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Marxism and educational theory: origins and issues

Mike Cole, 2008

London, Routledge

181 pp.

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The author of this book will be familiar to most readers since, along with Dave Hill and Glenn Rikowski, he has been one of the foremost Marxist writers on education in the UK in recent times. Despite the elevated place of Marxism in twentieth-century thought and political life, good books on Marxism and education are surprisingly rare and so this text provides a welcome contribution to the field.

The book is divided into two parts with the shorter introductory section providing historical sketches of some influential antecedents of Marx and a succinct outline of Marxist theory itself. This includes a valuable introduction to key Marxist ideas such as the materialist conception of history and the labour theory of value. The author makes an interesting point here explicitly linking the current dominant economic focus in education policy with the capitalist concern to maximise surplus labour value. In the second, and much larger and disparate, part of the book the author offers a critique of a number of theoretical positions including postmodernism, poststructuralism, transmodernism and critical race theory, as well as addressing such issues as globalisation and environmental damage.

However, one of the key problems that the author acknowledges is that Marx himself paid little heed to state education in his writings, stressing instead the role of class action and class struggle in effecting social change. As a result, there are precious few primary sources to be consulted. It is indicative of this difficulty that while the author cites 42 of his own works, Marx can merit only 11 citations and Engels a mere five. However, perhaps some consideration of the early Marxist Karl Kautsky's writings on education would have been worthwhile—certainly his prescient identification in the Erfurt Programme (1891) of the growing commodification of education merits attention.

In the second part of the book, Cole is especially effective in offering concise summaries of the positions that he intends to critique. The book thus offers a very useful guide to postmodernism, poststructuralism, transmodernism and critical race theory, albeit readied, as it were, for Marxist assault. The section on globalisation and neoliberalism is particularly perceptive, outlining its key features and implications. While Cole suggests some crucial weaknesses in the work of Michel Foucault, there seems a tendency to equate Foucault's concept of discourse with that of textualism,

making for a much easier, but perhaps inaccurate, critical target. Engagement here with the work of Foucauldian scholars such as Mark Olssen—who has written extensively on Foucault’s relationship with Marxism—would have aided the discussion. Indeed, this part of the book would also have benefited if room could have been found for a Marxist discussion of the work of such important figures as Habermas and Bourdieu, neither of whom feature in the book.

At the end, Cole offers a response to common objections to Marxism. This could have provided a fruitful conclusion to the book but it has been kept so short that it risks the exact opposite of what Cole has been at pains to promote in this text—that Marxism is not some utopian, idealistic blueprint. Fourteen searching questions about Marxism are answered in a little over nine pages and this makes for an unnecessarily glib impression. It may well be that publisher limits on book length compromised the potential of this chapter.

Overall, Mike Cole has produced a timely, if unashamedly tendentious, work and it is to be hoped that he will continue to produce similar work offering a Marxist critique of developing issues in the world of educational theory.

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