in both contexts.

Like Bowles and Gintis, Willis argues for a correspondence between work and school. However, this is not "imposed" by the school, the lads are not the docile, obedient pupils of Bowles and Gintis study. They have produced the correspondence by their rejection of the school - and in doing so they have prepared themselves for their place in the workplace.



**This argument seems to blame the lads for their lack of achievement – do you think the school is freed of all responsibility?**

The lads' culture is not entirely adapted to the requirements of the capitalist workforce. It contains an important, if easy to overlook, criticism of the dominant ideology of individualism and equality of opportunity. There is an implicit recognition that individual effort does not necessarily bring success, that society is not meritocratic and that collective action is a needed to improve the position of the working class. However, this is a long way from recognising the true nature of capitalist exploitation and oppression.

### Evaluation of Willis

Willis' study is popular as it addresses some of the problems of traditional structural-marxism. Gordon (1984), for instance, argues that it addresses the Marxist tendency to over-simplify the role of education in society. The study also provides empirical evidence (i.e. research findings) to support Willis' conclusions – an improvement on all of the studies we have covered so far!

However, the study has been criticised by a number of sociologists – in particular Blackledge and Hunt (1985). They give three main criticisms:

- Willis studied only 12 boys, and it is questionable whether he is justified in generalising his results from this small sample. The findings may have been particular to this group of boys.
- He focused on one extreme sub-culture, without examining the range of student experiences in school.
- His selection of data is very subjective, and it may well be the case that only data relevant to his conclusions was included.

## Activity 7 Learning to Labour

### Item A *Opposing authority*

The most basic, obvious and explicit dimension of counter school culture is entrenched, general and personalised opposition to 'authority'.

(In a group discussion on teachers)

**Joey:** ... they're able to punish us. They're bigger than us, they stand for a bigger establishment than we do, like, we're just little and they stand for bigger things, and you try to get your own back. It's, uh, resenting authority I suppose.

**Eddie:** The teachers think they're high and mighty 'cos they're teachers, but they're nobody really, they're just ordinary people ain't they?

**Bill:** Teachers think they're everybody. They are more, they're higher than us, but they think they're a lot higher and they're not.

This opposition involves an apparent inversion of the usual values held up by authority. It is lived out in countless small ways which are special to the school institution, instantly recognised by the teachers, and an almost ritualistic part of the daily fabric of life for the kids.

Adapted from P. Willis *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, 1977, pp11-12

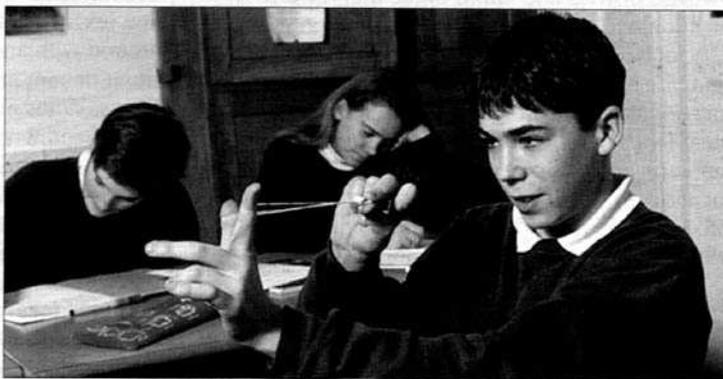
### Item B *Discrediting qualifications*

The lads reject the idea of qualifications. Since knowledge is opposed, so must qualifications be resisted and discredited. As in other things, the principal means of discrediting formal standards is to 'see behind' them to 'how things really work'. At a certain level, the lads really feel they know better. It is possible to get on without qualifications and school work because what really matters is 'knowing a bit about the world', 'having your head screwed on', and, 'pulling your finger out' when necessary.

Qualifications, to them, seem to be a deflection or displacement of direct activity. They feel that they can always demonstrate any necessary ability 'on the job', and that the doing of a thing is always easier than the account of it, or its representation in an exam, or its formal description seem to imply.

Adapted from P. Willis, *ibid*, p94

### Item C



### Questions

- 1 Look at Item A.
  - a) Show how 'the usual values held up by authority' are inverted by a counter school culture.
  - b) Suggest reasons for the development of a counter school culture.
- 2 Read Item B. Why is it important to the lads to reject the idea of qualifications?
- 3 Is there any evidence in Items A and B which a Marxist might use to suggest that the lads are not completely brainwashed by ruling class ideology? Explain your answer.
- 4 Explain why the actions in Item C might bring praise and encouragement from the lads.