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The 'Mini-Renaissance' in Marxist Educational Sociology: a critique

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ABSTRACT *This paper argues that the recent 'mini-renaissance' in Marxist educational sociology as propounded in particular by Rikowski (1996, 1997) is fatally flawed, not only denying the sui generis (autonomous) properties of the educational system but also precluding practical social theorising per se. The reason for this centres on the adoption of a universal internal relations social ontology, which results in the reduction of concrete social reality to the narrow abstraction of the omnipresent 'Capital Relation'. At the same time, such theorising remains conspicuously silent on the issue of the feasible alternatives to capitalism implied by the (albeit flawed) explanatory critiques of such recent Marxist theorising within the sociology of education.*

Introduction

The fall of the Soviet Empire signalled for the Right, especially, the theoretical and, moreover, practical redundancy of Marxism. 'The End of History' meant that American capitalism now dominated the world irrevocably. This paper does not wish to defend the latter nor to hammer yet another nail into the coffin of a putatively debunked corpus of ideas and failed socialist revolution. On the contrary, it takes as given the continuing relevance of radical political economy. Indeed, the explanatory utility of the distinction between use-value and exchange-value, and of the concepts of capital accumulation, labour-power and uneven development is indubitable. However, this paper proffers a sympathetic critique that has three modest aims. First, it aims to re-affirm the autonomy of the education system. Marxist educational sociology has tended to play down or expunge the autonomous irreducible properties of the education system. A typical (yet ambiguous) example delineated below is that of Dale, who tends towards an Althusserian 'determination-in-the-last-instance' approach. Second, it takes issue with the recent adoption by Glenn Rikowski of the universal internal relations ontology of Bertell Ollman. Any adequate Marxist sociology of education must eschew this path, since one of the consequences of this is to withdraw autonomy from the education system. The rejection of the universal internal relations ontology enjoins that we respect the auton-

omy of the education system and pay due attention to the open nature of any social system. In brief, we must not reduce concrete social reality to the 'Capital Relation'. Third, the feasible alternatives implied by an adequate Marxist sociology of education are rarely, if at all, considered [1]. If Marxist educational sociology is to have practical import, it must (a) recognise and theorise about the multi-faceted nature of the concrete, and (b) make use of counterfactual analysis to proffer *plausible* futures.

The Education System: to be autonomous or not to be autonomous?

Capitalist Social Relations and the Education System: the (ambiguous) example of Dale

Prior to Rikowski's incipient attempt to develop the rudimentary building blocks of 'labour-power theory', the primacy accorded to *capitalist* social relations (be it theoretically or practically) as subsuming the education system (and the state in general) is readily discernible in the Marxist literature. Thus, to Dale, for example:

While very many social forces affect education in very important ways, the major motor of educational change in capitalist society is the changing nature of the capitalist state. Thus, while I would agree very largely with Margaret Archer's (1979) view of the influence of the organized teaching profession on education change since the war and especially over the last 20 years, neither the profession's rise to the peak of its influence, nor its recent fall from that peak can be explained by examination of its composition, its policies, its leadership, its size, its level of expertise or anything else internal to it. All these factors are necessary to explain the *form* that the rise and fall took, but cannot explain *why* it took place. To do that, we have to examine the changing demands on the State in carrying out its basic functions ... (1989, p. 45)

Dale's criticism resonates well with Broadfoot's comment that Archer's 'elaborate model of educational systems might be criticised by neo-Marxists for its failure to address the characteristics of the over-arching capitalist order' (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 109). There is a tension here. For, on the one hand, Dale acknowledges the *sui generis* autonomy of the structure of the teaching profession (particularly its nature as corporate group) yet, on the other hand, he wants to subsume this under the 'major motor of the capitalist state'. He accepts the reality of other (i.e. non-capitalist) social factors that account for the nature of the education system at any given point in time but assumes *a priori* that capitalist factors are invariably more important. But the relative importance of non-capitalist factors is an *a posteriori* matter. In fact, one of Archer's crucial arguments was that at the beginning of the 1980s, 'the single most neglected question in the vast literature on education concerns [prior to the 1980s] is the educational system itself ... The defining characteristics of a *state* system are in it having both *political* and *systemic* aspects' (cited in Broadfoot, 1996, p. 102).

The education system possesses emergent *sui generis* properties, of which the centralised or decentralised configuration conditions agential activity in distinctive ways. Whatever the functional needs of capitalism (perceived or otherwise), there is no *tabula rasa* on which economic or cultural needs can be readily imprinted, modified or expunged at will. Crucially, any state education system *qua* system possesses autonomous properties that are irreducible to the nature of the economic system (capitalist, state socialist, market socialist or post-capitalist) in which it is embedded. Dale's implicit reductionism of the *sui generis* properties of the state education system to capitalist dynamics implies considerable degrees of freedom on the part of those fulfilling the needs of capital, yet historically this

is not the case. In fact, Archer does not artificially isolate the education system from the wider influences of the polity. She maintains that any macro-sociology of education involves recourse to the complex social interaction that results in particular forms of education, and the complex types of social and educational structures that shape the context in which such interaction and change occur.

It is a complicated task because it involves separating out the factors which impinge upon education and those which may be ignored at any given time because they do not impinge upon it. It also follows that the factors which are included are themselves treated as unproblematic—for instance, in incorporating the educational consequences of economic organization we do not try to explain the nature of the economy, but treat it as given. (Archer, 1979, p. 4)

Thus, Archer is not denying the (obvious) importance of the economy and its organisational implications for education. Instead, she is simply highlighting the methodological implications of one's substantive focus. When incorporating the impact of the economic recession during the 1970s, one does not need to spell out in detail its temporal dynamics, since this would be to detract from the substantive explanans in hand. But, of course, to take the economy as given is to accord autonomy to the education system as a prior ontological commitment. Such a commitment is a transcendental realist one, since any system (educational, civil service, ...) has to possess autonomous relations among its parts in order for it to be identified as such. However, Dale maintains that the largest category of staff in the education state apparatuses is teachers and that, therefore:

no account of how education state apparatuses operate and what they can achieve is complete without *some* reference to the teaching profession. I do not want to go into this in any great detail, but I do want to suggest that teachers are not merely 'state functionaries' *but do have some degree of autonomy*, and that this autonomy will not necessarily be used to further the proclaimed ends of the state apparatus. Rather than those who work there fitting themselves to the requirements of the institutions, there are a number of very important ways in which the institution has to take account of the interests of the employees and fit itself to them. It is here, for instance, that we may begin to look for the sources of the alleged inertia of education systems and schools; that is to say that what appears as inertia is not some immutable characteristic of bureaucracies, but is due to various groups within them having more immediate interests than the pursuit of the organization's goals. (Dale, 1989, p. 57; emphasis added)

That 'some' reference is required *vis-à-vis* the teaching profession evinces Dale's ontological equivocality about the relative causal efficacy of the profession *qua* corporate group *vis-à-vis* the polity and the basis for such efficacy. However, such equivocality is more apparent than real. The underlying prioritisation of the educational system(s) logically enjoins that Dale eschew any detailed analysis of the profession: he is not so readily inclined to put all his ontological cards on the table, so to speak. Yet his concession that teachers possess some autonomy immediately throws up the question of their degrees of freedom versus stringency of constraints; namely, that 'some autonomy' enjoins that capitalist needs cannot be deemed *a priori* of more importance. The very fact that teachers have interests begs the question of their *structural* provenance; here, Dale only accords the education system itself a pale materiality at best. He writes (see earlier) that any inertia is not due to the nature of the education system *per se*, but rather to the immediate vested interests of various groups. This elision of vested interest groups

and their structural embedding means that Dale would be unable to explain why concerted efforts by either the Government or teaching groups (or both) does not necessarily result in structural change because of the irreducible material properties of the system itself.

The nature of assessment is useful in highlighting the materiality of the education system; namely, its independent properties *vis-à-vis* capitalist economic dynamics. For, as Broadfoot (1996) rightly points out, the education system is now inconceivable without some form of external assessment. Indeed, assessment has been central to the creation of education systems. Whatever the imperfections of past and current assessment procedures and their intended/unintended inegalitarian consequences, it remains that the assessment rationale is constitutive of educational systems, in turn conditioning what central government and teachers can do in them and/or about them. Dale (1989, p. 55) notes that the Government is unable to institute effective day-to-day control over every aspect of an apparatus's activities but does not adequately specify the ontological (transcendental) basis for this. I would want to add that this is the case for any government. That is, capitalist and non-capitalist polities alike confront similar systemic properties that condition their activities. Any educational system objectively provides teachers with vested interests in virtue of the irreducible materiality of the system and the associated division of knowledge and expertise. It is the latter expertise, *inter alia*, that needs theorising about in terms of the degrees of objective bargaining power that teachers bring to the negotiating table, and their subsequent negotiating strength that can then be analysed in conjunction with other factors. In other words, teachers' relative negotiating strength derives from the skills and knowledge afforded by the education system rather than simply from the social relations of production. Thus, I am not denying that capitalist societies condition activity in distinctive ways from their 'state socialist' counterparts. The point is that both have to contend with common features that are independent of their economic-systemic anchorage. Hence the recent adoption by some commentators of the metaphor 'steering at a distance' (for example, Ball, 1994), whereby the educational division of labour precludes untrammelled top-down central control.

In a nutshell, the educational systemic division of labour and the associated division of knowledge and expertise do not comprise a pliable bundle with which any state (capitalist or otherwise) can do as it pleases. If the process of meeting capitalist needs were simply a one-way process of clarification and subsequent imposition, then one wonders why in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the development of the capitalist economy could be impeded by Anglican instruction, and that entrepreneurial groups were compelled to become 'self-taught scientists, to experiment with industrial applications on a trial and error basis [and] to develop in-service training for mechanics, operators and accountants ...' (Archer, 1979, p. 113). Indeed, without a detailed examination of the organisation, values and related negotiating strength of the teaching profession, one would be unable to provide an adequate account of the genesis of the Plowden Report, namely how groups exploited anterior socio-cultural conditioning (Hadow Report, nature of the economy, etc.). Equally, the 1993 teacher boycott of tests cannot be explained away as some sort of capitalist hiccup. Yet, for Dale, in the final analysis, one must focus attention on the 'major motor of change' (the needs of the *capitalist* state). What he omits, of course, is that any state within an advanced economy will have needs that may not be met by the education system for the very reasons already discussed. The problem with the *a priori* importance accorded to the needs or functions of the capitalist state is that we miss many important things.

Rikowski: the denial of autonomy

However, Whitty (1985) refers to Dale (1982), who wrote that we should be aware of trying to relate everything that goes on in schools back to the functions of the state on behalf of capital. In turn, one can argue that Dale does not allow a reduction of concrete social reality—specifically the autonomous properties of the education system—to that isolated in abstract thought, namely the capital relation. But for such Marxists as Rikowski (1996, 1997, 1999) and Sharp (1986), the opposite maintains. We should thus not be surprised that Rikowski takes to task the so-called 'relative autonomy' Marxists such as Fritzell (1987). For, as Fritzell puts it, 'In the structural context, autonomy may be seen to refer to a type of relationship in which significant properties or internal relations of one system cannot be empirically derived from corresponding features within another system ...' (1987, p. 25). In other words, he is talking about ontological emergence and the irreducibility of social structure (see Archer, 1995; Reed, 1997; Archer, 1999, 2000; forthcoming). The internal and necessary relation between lecturer and student is an irreducible emergent property since the powers of the individual *qua* individual are modified. Even though this emergent property depends for its existence upon continued state funding, the powers of the relation between lecturer and student are not reducible to the Department for Education and Employment and/or Local Education Authority *qua* structural entities. Following Gordon (1989), Rikowski believes he has defeated the 'relative autonomy' theorists when he comments that:

Firstly, [Gordon] argues that it lacks meaning. How much strength are we to give to the notion of 'relative' in 'relative autonomy'? Just like the arguments about angels on pinheads, it implies that there is an answer to a question that defies answers ... Secondly, whilst she sees that relative autonomy theory is appealing for those who wish to escape vulgar Marxism ... [she] also notes the determinism lurking within it in its insistence on 'determination in the last instance' (of educational forms and practices by the economy) through the workings of the capitalist state ... Thirdly, Gordon notes that the work of Apple (1985) and other supporters of relative autonomy theory is schizoid as it tends to oscillate violently between an 'all-powerful' state as a juggernaut pushing through education measures of the New Right which are purportedly in the interests of capital, and the ability of students and teachers to 'resist' the seemingly irresistible through a variety of counter-hegemonic cultural forms and practices. (1997, p. 559)

Rikowski argues that 'A dualistic structure-agency dilemma runs through the relative autonomy discourse which is indeterminate' (*idem*). He concludes that Gordon's alternative ends up as a variant along the same relative autonomy theme:

She attempts to construct a theory of theory of the 'limits' and 'capacity' of the state and apply this to education. 'Limits' suggests that the state is unable to do certain things regarding education, thus it becomes 'relatively autonomous' once more and Gordon's critique falls back upon itself. (Rikowski, 1997, p. 559)

First, there is nothing dilemmatic about the structure/agency distinction, since it delineates two irreducible strata of social reality. Rikowski is correct to point out that simply to posit the (transcendental) reality of the autonomy of structural forms does not tell us the extent of such autonomy (or degree, as Dale rightly notes). What is sometimes missing from the equation, then, is a specification of the degrees of freedom versus

stringency of constraints. The 'schizoid' tendency of relative autonomy theorists as described by Gordon is precisely that specification; in this instance, recognition of the (now) substantially increased degrees of freedom at the state's disposal to impose policy underpinned by New Right philosophy. What needs to be emphasised here is that even the most stringent constraints do not determine agency in puppet-like fashion. Structural emergent properties have to be mediated by us. Thus agency can exit at any point in time, but to do so would be to incur a structured penalty (see Archer, 1999; forthcoming).

Second, we need to bear in mind that Rikowski (1996, 1997) wishes to 'dissolve' the structure/agency dualism, not because of the usual (although misplaced) assumption that the dualism is a Cartesian rather than analytical one [2] but, rather, it is because of the all-powerful omnipresence of the 'Capital Relation', whose immanent 'transcendence' is left to the sociological imagination. Indeed, while undoubtedly Rikowski would deny the charges of reification and determinism, we are left with a residual sense of agency responding to, rather shaping, the 'logical' outcome of the unfolding of the Capital Relation (Rikowski, 1997, 1999). However, he writes that, while the notion of the education system *qua* autonomous entity is the antidote for 'simple economic reductionism', he follows Sharp, arguing that we should not view the relations between capital, the state and education as a set of relations between institutions or systems—'Capital is a social relation' (Rikowski, 1997, p. 560). Indeed it is, but so too are the lecturer/student relation, headteacher/teacher relation, husband/wife relation, and so on. Rikowski, like Sharp, is making redundant any adequate sociology of education. We are denied the capacity to assess the extent to which policy can be imposed, how far policy intentions match their implementation. In fact, they are committing the fallacy that the material character of what is organised by the state has no effect. Ultimately, one would expect empirical reality to lead Rikowski to reassess his prior ontological commitments. However, his conflation of a multiplicity of *sui generis* strata consistently leads him to recommend the 'destruction of the project of "Marxist educational theory" in its entirety. Whoever treads this path ends up as a Labour-power Theorist rather than a Marxist Educational Theorist' (1997, p. 568). So, education is now out of the equation altogether. Yet, clearly, a focus on labour-power is somewhat unhelpfully narrow. But such is the logic of his approach, since '... a focus on the social production of labour-power necessitates a theoretical perspective where *process* and *processes* replace systems and institutions at the heart of analysis. The social production of labour-power cuts across and through institutions' (1997, pp. 568–569).

Rikowski wants to expunge ontologically institutions and systems yet, naturally, cannot avoid using such terms. A focus on process and processes will not do. The processes involved in deciding whether to market a school aggressively take place within a 'product', namely the school. The concept of school necessarily entails reference to *sui generis* social relations (paradigmatically the teacher/pupil social relation). However, Rikowski maintains that:

Only a philosophy of internal relations allows us to think in these terms [process rather than product]. Flat, static thinking through such concepts as 'institution' and 'system' makes analysis of the social production of labour-power as process and as trajectory impossible ... Through utilising a philosophy of internal relations following Ollman (1993), the attention shifts away from 'systems' and 'institutions' (the usual fare of much sociology of education and Marxist educational theory. (1997, p. 569)

The next section critically dissects the Ollman social ontology of internal relations

adopted by Rikowski, extending its logic to argue that not only does it disavow a disaggregative analysis (Sayer, 1995), but also precludes any adequate explanatory methodology.

Ollman, Internal Relations and the Omnipresent Capital Relation

Class, Capital and the Division of Labour

In the context of the division of labour in both capitalist and non-capitalist advanced economies, Sayer (1995) has convincingly argued that the generic flaw in Marxist analysis of capitalism is its inability to appreciate the materiality, complexity and intractability of an advanced division of labour, whose properties and powers are independent of the mode of production. I would argue that this applies equally to the recent treatment of the education system. As Sayer rightly points out, if we have too few abstractions over too narrow a range of angles, then material aspects of social reality are lost at a stroke. Possibly in Dale's case—and certainly in Rikowski's—we end up missing the materiality of the education system itself and the differing degrees of freedom it affords the teaching profession (or fragmented groups thereof).

Whitty (1985) refers to the work of Holloway & Picciotto (1977) as illustrative of the limitations of neo-Marxist accounts of shifts in education policy. He notes that, for Holloway and Picciotto, like Rikowski and others, the central dynamic of the whole social formation is provided by the 'capital relation', which enters into all features of social life under capitalism. Although Whitty notes that Holloway and Picciotto introduced many caveats into their argument, in turn distinguishing it from a 'logic-of-capital' thesis, their approach still eluded an adequate understanding of the complex relative interplay of economic, political and ideological practice. While Whitty acknowledges the importance of economic needs on education policy, he does not elevate it to an ontological proposition that engulfs social reality *in toto*. On the contrary, what cannot be assumed is that economic pressures

will always generate policy initiatives whose character can be derived directly from them, nor indeed is it necessarily the case that they will bring about *outcomes* that are incontrovertibly functional for capital. Much of the progress of the Great Debate in England has, for example, to be understood in terms of the peculiar political, professional and cultural character of the English educational system and the existence within it of elements to which capitalism is 'relatively indifferent' or 'had great difficulty in changing' ... (Whitty, 1985, p. 85)

Holloway and Picciotto's privileging of the 'capital relation' is not uncommon in current neo-Marxist theorising, both within and outside education sociology. The assumption is that the effects of capitalism's central processes are so far-reaching that everything in such a society is to some extent capitalist. Indeed, as sociologists, we are used to such terms as 'cultural capital', 'human capital', and so on. However, Hodgson (1999) argues that these are abuses of the word 'capital', which is properly confined to the notion of the money value of an owned stock of assets that exist in, or are readily convertible into, a monetary form.

Outside slavery, therefore, there is no 'human capital' or 'social capital', as these are not stocks of assets that can be bought for money. At the most, outside slavery, human beings can be hired but not bought, but capital goods

can be both. It is not until one owns—rather than merely rents—the stock of assets that one becomes the owner of capital (Hodgson, 1999, p. 286)

We should not be surprised that, for Rikowski, ‘The class struggle, therefore, is not just ‘out there’—on picket lines, demonstrations and other forms of confrontation—but is everywhere, including *within* human-capital as life-form constituted *by* capital’ (1999, pp. 51–52). Yet, as Sayer (1995) argues, any advanced division of labour possesses an irreducible materiality that is more fundamental than particular modes of co-ordination, such as markets and planning. It is not only capitalism that generates macro-economic problems, but also market socialism. This should alert us to the fact that the social relations of production do not assume causal primacy or, indeed, constitute the key abstraction for Marxist theory, especially the sociology of education.

In addition to our routine attachment to such over-extended concepts as ‘cultural capital’, there is a pervasive tendency both in Marxism and sociology in general to subsume the effects of division of labour under class. Put simply, class is conflated or confused with division of labour, thereby obscuring the different sources of power at different corporate groups’ and individuals’ disposal. The teaching profession’s varying degrees of negotiating strength are not derivable from the social relations of production. Equally, technical divisions of labour objectively create scope for conflicts and inequalities within and between firms, and these objective power-bases can (and did) exist in state socialist society. The salient point here is that the materiality of an advanced division of labour greatly attenuates the causal primacy accorded to private ownership, *inter alia*, because of the considerable variety of power-bases it creates (which may or may not be strategically exploited) and the associated dispersal of knowledge. As Sayer (1995, p. 51) convincingly argues, such multiple sources of power cannot be subsumed under one single heading (i.e. class), yet this is precisely what much Marxism or ‘class theory’ tries to do. He suggests that those who resist the idea of treating professional employees and employee cleaners as in the same class probably do so because they cannot drop the habit of using an *overburdened* concept of class that attempts to cover all differences in power, income and life-chances. (This is one habit of which I am culpable.)

Bertell Ollman and Universal Internal Relations: the repudiation of disaggregative analysis

The common Marxist emphasis upon the totalising nature of the capital relation has its origins in the universal internal relations ontology, which can be traced back to the work of such prominent Marxist thinkers as Bertell Ollman and Marx himself. Rikowski’s recent contributions (1996, 1997) attempt to supersede the historical problems that have bedevilled ‘Marxist educational theory’, such as the well-known ‘correspondence theory’ of Bowles and Gintis, and ‘resistance theory’. However, while applauding his engagement with such past problematics, his unfinished programme is fatally flawed because of his adoption of the Ollman internal relations approach. One can glean Rikowski’s programme from Ollman’s account of his dialectical approach:

My account of the dialectic stresses its roots in the philosophy of internal relations which holds that the irreducible unit of reality is the relation and not the thing. The relations that people ordinarily assume to exist *between* things are viewed here as existing *within* (as a necessary part of) each thing in turn, now conceived of as a Relation (likewise, the changes which any ‘thing’ undergoes). This peculiar notion of relation is the key to understanding the entire dialectic, and is used to unlock the otherwise mysterious notions of totality, abstraction,

identity, law and contradiction. In the interests of clarity, these notions are examined in Hegel as well as Marx and contrasted with their equivalents in Aristotelian logic and its watered-down version—common sense. (Ollman, 1990, pp. 74–75)

For Ollman, all 'Relations' are aspects of the whole. Crucially, he writes thus:

The twin pillars of Marx's ontology are his conception of reality as a totality composed of internally related parts, and his conception of these parts as expandable relations, such that each one in its fullness can represent the totality. Few people would deny that everything in the world is related as causes, conditions or results; and many insist that the world is unintelligible except in terms of such relations. Marx goes a step further in conceptually interiorizing this interdependence within each thing, so that the conditions of its existence are taken to be part of what it is. *Capital, for example, is not simply the physical means of production, but includes potentially the whole pattern of social relations which enables these means to function as they do.* (1990, p. 100; emphasis added)

Contrary to Ollman, commonsense would immediately question the bizarre notion that *everything* is part of an internally related whole—a totality. The totalising reductionism is transparent—capital is the whole pattern of social relations. Of course, there are causes, conditions and results in the world, but not all conditions are internally related. Water is composed of the internal and necessary relation between two molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen. Yet water is not internally related to human beings (despite our asymmetrical internal dependence upon it). In other words, water provides one of the conditions for human existence, but water can exist without us yet we cannot exist without it. To be fair, however, for some objects, 'most famously capital itself, the internal-relations perspective is indeed illuminating, especially for making sense of Marx's own exposition of the properties of capital as it goes through different "moments" ...' (Sayer, 1995, p. 27).

But to extend the internal necessity that obtains between capital/labour as applying to all social relations and objects is, at best, an extremely unhelpful *non-sequitur*. At worst, it makes any form of critical social theory pointless. Yet if everything is internally related, how is it possible to step back? It seems logical to suggest that the internal relations ontology precludes critical standpoints. Nevertheless, Rikowski quotes Holloway, who maintains that 'If all aspects of society are to be understood as forms of social relations, then clearly they all form part of an internally-related whole ...' (Holloway, 1995, p. 166). Rikowski maintains, again following Holloway, that the state, money, capital and so on are 'apparently' separate: 'they are forms of social relations, the interconnections between which should be understood *not as external (causal relations, for example), but as internal, as processes of transformation or metamorphosis*' (*ibid*, p. 165; emphasis added). An unfortunate repudiation of explanatory power *per se* is the (heavy) price paid by adopting Ollman's internal-relations ontology. The complete lack of explanatory purchase on concrete educational systems and their interplay with the polity is readily gleaned from the withdrawal of causality to the state and capital respectively in the earlier reference to Holloway and Rikowski's own (unfinished) exposition of 'labour-power theory'. Surely, if they are interconnected, as Holloway maintains, then they must possess some modicum of autonomy in order to be so identified? And if they possess autonomy, then perforce they have properties independent of, and irreducible to, each other. But to recognise their irreducibility (which is not to deny any form of necessary interdepen-

dency) would be to accept that they have independent (autonomous) structural identities, which an internal-relations ontology precludes.

An internal-relations ontology would disclaim the tenability of the asymmetrical relation between schools and their governing bodies. That is, a school can exist without a governing body, but not *vice versa*. Equally, the police can causally affect a school and *vice versa*, yet the relation is contingent (or external). Inconsistently, Rikowski (1996, p. 445) approvingly quotes Hatcher, who rightly argues that it is possible to envisage gender equality in capitalist societies. This belies the internal-relations ontology, since gender is not ontologically dependent upon capitalism for its existence and vice versa. As Sayer puts it:

The ontology of universal internal relations leads one to assume that objects or processes cannot be the same under different circumstances. It simply excludes the possibility [and empirical reality] that particular processes that exist in capitalism could also exist in a society with non-capitalist social relations of production, for it assumes that they must be different, and not just superficially but fundamentally (1995, p. 29).

In fairness, Sayer points out that, with respect to the relationships between class, division of labour, money, commodities and property relations, Marx tended to assume ubiquitous internal relations in Hegelian fashion. Nevertheless, the denial of external social relations—or ‘forms’—means that Ollman and others cannot conceive the asymmetrical internal relation between money and capitalism, namely that the former can exist without the latter but not *vice versa*. In fact, Sayer argues that it would be maintained that, if the social relations of production were different, then everything would be different (!). Yet, *pace* Sayer, the very identification of that which is different is impossible. The universal internal-relations ontology cannot explain (or identify) enduring causal entities at all, since any change enjoins that some form or entity possess causal powers proper to itself; that is, an independent *sui generis* identity in order for the identification of change to be possible. Transcendentally, therefore, the universal internal-relations ontology is false. How, indeed, could Marx identify the transition from feudalism to capitalism if the latter did not have an independent structural identity?

The point of abstraction is to establish whether relations are internal or external. Thus, as Sayer points out, this allows for the possibility that features found within capitalism could exist outside it. The internal-relations ontology disallows a disaggregative approach, whereby we can consider whether particular elements of political-economic systems can exist in combination with one set of other elements or whether they can also co-exist with other sets. Without a disaggregative approach that entails the posing of counterfactual questions, we would not be in a position to underscore the contingency of sexism and racism *vis-à-vis* capitalism and schooling itself.

If x can exist without y , then it can obviously be considered separately from y , and doing so reduces the risk of misidentifying causal responsibility between them ... we could establish the asymmetric internal relation between capitalism and money ... Given Marxism's enormous emphasis on the social relations of production it is especially useful to consider how particular outcomes would differ were these to change. In some cases what is at issue is whether capitalist social relations are relevant at all ... For example, if not only capitalism but market socialism generate macro-economic problems ... then it is possible that their social relations of production are irrelevant ... (Sayer, 1995, pp. 31–32)

In summary, the problem with the Marxist adoption of the internal-relations ontology is

that it results in a totalising discourse that absorbs non-capitalist phenomena or simply ignores them.

The Absence of Feasible Alternatives

Briefly, despite the transcendently flawed nature of the universal internal-relations ontology of Ollman, we do not get even a hint of the sort of feasible alternatives implied by Marxist critiques in general. Rikowski is no exception here:

The historical drive towards communist thought, practice, organisation and praxis is *immanent* within the unfolding of capital itself, and takes on increasing significance as human possession by capital deepens. The becoming of capital opens up possibilities for us to *think communism* and to put communist thought into action ... (1999, p. 53)

Despite the generic evil of 'Capital', we are not provided with any feasible alternatives. Rikowski refers to Postone (1996) who, likewise, offers no discussion on feasible alternatives. There is much talk of emancipation in Postone's work (see also Ollman, 1990), and, in particular, of the 'transcendence' of the mode of production. But what does this actually entail? As Sayer notes, life would be better if its illusions, conflicts and contradictions were reduced but the desirability of the latter does not make it feasible. The usual implicit assumption in radical political economy is that all bad things go together in capitalism and all good things under communism/socialism: 'Yet it is possible that some of the "contradictions" involve dilemmas which can't be eliminated along with capitalism. Evaluations in terms of desirability therefore need to be cross-checked with assessments of feasibility, and optimistic assumptions of inevitable improvement suspended' (1995, p. 34). Finally, the problem with a focus on the narrow abstraction of the 'Capital Relation' is precisely its narrowness. It is worth quoting Sayer one last time:

Evaluations of whole systems need to be exactly that, not judgements of the whole based upon just a part of that system. It is not enough, for example, to argue that if the capital-labour relation can be shown to be unjust, it therefore follows that capitalism must be overthrown ... Capitalism in the inclusive sense consists of *more* than the capital-labour relation ... It also has to be demonstrated that there is a superior alternative. *All too often critical theorists ignore these points and judge and condemn whole (concrete) systems on the basis of abstract analysis of just one of their parts, while invoking an unspecified, imaginary society as automatically superior*, (1995, p. 36; emphasis added)

Concluding Remarks

This paper has argued that the recent 'mini-renaissance' in 'Marxist educational theory' is flawed because of its adoption of the universal internal-relations social ontology. It results in a totalising discourse that misses many important aspects of concrete social reality, not least the education system itself. The 'mini-renaissance' must not only acknowledge the (transcendental) reality of contingency (or externality), but also incorporate it robustly and consistently. At the same time, such recent Marxist theorising remains conspicuously silent on the feasibility of alternatives implied by its critique. It has been suggested that a disaggregative approach is required, in turn permitting the development of feasible (or realistic) alternatives: while we cannot predict the future, we are able to make judgements about what is feasible and desirable (Sayer, 1995).

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NOTES

- [1] I hope to develop the arguments in this paper in the future, suggesting reasons as to why Marxist education theorists have tended to fall foul of the relative autonomy of the education system. This would involve a more explicit elucidation of the utility of critical realism *vis-à-vis* Marxism. At the same time, discussion of feasible alternatives would be undertaken.
- [2] Analytical dualism is grounded in a stratified social ontology and is held by critical realists such as Archer (1995), Archer (1997, 1999, 2000) and Woods (2000) to be the methodological key to examining the relative interplay of structure and agency 'over time'. In contradistinction to Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, it is because structure and agency operate over different tracts of time that we are able to examine their interplay.

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