Reviews

Schooling in Capitalist America, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.

It's not so long since anyone wishing to speak in public on the politics of education had to begin by persuading the audience that they had something to do with each other. Circumstances have changed, and with them the state of our knowledge.

In 1974, G.S. Harman of the ANU published a bibliographical guide to the politics of education which ran to 311 pages, and there he described the field as a "new and exciting" one which "promises to provide substantial help in tackling some of the crucial problems in education today, both in complex technological societies, and in developing ones too". (1)

Sampling the items listed didn't inspire the same optimism in your reviewers - he'd left out material from France (2) and Germany (3), used a very narrow definition of politics, and so far as we could see, failed to include anything with a left or marxist perspective.

Now there has appeared a book which will make it harder to do the same thing in the inevitable second edition - and go a long way towards making us as optimistic as Harman.

In Schooling in Capitalist America by Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis, we have the first extended, penetrating and useful account by marxists of education in capitalist society. It is essential reading for anyone working in education or concerned with the analysis of the reproduction of the social relations of capitalism. Because the book is both important and not yet easily available in Australia, we will summarise its argument before commenting on it, and then conclude with a few brief remarks about its implications for research in education in Australia. We will summarise the argument under four headings:

What produces the schooling system?
How does the schooling system work?
Change in the schooling system.
Education and socialism.

What, at bottom, gives the school system its character and direction?

Bowles' and Gintis' argument is simple and direct. The accumulation of capital, the principal thrust in the determination of the social sphere is an erratic and sometimes tumultuous process riven by tension between the development of the means of production and the social relations of production. The reverberations are felt throughout the social formation:

Capitalist production ... is not simply a technical process; it is also a social process. Workers are neither machines nor commodities but, rather, active human beings who participate in production with the aim of satisfying their personal and social needs. The central problem of the employer is to erect a set of social relationships and organisational forms, within the enterprise, and, if possible, in society at large, that will channel these aims into the production and expropriation of surplus value.

The exploitative character of this objective impels the capitalists to construct what amounts to "a totalitarian system of economic power". (55) Their struggle to defend and extend this system forces them this way and that:

(onto) ameliorative social reforms .... the coercive force of the state .... racist, sexist, ageist, credentialist strategies used .... to divide and rule .... and an ideological perspective which serve(s) to hide rather than clarify the sources of exploitation and alienation of the capitalist order. (232)

Such is the engine which produces the schooling system. The expansion of mass education, embodying each of the above means has been a central element in resolving - at least temporarily - the contradictions between accumulation and reproduction. (233)

Their discussion of this basic contradiction of capital is not novel and doesn't claim to be. But to start an analysis of schooling from there is novel. Linking education with "the economy" is old hat. Right and Left have been correlating inputs and outputs and costs per student, or else attacking inequality, for some years now. But understanding education in terms of the basic contradictions of capitalism is quite a different thing.

In what ways does the schooling system serve capitalism?

Education in the US plays a dual role in the social process whereby surplus value .... is created and expropriated. On the one hand, by imparting technical and social skills and appropriate motivations, education increases the productive capacity of workers. On the other hand, education helps defuse and depoliticize the potentially explosive class relations of the
In carrying out this function the "education system does not add to or subtract from the overall degree of inequality and repressive personal development". (11) Rather it reproduces these conditions by facilitating in various ways the smooth integration of youth into the labor force.

Schools do this in a general way by habituating students to the structures and norms they will later encounter in the work-place.

In particular, schools legitimate inequalities by certifying them as differences of merit. They "create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students". They "foster types of personal development compatible with the relationships of dominance and subordination in the economic sphere". And they "create surpluses of skilled labor sufficiently extensive to render effective the prime weapon of the employer in disciplining labor - the power to hire and fire". (11)

Bowles and Gintis go into a good deal of fine print to test their propositions about the functioning of schools, and spend more energy in explaining the production of inequality than on any other question. Conventional accounts of schooling argue that schooling is, to an important degree at least, meritocratic, that it does sort people out according to their "ability"; and they justify the streaming and testing of schooling on the ground that a complex industrial economy requires highly developed and finely graded skills. Against this, Bowles and Gintis argue that the ".... association between length of education and economic success cannot be accounted for in terms of the cognitive achievement of students", and that tracking is "only tangentially related to social efficiency". (103) Both the meritocratic ("ability") ideology and the hierarchies of school life are much more easily explained, they insist, by the over-riding task of the school - to reproduce the capitalist relations of production.

There is also a good deal of detailed work associating the structures of family, school and work with patterns of personal development and consciousness. Here again, they point to "the long shadow of work", tracing the reach of the capitalist organisation of production through the social system and into the individual's life.

Change in the schooling system

Bowles and Gintis trace the sources of change in the US education system to the changing character of the tasks set it by capitalism, and to the tensions in its relationship with the capitalist society around it. Internally, the schools are wracked by ".... the incompatibility of the egalitarian developmental, and integrative functions" allocated to them. At the same time, the schooling system and the productive system "possess fairly distinct and independent internal dynamics of reproduction and development .... ". Hence the ".... ever-present possibility of a significant mismatch arising between economic conditions and education". (236)

They argue that this chronic tension became ever more acute when there is a re-structuring of the relations of production. In the concrete example of schools, they find three such historical moments. The first was in the decades before the Civil War, a period of "labor militancy associated with the rise of the factory system, growing economic inequality and the creation and vast expansion of a permanent wage-labor force". (234) The second was at the turn of the 20th century, a time of the "joint rise of organised labor and corporate capital", of " .... the integration of rural labor - both immigrant and native" into that system. (234-5) The third revolved around the "integration of three major groups into the wage-labor system: uprooted Southern blacks, women and the once respectable, solid members of the precorporate capitalist community - the small business people, independent professionals, and other white-collar workers." (235).

Each of these periods of reorganisation of the relations of production has been associated with a reorganisation of the relations of educational production too. The first was "the era of common school reform". The second was the progressive education movement with its concerns of "efficiency, co-operation, internalisation of bureaucratic norms, and preparation for variegated adult roles." (235) The third was the recent period, from the sixties to the present, a period of "educational change and ferment". (235) The history of education in that capitalist society "reveals not a smooth adjustment of educational structure to the evolution of economic life, but rather a jarring and conflict-ridden course of struggle and accommodation." (251)

They argue that accommodation proceeds by "two distinct but parallel processes". (236) One is "pluralist accommodation", the "relatively unco-ordinated pursuit of interests by millions of individuals and groups as mediated by local school boards, the market for private educational services, and other decentralised decision-making units". (236) The other appears only at points of crisis.

Then:

The capitalist class - through its police power of the state in suppression of capitalist alternatives, through its generalised political power naturally extending its control over production and investment, and through its extensive control over the financial resources for educational research, innovation and training - has been able to loosely define a feasible model of educational change, one which appeared reasonable and necessary in the light of the "economic realities" of the day. (238)
Education and socialism:

Bowles and Gintis conclude by drawing out the implications of their argument for deliberate intervention in the politics of schooling and capitalist society.

They begin by attacking current “alternatives” - free-schooling, de-schooling, variants of progressive schooling, compensatory schooling. However, they recognise the ambiguities, and divergent possibilities in these movements. They are especially to the point in discussing the contradictory pressures upon teachers who want, on the one hand, to provide children with an experience of spontaneity and creativity, yet feel checked and frustrated at every turn by the organisation of schools and of society.

Their message to those teachers is clear: “Schools cannot be considered repressive merely because they induce children to undergo experiences they would not choose on their own” (272), and teachers who would wish away this contradiction between individual and community will be “pushed aside in the historical struggle for human liberation”. Freedom and individuality arise, they insist, “only through a confrontation with necessity, and personal powers develop only when pitted against a recalcitrant reality”. (272)

The failure of successive waves of school reformers stems from the fact that:

- the social problems to which these reforms are addressed have their roots not primarily in the school system itself, but rather in the normal functioning of the economic system. Educational alternatives which fail to address this basic fact have served to deflect discontent, depoliticise social distress, and thereby have helped to stabilise the prevailing structures of privilege.” (246)

Properly understood, the economic system is driven by forces which are the basis of a revolutionary program. On the one hand, capitalism has begun to lose its capacity to provide for material welfare, and with it loses a prime claim to legitimacy. Its despotic hierarchies of production have become ever-more inefficient as they embrace greater and greater proportions of the workforce. As the state has expanded to accommodate capital’s expanding needs and temper its endemic turbulence, social problems have become increasingly politicised. Its spread throughout the globe has produced its own nemesis in nationalist and anti-capitalist revolution. On the other hand is capitalism’s chronic repression of its own potentials:

United States society offers all the material, technical, and organisational preconditions for a new stage in human liberation, but its economic institutions prevent progress from taking place.” (15) There is nothing inevitable about the liberation of this potential, but “the possibility grows yearly.” (15)

There are some suggestions as to how teachers and militants in education can exploit these possibilities. Press for the democratisation of schools and colleges. View that democratisation as a part of the struggle to break the correspondence of the relations of production and the relations of education. Reject simple anti-authoritarianism and spontaneity; freedom is the recognition of necessity. Join and lead the movement to create class consciousness. Combine a long-range vision with victories today; learn and practise the “revolutionary reform”.

What’s to be said about such a book? The most obvious thing about it - and the best - is its unremittingly political stance. It is a book written by two people who combine a deep engagement in active political struggle with hard and well-directed analysis, and the book shows it in every page. It handles complex ideas and issues ranging over a considerable field of social life, yet is never opaque, difficult or abstruse. It moves constantly and easily between theory, analysis, and political discussion.

Education is a difficult subject for analysis. Events coming under that heading obviously range from the most “macro” and structural to the most “micro” and experiential. It is precisely this which requires the analyst to work towards an account which matches the continuity of the subject. It’s just not possible to get education right with economic theory or sociological concepts or bits and pieces of psychology or phenomenology or whatever. That is why their argument will be either a revelation or a mystery to most educationists who are well and truly locked within their isolated sub-disciplines, focussed on either educational psychology or school-and-society or educational administration or the history of education or any one of a dozen other specialisms.

It is precisely their unwaveringly political perspective which has permitted Bowles and Gintis to make some decisive steps forward in the analysis of education. There is no one part of their argument which breaks new ground - with the possible exception of their strenuous and ingenious demolition of the myths about education and equality. What does distinguish it from any previous analysis by Marxists is, first, the tremendous impetus and grasp it gains by beginning not just with production, or even with capitalist production, but from an understanding of the ceaseless and contradictory growth of capitalism; and, second, by its constant treatment of capitalist production relations as social relations. No reified bases and superstructures, no abstract “forces”, or “structures” without people, will be found here.

As for the book’s failings: there may be points of detail and evidence which attract criticism. Some of the key arguments - such as that on inequality - are mounted with the aid of technical instruments that
we’re not qualified to inspect. With that qualification it seems clear to us that the book is unlikely to run into serious trouble at this level. Nor, for the time being, will it meet successful theoretical criticism. The book represents a starting point for the journey to the next stage of understanding. We want to suggest two areas where the further examination of the book might begin.

Bowles and Gintis know that "the economy produces people", but the question is: how? They discuss this process in terms of the acquisition of certain traits and attitudes, and the learning of modes of self-presentation. Their evidence, drawn mostly from bourgeois social science, serves them well at several points. But they never go beyond the problematic to which such evidence relates. Talking about the development of people under capitalism in terms of "traits" or "attitudes" is to repeat the well-recorded failings of socialisation theory. It forgets that people are active agents in their own production; it neglects the social dialectic and tends rather to see individuals as a kind of bundle of impulses or needs, and behavior as merely the expression of them. It emphasises a rather superficial level of personal formation and consciousness. And, finally, it doesn’t recognise the ambiguous and contradictory nature of much of the content of our experience. Sennett and Cobb talk about "the hidden injuries of class". It is a phrase which captures a dimension which seems lost in Bowles’ and Gintis’ analysis, except at the level of very general talk about oppression, liberation and so on. Unless we are very sharply aware of how oppressed people participate unwittingly in forming the chains that bind them, and the tensions that this participation leads to, then we are less well able to appreciate where the possibilities for change lie and where the obstacles lie. We may easily underestimate or wish away the difficulty of social transformation.

A second area - the foundations of their analysis. In his talk at the Sydney political economy conference Ian Gough saw contemporary British accounts of capitalism as falling into one of two schools. On the one hand is the "capital theoretical" analysis, stressing the internal logic of the development of capitalism from the stage of primitive accumulation to the present stage. On the other hand is the "class theoretical" analysis, beginning with the social formation and the centrality of class conflict in it. Some distinction like Gough’s is useful in placing Bowles’ and Gintis’ work decisively in the second school. As we have already suggested, it is this perspective which gives their work its tremendous vigor, flexibility, and grasp of apparently contradictory and disparate events. But by the same token it seems to lack a way of locating the present stage of US history which goes beyond predominantly political categories.

Their emphasis on capital-as-social-relation, as against capital-as-objective-force further enters deeply into their discussion of technology and the relations of production. They stress the political problem of turning labor-power into labor as the driving force behind the constant creation and recreation of capitalist relations of production. Their attack on the "industrial society" school (which thinks that some abstract force called "industry" shapes human affairs), on the technological determinists, and on some brands of left political economy, is well made. But they do not explicitly consider the way that the means of production made by one generation shape the social relations of the next. It is important to remember that the whole material world, the world of human artifacts, the "world-as-built", not only expresses the social arrangements of one generation but shapes those of the next. Bowles and Gintis under-estimate the power of the material, and correspondingly over-estimate the power of the political. That is why their analysis is so immensely attractive. But it may also be, at bottom, polemical.

This factor enters their discussion of education via the problem of education and the production of "skills". Again their attack on this part of the meritocratic ideology is beautifully mounted. Its basis is the argument:

that the mental-skill demands of work are sufficiently limited, the skills produced by our educational system sufficiently varied, and the possibilities for acquiring additional skills on the job sufficiently great so that skill differences among individuals who are acceptable for a given job on the basis of other criteria including race, sex, personality, and credentials are of little economic import. (114)

They go on to note that "Workers’ skills are an absolutely fundamental element in economic growth, but skill differences do not explain the lack of progress towards social justice". (114) True. But does the character of the skills to be acquired have an important influence in determining the way the education system is arranged? And to take the question one step further back, does the character of the presently-existing means of production play an important part in shaping the skills to be produced?

The contending classes do not in normal times directly confront one another - they stand in a relation which is mediated by a world-as-built.

Of course, when viewed historically that world isn’t given - it’s the fruit of our predecessors in the class struggle, and it embodies the past. But (and this is the crucial point) it also shapes the future in a pervasive and penetrating way. Those machines, and the science and technology which has risen with them, do demand skills and knowledge in quite definite forms. What’s more they shape our ways of relating to others and ourselves which make them a crucial ingredient in the production of both the relations of production and of culture in general. What we’re dealing with is not only a contest between human beings revolving around the means
of production — it is rather a dialectic between social beings as mediated by a culture (or cultures) shaped in part by the material circumstances of production. Bowles and Gintis are strong on the former; but, in our opinion, their argument is deeply marked by what amounts to a neglect of the latter.

Another way of making our points is to say that we suspect Bowles and Gintis of being a-historical at crucial points in their analysis, and rather neglectful of the power of capitalist culture. If we’re right about this, we can expect that some important parts of their analysis would be up for revision — their discussion of divisions in the working class, of skills, and of the way education institutions related to these, for example. We can’t hope to suggest what these modifications might look like, but we can see that they would produce a less optimistic, we might almost say, voluntaristic, political perspective.

Finally, what are the implications for research in Australia? The usefulness of Bowles’ and Gintis’ work to us flows from the similarities between the US and Australia. Both are industrialised capitalist formations, with similar distributions of production among different sectors, and with economies divided in roughly the same way between corporate, state, and small capital areas. Neither society has a feudal past. Both have experienced large-scale, ethnically-diverse migration, although there are of course differences in the pattern and timing of migration. Both bourgeoises enjoy a well-established hegemony, and achieve it through similar institutions (such as the education system) and ideologies (such as individualism and meritocracy).

But the analysis of education in Australia must take account of some important differences. Perhaps the most important of these is the peculiar relationship which Australia has had with the British metropolitan and imperial economy, and the way this relationship has permeated the form and timing of production — it is rather a dialectic between social beings as mediated by a culture (or cultures) shaped in part by the material circumstances of production. Bowles and Gintis are strong on the former; but, in our opinion, their argument is deeply marked by what amounts to a neglect of the latter.

Another way of making our points is to say that we suspect Bowles and Gintis of being a-historical at crucial points in their analysis, and rather neglectful of the power of capitalist culture. If we’re right about this, we can expect that some important parts of their analysis would be up for revision — their discussion of divisions in the working class, of skills, and of the way education institutions related to these, for example. We can’t hope to suggest what these modifications might look like, but we can see that they would produce a less optimistic, we might almost say, voluntaristic, political perspective.

Finally, what are the implications for research in Australia? The usefulness of Bowles’ and Gintis’ work to us flows from the similarities between the US and Australia. Both are industrialised capitalist formations, with similar distributions of production among different sectors, and with economies divided in roughly the same way between corporate, state, and small capital areas. Neither society has a feudal past. Both have experienced large-scale, ethnically-diverse migration, although there are of course differences in the pattern and timing of migration. Both bourgeoises enjoy a well-established hegemony, and achieve it through similar institutions (such as the education system) and ideologies (such as individualism and meritocracy).

But the analysis of education in Australia must take account of some important differences. Perhaps the most important of these is the peculiar relationship which Australia has had with the British metropolitan and imperial economy, and the way this relationship has permeated the form and timing of education in Australia. Linked with this is the much more developed and interventionist Australian state, which has played a much larger role in the production of education than has the American. Important differences have arisen since the second world war, with the growth of the imperial economy of the US (on the one hand) and the impact of US and Japanese capital which have relocated Australia within world capital (on the other). The Australian working class is better organised than the American, but faces the particular problem of social democracy. It is less weighed down by racial cleavages than the American working class.

Our system is more centralised; bureaucratic methods of control play a larger part, ideological methods a correspondingly lower one. The Australian education system has been less divided than the minutely-graded American one. The hierarchy of tertiary institutions is shorter here, but more exclusive.

The role of the state is much more apparent here. The Australian schooling system is less well integrated into the economy and society, despite its current re-adjustment.

The work towards a political economy of Australian education has hardly begun, but it will proceed more quickly if it takes Schooling in Capitalist America as its point of departure.

FOOTNOTES
3. See the article by Gero Lenhardt in Kapitalistate No. 3, Spring 1975; and the work by Altvater and others which Lenhardt cites.

Dean Ashenden & Brian Abbey.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 revealed to Marxists two new facts: that proletarian revolution could begin elsewhere than in developed capitalist states, and that the resulting non-capitalist socio-economic structure could be maintained, in the face of world capitalist opposition for a lengthy historical period. And that was all that it did reveal.

Yet, from these two facts were deduced a number of conclusions: that socialism could be built in one country; that the Russian model of party and revolutionary state had a universal form; that a world party, expressed first in the Comintern, could and should subsume all national parties into a single monolithic bloc as a model and basis for a future world soviet system.

As Stalin’s authority became supreme and as the Comintern became Stalin’s voice these views were further developed into a comprehensive, all-embracing ideology, producing in turn, a system of communist parties conformist and devoid of critical analysis, committed to the view that the defence of the Soviet state had priority over the development of revolution elsewhere, so negating the responsibility for...