

Education study-guide 4

The Marxist theory of Education

Marxists argue that education, although a state institution, is an important **component of the capitalist superstructure which functions to reproduce and legitimate (justify) the class inequalities which form in the economic infrastructure of all capitalist societies.** Consequently, **it mainly serves the interests of the capitalist class (the bourgeoisie or ruling class) rather than its students or society in general.**

Louis Althusser (1971), a leading Marxist sociologist, argued that the education system is an **'ideological state apparatus'** that aims to perform the following functions on behalf of the bourgeois or capitalist class.

- Education functions to **maintain, justify and reproduce, generation by generation, social class inequalities in power, opportunity, wealth and income.**
- Education claims to be **meritocratic** but this is an **ideological myth** designed to placate those (pupils from working-class backgrounds) who are penalised by the fact that **British education actually discriminates in favour of those who are privately educated in the so-called public schools, and middle-class students.**
- Middle-class students in particular have access to **resources denied to working-class students.** These resources constitute **forms of 'capital' – 'economic', 'cultural' and 'social' capital** or advantages which largely ensures that they perform better academically than their working-class peers.
- **Education functions to deliberately engineer working-class academic failure because capitalism requires an unskilled and semi-skilled workforce.**
- **Private education and Oxbridge, on the other hand, prepare the children of the capitalist elite for future positions of power and privilege.**
- Education encourages students to **uncritically accept capitalist values** such as competition, individualism and private enterprise **as normal and natural.**
- Teachers are **agents of capitalism** who funnel middle-class students towards academic success, and 'persuade' working-class children to accept that their under-achievement is down to **lack of effort and is a matter of personal failure** (rather than a predictable outcome of an economic system that needs workers with no qualifications to do menial work).
- The organisation and content of education is shaped by a **'hidden curriculum'** which functions to assist middle-class achievement and to deter the

aspirations or ambitions of working-class pupils, thus ensuring class inequalities persist unchecked.

- The **hidden curriculum encourages working-class pupils to passively accept their failure, to conform and to accept the inevitability of hierarchy** (for example, the necessity of taking and obeying orders without question) **and inequality** (especially the fact that they will occupy a position towards the bottom of society).
- The hidden curriculum **transfers blame for educational failure and under-achievement** from the social structure of capitalist societies to the **personal shortcomings of working-class individuals**.

The Correspondence Principle

The American Marxists, **Bowles and Gintis (1976)** argue that **schooling stands in 'the long shadow of work'**. This essentially means that **what goes on in schools corresponds with or mirrors what goes on in the capitalist work place**. They see the **main function of education as preparing working-class children for their future role as docile unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers**. This correspondence is transmitted via the **hidden curriculum**.

- For example, students are encouraged to work primarily for marks and qualifications rather than for the satisfaction of doing the work. Similarly, workers are encouraged to see money (wages) as **more important than job satisfaction**.
- Secondly, students have **no control** over what they are taught. Similarly, workers have no control over how their workplace is organised.
- Students have to **unquestioningly obey** teachers in much the same way that workers are supposed to obey their employers or line-managers.
- Failure to obey in schools results in **punishments** such as detentions, suspensions and exclusion. Failure to toe the line at work may result in dismissal.
- Schools encourage the idea that **some students are deserving of more status** than others because they are more academic, talented or hardworking. A similar hierarchy can be seen at work. Professionals, managers and white-collar workers tend to have more status than skilled manual workers whereas skilled blue-collar workers have more status and are better paid than the semi-skilled and unskilled.
- Finally students learn to accept that most schoolwork is **routine and consequently dull**. Similarly, workers expect most of their work day to lack excitement.

Evaluating the Marxist theory of Education

The Marxist theory of education has been criticised by a range of sociological perspectives;

- (1) **Neo-Marxists** such as **Giroux (1984)** reject the idea that **working-class children passively accept their lot and become compliant or docile workers who never 'rock the boat'**. He suggests that the existence of **anti-school subcultures, truancy, exclusion and industrial action** show that both the hidden curriculum and the correspondence principle may actually be failing in practice. **Paul Willis** carried out an empirical study in a comprehensive school (titled **Learning to Labour**) in which he studied a small group of 12 working-class teenagers to see how they interpreted their education on an everyday basis. He also observed them in their workplace for a short period after they left school at the age of 16. Willis found that the lads
- **Took little notice of their teachers and that consequently their actions were not shaped by a hidden curriculum**
 - That they **chose to reject academic work and qualifications** because they actually wanted the types of manual jobs that did not require qualifications.
 - They saw their **everyday schooling as a success** because from their perspective it functioned as a 'laugh' rather than as an opportunity to gain qualifications. **Their interpretation of the point of school differed considerably from the teacher or official interpretation.**
- (2) The **social democratic perspective on education** focuses on the need to offer all students '**equality of opportunity**'. They believe that **Marxists exaggerate the effect of the education system on working-class achievement**. For example, **Halsey, Floud and Martin (1973)** argue that **the comprehensive system and the expansion of the higher education sector in the 1960s actually benefitted the working-class in that more working-class people went on to university and entered professional jobs as a result**. **Allocation to manual work is not an inevitability for bright working-class pupils.**
- (3) The **New Right** claim that **Marxists fail to consider that some people are naturally more talented than others**. **Peter Saunders (1996)**, for example, rather contentiously claims that middle-class educational success is '**deserved**' because **middle-class children inherit a genetic predisposition to be more intelligent than their working-class peers**. Saunders argues that middle-class children **possess genetic advantages** in the form of **higher IQs** whereas working-class children **inherit a genetic deficit from their parents** with regard to intelligence and ability. These ideas are strongly contested by other sociologists and psychologists who argue that there is **no strong scientific evidence in favour of these assertions**.

- (4) **Neo-liberals** argue that **Marxists fail to see that state intervention in education has actually failed all social groups, not just the working-class.** Chubb and Moe, for example, argue that **state education is inefficient and wasteful in its use of resources. It has failed to equip all students with the skills needed to be successful in the global marketplace.**
- (5) **Postmodernists** argue that **Marxists fail to see that modern schools reproduce diversity rather than inequality.** Moreover postmodernists such as **Morrow and Torres (1998)** claim that **students actively construct their own identities rather than have their successful or failing identity constructed by teachers and schools as Marxists argue.** They argue that postmodern societies are characterised by individualisation. This means people are no longer constrained by influences produced by traditional social structures such as social class inequality. In contrast, in postmodern societies, students are free to make their own choices about identity. Consequently, postmodernists argue that Marxists exaggerate the influence of capitalism, social class inequality and the hidden curriculum because student identity is just as likely to be influenced by their gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion. In 2016, for example, it was reported that British schools were having to cope with an increasing number of trans students.