

Against Economic Determinism: Revisiting the Roots of Neo-Marxism in Critical Educational Theory

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Abstract

There is a long tradition in critical educational theory of critiquing Marxist analyses of the relationship between schools and capitalist relations of production for being overly economistic and deterministic in their formulations. In response to these critiques, many critical educational theorists turned to the works of Althusser, Gramsci, and others to develop theoretical and political conceptions of schooling that allowed for "relative autonomy" and individual agency. Thus, the field of neo-Marxist educational theory was born. In this paper I argue that, while in some cases critiques of economic determinism have been warranted, by and large these critiques rely on a fundamentally faulty understanding of Marx and Engels' original conceptions of the relationship between society (schools included) and capitalist production. Further, using historical documents written by Marx and Engels themselves as evidence, I posit that their original, dialectical conception of the relationship between social structures and the economic base was nonlinear, non-mechanistic, and non-deterministic. Thus, I conclude that the neo-Marxist turn away from what has been labeled "traditional" or "orthodox" Marxist analyses of education was unnecessary and unwarranted.

Introduction

In the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1968b) writes:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure

of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (p. 183)

Of all of Marx's extensive writing on political economy and philosophy, there is perhaps no other single segment that has produced as much theoretical wrangling, conflict, and discussion as this one. These four sentences outline what is commonly referred to as the base/superstructure model in Marxism, where the "legal and political superstructure" rises out of the "relations of production" that make up the base "economic structure of society."

In critical educational theory, Marxism's trenchant critique of capitalism and the production of social inequality provides a valuable tool for theorists to interrogate how and even explain why schools seem to reproduce dominant social relations. Given the vast disparities in educational achievement along lines of race and class, it seems that schools, as part of the superstructure, play a role in reproducing inequalities associated with the economic base. The data from any number of educational indicators (i.e. test scores, graduation rates, drop-out rates, college admissions, tracking, expulsion rates) clearly show some type of correlation between economic structures and the outcomes of education (see, e.g., Anyon, 2005; Apple, 1995; Jencks & Phillips, 1999; McNeil, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Oakes, 1985/2005; Sirin, 2005), and a Marxist analysis of schooling provides a powerful explanation of this correlation.

However, it has been commonplace to critique Marx's conception for being economicistic; that is, for placing too much emphasis on the economy as the sole determinant of society, social relations, and socio-political institutions. In the field of education this has translated into a criticism of Marxism for asserting that, in essence, there is a direct, linear, mechanical, or functionalist correspondence between the needs of the capitalist economy and the structures of schooling. In an attempt at self-correction, this has led to a response of placing more emphasis on the "superstructure" of society and culture through a focus on the concept of "hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971) and the assertion of "relative autonomy" of the superstructure from

the economic base (Althusser, 1971). These added distinctions presumably distinguish neo-Marxist analyses of education from traditionally Marxist ones.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the foundations of this debate. First, I explain the application of economic determinism within critical educational theory and outlines the substantial critiques of this analysis. Then, I outline how critical educational theorists turned to the work of Gramsci and Althusser in the interest of developing neo-Marxist theory that explains inequality in education but still allows for the agency of individuals and relative autonomy of education in relation to capitalist production. Finally, I return to the works of Marx and Engels to explore their conception of the relationship between society and capitalist production, and find the turn to neo-Marxism as unwarranted, given the non-deterministic, non-functional nature of Marx and Engel's original formulation.

Education, Social Reproduction, and the Correspondence Principle

The contemporary arguments surrounding the relationship between schools and the reproduction of capitalist economic relations were sparked by Bowles and Gintis' (1976), *Schooling in Capitalist America: Education Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. In their book, Bowles and Gintis advance the "correspondence principle" of educational relations. According to this principle, in capitalist societies,

the division of labor in education, as well as its structure of authority and reward, mirror those of the economy ... [and] in any stable society in which a formal educational system has a major role in the personal development of working people, there will tend to emerge a correspondence between the social relations of education and those of the economic system. (Bowles & Gintis, 1988, p. 237)

Bowles and Gintis' formulation asserts that schools simply function to serve the needs of capitalist production in nearly a one-to-one correspondence, and offers a mechanistic interpretation of Marx's analysis of the relationship between the economic base and superstructure quoted above.

Critical education theorists sharply criticize Bowles and Gintis' "correspondence principle." These critics argue that the correspondence principle ignore the role of teachers, culture, and ideology in schools, is too mechanical and overly economic, and neglects students' and others' resistance to dominant social relations (Apple,

1979/2004, 1980, 1980-81; Carlson, 1988; Cole, 1988; Giroux, 1980, 1983; Moore, 1988; Sarup, 1978; Sharp, 1980). Arnot and Whitty (1982) provide a clear summary of these critiques when they state:

[T]he political economy of schooling as presented by Bowles & Gintis ... failed to describe and explain classroom life, the conflicts and contradictions within the school and the distance and conflict between the school and the economy. Further, it could not account for the variety of responses of teachers and pupils to the structures of the school—some of which were liable to threaten the successful socialisation of the new generation. (p. 98)

Instead of schools reproducing an exact reflection of norms of behavior, attitude, and ideological dispositions required for capitalist production, critics argue, individuals within those schools possess *agency* and *consciousness* which allows them to mediate and *resist* the dominant social relations reproduced through institutions (Apple, 1995, 1982).

Faced with a mechanical formulation of a functionalist, direct, one-to-one correspondence between the relations of production (economic base) and their reproduction in schools (the superstructure), critical educational theorists were compelled to develop a critique of capitalist relations in schools and society while simultaneously allowing for resistance to those dominant relations. These theorists turned to the works of Gramsci and Althusser for a solution to this dilemma, thus establishing the neo-Marxist tradition of analysis within critical educational theory.

Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci was a founder of the Italian Communist Party, and was imprisoned by the Italian Fascists in 1926. In prison he penned over 3,000 pages of notebooks on Marxist theory and political strategies for his party (Allman, 1999; Coben, 1995) that were subsequently edited and published in English translation as *Selections From The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971).¹ Gramsci's exploration and elaboration of the concept of *hegemony* has become a central tenet in neo-Marxist theorizing. In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci (1971) posits that “social hegemony” is the,

‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the

dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (p. 12)

Gramsci further discusses how social hegemony takes on universality when he states that, “[T]he development and expansion of the particular [dominant] group are conceived of and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion” (p. 182). Based on a close textual reading of *The Prison Notebooks*, Allman (1999) explains:

[Gramsci] uses the term “hegemony,” or moral, ethical leadership, to describe the means by which consent is organized. However, hegemony is a form of leadership that can work primarily by either domination or direction (i.e., leading). In his analysis of how hegemony works in bourgeois civil society, he describes how it works primarily by domination or imposition of ideological systems of belief as well as through the absorption of radical elements into the existing framework. (pp. 105-106)

Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is intimately linked to his formulation of the relationship between the superstructure and the economic base. He specifies two ways in which the superstructure reproduces capitalist relations: The first is hegemonic – through ideology and universalized “spontaneous consent”—while the second is through “legal” enforcement of judiciaries and other institutions associated with the state (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). With his focus on the processes of hegemony and domination and the state’s role in the two, Gramsci places an emphasis on the superstructure’s autonomy from the economic base (Carnoy, 1982). For instance, Gramsci (1971) argues:

...[T]he fact that the State/government, conceived as an autonomous force, should reflect back its prestige upon the class upon which it is based, is of the greatest practical and theoretical importance, and deserves to be analysed more fully if one wants a more realistic concept of the State itself. (p. 269)

However, Gramsci does not elevate the superstructure to independent status. Rather, he conceives of the superstructure as being dialectically related to the economic base:

[Economic] structures and superstructures form an ‘historical bloc’. That is to say the complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructure is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production. From this, one can conclude: that only a totalitarian system of ideologies gives a rational reflection of the contradiction of the structure... This reasoning is based on the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure, a reciprocity which is

nothing other than the real dialectical process. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 366, original emphasis)

Gramsci's description of the superstructure as a "complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble*" (his emphasis) is an expression of the superstructure as dynamic, fluid, and consisting of an assemblage of parts, suggesting a dialectical, non-functionalist conception of the relationship, a conception he reiterates through his work (see, e.g., Gramsci, 1971, p. 116).

In placing a focus on the superstructure, identifying its two levels, expanding the concept of hegemony, and asserting the partial autonomy of the state, Gramsci provides neo-Marxists with a way to address the dilemma presented by mechanical, functionalist analyses of the relationship between the economic base and the social superstructure. For instance, understanding hegemony as a process in and of itself that takes place partially through education, allows it to be explicitly targeted, analyzed, and potentially disrupted – a tactical position that has been noted by critical educational theorists. Apple (1980) explains that:

As Gramsci was adamant in pointing out, there will be countervailing tendencies and oppositional practices going on as well. These tendencies and practices may not be as powerful as the ideological and material forces of determination that aim toward reproduction; they may in fact be inherently contradictory and relatively disorganized. But, they will exist. (p. 60)

The position that education provides a site for resistance to bourgeois hegemony is a key concept for neo-Marxist theorists. Gramsci's emphasis on the potential autonomy of the State/superstructure in relation to the economic base places schools in a position of not being fully determined by the economic structure and reinforces their potential for resisting bourgeois hegemony (Allman, 1999, 2001; Apple, 1979/2004, 1995, 2002; Coben, 1995; Giroux, 1983, 1999).

Additionally, Gramsci's conception of hegemony has also been used within critical educational theory to explain how consent of the subordinate is essentially "won" by those in power. Often, to maintain their legitimacy, dominant elites offer compromises or accords with subordinate groups (Apple & Buras, 2006), accords that can act as "an umbrella under which many groups can stand but which basically still is under the guiding principles of dominant groups" (Apple, 2000, p. 64). This particular application of hegemony has been used within critical educational policy

studies, for instance, to frame and understand why some segments of racially oppressed communities lend their support to the movement to privatize public education via the use of vouchers – a movement that ultimately increases social inequality (Apple, 2006; Apple & Pedroni, 2005). Such an analysis finds that the hegemonic conservative Right uses appeals to racial equity to gain the support of communities of color, who see their immediate interests served through the implementation of a policy such as school vouchers. Thus, Gramsci's conception of hegemony also allows for critical education theorists to recognize some amount of human agentic action as individuals and communities that consciously relate to social, economic, cultural, political, and educational “structures.”

Althusser and Relative Autonomy

Althusser, a French communist and philosopher, is another theorist whose ideas have been widely adopted by neo-Marxist educational scholars. In his discussion of the relationship between the economic base (what he refers to as the “infrastructure”) and the superstructure, Althusser (1971) states:

It is easy to see that this representation of the structure of every society as an edifice containing a base (infrastructure) on which are erected the two ‘floors’ of the superstructure, is a metaphor, to be quite precise, a spatial metaphor...this metaphor...suggests that the upper floors could not ‘stay up’ (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base...Thus the object of the metaphor of the edifice is to represent above all the ‘determination in the last instance’ by the economic base. (p. 135)

Althusser goes on to explore the base/superstructure relationship. Given the superstructure's “determination in the last instance” by the base, he arrives at two conclusions: “(1) there is a ‘relative autonomy’ of the superstructure with respect to the base; (2) there is a ‘reciprocal action’ of the superstructure on the base” (Althusser, 1971, p. 136).² Additionally, Althusser identifies two distinct components of the superstructure: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which the powerful use to maintain hegemonic control through force and ideology respectively.

For Althusser it is the ISA, of which schools are a part, that maintains ideological hegemony for the ruling class. Indeed, Althusser sees state-sanctioned education as central in maintaining hegemony. In his discussion of the role of schools he states, “I

believe that the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations...is the *educational ideological apparatus*" (Althusser, 1971, p. 153). He goes on to discuss how schools, as a tool of bourgeois hegemony, are presented as a universally neutral and natural mechanism:

The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology: an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology... (Althusser, 1971, p. 157)

Althusser's conception of schools in relation to hegemony meshes with Gramscian view in that schools transmit the "universally reigning ideology" while simultaneously maintaining the image of being a "neutral environment purged of ideology." Thus, they contribute to, in Gramscian terms, the "spontaneous consent" of the dominated.

It is Althusser's "relative autonomy" that has been taken up by critical education theorists. For instance, Apple (1995) explains that:

...[T]here was as dynamic interplay between the political and economic spheres which was found in education. While the former was not reducible to the latter—and, like culture, it had a significant degree of relative autonomy—the role the school plays *as a state apparatus* is strongly related to the core problems of accumulation and legitimation faced by the state and a mode of production... (p. 26)

Strands of Althusser's formulation can also be found running through the work of theorists such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bernstein (Apple, 2002; Bernstein, 1990). Althusser's concept of relative autonomy is also used within what is loosely referred to "resistance theory" in education. According to Giroux (1983):

In resistance accounts, schools are relatively autonomous institutions that not only provide spaces for oppositional behavior and teaching but also represent a source of contradictions that sometimes make them dysfunctional to the material and ideological interests of the dominant society. (p. 260)

Resistance theory, as evidence of the relative autonomy of schools, takes on issues of cultural production and reproduction as central fields of inquiry, and is perhaps epitomized by the ethnographic work of Paul Willis (1977; 2003), who, in his work with the "lads" in the United Kingdom, found that working class school boys "resisted

the mental and bodily inculcations of the school and rejected students who showed conformist attitudes to the school authorities” (Willis, 2003, pp. 392-393). As Giroux (1981) notes:

Theories of resistance take as their major objective a study of the way in which class and culture combine to offer the outlines for a cultural politics. Central to such a politics is a semiotic reading of the style, rituals, language, and systems of meaning that constitute the cultural field of the oppressed. (1981, p. 13)

The concept of relative autonomy thus holds a utilitarian value for resolving the problems posed by economic determinism and aids critical education theorists in developing theories of resistance (Dance, 2002; Giroux, 1981, 1983; Willis, 1977, 2003), because it attempts to both acknowledge human intervention through cultural practices and to establish schools as spaces where the possibility of social transformation might be created.³

Althusser’s conception is contradictory, however. Ironically, while he does challenge economic determinism broadly through the concept of relative autonomy, he is also noted for denying human subjectivity and agency in relation to social, economic, and historical structures. This has been termed Althusser’s “antihumanism” where:

the self, the human subject, does not so much constitute but is constituted by the structural, systemic relations in which it finds itself. It is the belief not that [humans] make history but that history makes [humans] or that history makes itself... (Smith, 1985, p. 649)

Indeed, in *For Marx*, Althusser (1969) argues that Marx’s early analysis of human agency should be thrown out in favor of an analysis that focuses solely on structures (Poster, 1974). Critiques of Althusser’s emphasis on structuralism also appear in critical educational theory, where his work is even grouped with the economic determinism of Bowles and Gintis (Giroux, 1980, 1983, 2003). This critique is warranted, for instance, when Althusser (1971) asserts:

[C]hildren at school also learn the ‘rules’ of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is ‘destined’ for...[The] school...teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its ‘practice’.
(Althusser, 1971, pp. 132-133, original emphasis)

In this section on education, Althusser, using language such as “destined” and “ensure subjection,” evokes an air of predetermination and lack of agency/subjectivity on the part of students. Thus, Althusser’s formulation of schools is internally contradictory because, “relative autonomy” withstanding, it belies the power of humans, as agentic subjects, to act in the world.

Exploring Marx and Engels’ Conception of Hegemony and Relative Autonomy

Thus far I have explained how the functionalist, economic determinist explanation of the relationship between schools and capitalist production was deemed inadequate by critical educational theorists. Further, I have explained how these theorists turned towards Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” and Althusser’s conception of “relative autonomy” in search of a less restrictive analysis that could still maintain a Marxist critique of capitalism while allowing for human agency and consciousness – thus giving rise of neo-Marxist critical education theory. What I have found in this historical-theoretical study, however, is a problematic within neo-Marxist theorizing. Mainly, much of the neo-Marxist critique has erroneously conflated functionalist, economic determinism with Marxism. In this sense, we can see the disservice of Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) analysis: Their functionalist, economic determinist account epitomizes what today is often referred to as “orthodox Marxism” almost as if it were common sense (see, e.g., Leonardo, 2004; Smith, 1984).⁴ As Apple (1982) notes, however, “...Marx himself consistently employed the ideas of base and superstructure in a complex way. Rather than calling for an economic perspective where ‘the economy’ produces everything else, we find a much more substantive usage” (p. 10). Apple is indeed correct. Marx and Engels themselves have a tradition of struggling against economic and mechanical interpretations of Marxist theory; as we shall see, their conception is complex enough to raise doubts about the necessity of the turn towards “neo” Marxism in the first place.

In their texts, Marx and Engels’ offer a conception of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure that is dynamic and non-functionalist. For instance, although they did not take up an explicit study of the concept, the roots of a complex analysis of hegemony exist in *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1978), where they state:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas;... The individuals composing the ruling class... rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of the epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas on their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch... (pp. 172-173, emphasis in original)

They go on to add that:

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones... Every new class, therefore, achieves its hegemony only on a broader basis than that of the class ruling previously... (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 174)

Clearly, the above offerings of Marx and Engels are open to a complex analysis of hegemony that does several things. First, it begins to interrogate the relationship between ideology and power in society in a way that recognizes how those in control have the power and capacity to produce and distribute their ideas, and that this power and capacity rests on their relative control over material production. Further, Marx and Engels' analysis includes the concept of ideological universality, where the interests of the ruling elite are presented as the common interests of the whole society. Additionally, Marx addresses the concept of hegemony in *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850* (Marx, 1978) where he raises the role of inter-class and intra-class conflict and compromise in the social, political, and economic turmoil in France at the time. Thus, while Gramsci may have considered hegemony as a specific concept more deeply in his notebooks, Marx and Engels express a what might be considered a proto-conception of hegemony that is congruent with Gramsci's later work (Carnoy, 1982).

In concert with developing a proto-conception of hegemony, Marx and Engels also provide a nuanced and complex analysis of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure. In a letter to J. Bloch, Engels (1968d) critiques

economistic interpretations of Marxism for gutting the “the materialist conceptions of history.”

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions,... judicial forms,... political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents, the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary... (p. 692, original emphasis)

In this passage Engels clarifies the Marxist conception of the base/superstructure relationship. After establishing that he and Marx never asserted that economics was the sole determining factor, and recognizing that the superstructure does play a role in shaping history, Engels adds that the superstructure “in many cases preponderate in determining [the] *form*” of class struggle. This point in particular speaks to issues of resistance, human agency, and mediation of bourgeois hegemony within the superstructure, including schools. In essence, it posits a type of relative autonomy to the superstructural elements that Engels outlines, thus opening the door for a Marxist analysis that asserts that various superstructural elements, human consciousness and human action “exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles ...,” even as the “economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary” (Engels, 1968d, p. 692; see also Engels, 1968e).

Further, Engels (1968c), in a letter to H. Borgius, addresses the role of capitalist economic necessity in relation to the superstructure:

Political, juridicial, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis. It is not that the economic situation is *cause, solely active*, while everything else is only passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which *ultimately* always asserts itself... So it is not, as people try here and there conveniently try to imagine, that the economic situation produces an automatic effect. No. [Humans] make their history themselves, only they do so in a given environment, which conditions it, and on

the basis of actual relations already existing, among which the economic relations...are still ultimately the decisive ones. (pp. 704-705, original emphasis)

It is the economic necessity, the movement created by the contradictions inherent in capitalist production, that “ultimately always asserts itself” over the superstructure. It is in this dialectical sense that the economic basis is the driving force for the superstructure “in the last analysis” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 162) or “in the last instance” (Althusser, 1971, p. 135). However, it is worth highlighting that in the above quotation, Engels also posits that, “It is not that the economic situation is the *cause*, *solely active*...There is, rather, interaction...”

As we see from the above evidence, Marx and Engels explained the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure in terms of relational interaction, not in terms of economic functionalism. This does not mean, however, that Marx and Engels denied that the state could at times have “relative autonomy” from the economic base. On the contrary, Marx and Engels explained the “relative autonomy” of the State both historically and theoretically. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1968a) offers historical evidence of the “relative autonomy” of the state. He observes that, “Only under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent...And yet the state power is not suspended in mid-air. Bonaparte represents a class...” (p. 171). Engels (1968c) offers a more theoretical explanation of the “relative autonomy” of “particular spheres” from the “economic sphere” when he states that:

The further the particular sphere which we are investigating is removed from the economic sphere and approaches that of pure abstract ideology, the more shall we find it exhibiting accidents in its development, the more will its curve zigzag. But if you plot the average axis of the curve, you will find that this axis will run more and more nearly parallel to the axis of economic history. (p. 705)

Engels’ point here is particularly provocative. Not only is he advocating that other “spheres” can behave somewhat autonomously in relation to the “economic sphere,” but he posits that we can only qualify the economic base and superstructure *relationally* with each other. Further he asserts that, the more autonomous the State or aspects of the superstructure are from the economic base, the more they contradict the needs of the relations of production. This distance is expressed relatively through “accidents” in the development of a “particular sphere.”

However, it is apparent that, in stressing the power that the economic production wields over the superstructure, many of Marx and Engels' contemporaries interpreted their analysis as being economic determinist. For instance, Engels (1968b), in a letter to F. Mehring, laments:

Marx and I always failed to stress enough in our writings in regard to which we are all equally guilty. That is to say, we all laid, and *were bound to lay*, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing we neglected the formal side—the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about—for the sake of content. This has given our adversaries a welcome opportunity for misunderstandings and distortions... (p. 700, emphasis in original)

In an explanation of why he and Marx emphasized the economic base in relation to the superstructure, Engels (1968d) that:

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction. (p. 693)

Further, in a critique of mechanistic formulations of Marxist theory by their contemporaries, Engels (1968b) explains:

It is above all this semblance of an independent history of state constitutions, of systems of law, of ideological conceptions in every separate domain that dazzles most people... This aspect of the matter, which I can only indicate here, we have all, I think, neglected more than it deserves. It is the old story: form is always neglected at first for content... Hanging together with this is the fatuous notion of the ideologists that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any *effect upon history*. The basis of this is the common undialectical conception of cause and effect. (p. 701, emphasis in original)

Marx and Engels were so focused on developing a materialist understanding of capital and capitalism that Engels admits they neglected issues of ideological and state form – partially as an expression of their human physical limitations. (In spite of the monumental amount of work he produced, Marx simply died before he was able to finish all the volumes of *Capital*.) In the same stroke, Engels does correctly place blame for the critique of Marxism for not allowing for enough “independent history of state constitutions, of systems of law, or ideological conceptions” squarely on an

“undialectical conception of cause and effect.” As I have argued here, such undialectical conceptions, led neo-Marxists to critique Marxism for economic determinism in the first place.

Against Economic Determinism: A Defense of Dialectics

What these [people] all lack is dialectics. They always see only here cause, there effect. That this is a hollow abstraction, that such metaphysical polar opposites exist in the real world only during crises, while the whole vast process goes on in the form of interaction—though of very unequal forces, the economic movement being by far the strongest, most primordial, most decisive—that here everything is relative and nothing absolute—this they never begin to see... (Engels, 1968a, p. 699)

The problematic conflation of Marxism with functionalist, economic determinism within critical educational theory recalls Engels’ above remark. If we take dialectical materialism as the core philosophical perspective of Marxist theory,⁵ then it is a logical impossibility to equate a Marxist account (at least in the sense of Marx and Engels’ original, “orthodox” dialectical materialist conception) with a functionalist, economic determinist account of social reproduction in education (Sayers, 1990). This is because dialectical relationships are dynamic, interactional, fluid, and relational and therefore do not allow for linear, mechanical, one-to-one chains of causality or correspondence (Allman, 1999; Engels, 1940; Ollman, 2003; Sayers, 1990; Woods & Grant, 2002). This is the type of analysis we see in Engels’ explanation of the relationship between the economy and society, discussed above in several instances. It is a relationship characterized by “zigzags,” “the wills of individuals,” “exhibiting accidents,” and “interactions” between various aspects of the superstructure and the base of capitalist economic production. It is apparent that Engels in fact disagreed with his contemporaries who interpreted Marx’s analysis to mean that there was a direct, automatic cause and effect relationship between the economy and society. To posit a functionalist, deterministic, one-to-one correspondence between schools and capitalist production is decidedly anti-dialectical, or “undialectical” in Engels’ words, and therefore arguably does not fall within the tradition of Marxist analysis.

The question still remains: What is the relationship between schools and the reproduction of capitalist social relations? Some advocate that the base/superstructure metaphor within Marxist, critical educational analysis be completely rejected (see,

e.g., Rikowski, 1997). It is not clear to me, however, that the problem is with the metaphor itself. Rather, based on the analysis presented here, the central problem seems to have been maintaining a dialectical materialist analysis when we think about the relationships and processes at hand. It is when their analyses slip into the linear, mechanical logics associated with the rationalist tradition (Benton & Craib, 2001; Sayers, 1990) that critical theorists generally run into difficulty with Marxism.

As Sayers (1990) points out, one of the key tenets of Marxist dialectics is that in order for us to understand something as it concretely exists as part of material reality, “[I]t is vital to see them in the context of their interconnections with other things within a wider whole” (p. 143). Arguably, this has been the intent of all Marxist, functionalist, and neo-Marxist formulations of the relationship between schools and society – the empirical evidence connecting schools and inequality is too overwhelming to deny such a relationship. The devil, however, is in the details, in *how* we conceive of the interconnections between things within an organic, interrelated totality. Again, Sayers (1990) provides an glimpse of such a conception in his summation of Marxist dialectical relations:

Social processes have their own internal dynamic, their own inner contradictions. The different aspects of society – forces and relations of production, base and superstructure – are aspects of a single whole, internally and organically interrelated, in dialectical interaction and conflict. It is these interactions, these conflicts, these contradictions – which are internal to society – that lead to historical change. In the process, none of these aspects is inert or passive: the forces and relations of production and also the superstructure are all transformed and developed. (p. 164)

The importance of understanding social and economic processes as having their own internal dynamics cannot be overstated, for it recognizes that there are logics of development at play within these relationships, that there are social and economic systems in a sense have their own life *and* are made up of the lives of individual humans. As Creaven (2000) observes,

The existence of such relationships of structural dependence (of polity, law, major cultural institutions, etc.) upon economic production and exploitation is what justifies the Marxist view that societies are systems, or totalities, following their own logics of development, rather than a heterogeneous ensemble of “autonomous” structures or practices, moving in no particular direction. (p. 67)

The conception of these relationships systematic, as processes that develop in particular directions and that exhibit particular characteristics, they function in ways that can be interrogated, understood, and ultimately, changed.

In a Marxist conception, schools, as part of the superstructure, have a contradictory relationship with the relations of capitalist production. Fritzell's (1987) explanation of the contradictory nature of the State's relationship with the economic base is apt for the present discussion about education, when he observes that,

[It] could be argued that in a functional context the autonomy of the State refers essentially to a *potentiality*, insofar as it is granted that even under empirical conditions of advanced capitalism the State cannot in the long run enforce policies and interventions that are basically destructive to the commodity form of economic production. (p. 27)

Fritzell roots the essential contradiction of the position of the State in the fact that it is fundamentally outside of the process of producing commodities—"autonomous from the commodity form," yet it still is required under capitalism to support the production of those commodities and thus "cannot...enforce policies...that are basically destructive to the commodity form." In relation to capitalist production and social reproduction, the State is required to work out this internal contradiction. Apple (1995) provides a corollary analysis of schools, as part of the State, when he observes:

On the one hand, the school must assist in accumulation by producing both agents for a hierarchical labor market and the cultural capital of technical/administrative knowledge. On the other hand, our educational institutions must legitimate ideologies of equality and class mobility, and make themselves be seen as positively by as many classes and class segments as possible. In a time of fiscal crisis, the structural contradiction is exacerbated. The need for *economic* and ideological efficiency and stable production tends to be in conflict with other *political* needs. What we see is the school attempting to resolve what may be the inherently contradictory roles it must play. (p. 53, emphasis in original)

In this statement, Apple gets at the root of the relationship between schools and social reproduction. Schools, on behalf of the State-superstructure, have to simultaneously accomplish the fundamentally contradictory goals of reproducing the social and material relations of capitalist production while hegemonically working to win the "spontaneous consent" of the students/workers through appeals to individual equality within the educational and social meritocracy. This contradiction presents a dialectical

relationship between production of capitalist social relations and the maintenance of bourgeois hegemony *vis-à-vis* education.

The important piece of the neo-Marxist impetus, however, is to recognize that within a Marxist, dialectical analysis, human beings are not totally determined beings. As Marx (1968a) himself asserted in the oft quoted *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “[Humans] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (p. 97). Or, in Engel’s (1968e) words, “In the history of society...the actors are all endowed with consciousness, are [humans] acting with deliberation or passion, working towards definite goals; nothing happens without a conscious purposes, without an intended aim” (p. 622). Indeed, within a Marxist conception, humans do have agency, they can be and are subjects of history. This was the goal of both Lenin’s (1975) and Vygotsky’s (1978; 1987) conceptions of consciousness (Au, in press) and is the backbone of Freire’s (1974) conception of “liberatory pedagogy”: that humans, as subjects, as agents, as individuals, and as individual classes, develop consciousness of the imposition of structures on their lives and, based on that consciousness, take action to change it.

However, as Anderson (1980, Ch. 2) remarks, the terms “agent” and “subject” both are internally contradictory: “agent” signifies both “active initiator” and “passive instrument” (e.g., the agent of a foreign power), and “subject” signifies both “sovereignty” and “subordination.” Such internal contradiction perhaps points to the appropriateness of both terms, for it provides analytic space, in a Marxist conception, for both individual consciousness and schools to be “relatively autonomous” from the relations of production associated with the economic base. Thus, while schools play a key role in reproducing social inequality, their contradictory role in legitimating ideologies of equality also allows room for resistance to this reproduction (Apple, 1979/2004, 1995; Carnoy & Levin, 1985). It is absolutely crucial for us to recognize this room for resistance because students *do* resist the inculcations of schooling on many levels (Au, 2005; Dance, 2002; McNeil, 1986; Shor, 1992; Willis, 1977, 2003), and teachers, as laborers within the political economy of education (Apple, 1986, 1995), also resist the reproduction of inequitable capitalist socialist relations in their classrooms and schools (Allman, 1999; Allman, McLaren, & Rikowski, 2000; Carlson, 1988; Freire, 1974; Shor, 1992, 1987). In this way, a dialectical conception

of the relationship between schools and capitalism, in a Marxist, dialectical materialist sense, poses a significant challenge to the economic determinism of Bowles and Gintis, one that still recognizes that the superstructure is emergent from, but not reducible to, the economic base (Apple, 2000; Creaven, 2000).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the broad contours of the scholarly debate amongst critical educational theorists regarding the relationship between schools and the reproduction of dominant social relations associated with capitalism. As I have shown, this debate hinges on a critique of functionalist, economic determinist analyses that frame education as a mirror reflection of capitalist production, analyses that posit a one-to-one correspondence between schools and the economy. Further, I have outlined how, in response to this critique, many critical educational theorists turned to the works of Gramsci and Althusser, particularly their concepts of hegemony and relative autonomy, respectively, in order to address the shortcomings of the functionalist analysis. This enabled these theorists to critique the role that capitalist production plays in the formation of schooling, while also leaving space for individuals to resist and for schools to have relative autonomy from the capitalist economic base. Using these concepts, critical educational theorists developed neo-Marxist theory, trying to incorporate ideas of individual agency, resistance, cultural expression, and subjectivity that they felt Marxism lacked. Lastly, this paper interrogated Marx and Engels' conception of the base/superstructure relationship, finding this conception to be quite dynamic and in direct contradiction to the assumed economic determinism often asserted by neo-Marxists.

Based on the analysis this paper provides, neo-Marxism had no need to reject the original Marxist formulations of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure for being functionalist, mechanistic, or completely economically determined. Rather, this paper finds that Marx and Engels recognized a non-linear, dynamic, non-mechanistic, *dialectical*, relationship between the economic base and the superstructure—one that acknowledges that the superstructure and the State have an effect on history and the forms in which class struggle and bourgeois hegemony are expressed through the complex, chaotic social relations of capitalist production.

Such a conception is a far cry from the critique of functionalist, economic determinism often laid at the feet of Marxism.

As such, this paper has specifically sought to critique the neo-Marxist rejection of Marxist orthodoxy, for, as has been shown here, this rejection is based on an incorrect conflation of Marxism with functionalist, economic determinism. Indeed, this paper has performed what in Marxist, dialectical materialist terms would be called a negation of the negation (Ollman, 2003). Where neo-Marxism sought to negate the perceived economic functionalism of Marx and Engels' original conceptions, the analysis provided here has in turn negated that negation. The negation of the negation completed here essentially sublates, or subsumes, the concepts of hegemony and relative autonomy within a more refined understanding of Marxist dialectics. Thus we are left with a Marxist conception of schools and society that does indeed account for resistance to the pressures of capitalist production within schooling and education, one that still acknowledges that capitalist production plays a defining role in the outcomes of our systems of education.

Notes

1. It should be noted that various aspects of Gramsci's ideas have been claimed by a wide-ranging and often contradictory set of political perspectives, including educational conservatives (i.e., E.D. Hirsch), Marxists, Leninists, post-Marxists, neo-Marxists, feminists, post-structuralists, and post-modernists (Buras, 1999; Giroux, 1999; Holst, 1999; Jessop, 2001). Jessop (2001) qualifies Gramsci's theorizing as being of "incomplete and tentative character," thus making it "compatible with several other theoretical currents" (p. 151). Indeed, Gramsci had to write cryptically in order to avoid the censors, and he died before getting the chance to edit the notebooks himself, allowing for increased confusion on the meanings of key terms like ideology, State, and hegemony (Allman, 1999; Giroux, 1983). The editors and translators of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* attribute this confusion partially to Gramsci's own mixed usage of terms and partly to issues related to translation into English (see Hoare and Smith in the preface to Gramsci, 1971, pp. xii-xiv)

2. It is not a very far stretch to map Gramsci's formulation of "civil society" and "political society," what he identifies as the two categorical parts of the State in his

later writings, onto Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatus"(ISA) and "Repressive State Apparatus"(RSA) respectively.

3. I do not fully endorse Althusser's conception. Indeed, in my own analysis of "relative autonomy," I arrive at the conclusion that Althusser provides for too much autonomy to the superstructure, and therefore opens up the space for analyses of culture, the superstructure and/or the State that are divorced from the material reality of capitalist production. This raises the question as to whether or not Althusser's conception was indeed philosophically materialist, a prerequisite for Marxist analysis. For a critique of the use of relative autonomy and resistance theories in education, see Rikowski (1997).

4. My critique of Leonardo here must be seen as friendly, for I very much respect and appreciate both Leonardo and his work in critical educational theory.

5. I recognize that this is a position that some "analytic Marxists," such as Cohen (1978) and Wright (1997), challenge. For a critique of analytic Marxism, see Sayers (1990) and Roberts (1996).

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