

Looking for Marx: A Review of *Marx and Education* by Jean Anyon

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Marx and Education is the second and latest volume in the new ‘Routledge Key Ideas in Education Series’. Edited by Greg Dimitriadis and Bob Lingard, the series is intended to offer readers concise introductions to specific sub-field developments in the field of educational scholarship. As Dimitriadis and Lingard put it, each volume of their series will be short ‘conversational’ pieces “that look to shape ongoing discussion in the field of education by putting the field’s contemporary luminaries in dialogue with its foundational figures and critical topics” (Dimitriadis and Lingard 2011: np). This is a worthy and welcomed initiative. To introduce and open the field of educational enquiry to new audiences is to be applauded. This is especially the case in the field of Marxist education where, in contemporary times at least, Marx is much maligned and the applicability of his ideas to education are increasingly questioned, summarily rejected or plainly ignored.

For their *Marx and Education* volume, Dimitriadis and Lingard invited Jean Anyon to illuminate foundational figures and critical topics in the field. Early in *Marx and Education* Anyon communicates a sense of honor in being identified as a ‘contemporary luminary’ of Marxian educational ideas and practice. However, Anyon must have also felt the weight of the editorial challenge to produce a short, concise and introductory text that still did justice to the long and rich history of Marx’s influence on educational praxis. In a volume of less than one hundred and ten pages, Anyon did not have the freedom to explore the field in the breadth and depth that, for example, Robin Small (2005) had. Interestingly, Small’s book also carries the title *Marx and Education*. In it, Small engages in a careful explication and historical framing of what he sees as the core concepts of Marxian education theory that he brings into dialogue with various forms of educational practice (both Marxist and non-Marxist). This method allowed Small to speak of ‘Marx’s educational legacy’ and how that legacy had shaped, and been shaped by, various structural, functional, cultural and postmodern impulses over time (see Small 2005: 169 - 187). The challenge thrown to Anyon was significant.

In contrast to the approach taken by Small, Anyon’s brief saw her positioning her own work as the illuminating focal point. Anyon recalls that she was approached

... to produce a volume that traced the trajectory of my scholarly work over the years as an example of how Marx has been used as a guide to educational analysis. I have been pleased to carry out this request. ... [In this book] my main focus is on studies I have done. ... I discuss the scholarship of other writers as well – scholars who were important to me during that time period. I admire the many other colleagues who have been inspired by Marx, but must limit myself to including them only in footnotes, or in brief references to their work. (Anyon 2011: 4 - 5)

Anyon’s reference to ‘limits’ is important. Of course, all intellectual and scientific work has limits. By bringing certain objects and purposes into focus means that other objects and purposes will necessarily, and to various degrees, be out of focus. Clearly, Anyon appreciates that the more attention she gives to her own work the greater the danger of limiting the volume’s ‘dialogue’ with the broader field. In a project that 5

sets out to explore the field of 'Marx and education', Anyon seems to be aware that what can be gained by revealing the *particular* can result in obscuring *breadth* and *depth*. The problem is one of reducing understandings of the whole to knowledge of specific trajectories within it. Anyon's strategy of avoiding such a reductionist fall was, as noted above, to bring the work of fellow 'Marx inspired' colleagues into the volume's conversation. This was to be done via the efficiency of footnotes.

I read the early introductory pages of *Marx and Education* with a sense of positive anticipation. I thought Anyon's footnote strategy could not just work – it could work well. Furthermore, I was drawn to imagining the prospect of being able to recommend a clearly written and concise introductory text on Marx and education to students, friends and colleagues. Unfortunately, the more I read of *Marx and Education* the more it became apparent that it would not be that text. There are a number of reasons for this.

At the head of my concerns is the fact that Anyon does not implement her footnote strategy. A quick flick-through browse of *Marx and Education* shows that Anyon's use of footnotes is far from extensive. There are only four footnotes in the entire volume. Of these, only two refer to the work in the field of Marxist education. In the body of the text, Anyon primarily limits her discussion of the field to the cultural Marxist and critical pedagogy traditions as they have emerged within the United States. Reference to non-US research or scholarship outside the 'neo' and 'critical' traditions is largely non-existent. In a short footnote Anyon gestures to some general contribution that British scholarship of three or four decades past had made to the development of US neo-Marxism in education (see Anyon 2011: 5).

As a reader, I was left with the impression that nothing of significant (foot)note in the field of Marxist educational research and scholarship had occurred outside the boundaries of the United States since the 1970s and 1980s. I found it exceptionally strange that the voluminous work of Peter McLaren only rates a passing reference in a single footnote of *Marx and Education*. As is well known, McLaren's contribution to the field spans more than three decades and covers a breadth of theoretical terrain from the post-structuralism in his early work to his more recent applications of classical Marxism to educational research and inquiry. On its own, McLaren's work represents an instructive case of the ongoing dynamism and developmental tensions in the field of Marxism and education. It is in relation to the latter that McLaren is recognized as a prime mover in the development of *revolutionary* critical pedagogy. It might be that Anyon does not agree with McLaren's Marxism nor might she share his radicalism – but this is hardly the point. Her task in *Marx and Education* was to bring the field's 'contemporary luminaries' into conversation with 'foundational figures and critical topics'. To my mind, it would be difficult to not to describe McLaren as a significant contemporary figure in the field. That he has not been brought into even the lightest of conversations in *Marx and Education* is, as I have said, strange.

A general feature of *Marx and Education* is its framing of the field within the confines of (i) a United States vista and (ii) a particular neo-ing of Marxist theory and practice. Without a method for moving outside this frame, the prospect of an expanded dialogue with the field is left only as a promise. For example, Anyon's shorthand conflation of 'Marxism' with 'neo-Marxism' throughout the volume limits not only her power to engage with the historical emergence of various (and often competing) forms of Marxisms (e.g. 'classical', 'neo', 'post', 'analytical') but also her capacity to assess their contributions to the field of Marxist Education. Relatedly, this restricted any historical or conceptual situating of her own work i.e. her ability to

bring, as she promised, her work into explanatory conversation with the field. Again, I stress that this is a challenging - but not impossible - task. I believe Anyon could have used her own work as the focal point to illuminate the broader relation of Marx and education. This would not necessarily have been a lengthy, word-consuming, task. For example, it could have involved drawing briefly on the work of Robin Small in the main body of *Marx and Education* supplemented with appropriate footnotes. My point here is that this would have, importantly, brought Marx more clearly into the volume's conversation.

Significantly, nowhere in *Marx and Education* does Anyon engage in conversation with Marx. This is curious given the fact that the volume is supposedly about *Marx* and education. I am not necessarily suggesting here that Anyon needed to deal with what Marx actually said about education – although this would have been interesting and might have contributed to her discussion in final chapter where she sought to 'extend Marxist practice' (Anyon 2011: 81-106). Rather, I am indicating that Anyon needed to at least touch the bedrock Marxist theory and practice i.e. Marx's materialist conception of history. I suggest that, together with the labour theory of value (which Anyon also does not consider), historical materialism is recognized amongst Marxist scholars to be the anchor point of Marxian theory and practice. Marx himself described his materialist view of history as the 'guiding thread' to all his work (Marx 1966 / 1859: 503) and Engels, speaking at Marx's funeral, proclaimed it to be his collaborator's greatest achievement and legacy (Engels 1970 / 1883).

That there is no engagement with, let alone reference to, historical materialism in *Marx and Education* is a screaming silence. The 'guiding thread' - developed by Marx from a rich history of German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism - is what identifies the uniqueness of *Marxist* theory and practice. In this light, *Marxism* is the continuance of work on and around the thread and its revolutionary fibres. The materialist conception of history not only defines Marxism but also is open to critique. If historical materialism is shown to lack explanatory power then it is to be modified or even rejected. Where the latter is established Marxism falls. Historical materialism offers no universal truths. But if Marx is to be judged then it is to be in terms of the adequacy and explanatory power of his guiding thread.

What is the relevance of this to *Marx and Education*? As suggested above, historical materialism, together with the labour theory of value, provide the basis from which to conceptualize the field of Marxist Education and to grasp the relation between Marx(ism) and education. Their outline would facilitate the bringing of neo-Marxist theories (including those of Anyon) into dialogue with other (e.g. 'classical', 'orthodox' etc.) understandings. This would have provided Anyon with the means to engage in a coherent conversation with the broader field.

Outlining the 'basics' of Marxism is of considerable import – and Anyon recognises this. In her introductory chapter Anyon provides an explication of what she refers to as the 'Basic Ideas of Karl Marx'. These are identified as: capitalism, social class and ideology (Anyon 2011: 6-14). However, it must be stressed that these are not 'basic concepts' of Marx. While Marx did use the terms (although it should be noted that Marx rarely used the noun 'capitalism'), it is their grounding in historical materialism and the labour theory of value that makes them Marxian. Without providing such a grounding for readers, Anyon makes her task of introducing Marx's

'basic ideas' extremely difficult.¹ Indeed, in her search for brevity, Anyon is led to conceptual confusion (and perhaps errors) in explaining her tripartite of Marx's basic ideas. For example, she defines capitalism as an economic system where "Workers (and other employees) are bought and sold in the market place" (2011: 8). This would not be Marx's definition. For Marx, it is not people nor is it actual labour that is bought and sold in the market place. Rather, it is the *labour power* commodity. Marx's distinction between labour and labour power is at the heart of his labour theory of value and his critique of political economy. Through it, Marx explains the source of surplus value and, consequently, the origin of exploitation in capitalist societies. On this basis, it could be expected that a Marxian account of schooling and education in capitalist societies would take the issues of labour power and labour power production seriously. Here, the work of British Marxist, Glenn Rikowski, is spectacularly prominent in the field (see, for example, Rikowski 2002). Curiously, both labour power and Rikowski's work are silences in *Marx and Education*.

Also quite curious is Anyon's description of socialism and communism as social formations characterised by "a democratic sharing of resources and profits" (2011: 9). As Marx (1976 / 1867) outlines in the first three chapters of *Capital*, the extraction of surplus value (i.e. profit) is the source of exploitation in capitalist societies. Socialism and communism represent the radical transcendence of social relations that make profits and the extraction of surplus value possible. In contrast, Anyon's point seems to be that exploitation should be shared i.e. she calls for an amelioration of the state of existing affairs rather than an overthrow of the causal roots of those affairs. A tenor of reformism echoes throughout *Marx and Education*. The problems of capitalism are described as problems of distribution. Anyon tells us that education and education policy should be directed to "assisting low-income students in their efforts to climb the socioeconomic ladder" (2011: 79). Outside of distributive tinkering, Anyon offers no vision beyond the horizon of capital. With no alternative vista, Anyon's message is that "'Revolution' appears an old fashioned concept" (2011: 18).

In making reference to the 'old fashioned', Anyon has 'traditional Marxism' in her sights. Early in *Marx and Education*, the themes of 'old' and 'new' are established as a means of advancing the groundbreaking and progressive impulse of neo-Marxism. For example, Anyon tells us that neo-Marxism has challenged

... the traditional Marxist paradigm by going beyond the argument that the reproduction of a compliant labor force is the primary role of education systems in capitalist economies. (2011: 42)

There are two interesting things about the way Anyon develops the themes of 'new' and 'old' in *Marx and Education*. They are the absence of examples of 'traditional Marxist'² work (a footnote or two would have sufficed) and the lack of

¹ See Cole (2011: 19-20; 42-44) as an example of how concise introductory explications of historical materialism and the labour theory of value are possible.

² Anyon provides something of a hint as to what work, or kind of work, she might consider as representing the 'traditional Marxist paradigm' when she discusses Bowles and Gintis' correspondence theory (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Anyon notes that their theory "overdetermined students' future status, and robbed them of agency" (2011: 40). This fits with her characterisation of the 'old' and 'traditional' Marxist theories as reproductive allowing little space for human agency. However, earlier in *Marx and Education*, Anyon describes Bowles and Gintis as "the first *neo-Marxists* to receive wide attention in education circles" (2011: 19, emphasis added). My point here is that it is never made clear in *Marx and Education* whether 'neo' is to be taken as a general descriptor of all 'new' developments⁸

detail provided that pertains to the philosophical, theoretical and methodological content of the ‘traditional paradigm’. In the brevity of *Marx and Education*, readers are to accept - without evidence, argument or example - that an ‘old’ Marxism consisting in seemingly quaint ideas of social revolution and long defunct theories of economic reductionism has been (or should be) swept aside in a progressive ‘neo’ tide. For example, Anyon tells us:

Latino writers on the Left in the 1990s challenged the traditional Marxist paradigm because it focused primarily on social class and economic exploitation. This new scholarship gave a poignant reminder that race and culture can also be causes of oppression. (Anyon 2011: 40)

Here, Anyon presents three inter-related claims that are employed throughout *Marx and Education* to juxtapose the ‘new’ and the ‘old’. In this juxtaposition, the ‘traditional paradigm’ is characterized as (i) underplaying - or completely ignoring - non-class forms of oppression, (ii) tending to class reductionism and (iii) focusing on the ‘economic’ at the expense of the ‘social’. Whatever the specific form or content of the ‘traditional paradigm’ might be (and recall that we are given no specifics on this), readers are led to believe that its origins reside in the actual work of Marx himself. As such, Anyon warns us that “Much in Marx is outdated” (2011: 17). The final chapter of *Marx and Education* is devoted to updating Marx and ‘extending Marxist theory and practice’ in order to bring it into the light of contemporary relevance (see Anyon 2011: 81-106). What Anyon considers as the ‘traditional’ deficiencies will be discussed below with reference to her three claims. For convenience and explanatory efficiency, I will take the first two claims together before moving to the third.

It is reasonable to assert that the issues of class and the relationship of class to other forms of oppression in capitalist societies are central points of debate and tension in Marxist circles. This is certainly no exception where these circles draw in concerns about education and schooling. In the field of Marxist sociology of education, the problem of ‘class essentialism’ has been extensively debated (as Anyon discusses in Chapter 1 of *Marx and Education*) especially since the rise of cultural Marxist critiques of Bowles and Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America*. Anyon expertly brings the reader to an awareness of the problem and, as I have indicated above, returns to it through the volume. This is good. I would argue that ‘class essentialism’ has been a pivotal problematic around which, for example, Marxist sociology of education has continued to develop since the 1970s.

However, where *Marx and Education* falls short is in its failure to offer readers even the slightest glance into the debates around class and its relationship to other forms of oppression. Anyon’s method is to simply position an unidentified ‘traditional paradigm’ as out of touch with contemporary class realities. In this regard, Anyon tell us that some of ‘old’ Marx’s ideas on class are to be consigned to the dustbin of history. For example, we are told that “The industrial proletariat ... has not been, and – in the U.S., at least – can not be expected to act as the ‘vanguard of the revolution’” (Anyon 2011: 17-18).

What is to be made of such a claim against ‘old’ Marx? Firstly, it is important to note that although class is important in Marxist theory it never received systematic explication from either Marx or Engels.

However, I suggest that in *Capital* we find that Marx was far more nuanced in his discussions about classes than Anyon presents. For example, Marx discusses commercial workers along with industrial workers and identifies domestic (women) servants - not the industrial proletariat - as the largest group of wage labourers. The working class was not simply the industrial proletariat. Secondly, in relation to revolutionary social change, I think it is clear that Marx did see the industrial proletariat taking a leading role in the overthrow of the historically specific capitalist relations *of his day*. What also is clear that Marx believed this had to be done by forging alliances with not only other members of the working class but also other oppressed groups. Furthermore, Marx did not see socialism guaranteed by proletarian revolution nor by an unfolding historical inevitability. Indeed, it was plausible to Marx that capitalism might be transcended by fascism, or barbarism – or end, as he put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, ‘in the common ruin of the contending classes’. But what Marx did not fore-see³ was the unfolding of Western Marxism and the emergence of social democratic reformism in the twentieth century that would trade struggles to realize alternatives outside the universe of capital for the amelioration of the state of affairs. Radicalism, in Margaret Thatcher’s world of no alternative, is contained within the existing order of things. Thus, as capitalism becomes *our* system, equity reduces to bourgeois justice. This is the world that Anyon seems to endorse when she explains that her neo-Marxism “is a theoretical and practical weapon, potentially powerful in advancing the cause of equity *in our* economic and educational systems (2011: 18, emphasis added).

The claim that ‘traditional’ Marxism is a form of economism is not an unusual one. Both opponents of Marx as well as proponents of ‘neo’ and ‘post’ Marxisms hold to it. However, as Marx makes explicit in *The German Ideology*, the ‘real process of production’ does not simply refer to ‘economic’ production. Rather, his materialist view of history starts

... from the material production of life itself - and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history; describing it in its action as the state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc., etc., arise from it, and tracing the process of their formation from that basis; thus the whole thing can, of course, be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various aspects on one another). (Marx and Engels 1976 / 1845 - 6: 61)

‘Production’ thus consists of determining and codetermining relations that include those of nature, work, and social organisation. Furthermore, Marx stresses that humans produce not just material things but ‘theoretical products’ as well. In my assessment, economic reductionist readings of Marx that charge him with ignoring (or downplaying) other social divisions rests on particular misunderstandings of Marx’s materialist view of history (Banfield 2010). Generally, these readings follow anti-dialectical and irrealist interpretations of the base-superstructure relation. As a materialist theory of history, Marxism does not equate the ‘material’ with ‘economic’ and then separate them from other societal ‘levels’. Indeed, their conflation and ultimate separation from other ‘domains’ like the ‘political’, ‘cultural’ or ‘ideological’ is, as Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995) argues, a product of capitalist ideology. The point

³ Of course, Marx was never about predicting. Historical materialism was not developed for crystal balling. Rather, it is a scientific theory where ‘laws’ are understood as tendencies.

here is that ‘base’ and superstructure’ do not refer to concrete events, processes, or ‘things’ but to underlying generative mechanisms. Note Marx’s opening sentences in *Capital*:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (Marx 1976 / 1867: 125)

Here we see Marx referring more than once to the appearance of things (in this case commodities). As a scientific realist, Marx sees the object of scientific investigation being to dig below appearances to uncover their generative mechanisms. Hence, early in *Capital*, Marx proceeds to unpack the commodity form to reveal its content i.e. exchange value, use value and value. Explanation comes from grasping the interactive dynamics of causal mechanisms and the emergent forms they generate. What we glean from this is that mechanisms generating the ‘economic’, ‘cultural’ and ‘ideological’ simultaneously determine (and co-determine) actual events, processes and things that, in turn, comprise schools, workplaces, families and the like. In other words, Marx does not take the ‘economy’ as a separate level to other historically specific social forms. Rather, he understands that it is mechanisms that are stratified – and Marx draws on his philosophical materialism to explain that stratification.

We can say that Marx’s materialism provides the ontological orientation required for deep explanation. Conversely, historical analysis provides empirical data for broad explanation. Together, these moves comprise Marx’s historical materialist method in its depth and breadth. The significance I wish to draw from this is that to point out the ‘limits of Marx’ or to ‘extend Marxist theory and practice’ requires clarity as to precisely what those limits are or what precisely is to be extended. To take the example of class: a Marxian theory of class as a body of trans-historical conceptual abstractions is distinguishable from historically specific and empirically concrete forms of class. The two comprise different moments in Marx’s historical materialist method. It is not sufficient simply to claim that a theory of class is deficient because class forms have changed over time (as I think Anyon tries to do). Rather, a theory is to be judged on the extent of its explanatory power.

This is the sticking point for Anyon. Without reference to Marx’s ‘guiding thread’, she cannot judge the explanatory power of ‘traditional Marxism’ or indeed any ‘new Marxism’. She can only call on the historically present empirical world as her guide. This is why, when we get to the final chapter of *Marx and Education*, Anyon does not offer a critique of Marxist theory (or practice). Nor, wisely, does she claim to. Instead, she provides an ‘extension’: an up-date for the out-of-date. However, this is an extension without *deep* explanation. Without means from which to judge the explanatory claims of the trans-historical materialism that ‘old’ Marx offers, Anyon can do no more. *Marx and Education* seems stuck: it calls on Marx but does not know what to call Marx.

To conclude, I must say I found *Marx and Education* to be a curious book. The essence of its curiousness rests, to my mind, in the fact that its title does not reflect its content. In straightforward terms, *Marx and Education* is not about Marx and education. Rather, the object of the volume might be more accurately described as a *particular* account of the development of neo-Marxist analyses of United States schooling since the 1970s. In itself, this is a worthy project with undoubted relevance to researchers and scholars that have an interest in the specific content trajectory of

the book. But I suspect that those with an interest in Marx and education will be left, as I was, disappointed.

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She has made an important contribution.
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