Chapter 1

Culture, Class, and Curriculum: A Reflective Essay

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Introduction: The Complexity of *Culture* and *Class*

Any attempt to review the use of the term *culture* in education is asking for trouble. Raymond Williams, in *Keywords* (1976: 87), claims that culture is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." As part of this complexity, it can refer to "high" art, to artistic practices more broadly including popular arts, and to the whole way of life of a people or period. Williams traces the history and multiplicity of denotation and connotation of the word *culture* not in order to arrive at a singular meaning, but to enable us to hold in tension these differences of meaning or emphasis. Terry Eagleton goes even further in this rejection of attempts to pin it down, referring to the concept *culture* both as "an historical and philosophical text" and as "the site of a political conflict" (2000: 19). Rather a lot for one word to carry.

Even more perilous, then, is it to trace the extent of Marxist influence. There is the rather obvious difficulty that Marx himself hardly ever uses the word. Yet, as I will attempt to show, it is not surprising that, through those working within the Marxist heritage, the concept has acquired enormous resonance, providing us with rich resources for understanding education, its processes, and outcomes. I deliberately say "working within the Marxist heritage" rather than the shorter "Marxists," to include those such as Freire or Bourdieu who, for various reasons, preferred to avoid the suggestion of club membership.

It is not simply that both these writers and others understand that culture is deeply affected by social structures, specifically class, and by material production. Their link to Marxism goes all the way down, to

an ontology that rejects the Cartesian dualism of a mind-matter split, in favor of a dynamic and dialectical materialism in which spirit (intellect, ideas, *Geist*) thoroughly inhabits and springs forth from the world we touch and see. Of course, one cannot call all nondualists "Marxists"—think, for example, of Spinoza or Dewey—but it is essential to recognize, in Williams's and Eagleton's discussion, the significance of the origins of the "culture" word: it is fundamentally nondualist.

> One of its original meanings is "husbandry," or the tending of natural growth...The word "coulter," which is a cognate of "culture," means the blade of a ploughshare. We derive our word for the finest of human activities from labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation. Francis Bacon writes of "the culture and manurance of minds," in a suggestive hesitancy between dung and mental distinction. "Culture" here means an activity, and it was a long time before the word came to denote an entity. (Eagleton, 2000: 1)

It is somewhat paradoxical therefore (though historically understandable, given Stalinist distortions) that Marxism has been accused of subordinating culture to vulgar material reality—poetry to pig iron production—a dualist and nondialectical division into mind and matter. In this model, culture is crudely equated to "the superstructure" that is "determined" by the "material base." As Williams (1980[1973]: 31–3) argues, this shows a limited grasp of both ends of the relationship as well as the link verb *determines* to convey the connection between them. He regards the architectural metaphor of base/superstructure as unhelpful, preferring Marx's earlier terminology of *social being* and *consciousness.* Williams rightly insists that "base" involves both the forces of production (the technology, materials, and so on) and the relations of production (especially class divisions), themselves often in deep contradiction with one another:

> When these forces are considered, as Marx always considers them, as the specific activities and relationships of real men, they mean something very much more active, more complicated and more contradictory than the developed metaphorical notion of "the base" could possibly allow us to realize. So we have to say that when we talk of "the base," we are talking of a process and not a state. (Ibid: 34)

Eagleton (2000: 1–2) goes further in opposing a simplistic and dualistic opposition between culture and the material world (production, society, etc.): "In Marxist parlance, it [culture] brings together both base and superstructure in a single word." Culture (seen as a "whole

way of life," Williams, 1958: 16) can scarcely be viewed as ethereally spiritual; similarly (using "culture" in a more aesthetic sense), it is no longer possible, if it ever was, to write off cultural workers as economically unproductive floss who are somehow marginal to the "real working class." Thus, rather than the caricature of subordinating culture to some inert block of matter, Marxism views culture as *practice* (labor, preferably nonalienated) and the *products of practice* (everyday artifacts as well as works of art), and requires that we look for *meaning* in both.

Williams rightly argues for a lighter and less mechanistic (less *deterministic*) sense of *determine* (German: *bestimmen*), in terms of setting limits or exerting pressures, rather than a precise "prefiguration, prediction or control." The "determination" is often qualified by the rider "in the last instance."

> 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. (Engels, 1890)

Williams himself made a key contribution to understanding the complexity of this relationship by conceptualizing some cultures and cultural phenomena as *residual*; namely, they reflect earlier material and social circumstances but, nevertheless, have an ideological impact in the present. The Church of England, or idyllic concepts of rural England, are good examples. Conversely, Williams describes cultural phenomena that reflect the beginnings of a new social situation as *emergent* (see Williams, 1980[1973]: 40 for a more detailed discussion).

The contradictory, conflictual, and unresolved character of culture also forms a key part of Gramsci's thinking, in his discussion of "common sense" attitudes and understandings. Gramsci argues that the ideology of a subordinate class is a complex mixture of uncritical responses to social circumstances, taken-for-granted pieces of traditional "wisdom," the opinions of "minor intellectuals" (the mass media?), as well as more accurate and productive reflections on contemporary society.

> The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or

verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci, 1971: 641)

When we begin to see culture as

- linking matter and meaning—matter with meaning, activities that signify
- contradictory and unresolved
- shaped by economic and social realities in complex and indirect ways

we move into a space where the concept becomes an invaluable resource for understanding educational processes and institutions in a capitalist society. We are enabled to explore the complex, dynamic, and often indirect influence of work and class on culture, and on the way culture is handed on through education. Conversely, such a complex understanding is undermined by parodies of Marxism that posit a simplistic determination of culture by production, but also by the simplistic reductionism of non-Marxists who assume that a subordinate class must therefore have an inferior culture (see, for example, the critique of Bernstein below).

It is important to recognize that the concept of class is equally problematic. (Williams calls it an "obviously difficult word.") In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (2005 [1848]) clearly predict the complete division of society into two major classes, with hitherto privileged groups collapsing into the proletariat. The concept of "middle class," used vaguely nowadays to refer to all white-collar and professional employees, simply doesn't fit Marx's worldview. We don't get far in understanding current industrial struggles if we fail to see that most supposed members of the "middle class" are simply different kinds of employees of capitalism, whether directly or indirectly through the state. Indeed, the supposed equivalence of "working class" and "manual workers" is doubly misleading, in that many of the self-employed are manual workers but without occupying positions (being positioned?) as employees vis-à-vis capitalism.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming tendency in educational sociology has been to distinguish between "the working class(es)" and the "middle class," using these two terms synonymously with manual and nonmanual types of work. Though a gross and damaging overgeneralization, it is arguable that people employed in clerical or professional occupations, especially those with higher levels of academic education, may tend to pass on to their children ways of speaking and a range of interests that—compared with manual workers—are closer to the

discourses and subject matters of formal school learning. This has pedagogical implications, but is not a difference of class. Clarity is essential when reading educational sociology: Does "working class" refer to the entire proletariat in a Marxist sense? Or exclusively to manual workers? Or is it being used as a pseudonym for that section of the working class living in poverty? Furthermore, is it referring to a section of capitalist society, to their lifestyles, to their attitudes, or to the exercise of political agency?

Second, when the "middle class" actually materializes in many sociology of education texts, it has a tendency to take the shape of high-level professionals living in exclusive suburbs, driving their children to school in four-wheel drives by day and entertaining one another to dinner parties by night. Even Bourdieu is guilty of this dualism, implicitly portraying a society divided between impoverished indigenous or immigrant workers on the one hand and graduates of France's *hautes écoles* (elite colleges) on the other (Bourdieu, 1984).

It should be clear by now that that there are compound possibilities of misunderstanding in the relationship between class and culture, some of which are discussed below. This chapter will examine the abuses and uses of *culture* in the subfields of school development, curriculum, and pedagogy.

Culture and Managerialism

The adoption of "culture" as a keyword in the study of management and organizational change is both an opening up and a closure; the polyvalence and dynamism of the concept potentially enables management theory to transcend a monochrome and mechanistic "sociotechnical approach" (Parker, 2000: 47), but simultaneously reduces "culture" to a means of domestication and control.

This first occurred across management studies in the private sector, before being imported to educational governance. Martin Parker (2000: 59) maps an "explosion of academic interest in culture" from the early 1980s in terms of a ten- or twentyfold increase in academic papers. Deploying the word "culture" amounts to a recognition that social organizations are far too complex to be controlled and developed in simple top-down authoritarian ways; their complexity involves a multiplicity of perspectives and motivations and relationships, and crucially involves a realization that environments, practices, and relationships signify and have an impact on an organization's development. But, unwilling to take a democratic turn, theorists began to propagate new modes of analysis and "leadership." They seized on Burns's (1978)

"transformational leadership" (though failing to understand the political and ethical dimension of Burns's text and concept). Management gurus such as Peters and Waterman (1982) became best sellers, while theorists with a more critical and dynamic understanding of organizational cultures such as Mats Alvesson (2002) were generally overlooked.

New organizational structures (delegated school management, a quasi-market, loosening of local authority control) opened the gates for a flood of management and leadership texts directed at schools. A culturalist model was attractive given the complexity of controlling schools and teachers and the difficulties of realigning their activity to neoliberal policy. Besides, culture had a friendly feel to it: after all, wasn't that what schooling was about? However,

> in the process, the everyday meaning of "culture" in English education was substantially changed. Culture is not now understood as a dialogic space of negotiated (or struggled-over) meanings, but rather as something that is an internal, self-created and relatively secure property of an organisation. (Jones, 2003: 146)

The English case shows how contradictory the shift of control to schools could be: a promised "liberation" from local authority "bureaucracy" was soon revealed as a concentration of power by central government (a standardized National Curriculum, Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), high-stakes tests); lest anybody assumed that ordinary teachers, let alone students and parents, might enjoy democratic participation, headteachers were reconstituted as managers and trained to exercise power over those they had previously thought of as colleagues in the ways approved by a National College of School Leadership. Headteachers found themselves with a certain amount of administrative and financial autonomy, but they and their colleagues simultaneously lost control of curriculum and pedagogy.

Whereas the real staff culture was dynamic, critical, or contradictory, it was the role of managers to homogenize it. This was a recognition of the complexity of school cultures but in the same move the myth was propagated that this could be overcome through appropriate "leadership." The new managerial culturalists were right to insist, against more mechanistic paradigms, that school change requires a holistic understanding and a willingness to involve staff—a recognition neatly summed up in Fullan's slogan (actually coined by McLaughlin, 1990) that "You can't mandate what matters." There was an important truth in Fullan and Hargreaves's (1992: 71) identification of the problem of "balkanised" cultures in many secondary schools, though the

structural implications of this, namely, the benefit of more coherent small schools, were sidestepped. Generally, it was uncritically assumed that headteachers and senior management teams should be able to align the various voices, and that this alignment and homogenization would be in the public's or students' best interest, particularly if the direction was determined by national government. Such confusion arises by neglecting issues of power and class.

As Ken Jones points out:

> The school is separated from its complex cultural matrix in order to be presented as a potentially homogenous organisation, and in order to be more easily managed. (Jones, 2003: 146)

Jones (2003: 148, quoting Geoff Whitty, John Dixon, and others) summarizes the cultural loss in terms of an unquestioning attitude to educational processes, a willingness to deploy ways of learning whose rationales are beyond question, and a lack of interest in other people's experiences.

Culturalist managerialism involves engineering uniformity and conformity to the aims set by governments and their test-driven accountability regimes. The central role of school principals is to "manage culture" (Deal and Peterson, 1999). They can recognize success through blandly positive indicators ("Norms of Improving Schools") such as

- shared goals—"we know where we're going,"
- responsibility for success—"we must succeed,"
- collegiality—"we're working on this together," and so on. (Stoll and Fink, 1996)

As I have argued elsewhere,

> As the Weltanschauung of school improvement, it is bland and one-dimensional, taking little account of the many contradictions, of teachers' and pupils' lives outside, and of external pressures both political and socioeconomic. There is no concession that some innovations might be ill-conceived, that professionals have a right and duty to evaluate them critically, or that some changes should be resisted. There is a warm glow about this notion of culture, emphasising a rather uncritical cohesion, which can conceal some of the turmoil outside. (Wrigley, 2008)

I am not of course arguing against highlighting cultural dimensions of school change, but that a particularly limiting and controlling usage, in favor of a managerialist homogenization, crucially misrecognizes and

does violence to the conflicting voices and interests that exist in reality
and that cry out for change in the direction of greater social justice.

> School improvement cannot be understood by focusing on internal pro-
> cesses alone but requires us to look at the interaction between internal
> and external cultures. . . . There is, within each school, a contest of dif-
> ferent voices, which is what makes school development so interesting.
> Indeed, it is this that makes school development *possible*. The voice of
> teachers who insist upon challenging inequality, tedium, and superficial
> or irrelevant learning is a powerful force for change, despite attempts to
> silence it. The voice of the local community is crucial to the successful
> development of multiethnic and other urban schools.
>
> The conflicts that arise from the gap between dominant school cul-
> tures, on the one hand, and the crises of children growing up in poverty,
> dealing with racism or the life choices offered by mass media, on the
> other, can lead to a dysfunctional disengagement of adolescents from
> learning. The challenge for school improvers is to find creative ways of
> engaging with the various cultures and interests at work, and to develop
> a learning culture which supports achievement and social development
> within this context. (Wrigley, 2003: 35)

Many writers have commented on the manipulation that managerial-
ist usages of culture give rise to. Andy Hargreaves, a leading figure in
school change theory, and by no means a political radical, has consis-
tently warned of "contrived collegiality" (1994: 229 and elsewhere).
Helen Gunter (2001: 122) sums up the problem:

> The neo-liberal version of the performing school requires teachers and
> students to be followers, but to feel good about it.

Bennett (2001: 107–9) points out that

> the culture of an organization, then, is a construct made up of a range
> of expectations about what are proper and appropriate actions. . . . This
> raises two very important questions . . . where the expectations that
> define legitimate action come from and how they become part of the
> assumptive worlds of each organizational member.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding when culture is no lon-
ger regarded as uncertain and contested, but as "plastic, shapeable"
(Jones, 2003: 147). The social, contradictory, and material character
of culture is reduced to a tacit assumption that teachers can be led
to assimilate to a single authorial message. By failing to recognize a
range of voices, and privileging a monologic authoritarian discourse,

managerialism dematerializes culture so that it floats above the popular consciousness that derives from real lives and lifeworlds.

Ironically, even this manipulative misuse of culture proved insufficient for the more impatient of New Labour's school improvement gurus. Michael Barber, who was in command of school development for many years of Blair's government, and his coauthor, Pennsylvanian School Superintendent Vicki Phillips, argue that culture can best be changed by enforcing a change of actions:

> Winning hearts and minds is not the best first step in any process of urgent change. Beliefs do not necessarily change behaviour. More usually...behaviours shape beliefs. Only when people have experienced a change do they revise their beliefs accordingly. Sometimes it is necessary to mandate the change, implement it well, consciously challenge the prevailing culture and have the courage to sustain it until beliefs shift. (Barber and Phillips, 2000: 9–11)

While this view of culture is certainly materialist, it fails to ask critical questions about the legitimate use of power, lacks any concept of class, and appears to regard culture as deadweight, overlooking the extended historical formation of a culture.

So what would be the foundations of a Marxist use of culture in the field of school change? The starting point has got to be an acceptance that we are living in a class society, in which not only the dominant ideas but also institutional norms are strongly influenced by the power of the ruling class and by hegemonic responses to inequality such as discourses of deficit. These macrocultural relationships impact in complex ways on the microculture of a school, as I attempted to outline in my book *Schools of Hope*:

> School improvement requires a more political and situated exploration of culture than we have managed so far, and specifically in relation to demands for greater democracy and the achievement of real success in inner-city schools. For example:
>
> - exploring the differences between authoritarian and cooperative cultures, including developing new rituals for cooperative and democratic learning
> - examining the cultural significance of alienated forms of learning, in which, like factory work, you are told what to write and then hand over your product not to an interested audience but to the teacher-as-examiner, for token payment in the form of a mark or grade
> - questioning the culture of target setting and surveillance which regulates the lives of pupils and teachers, and exploring more democratic

forms of educational responsibility than the present accountability
culture

- examining the cultural messages of classrooms which are dominated
  by the teacher's voice, closed questions and rituals of transmission of
  superior wisdom
- developing a better understanding of cultural difference, in order to
  prevent high levels of exclusion
- understanding how assumptions about ability and intelligence are
  worked out in classroom interactions
- discovering how assumptions about single parents, ethnic minorities
  and "dysfunctional" working-class families operate symbolically in
  classroom interactions. (Wrigley, 2003: 36–7)

This is especially important if we are looking for school change to pro-
mote social justice. Unfortunately, what we might call "official School
Improvement" (Hatcher, 1998) has remained inexcusably ignorant of
sociological theories relating to social justice. This is ironic given that
international data over the past decade have consistently shown that higher
average attainment in a country crucially depends on overcoming inequal-
ities and raising the attainment of working-class and ethnic minority stu-
dents (Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)).

Culture between School and Neighborhood

An important starting point is Bourdieu, who relates culture to a
divided society in a two-directional analysis, showing how a higher
class position shapes and sanctifies aesthetic taste (1984)—what counts
as Culture with a capital C—but equally how culture can itself serve as
"capital," complementing economic capital as a means toward higher
status and higher earnings (1986).

Bourdieu's concept of *cultural capital* is key to understanding how
schools reproduce social difference. Bourdieu's argument is not that
higher-class families have *more* culture or even a better culture, but that
their culture is *recognized* by schools, whereas the cultural interests and
knowledge of working-class and ethnic minority families is either ignored
altogether or viewed with disdain. As a simple illustration, consider how
traditionalist schools might respond in different ways to two students,
one who plays the cello and the other a bass guitar. Prior to Bourdieu,
the chapter "Scholarship Boy" in Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*
illustrates how working-class students are constrained to achieve aca-
demic success and social acceptance in higher-status schools by aban-
doning their family and neighborhood culture. This enforced choice,

between school success and class belonging, is also a central theme of Paul Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour*, an ethnographic study of how "working-class kids get working-class jobs." Young people at school are affected by daily border crossings between school and the lifeworld of their neighborhood. Where these diverge strongly, cultural conflict prevents many students from thriving. The process is not dissimilar to the symbolic violence that Goffman (1961) in *Asylums* describes in the context of "total institutions," for example, mental hospitals, prisons, and boarding schools, where newcomers are stripped of previous identities to become inmates (patients, convicts, pupils). If anything, the process is more problematic in normal schools since it happens on a daily basis. Conversely, in the minority of schools where the children of manual workers and ethnic minorities succeed, one often finds positive and coordinated efforts of cultural recognition.

The "Culture of Poverty" Argument

Unfortunately, some sociological theorizations of culture difference that do focus on class as formative of culture have served to encourage a deficit view of working-class and minority students and their families. The concept of a "culture of poverty" has an element of truth, in that harsh economic conditions (absolute poverty, long hours of work that make for neglect of children) do tend to bring about cultural damage. Indeed, one of Marx's few references to culture in *Capital* is a mere footnote (no. 66, citing the Fourth Report of the Children's Employment Commission) illustrating the lack of basic general knowledge on the part of children forced to work long hours in mines and factories. The danger is of a one-sided emphasis on the demoralizing impact of poverty, and that, by deploying the word "culture," one creates the impression of something permanent and unchallengeable, neglecting the potential for resistance. The classic case is Oscar Lewis's anthropological studies of Latin American societies, for example:

> The culture of poverty is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime. (Lewis, 1966: xlv)

While this is one strand of a complex process of adaptation and reaction to poverty, the renowned Marxist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock (1971) points out how easily such an outlook is translated into a "blame the victim" ideology, involving the most abusive denigration of poor and especially black families. She quotes, for example, Bartky's *Social Issues in Public Education* (1963) with its references to the "dregs culture" of the Chicago ghetto, with its high crime such that the law must work "fast and ruthlessly," and where even religion takes the form of a "wild cat church," which "is more of an amusement than . . . a moral influence." Similarly, in Moynihan's report for the US Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, the black American family is portrayed as a "tangle of pathology" and as the "principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (1965: 30, 47).

Leacock reminds us how quickly the seemingly fixed, fatalistic "culture" of the slums of Havana studied by Lewis was transformed by revolution. Her lasting challenge to the discourse of "cultures of disadvantage" is that

> Cultural norms do not exist outside man's living history, and they involve conflicting and contradictory goals and values, from which people choose, and which allow for change and development.
>
> Furthermore, individuals may either passively accept their cultural environment or actively seek to develop or change some part of it, and they will exhibit a wide variety of styles in the way they do either one. (1971: 14)

"Culture of poverty" arguments are, as Leacock rightly argues, a restoration of "the nineteenth-century argument that the poor are poor through their own lack of ability and initiative," which has "reentered the scene in a new form, well decked out with scientific jargon" (1971: 11). The line of this "blame the victim" ideology based on cultural deficit can be traced forward to Charles Murray's "underclass polemic" (e.g., Murray, 1990), and is identified by Levitas (2004: 5) as a strand in Blairite "social exclusion" policy on poverty. This is not to suggest that poverty has no cultural impact, including lowering aspirations as people accommodate to the possible at the "threshold of calculability" (Jenkins, 2002: 28, quoting Bourdieu), but rather it stresses the vital importance of cultural recognition and of enabling the poor "to have and to cultivate voice," in order to increase the "capacity to aspire" in a process of "bringing the future back in" (Appadurai, 2004: 62–3).

Culture and Language Deficit

One of the most subtle but damaging offshoots of this was the "language deficit" argument, transmuted by Basil Bernstein from a crudely racist North American form into a more urbane English argument on language and class. In its original form, language deficit theory was based on the linguistically ignorant belief that the frequent omission of the verb "to be" (e.g., "She no good") by African Americans and their use of double negatives ("I ain't done nothing") is "illogical" and that this supposed "illogicality" leads to unclear thinking, which is the root cause of educational underachievement. As Labov (1969) pointed out, its proponents were seemingly not aware that many languages share these features; the copula "to be" is similarly absent in Russian, and double negatives are standard in French and other Romance languages. This would presumably prevent their entire populations from thinking logically.

Bernstein's more sophisticated argument was essentially that

 (i) working-class language is mainly orientated toward the familiar and toward objects and events that are physically present and visible to the speakers; and
(ii) it therefore tends to use a code that, for example, deploys pronouns rather than nouns, less complex sentences, and so on.

He called discursive patterns appropriate to circumstances where people are talking about immediately visible or thoroughly familiar referents "restricted code" and discursive patterns oriented toward more distant objects "elaborated code." Bernstein argued that "middle-class" families are capable of using both according to circumstance, but that "working-class" families are only well practiced in "restricted code," leading to educational failure in their children.

It is useful to distinguish between everyday transactional or conversational discourses that relate to what is immediately visible or closely familiar, such as family talk, and discourses that relate to more hidden, distant, or abstract matter, such as academic writing. Wertsch has helpfully termed this more abstract mode one of "decontextualised rationality" (Wertsch, 1990); this is more helpful because it suggests the possibility of discourses of contextualized rationality, but also implies (de-) that loss of context can become problematic. While it is important for schools to develop in all pupils a fluency in the academic or abstract mode of language, Bernstein (1970 and elsewhere) failed to provide proof that "working-class" families did not use the former, or that this was a cause of underachievement in school. Indeed, his attempt

at experimental proof was deeply flawed: the "working-class" children whom he criticized for using "restricted code" did so to describe events in a cartoon story that remained in front of them the whole time (see Rosen, 1972: 12–13, for a more extended critique). Indeed, exceeding this, Bernstein also deployed a cruder argument that "working-class" mothers smacked their children rather than reasoning with them; this too was presented without empirical evidence. The language-deprivation arguments led to a widespread professional folklore among a generation of teachers that "working-class children are barely talked to by their parents"; that "working-class children have little experience of having their questions answered, or of hearing explanations, reasoning, predictions and projects into the experience of others"; that working-class mothers pass on to their children a failure to be explicit, that their range of topics is limited, that they do not play with their children, and that they exercise authority by force rather than reason (see critique by Tizard and Hughes, 1984: 135–55).

Harold Rosen's (1972) challenge to Bernstein's deficit view was not only based on linguistic considerations but was also grounded in his socialist engagement in class struggle. In his critique of Bernstein, Rosen highlights the rich verbal culture of militant working-class areas such as the East End of London where he grew up, or the coal-mining regions:

> No attention is paid to that vast area of critical working class experience, the encounter with exploitation at the place of work and the response to it…Collective bargaining, demonstrations, strikes and so on…can occur only if language is available which is adequate to the task. What kind of people imagine that the 1972 miners' strike, for example, was made possible merely by the incantation of a few rabble-rousing slogans? (1972)

Bernstein's explanation of school underachievement in terms of language deficit illustrates the consequences of reading off cultural features directly from class position. It is almost a parody of a vulgar Marxist position (superstructure mechanistically "determined by" base). Rather than theory providing a guide to action, it closes off possibilities of both individual achievement and social emancipation.

It also fails to recognize that, in key respects, the most typical discourse of school learning (a preponderance of low-level closed questions that are presented to test pupils rather than engage them in dialogue or explore ideas) is just as restricted as Bernstein's "working-class restricted code" and just as great a limitation on educational engagement and achievement (Cooper, 1976). Similarly, the "culture

of poverty" argument fails to pick up on the many ways in which school structures, and the assumptions of many teachers about communities in poverty, serve to reproduce poverty, inequality, and disadvantage. It is clear that chronic unemployment and poverty create a psychology of shame and futility (see, for example, Charlesworth, 2000), but the normative practices of most schools may be reinforcing these rather than countering them. In other words, schools themselves are reproductive of a culture of poverty.

Culture and Curriculum

Two of the key principles of Marxism form a paradox: first, a faith in the "self-emancipation of the working class" and, second, the belief that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." The contradiction is resolved only in practice, as a working class in struggle also undertakes and experiences an intellectual struggle against ideologies that hold it back.

Raymond Williams, the son of a railway worker appointed to a lectureship in English in an elite university, set about rethinking the nature of establishment culture, specifically the academic field of English literature, and its relationship to the working class. His analysis inevitably faced both ways.

One side of Williams's project was to ask questions about the "canon" of English literature: who decided what was included, and upon what principles was this selection based? Though appearing to students as if cast in stone, the literary canon had changed over time, and is, as Williams perceived, a selection based as much on class preferences as "literary quality" (Williams, 1961: 67). The (often implicit) ideologies of writers showed through in form as well as content, and criticism too provided a selective filter. Thus, Williams challenged the standard view of critics that Thomas Hardy's novels were peopled by quaintly bucolic "peasants"; Hardy is describing not peasants but an oppressed rural proletariat in a solidly capitalist economy (Williams, 1984: 100). Similarly, Williams's class perspective enabled him to notice that Jane Austen uses the word "neighbours" not to refer to "the people actually living nearby" but to

> the people living a little less nearby who, in social recognition, can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through the holes of this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. To be face-to-face in this world is already to belong to a class. (Williams, 1985: 166)

But the other side of Williams's work was to fill the gaps, to focus on neglected works, including political and social texts that provided the essential context (not merely "background") for the canonical literary texts. This began with the book *Culture and Society* (Williams, 1958), but eventually led to the establishment of an entirely new academic field of cultural studies that would concern itself with other kinds of cultural phenomena. For Williams, culture was "ordinary." This in itself was a political challenge, given the elitist view that Culture (with a capital C) was intrinsically beyond the reach of the working class.

School Curriculum and the Selective Tradition

It was not too great a step from Williams's writing about the "selective tradition" in universities (1961) to Denys Lawton's (Lawton, Gordon and Ing, 1978) formulation about schools, "Curriculum is a selection from the culture." The term was liberating to a point, since the school curriculum no longer appeared normal or "natural," but Lawton risked losing Williams's critical edge. His statement begs some questions:

 (i) The definite article suggests a singular entity, begging the question whether Lawton is referring to an authoritarian canon or a broadly accepted common culture.
(ii) It is crucial to ask why particular items are selected, who has done the selecting, for whom, and to what ends.

More radical voices, including Liverpool's director of education, Eric Midwinter (1972), sought to establish models for a curriculum that was more in tune with working-class culture. Lawton was very critical of this, condemning Midwinter for trapping working-class students in their neighborhoods of origin.

This tension can only be resolved by holding on to Williams's ideal of an education that would both respect the "ordinary" culture—in the sense of both creative activity and its products and of culture as a "whole way of life"—and provide access to (a critical reading of) the selective tradition. Indeed, Williams argued strongly in the conclusion to *Culture and Society* (1958: 307) that the small amount of "proletarian" writing and art that exists can only form a "valuable dissident element" rather than a culture; and conversely, that what we have received as "traditional culture" is always something more than the product of a single class.

> Even within a society in which a particular class is dominant, it is evidently possible both for members of other classes to contribute to the

common stock, and for such contributions to be unaffected by or in opposition to the ideas and values of the dominant class. (Ibid: 307)

This is close to Trotsky's view as expressed in *Literature and Revolution* (1960 [1923]). The point is—and Williams models this out for us in various books (1958; 1984; 1985)—to seize the assets by rereading from a different class perspective. Similarly, a popular scientific and environmental education should respect and build upon knowledge deriving from the lifeworld of students while providing a clear understanding of scientific theory. The one pole without the other provides a limited education.

This connects with more recent attempts to discover, respect, and build upon the practices and knowledges of young people, including the work of Luis Moll who refers to these as "funds of knowledge" (Moll and Greenberg, 1990). Pat Thomson (2002) uses the term "virtual schoolbag" in a similar sense. Without this bridging between ordinary and high-status culture, practical and academic knowledge, the project of the "common school" or "comprehensive school" is doomed to failure. But it is not enough, because, as Gramsci points out, everyday "common sense" knowledge, while reflecting aspects of reality, can provide misleading explanations of reality and be inadequate as a guide to action. The funds of knowledge by themselves could be extremely limiting, for example, by providing only local or archaic perspectives, being loaded with prejudice, carrying attitudes of servility, or being built on mystifying religious and unscientific models of the world.

Freire's curricular approach is based upon respect for the everyday experiences of the learners, achieved by identifying words and themes based on the familiar, but engaging learners in discussion of the political significance of the words and experiences. Williams's work on culture in many ways parallels this. As Eagleton summarizes Williams's project, "the making of a common culture is a continual exchange of meanings, actions and descriptions." It does not involve the rejection of either a low or a high culture, but rather of bringing

the culture of the selective tradition [into] a relationship with the lived culture of a particular time and place.

This involves

both a revaluation of established high culture . . . and a project of "releasing and enriching the life experience which the rising class brings with it" (Jones, 2009: 21–2, quoting various texts of Williams)

One particular site of struggle was the subject English in secondary schools, originating in London and involving Marxists such as Harold and Michael Rosen, Chris Searle, the Hackney-based publishing project Centerprise, as well as numerous other progressive non-Marxists, under the umbrella of the London Association of Teachers of English (LATE). This movement quickly became aware of the accelerating cultural diversity of the working class and the need to struggle against racism both in the classroom and on the streets. New pedagogies were developed, based on a commitment to the understanding that all students have the capacity for creative expression—that the working class does have culture if only schools could learn to work with it and not against it (Rosen, 1982). This movement was a particular target of the Thatcherite counterrevolution; the National Curriculum to a great extent effectively filled up all the creative spaces with the rubble of grammatical knowledge "about" English, sterilizing the ground and closing down the space for affective and critical engagement. English was seen once again as predominantly a skill for working life, rather than a space for cultural participation and articulation as part of a wider democratic struggle.

The need is equally great today for schools to promote the creation of a common culture through "the exchange of meanings, actions and descriptions" (see above), but the task is more difficult. First, as a result of deindustrialization and the defeats suffered by the labor movement in the 1980s, the "working class has been largely eviscerated as a visible social presence" and "is no longer a central reference point in British culture" (Savage, 2003: 536). The dignity attached to job stability and reliable earnings has been replaced by "the indignities of flexible and obedient labour" (Willis, 2003: 397). Culture has been increasingly commodified, removing some of the potential for creative engagement. The purposes of schooling have been redefined by neoliberalism, for society in terms of economic competitiveness and for the individual in terms of acquiring marketable labor power (Ball, 2008).

At the same time, we should be careful not to limit our meaning of "working class" to manual or industrial. The vast majority of the population, whether in blue-collar, white-collar, or "professional" occupations, belongs to the wider working class, as foreseen by Marx and Engels a century and a half ago (2005 [1848]). The cultural interests of young people of these different sections of a broader working class are probably closer than ever. The culture now available to young people has been considerably enriched by migration and international influences. New struggles have developed around such issues as the

war, environment, and antifascism, helping to generate a new culture of resistance; though this is not always class conscious, it objectively unites large numbers against global capitalism. The challenge now is to rethink Williams's project in a new context, rather than engage in cultural nostalgia.

Culture and Pedagogy

For most of the twentieth century, an authoritarian and transmission-based pedagogy was underpinned and justified by the pseudo-science of behaviorism, a theory based on experimentally inculcating unnatural patterns of behavior on caged animals. Behaviorism represents a rigorously nondialectical and mechanistic materialism that eschews all reference to meaning-making, reducing interpretative capacity to the manipulative linking of one object or event to another as conditioned by reward and punishment. This served to rationalize and justify the worst practices of mass public schooling that had been developed in the nineteenth century to prepare working-class children for industrial work.

For many years, opposition to this, in the name of progressive child-centered reform, was limited by being both idealist and individualist. Even Piaget's constructivism, based on interpretation of the real world, was limited to individual operations and reflections on nature, with progress dependent on maturation, and with both teachers and language playing an uncertain part.

The rediscovery of Vygotsky's sociocultural psychology, starting in the 1960s, provided a means to overcome these limitations. Vygotsky (1978: 19–20) sought to overcome both the individualistic psychology based on the behaviorist animal metaphor and the progressive-Romantic plant metaphor with its discourse of independent "growth." He started to build a new psychology, which is three times social:

 (i) It regards learning as fundamentally social before being internalized.
 (ii) It emphasizes interaction with more knowledgeable or skilled coparticipants.
(iii) It places enormous emphasis on the mediating function of signs (particularly language), which are regarded as a special kind of tool (Vygotsky, 1978: 1986).

The latter idea derives directly from Marx and Engels, whose view of history places strong emphasis on technological development and the

invention of new tools for transforming nature into useful objects. Vygotsky adopts this concept of tools, building a theory that language and other signs are cultural or semiotic tools that not only help us draw up plans and carry out tasks effectively through communication, but also turn inward, helping us reflect upon, regulate, and transform our own behavior and consciousness.

The notion of sign as "tool" should not be seen as a simple reflection, a static representation of an object, a mental proxy, but as potentially transformative. This goes beyond a tool's role in carrying out a physical operation on nature. Marx's explanation of the key difference between human beings and animals, well known to Vygotsky, shows that symbolic systems also provide a way of planning forward, of remaking the world, of doing things differently:

> What distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is that the architect raises his structure first in imagination before he erects it in reality. (*Capital* Volume 1, Chapter 7 used as the opening motto for Vygotsky, 1925)

Semiotic tools range from the abstractions of algebra to rich experiential forms such as paintings and computer simulations. The philosopher of science, Marx Wartofsky, points out that even the least abstract, most experiential forms of representation (e.g., novels, children's dramatic play, scientific models) are *off-line*—that is, they are not reality itself. This provides the potential to reimagine and redesign the world (Wartofsky, 1979: 208–9). The concept of semiotic tools connects with a view of culture that not only inherits from the past but is technologically and politically active in creating a very different kind of future.

The interpretation of Vygotsky has suffered from various kinds of distortion, both under Stalinism and in the West. It was reduced to a more mechanistic "activity theory," under pressure from the Stalinist authorities, by Leontiev and others (Kozulin, 2005). This reduced the role of culture, including the mediating role of the sign, such that activity came to be seen as sufficient. When *Thought and Language* first appeared in English, almost all references to Marx had been removed (Daniels, 2005: 2). It is also important to understand that Vygotsky's life was cut short by tuberculosis, after only 15 years of scholarly activity, and that many of his ideas were written down in an undeveloped form only, giving enormous space for further development.

It is in the last 30 years that teachers and scholars have begun to build upon Vygotsky. The principle that learning is primarily social has led to new conceptions of mind and thinking as "stretched" between

people, the environment, and language—"distributed cognition" (Salomon, 1993). This provides a basis for challenging the individualism and abstraction of traditional school learning (see, for example, Perkins, 1992; Wertsch, 1990). This is not to diminish the importance of abstract thinking or theory, but to understand that they are best comprehended when used as means of illuminating and guiding practice.

Another area of creative application of Vygotsky, drawing also on Freire and Bourdieu, relates to the need to overcome tendencies to disengagement and low achievement of many young people in working-class neighborhoods, including minorities. The "funds of knowledge" concept of Luis Moll and colleagues (Moll and Greenberg, 1990; Gonzalez et al., 2005) referred to earlier is crucial here. Again, it must be stressed that this is no one-sided cult of relevance, but a process whereby accessing and recognizing hidden community knowledge and culture, which is normally ignored or marginalized in schools, not only gives important recognition, but also provides a route for engaging with formal academic knowledge.

Conclusion: Culture and the Future

What links the above sections, on reflection, is a sense of *culture* as meaningful activities and artifacts—matter that signifies—and a struggle to bring into relationship, through practical pedagogical work, culture as a high-status aesthetic product with culture as "ordinary." This intellectual struggle has all the difficulties of counterhegemonic theorizing, given the strength throughout the bourgeois epoch of both a Cartesian dualism and a view of aesthetic artifacts as belonging intrinsically to an elite. When it is actually conceded that workers have a culture, this is often either reified as a cultural remnant (pigeons and whippets) or denigrated as a "culture of poverty."

Following Thatcher's destruction of the industrial heartlands and their communities and cultures, it is difficult to locate a "working-class culture" that might be a source of pride. The material foundations for the Grimethorpe Colliery Band have been visibly destroyed. However, the political history and cultural heritage needs to be passed on, as a cultural tool without which it may be impossible for a new generation to relate positively to new cultural elements imported through migration or surviving in a commercially captured youth culture. As Williams (1958: 313) insisted, the central cultural achievement of the British working class has been to invent organizations for struggle and to establish practices of solidarity. Future generations will lose out if

the history of struggle for democracy and a welfare state, and the arguments surrounding this, are unavailable to new generations. It is also important to carry forward an understanding of the working class as knowledgeable and critical, demanding access to quality education for its children and at times creating its own sites for learning.

In the twentieth century, Marxism began to take culture seriously as an essential factor in deciding whether we would be trapped by ruling-class ideologies and hegemonic "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971), and whether our future would be socialism or barbarism (Luxemburg, 1915). However, there is little clarity among Marxists as to how this cultural struggle might relate to formal education and a great deal of pedagogical thinking to be done.

This is immensely difficult in contexts in which curriculum is tightly controlled by the state, and when even the concept of publicly provided schooling is being undermined by charter schools (United States) and academies (United Kingdom). The struggle for culture is unavoidably a question of power. It cannot be pursued without holding on to the Marxist view of emancipation as the project of the working class, which includes engaged teachers, the communities they serve, and the students.

The processes by which a capitalist ruling class has denied the working class the opportunity to develop a culture for liberation have taken many forms historically, including

- the attempt by Victorian teacher training colleges to declass and reculture academically successful young people of working-class families to turn them into teachers who would domesticate the next generation;
- the desiccation of culture into a curriculum of inert facts, and the authoritarian mode of its transmission;
- establishing competitive markets between schools, and the setting and streaming and grading within, to limit the aspirations and opportunities of working-class students; and
- outpricing higher levels of education from working-class reach, then blaming parents and students for "lack of ambition."

In these neoliberal times, educational policy making has been dominated by the perspective of economics, its prime aim being seen as the efficient production of human capital (Ball, 2008: 11). In England, the 2006 Education and Inspections Act (UK Parliament, 2006) divided 14- to 16-year-olds into an academic and a vocational track, with the latter losing the entitlement to study history or geography, a foreign

language, creative and performing arts, and design and technology. This move implicitly carries the message that the established cultural heritage of academic learning is inappropriate to the working class, and, conversely, often in the name of relevance, offers them a vocationalist curriculum that is stripped bare of culture, history, politics, and critique. A similar division is occurring in primary education, where particular pressure is placed on schools in poorer neighborhoods to implement a decultured version of literacy teaching with an exclusive emphasis on phonics. The children who might have had least opportunity in early childhood to gain pleasure from books are then denied it at school.

> Nowhere in this anaemic instructional vision is there room for really connecting at a human level with culturally diverse students. When we frame the universe of discourse only in terms of children's deficits in English and in phonological awareness (or deficits in any other area), we expel culture, language, identity, intellect, and imagination from our image of the child.
>
> Effective citizenship requires active intelligence, critical literacy, and a willingness to challenge power structures that constrict human possibility…Identity, intellect, imagination and power are absent from the new regime of truth because they potentially challenge the smooth operation of coercive power structures. (Cummins, 2003: 56–8)

The most recent form of this attack is the plan of the Conservative-led UK coalition government to remove all subsidy from university teaching in the arts and humanities, so that these courses become the exclusive preserve of the rich.

Making working-class cultures available is not some kind of heritage industry. It is about recognition and identity but also about tools for critical understanding, a sense of history, conflict, and the nature of human labor. As Wexler (1982) points out, such perspectives are systematically absent from most school learning. How often is class or poverty or exploitation discussed in schools? It has become commonplace to speak of a multicultural curriculum, whereas a "working-class curriculum" (or indeed "community curriculum") is unspeakable, but the former only makes full sense within wider perspectives of class and struggle.

Some excellent models do exist of teachers within state-run schools working together to establish a socially critical curriculum that relates to students' cultural foundations. The most inspiring and wide-ranging is probably the *Rethinking Schools* collective, which has promoted the teaching of issues that are normally missing from school curricula, redefined standard topics (see the book *Rethinking Columbus*, Bigelow and Peterson, 2003), found ways of

connecting subjects that are generally assumed to be unpolitical to the big issues of the day (see *Rethinking Mathematics,* Gutstein and Peterson, 2005), and conveyed a sense of the injustices of the past and present while honoring and respecting oppressed cultures in a spirit of hope for the future.

Another important model is the work of the MST (Landless Workers Movement) in Brazil, which insists that the public authorities must fund schools while the teachers and communities themselves must decide what and how to teach. The MST has created a school culture for young people who have experienced struggle against oppression, which does not seek to domesticate. They have combined an appreciation of the local with critical perspectives on the national and global context (Kane, 2001; MST, 2005).

A Marxist cultural project involves critical engagement with a range of symbolic tools, from single words to novels, from the abacus to algebra. However, it is too limited to regard these in static ways as tools for recording or classifying; they are not simple *reflections* of material reality. At the most basic level, words are inflected according to the social position and desires of those who use them (Volosinov, 1973 [1929]). Symbolic representations highlight particular features of experience but always, as Volosinov stressed, in a "partial" way, that is from particular points of view. We need to appreciate their partiality in order not to be absorbed uncritically by them. Thus, for example, the Marxist playwright Brecht (1949) sought to create in his theatre a *Verfremdungseffekt*, a distancing process whereby the audience are jolted into taking a step back from the scene, to recognize that things can be different than they are, the future can be different from the present, that cruelty and poverty and war are not inevitable. Whether reading a book or taking part in a simulation, absorption and empathy must be complemented by a critical distancing, a reediting of the text brought about by asking questions about power and authorial perspective and significant omissions. This is a critical pedagogy based on cultural reflection and reimagining and repositioning.

One of the seams running through this chapter has been the orientation of culture toward the future as well as the past, so I will return to and extend Marx's metaphor of architect and bee. Architects have the cultural tools to imagine and draw a building before construction. Their cultural resources include pens and paper, drawing techniques, and engineering knowledge, but also the broader humanistic knowledge and understanding drawing on memories of the other buildings they have seen and how people live in built environments. The most

enlightened architects have a sense of how their fellow human beings are forced to live but also a vision of how they might live.

This is a wonderful metaphor of culture and what it means to be human. Worker bees are trapped in a natural cycle of serving the queen or the beekeeper, but humanity is not condemned to endless repetition of exploitation and injustice. Culture enables us to build a world to meet our own needs, not labor endlessly for our exploiters. For Marxists, culture is a resource for resistance. Culture is more than drawing on riches from the past for our present enjoyment, or utilizing technologies developed across many generations to produce for current needs. It is a set of living practices and relationships, activities and artifacts that help and inspire us to shape a radically better future.

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