

A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education

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Richard A. Brosio

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reviewed by Felix Garcia Moriyon

One of the first impressions you receive when you look over Brosio's book is that you are facing a very huge work, a work coming out of years of serious, committed and deep thought on education. This first impression is more than confirmed after reading the book: 635 pages of an exhaustive analysis of capitalist education. Brosio helps us to go under the surface of education and schooling and to discover the capitalist logic that is always eroding the democratic goals that schools are supposed to accomplish.

As Brosio himself acknowledges, the emphasis has been mainly upon the United States. His analysis of the American school system, of the history of education in the States and of its social and political educational literature are very impressive. However, even if I have to admit that at present you can find some of the best educational theorists in the States, and that American capitalist education is a useful example for every other developed country, I really miss a broader theoretical background, one that takes into account people like Richard Peters, Wilfred Carr and John and Pam White, Stephen Kemmis and Lawrence Stenhouse, Torsten Husen and Basil Bernstein, or Paulo Freire. All of them would offer some useful suggestions to Brosio's analysis and proposals.

The main thesis of Brosio's book is clear from the beginning: the public school, and education in its broadest meaning, has a Janus face in capitalist developed countries because it is answerable to two very different, even contradictory, imperatives: those imposed by the capitalist economic system and those arising from democracy and its ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity (although Brosio focuses above all on equality). "The capitalist economic imperative requests that the schools produce competent, willing workers; whereas, the democratic-egalitarian imperative requests that public education develop critical, wellrounded, citizen-workers who are committed to complex roles beyond work - and who may use their critical skills to analyze capitalist work relations and command of the economy. The democratic-egalitarian imperative seeks to have the public schools develop a society which is based upon authentic, participatory decision making; moreover, it favors the existence of basic equality of opportunity and of ultimate life experiences."

These two imperatives are contradictory and for most of the time they just clash. The power of capital is stronger than that of democracy, and the state backs the capitalist imperative, even when it follows that democracy has to be seriously undermined. The democratic imperative, notwithstanding, challenges capitalism and from time to time some democratic advances have occurred, but if and only if they do not really threaten capitalist domination. And that is the pessimistic bias of Brosio's book, one that comes from his theoretical background: Marx, Gramsci and Dewey. Even if his deep reading of and acquaintance with Gramsci's and Dewey's ideas allow him to have a much more optimistic approach to education, and to educational contribution to the building of democratic societies, at the end Marx's economic determinism comes to the surface. The logic of the market is more powerful than the logic of citizenship, and advances of democratic-egalitarian imperative are just not conquests of working class or committed people, but concessions of the hegemonic capitalist class which keeps dominating the social system even after those concessions.

Gramsci's theoretical analysis of capitalist democracies helps Brosio overcome some of the most rigid thesis of Marxism, and that is very useful. Useful also is Dewey's philosophy, whose contribution to education is subject to sharp and clever criticisms from Brosio. Had Brosio been tutored in a different socialist tradition, anarchist for example, he may have developed a more balanced contribution to the relationship between education and social transformation. Democratic education is a necessary condition for social transformation, but it is not enough. If you want to live under a very democratic system, you should go beyond the walls of your school and cooperate with other people who are also looking towards a different society. This is a point that Brosio stresses poignantly; and he is right.

However, it is also true that even if one modifies economic capitalistic relations, there is still a long way to go to get a free, equal and fraternal society. Oppression is much more deeply rooted than economic exploitation. Then, if you focus only, or mainly, on economic relations, you might miss the point - as Marx himself did, and more so Marx's heirs - Lenin and Stalin and Castro. There is no such thing as democratic Marxism, at least in real praxis, and Marx did not appreciate democratic institutions, even real freedom or human rights - all of them ideological constructions of the bourgeoisie. I really appreciate Brosio's ideas on democratic Marxism, and I think that Gramsci is the best he can find to develop a new approach to Marxism, an approach that, in order to eventually flourish, will have to put aside the narrowminded economic determinism that impoverishes Marx's criticism of capitalist society.

As soon as you move from this economicism, you can have a better understanding and evaluation of the contribution of education to the transformation of society. Even more, you can discover that the school system is the place where submission and obedience are sown in children's minds. From this point of view, Dewey's contribution on democracy and education are worthy of a more positive criticism, as Brosio has to admit. You can also understand why Freire's work in education in Brasil was so revolutionary. Or, last but not least, you have to admit that people who actually pushed the democratic imperative forward within the capitalist society did win very important battles against the hegemonic class, against people in power, who had to renounce some privileges because they had lost the battle, and against their will.

I can not answer Brosio's question whether a "bona fide progressive school that aims at the development of the whole person can flourish or even survive as an island within a sea dominated by capitalist priorities". I also would like to have an answer to the question of who the agent of that hoped for transformation of the school system and society will be, but I really don't know. Of course, as Brosio argues in the last chapter, nothing can grow out of "post-modernist" people, and I support his criticism of Rorty and some other scholars. I would be even more negative about Vattimo's ideas than Brosio's. But he is right when he points to the naive or collaborationist acts of those people who, as soon as they give up to any idea of totality, are opening the door to the Right, and that seems to be the case at present in the States. As he emphasizes, "postmodernism can be viewed as the cultural skin of late capitalism", and postmodernist thinkers are part of the problem we have to cope with, rather than the solution.

My suggestion is that both questions might be the wrong questions. He is assuming that there is just "one" agent of social transformation, an old Marxist prejudice, a nostalgia of a lost working class who fought impressive battles against a more cruel capitalist system. He is also assuming that there is a kind of "all-nothing" alternative in the contradiction between the two imperatives he analyzes all through his book. Social reality is much more dialectical than expected, or desired; we should accustom ourselves to living with these two contradictory imperatives for a very long time, possibly forever. The first question you have to answer is a very simple one: which imperative do you want to put forward? If you are on the side of those who keep challenging the capitalist imperative and long for a different society, you have to keep alive the global theories, the "big stories" ("grandes relatos" in Spanish) that allow you to have a broader frame of reference and to discover the relationship between school and society. And against Brosio's claims, you should realize that the main foe, the greatest impediment, is not capitalism (great impediment that it is), but power and oppression.

One last comment. In order to accomplish the agent of school transformation he is looking for, I dare to suggest that Brosio write a shorter book, the kind of book that, keeping the main ideas of this book, can be read by teachers who are actually working in the elementary and secondary school.

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