Chapter 4 Marxist Theory and Education

Conflict Theory and Functionalism

We have seen that functionalists believe that the driving force behind the expansion of schooling is the need created by a highly industrialized, modern society to develop the skills and attitudes that are appropriate for a changing economic and social world. Functionalists like Dreeben argue that the modern school furthers the selection of individuals on the basis of merit and talent and, in so doing, discourages the distribution of income, social positions, and authority on the basis of family background, race, sex, or religion. Thus, for the functionalist, schools serve both a social and an individual purpose. On the social level they help assure that the skills and attitudes required by an industrial, urban democracy will be developed and maintained. On the individual level, they enhance the possibility that placement into jobs and the distribution of income, prestige, and authority will be fair.

While functionalism has been the dominant tradition in educational scholarship and research, it has not been without competitors. Among these, conflict theory has been the most prominent. Conflict theory derives from a number of sources. Marxist scholarship is clearly the most influential and the one that we will address most fully.

Whereas functionalists believe that the driving force behind social and educational change is the progressive movement toward technical development and social integration, conflict theorists believe the driving force in complex societies is the unending struggle between different groups to hold power and status. In modern society, they see schools as an important instrument in this struggle. They believe that schools serve the dominant privileged class by providing for the social reproduction of the economic and political status quo in a way that gives the illusion of objectivity, neutrality, and opportunity. They believe that the schools reproduce the attitudes and dispositions that are required for the continuation of the present system of domination by the privileged class.

Even though the groups that are visibly contesting for power may differ from time to time, Marxist-orientated conflict theorists believe that the basic cause of such conflict can usually be traced to differences among social classes. Thus, the direct conflict may be one among blacks and whites, males and females, or Christians and Jews, but the underlying cause will be found in something deeper—the division between the classes in a capitalist society. One important implication of this view is that while the deeper reason for a conflict involves class differences, the participants themselves may view the struggle as essentially racial, ethnic, generational, or sexual. Another implication is that there may be times when no struggle is visible and even the participants believe that harmony reigns. Yet on closer examination the seeds of conflict become visible to an outside observer. We will return to look at these and other implications shortly. First, however, it will be useful to see the different ways in which functionalism and conflict theory might view the same event.

Imagine that you are the dean of a college of education within a large state university, and you decide to increase the standards for entrance into your program. In this imaginary world, the degree
in education has recently become one of the more lucrative credentials that the university is providing. Thus, your program has attracted an increasing number of applicants, and you have good evidence for believing that standards can be raised significantly without reducing the number of students entering the program. This calculation is important because the amount of resources that your school receives from the total university is partly determined by the number of students in the program. In addition, however, the university is concerned about the ranking of the teacher education program nationally, and there is a good chance that by increasing standards the national ranking of the college of education will improve. Moreover, colleges of education from other universities have been increasing their entrance standards, and unless similar steps are taken by your college, it will likely lose ground in the national rankings. An additional incentive for raising entrance standards is the competitive edge that a higher national ranking will provide your students in bidding for the better jobs in the best schools. Hence, from your own point of view, there is an overwhelming set of interrelated reasons for raising standards. To do so will enhance the position of your college within the university and will allow stronger arguments to be made for increasing your budget. At the same time a higher budget will allow you to hire more prestigious faculty, who will increase the attractiveness of your teacher education program for the better students. With both better faculty and better students, the national ranking of your program will continue to improve, and employers will be more likely to hire students from your institution than those from competing ones.

From the functionalist point of view, the important things to see in this process are the way it actually serves to increase the talent and the technical skills that are available to the public school community and the fact that this is accomplished by instituting standards that can be applied universally to any and all applicants. Raising standards means increasing the institution's ability to discriminate on the basis of relevant criteria alone. Lower standards mean more eligible applicants and therefore more room for judgments made on the basis of less relevant factors such as in-state/out-of-state discrimination, sex, and minority quotas.

From the point of view of the conflict theorists, the situation may look quite different. They might see the result of higher standards working this way: In order to meet the new admissions requirements that have been established, students from outstanding secondary schools would clearly have the edge over those whose schools are less adequate. Since the most outstanding secondary schools are found in wealthy communities where the citizens can afford the price of high-quality education, the children of the wealthy will clearly have a marked advantage. Moreover, if a required course of study is missing from a high-school curriculum, or if a child is having difficulty with a certain subject, wealthy parents can afford to provide outside help and tutoring. Poorer parents cannot usually afford to provide this kind of help, and their children are almost completely dependent on what the public school has to offer. Thus, to raise standards for admission into the college of education is to place an added burden on the already disadvantaged. While the intent of the reform is simply to raise standards and to provide a competitive advantage to the college and its students, the effect, as seen from the conflict theorists' point of view, is to reduce the opportunities for the less advantaged youngster and to increase opportunities for the more advantaged one.

This example can be used to point out some important features of the conflict theory model. First, there is no necessary and direct relation between the intent behind an action or policy and the social effects of that action. In this case the intent of the dean was to raise standards and to increase the competitive advantage of students in the college of education. It was neither to decrease the opportunities for the less wealthy students nor to increase them for the more wealthy students. While there may be some cases in which a college policy is instituted with these goals in mind, they may also come about as the unintended consequences of other, more acceptable motives. Second, because the social effects may arise without conscious intent, there is no need to suggest that they are
the result of conspiratorial action. In this case, raising entrance standards benefited the already advantaged wealthy students. It also improved the already admirable position of the college of education. It even promised benefits to the affluent schooling community, which will get more talented teachers. However, there is no reason to believe that some conscious plan or plot has been devised in order to achieve these goals. In other words, it is possible to have a system in which different members of an advantaged class decide matters independently of one another without intentionally serving the narrow interest of their own class.

The problem with functionalism, according to conflict theory, is that, consciously or not, it takes the interests and perspectives of the dominant social groups in society and elevates them to the status of universal norms. Having done this, it then uses these norms to measure the contributions of members of all other groups. In this way the interests of a particular class are misrepresented as belonging to the society as a whole, and this misrepresentation then serves to maintain the privileged position of the members of that class. In our example, certain forms of achievement, which are the values of prestigious universities and affluent school systems, become the universalized norm that keeps other groups out of teaching and maintains the affluent in the best positions. This criticism of functionalism has been developed most explicitly by that form of conflict theory known as Marxism, and it is to that perspective that we now turn. Before going on, you may want to consider the case “Equal but Separate” in chapter 8.

Marxist Theory

In order to understand Marxism, it is essential to grasp a fundamental idea about the relationship between the way we think and the way we live. For the Marxist, the way people think, perceive, and feel—that is, their “consciousness”—is related to the basic mode of economic production in their society. This means that people's fundamental ideas about the nature of truth and falsity, about goodness and beauty, can be understood by examining the way in which production is carried on at a certain point in time. It is important not to confuse Marxism with relativism, a position that we will examine briefly in the next chapter. Marxists are not arguing, as the relativists do, that what is true, good, or beautiful is whatever I or my culture takes to be truth, goodness, or beauty. Rather they believe that the basic concepts by which we organize our conceptual, ethical, and aesthetic worlds can be understood only if we recognize their relation to the productive possibilities of the society in which we live.

To illustrate, let us consider two of the fundamental categories through which we organize our physical world, those of space and time. These categories are a part of our “consciousness” and are fundamental to any truth claims we might make, since they allow us to locate objects and events in a way that would otherwise be impossible. Indeed, it is the conceptions of space and time that make much of our everyday conversation intelligible. If I say, “It is raining outside,” or “Sally is depressed today,” or “School was closed during the summer,” what I am saying can be understood and its truth or falsity determined only because I share with my listener implicit conceptions of space and time. We both divide time into the same units, for example, day and night, summer and winter; and we divide space in similar ways, for example, inside and outside.

Thus, conceptions of space and time seem to be conditions for intelligibility and mutual understanding in any human society. This insight is not unique to Marxist theory. Interpretivists would also hold this view. The unique contribution of Marxist theory can be seen when we look at specific conceptions that different groups have of space and time. Take the idea of space. In our own civilization, we will often locate objects in space by using specific coordinates such as north, east, south, and west. So if it is said that “New York is south of Boston,” the statement is both understandable and true. It is understandable because we each share the conception of direction,
which includes the coordinates north, east, south, and west. And it is true because, given this understanding, New York is in fact south of Boston. It is important, however, to see that being “south of” indicates a relationship. To tell someone to go south is not like telling them to go to New York. The first involves an abstract notion of space, while the latter notion is concrete. There is a concrete place “New York”; “south” is not such a place.

Now imagine a society that has not yet invented the abstract concepts north, east, south, and west. Perhaps this would be a society in which directions would be given only in terms of local concrete objects: “Go to the big rock”; “look for the river”; “follow the stream”; “at the fork, look for the biggest tree”; and so forth. Here the statement that one place is south of another would be neither true nor false. It would have no meaning at all.

Truth for the Marxist is not relative in the sense that anything that one's culture deems true is true. Rather, truth is dependent on the concepts that one's culture makes available. At any given stage of our culture's development, certain concepts are made available to us that then allow us to think in new ways; and education plays a large role in ensuring that we come to share our culture's most important concepts. Now the question to be asked is: Just how do concepts such as north, east, south, and west arise? or How can we account for their development? One possible answer is that they are the inventions of very talented individuals who are able to break away from the limited forms of thought that their own civilization provides and invent new ones. The problem with this view is that it does not tell us what it is that allows such people to break the traditional boundaries of thinking (something that is very hard to do), or why the concepts of some talented people may be accepted at a certain time and become ingrained in the thinking of the population as a whole while the conceptual inventions of others are rejected.

For the Marxist, the way to address these questions properly is to explore the relationship between changes in the mode of production and changes in the characteristics of thought. In essence, the Marxist is asking us to break the traditional boundaries of our thinking and look at a new conception of how concepts and “consciousness” are formed. Let us return to our hypothetical example of the development from a concrete conception of space to an abstract one. Suppose we were to ask which was better, the concrete conception of space, where individuals are extraordinarily sensitive to immediate visual cues, or the abstract conception of space, which allows unknown areas to be charted and traveled. Given our own modern framework, where the abstract conception of space has become taken for granted and serves as an important tool, there would be little hesitation in answering the question.

Assume, however, that the material needs of the members of the earlier culture in our example are easily met; that people live quite happily and peacefully in a lush, isolated, self-contained area. Food, shelter, and other necessary items are available within the boundaries that their concrete understanding of space allows them to travel. Assume, too, that the use of a more sophisticated, abstract, and flexible notion of space could bring this group into areas where it would find itself in conflict with other groups. Given these assumptions, it is difficult to proclaim categorically that the more sophisticated conception of spatial relations is a better conception than the less sophisticated one.

Suppose, however, that certain key resources become scarce or that the environment is no longer sufficient to support a growing population. If the group is to continue to survive, means must be developed to go far afield to find new resources. Some of these means might be material ones, such as larger, more durable boats or suitable overland conveyances that could bring back the needed resources. Others would be conceptual. New ways of locating one's position in earthly space would be important to be able to travel and return
successfully. The group might even invent north, east, south, and west! “Necessity is the mother of invention,” but for the Marxist this does not just mean material inventions; it means conceptual ones as well, and such “inventions” are stimulated by changes in our material conditions. Therefore to say whether one way of conceiving of space is better than another way, we have to be able to view it in relation to existing material conditions and needs of a certain historical period.

While the example illustrates how conceptual differences might evolve historically within a group, it does not provide a sense of the different ways of thinking that can be found among different groups existing within the same society during the same historical period. Marxists explain this by using the concept of social class. For the Marxist, whenever people are related in different ways to the means of production we have a class society, and each particular class is defined in terms of this relationship. For example, in a capitalist society, where the means of production are privately owned, the group that owns them will constitute a different class from the group that is hired to work in their factories and plants. As we shall see, being a member of a class will entail many things that go well beyond the relation that one has to the means of production. It will entail having certain values, a certain outlook, and a set of perceptions and concepts about the nature of social life, or, in sum, having a certain “class consciousness.”

**Class Consciousness, False Consciousness, and Hegemony**

According to Marxism, a class can exist in two different ways—objectively and subjectively. Objectively, all of those people who must sell their labor to others in order to meet their daily needs and who do not own any significant part of the production process may be thought of as a class—the working class. Since a class is defined only in terms of the relation its members have to the means of production, a class may consist of many different kinds of individuals. For example, the working class contains people of different races, nationalities, and religions. However, because of their differences, they may fail to recognize their working-class interest as a shared one. In this instance the class would be said to have an objective existence but to lack consciousness of itself as a class. If the members of a class become aware of their common interest and are able to articulate that interest through common action and through legitimate spokespeople, then the class has not only an objective existence but also a subjective existence. At this stage it has become conscious of itself as a class. The labor union movement is sometimes an example of this. Its existence is reflected in the subjective understanding of its members. And it may be able to exert its collective power for its own interests.

The development of class consciousness may be blocked by society, and progressive social change may be impeded. Marxists use the concepts of false consciousness and hegemony to explain how this can happen. Members of the subordinate class who express the point of view and share the values of the dominant class exhibit false consciousness. True consciousness of your own class is impeded by your acceptance of the values of the dominant class. When the dominant class is successful in establishing its own mode of thinking among most members of the subordinate class, it is said to have established hegemony over the subordinate class. Hegemony means having a preponderance of influence and authority over others. This influence is expressed both in the concepts and the institutional arrangements of the social structure. False consciousness is illustrated by the slave who espouses the values of the master. The slave believes that he or she is the master's property, to do with as the master pleases. It is also illustrated by the worker who carries the values of the owner or by the concentration camp inmate who begins to think like the prison guard. Hegemony exists when one class controls the thinking of another class through such cultural forms as the media, the church, or the schools.

Orthodox Marxists believe that all social change, including changes in the way in which we think about the world around us, is rooted in the way in which people produce their goods and in the
possibilities that new productive methods open up for positive human development. This means that the political, legal, religious, and educational systems must be understood dynamically in terms of whether, in any given historical period, they serve to enhance or to hinder human development. Thus, a system that, at one point in time, may have served a progressive role in a society may, because of changes in the possibilities created by new modes of production, come to serve a negative function. This means that it may be quite appropriate and functional for a certain perspective or ideology to dominate thinking at a given historical moment, while at a later time those same ideas may become unproductive expressions of false consciousness and hegemony. Let us consider a case in order to illustrate this.

Imagine a society, not unlike those in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, where there are strong moral, religious, and legal sanctions against the practice of usury, that is, the charging of high interest rates for loans. Let us assume that this society does not have the means to accumulate capital or material goods and cannot store food and other perishable necessities for long periods of time. The production and consumption of necessities are tightly bound together in an agrarian life style. At this point in time the restrictions against usury make sense, because there is little possibility for economic growth and because the upward mobility of one person would mean the downward mobility of another. In other words, since little possibility for economic growth exists, the mutual well-being of all depends upon a smooth and stable relationship among different segments of the society. At this stage money lending is not very common, but when it occurs it is usually performed as an act of friendship. It serves to cement essential communal relations. Usury threatens to destroy those relations by turning friendship into a business. However, because there is a recognition that certain unforeseen disasters may require larger sums of money than friends can afford to lend, a special group is designated as the money-lenders-of-last-resort. These people are defined as outside of the community and generally looked down upon. The moral code that governs the members of the dominant community pictures a world of mutual service where God has given each member a specific place and role.

Suppose, however, that at another point in time new possibilities arise in the form of new knowledge about production and navigation, possibilities that, if realized, will increase the total wealth available to all. These possibilities could occur in a number of areas all at once. They might include new methods for storing food, new techniques for navigating long distances, and new ways of building larger and sturdier ships that are able to cross oceans and bring back spices to preserve foods, new kinds of fiber, gold, and exotic material goods. However, to bring these possibilities about and to realize the new wealth that they will make possible, large stores of capital must be brought together and centralized under a single project. Borrowing now becomes more businesslike and necessary.

Now the restrictions against usury would stand as an impediment to the accumulation of new wealth, and strong arguments might be developed for their elimination. As usury laws are overturned, wealth would become more centralized; large, previously unthinkable projects could be undertaken; and new territories might then be discovered, providing even more incentive for the centralization of capital. This would lead to an increase in the physical and economic mobility of individuals, in a rapid growth of cities, in new political power for a new class of merchants, bankers, and manufacturers. Moreover, in order to assure the flow of materials from recently discovered territories, a governing structure attached to the homeland would have to be extended to these areas, and colonies would need to be established.

As control over different and strange people is extended, a different moral conception would be needed to justify these extended political structures. Writers might begin to develop new themes
(such as the idea of the “white man's burden”) for home consumption and legitimation of hegemony abroad. New educational forms would develop in order to maintain the flow of administrators needed to govern the foreign areas. Promising native students from the territories would have to be provided the opportunity to study in the homeland before returning to their own country to take up positions as subservient, middle-level administrators. And in the process, a new equilibrium would be developed between the society's productive capacities and the new social norms, legal regulations, and patterns of thought that have arisen because of the shift in relationships to the means of production.

Marxists observe that new codes are developed by and for a specific social class. They note that the development of a new code involves a struggle with other classes, which serve as the protective agents for the older, more established norms. In our example, new norms would be advanced by and for the manufacturing, banking, and merchant classes, while the older norms would be defended by the agrarian aristocracy and supported by the traditional elements of the clergy. In order to enlist the support of other classes, the new moral code would be advanced, not as serving the narrow interest of the rising classes, but as “universal principles” that promise to serve the interest of all. For example, in American history, the principles of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” were not explicitly articulated as serving the interests of only a specific class of people, even though the founding fathers had common interests as slave owners and large property holders. Rather, these ideals were formulated to appeal to as wide a range of individuals as possible. They were expressed as universal rights that would advance the position of everyone against what was seen by some as oppressive taxation and arbitrary rule by the monarchy. In general, this is a very good tactical move—it helps enlist the support of many dissatisfied elements in society. However, it also helps create a new set of standards by which even the emerging order and its newly advantaged classes may eventually be judged. In less than a hundred years a war over slavery was fought in the United States. Today freedom and equality are still elusive prizes for many blacks, other minority groups, and women.

Returning to our example, instead of a medieval society governed by the idea that God has given each and every person a specific place in life,

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we now would have a society in which people believed that talent should determine one's social and economic position. Of course, this principle is exactly the same as that expressed by the functionalists—that in modern society it is achieved, rather than ascribed, characteristics that are to be rewarded. However, the difference between the Marxists and the functionalists on this point must also be remembered. The functionalists believe that this principle serves as a real universal norm, one which evolved and governs the process of selection of talent in modern society. In contrast, the Marxists believe that the principle is best seen historically as a weapon in a class struggle used first to overcome one's assigned place in life and used later by the newly advantaged groups to maintain their gains and by the still disadvantaged ones to assert their claims to equal treatment.

Before continuing, you might want to look back at chapter 2's imaginary Third-World cases, where education for national purposes was used to illustrate the functionalist point of view. How would a Marxist interpret these cases? Is hegemony being exercised? Who would suffer from false consciousness? How would class separation be manifested?

Marxism, Neo-Marxism, and Education

There are at least two different opinions among Marxists about the role of social and educational research. Orthodox Marxists believe that their task is to discover instances of scientifelike laws that govern social movement. They believe that social research should seek to explain the way in which a particular mode of production (which includes both the means by which goods are produced and the relations of different classes to the means of production) influences and determines other forms
of social life. In Marxist theory one of the fundamental laws has been the law of contradiction. This law holds that each social form contains within it the seeds of its own destruction and transcendence. In capitalist society, for example, there is an essential contradiction in the fact that while the means of production are privately owned, they are socially used. In other words, the means of production, such as factories and machinery, are owned by private individuals for their own profit, but the operation of this productive capacity requires a workforce of nonowners that is brought together in a common work place to work cooperatively. This creates the conditions required for the development of class consciousness among workers, whom the Marxists call the proletariat. With a disciplined, self-conscious proletarian work force that senses it is being exploited, the means are in place for seizing control of the productive forces and taking them from private hands through revolution. We do not need to go into detail about all of the steps that are supposed to be involved in this process. It is sufficient to note that this development and others like it in history are seen by orthodox Marxists to have the force of a natural law about them. Orthodox Marxists believe that each social form must have within it the seeds of its own destruction; otherwise basic social change would not occur and the class in power would continue to sequester and use their power forever. While there are few Marxists who continue to take such a rigid and deterministic view of social change today, there are many who believe that economics and the relationship of classes to the means of production must be given primacy in understanding other institutions, including the public schools.

Newer forms of Marxism offer a challenge to the deterministic view of the orthodox position. These new forms are concerned with issues related not only to economic oppression but also to domination by classes in noneconomic social forms. These neo-Marxists still consider economic domination important, but they do not believe that the end of private ownership of the means of production is a guarantee that class domination in all its forms will come to an end. In other words, these neo-Marxists believe that there is a need to analyze critically each situation of domination on its own terms, without presupposing that the cause of injustice or inequality will always be found in the same place. Some believe that in contemporary society domination is as likely to be found in the communication structures as in the economic ones. Therefore, as much attention may need to be paid to the control of information as to the control of production. They argue that the media and the schools are as important for a Marxist critique of society as are the economic institutions and the means of production.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in Marxist theory and an increasing application of its insights to schooling. To a large extent this renewed interest in Marxism can be understood in terms of the inability of functionalism to explain adequately some of the social effects of schooling. Randall Collins (who does not identify himself as a Marxist but as a conflict sociologist) lists a number of the failures of functionalist theory in explaining the social effects of schooling. He notes that functionalists argue that the increase in technological sophistication within society accounts for the increasing number of years required in school. However, Collins finds only a very loose relationship between years of education and any increase in the technological sophistication demanded by the job market. In reviewing the literature on this subject, he concludes that “the educational level of the U.S. labor force has changed in excess of that which is necessary to keep up with the skill requirements of jobs.”

The plausibility of the functionalist claim that there is a strong relationship between the increased number of years required in school and the educational level required by the technological demands of work rests on the fact that during the very early stages of industrialization, the basic skills required by the work world did undergo a change. Whereas reading and simple arithmetic were not requirements for most jobs in a preindustrial society, they are required in an industrial one. Yet
Functionalists have extrapolated from the relation between education and industrialization at this early stage and assumed that it holds for all stages. They then conclude that knowledge of higher-level mathematics and science is required for work in high-tech industries. Collins finds that this conclusion is not justified by the evidence. While there is likely some continuing relationship between the increasing technical sophistication of some jobs and the educational requirements needed to hold them, there is little evidence suggesting that most jobs demand higher-level technical skills. If the real increase in the years of schooling cannot be explained by an increase in the technological skills needed in most jobs, then the explanation will have to be sought elsewhere. Collins's argument is supported by others. Harry Braverman, for example, presents strong evidence that the skills required for a large number of positions in society have actually decreased; owners and managers try to squeeze more profits out of an enterprise by routinizing as much of the work as they possibly can. This routinization of labor then provides them more control over the workforce by allowing the substitution of one worker for another. Thus owners are no longer dependent upon the labor of any one person or group. Moreover, according to Collins, there is little evidence that, for most jobs, the more educated the workers are, the more productive they are. In fact, the opposite might be true. More education might make one less tolerant of routine and monotonous work. The dispute “Education for Work” in chapter 8 is relevant here.

Functionalists argue that the newly industrializing Third-World countries need an expanded educational system to develop a workforce. Yet in many of these countries increased education seems to produce a larger unemployed urban population that is overeducated for the types of jobs available. Rather than being driven by the technical and economic needs of the society, the educational system seems to develop a momentum of its own, and the economy is unable to provide jobs for the number of educated workers that the school system produces. According to conflict theorists, the fact that functionalism cannot account for these problems suggests that a new understanding is required. Marxist theorists have attempted to provide it.

**A Neo-Marxist Interpretation of Schooling in Capitalist Society**

Public schools are state-run educational agencies. According to Marxists, they must therefore be understood in terms of the role that the state plays as the arm of the ruling class. Marxists believe that in a capitalist society, schools will serve to reproduce the relations of production that are essential to maintaining the dominance of the capitalist class. This means that schools will produce workers who are able to work at the different levels of the capitalist enterprise. They produce managers and janitors, as well as an array of people in between. How do the schools do this? The answer is critical to Marxist educational thought, because one criticism of functionalism is based on findings that schools are relatively minor instruments for developing the technical skills required by modern, industrial society. If the schools do not reproduce the relations of production by reproducing the skills that workers need to be laborers, then what is it that schools do reproduce?

To answer this question from a Marxist point of view, we need to see the different ways in which Marxists believe that the state serves the ruling class. One of these is obvious. Through the courts, the police, and the army, the state maintains a monopoly on repressive powers. The repressive features of the state are those that involve force or the threat of force and that can be used whenever there is a direct assault on established property relations. The repressive state apparatus has limited utility, however. Its effectiveness depends upon the willingness of workers who are not members of the ruling class to intervene on behalf of the dominant group. This willingness itself can be assured only if the functionaries who staff the courts, the army, and the police can be counted on to “have the right thoughts.” If they cannot be counted on to believe that what they are doing is right and justifiable, there remains the uncomfortable possibility that they will turn their weapons in the wrong direction. To put it in Marxist terms, the development of false consciousness is an essential component of maintaining the capitalist state.
Repressive force is costly, however, and an exclusive reliance on the police and the army can provide an intolerable expense for any state. In addition, while repression can be reasonably effective in preventing a population from performing acts that are directed against the ruling class, it is much less effective in forcing people to act in ways that advance the interest of the ruling class. For example, “working to rule” or to the “letter of the contract” often provides workers with an effective way to protest a situation without triggering the release of repressive force. Enthusiasm and commitment cannot be legislated, even though these are important factors in maintaining a stable structure of domination.

Because the repressive apparatus of the state is not sufficient to maintain the interests of the ruling class, another mechanism is needed, and this is what Louis Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The ISAs include the communications institutions, such as newspapers, radio, and television; the cultural institutions, such as art, literature, and sports; the religious institutions; the family; political parties; and trade unions. And, above all, the ISAs include the schools. The function of all of these institutions is to provide people with compelling reasons for doing that which they otherwise might not be inclined to do and which is essential for maintaining the current system of production relations and power.

Neo-Marxists view the schools in modern society as the most important of the ISAs. In order to understand the importance of schooling in this process, it will help to return to a fundamental claim of functionalism and see the way in which it both fits and does not fit the reality of contemporary life. That claim, you will recall, is that contemporary society exhibits a strong movement from a system of rewards based on ascribed status to one in which rewards are based on achieved status. In fact, functionalists see this movement as one of the essential features of modern society. However, a number of considerations seem to suggest that their perception is less than correct. Among these is the treatment that has been accorded to certain groups in contemporary Western societies. It is clear, for example, that in the United States, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and other minorities have not been treated in the same way as more established groups and that children from these minorities often suffer disadvantages purely because of their racial or ethnic status. In addition, in almost all advanced capitalist societies, women still function at a disadvantage simply because of their sex. The treatment of minorities and women provides strong reasons to question the functionalist view that modern society strives to reward achieved characteristics. Moreover, the steps that have been taken to correct these inequities have not arisen out of any inner tendency of advanced society. They have come from grassroots political action, from protests, sit downs, boycotts, strikes, and other such means.

The treatment of minority groups and women tells only part of the story. In analyzing data from white males in the United States, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis found that economic success cannot be explained by intelligence as measured by IQ tests. An IQ-based meritocracy does not exist. Moreover, they found no significant relationship between the trend toward equalizing the number of years of schooling of individuals and the equalization of income. Studies like these, both in the United States and elsewhere, suggest that ascribed characteristics still play a prominent role in the distribution of economic rewards and social benefits.

However, even though the functionalist claim about the importance of achieved qualities does not hold up as a matter of fact, it does hold up as a matter of belief. In other words, people think that rewards ought to be distributed according to achievement and merit rather than according to family background, sex, or ethnic group. They believe that a system that does otherwise is unfair, and they judge the merits of their own social system on the basis of how well they think it is meeting this standard. Individuals who are unhappy with their lot in life will be more likely to endure their situation if they believe they have been given a fair chance than if they believe the cards were
stacked against them. And most people believe that free public schooling gives them a fair and equal chance in life; that it is up to them. According to Bowles and Gintis and other Marxists, schools provide an important element of political stability by legitimizing existing inequalities. In other words, while the primary role of schooling under a capitalist system is to reproduce the relations of production, and thereby to reproduce the hierarchical, autocratic system of labor, it must also provide people with the belief that they have been given an equal chance to succeed. The case “Workforce School” in chapter 8 raises some relevant issues.