KARL MARX AND THE THEORY OF EDUCATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Coordinator</td>
<td>Prof. Sujata Patel</td>
<td>Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Coordinator</td>
<td>Prof. R.Indira</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Writer</td>
<td>Prof. Ganesha Somayaji</td>
<td>Department of Sociology, Goa University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Editor</td>
<td>Prof. R.Indira</td>
<td>Formerly Professor of Sociology, University of Mysore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Technical Conversion

Module Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module Id</th>
<th>Description of the Module</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.a</td>
<td>Karl Marx and the Theory of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction, Salient components of Marxist Social Theory, Marxian perspectives on education, Concluding remarks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Description of the Module

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Description of the Module</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject Name</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Name</td>
<td>Education and Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module Name/Title</td>
<td>Karl Marx and the Theory of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module Id</td>
<td>2.a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre Requisites</td>
<td>Knowledge of social institutions, education as a social institution and the knowledge of classical sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>This module seeks to identify the contributions of Karl Marx and Marxists to the theory of education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key words</td>
<td>Capitalism, education for classless society, Frankfurt school, egalitarian society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Karl Marx (5 May 1818 – 14 March 1883) was primarily an economic, social, and political philosopher and not an educational theorist. He had formulated the materialistic theory of modern capitalistic societies. There are certain problems with Marxist positions in the sociology of education, mainly because Marx (unlike Durkheim and Weber) directly said very little about education (Moore 2004: 47).

While tracing the early history of the Sociology of Education, Saha (2011: 300) observes that though Marx and Engels have not directly written on education, their passing references to education of the working class children and education for bringing about socialist transformation are very informative. Marx never fully developed or integrated education into his theory of capitalism and social class. But he and Fredrick Engels did refer to education frequently in their writings about the class struggle. They advocated education for all, but they were primarily concerned with the type of education that was given to the children of the working classes and how this education served the interests of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, in maintaining their social dominance. Although Marx did not focus directly on education in his theory of society, his ideas have formed the base of what later would become known as neo-Marxist sociology of education. This perspective is very much related to forms of reproduction theory, in which education is thought to serve as a mechanism for reproducing the class structure of society, thereby reproducing the privileges of the dominant class (Ibid: 300).

From various works of Marx and Engels on the analyses of transformation of capitalist and socialist societies and the works of Marxists and neo-Marxists, we have to knit a Marxist theory of education, which, we urge you to consider as ideas presented in logical sequence and not theoretical constructions. Marx and Engels and Marxists’ views on education are only parts of the general theory of Marxian analyses of modern society and societal transformation. Therefore, you will first learn an outline of the Marxian theory before studying Marx’s and neo-Marxists’ views on education as a social institution.

Salient components of Marxian Social Theory

Karl Marx’s social theory saw society as moving from one historical stage to another on account of class struggle. This class struggle was a reflection of disproportionate access of different classes to the material base of society. Thus Marx’s theory, though economic in nature, has social political and cultural implications. He felt that social theory should be grounded in the existence of living human beings who must survive in a relatively hostile environment. A social scientist and revolutionary, he was of the opinion that social theorists should give attention to the material conditions that influence the life of people.
Marx’s materialist orientation is seen by many to be in direct opposition to Hegel’s idealism. Marx himself attacks the young Hegelians in *The German Ideology* and accuses them of “theoretical bubble blowing.” Marx believed that for young Hegelians, great revolutions only take place in thought because no buildings are destroyed, and no one is injured or dies (Turner, *et al.* 2012: 142). In fact, Marx’s understanding of the nature of society developed in response to what he saw as an idealistic humbug of the Young Hegelians.

But Marx’s critique of the Young Hegelians should not be seen as an outright rejection of the ideas of Hegel. He had a lifelong fascination with Hegel and kept returning to him, strengthening his points of differences as well his agreement with the dead philosopher. One of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century, Hegel proposed the notion of philosophical idealism. To put it simply, philosophical idealism is the view that matter does not exist in its own right, that in fact it is a product of mind. The world, which is filled with objects, is ultimately a mental construction. It is only through an examination of abstract philosophical categories, that we can have a thorough understanding of human existence. Marx questioned the role that Hegel’s philosophy played in understanding human existence. As the focus of philosophical idealism was an abstract processes and not on concrete reality, Marx felt that it led to a distortion that overlooked the more real and practical problems that humans faced.

Marx believed that only when the physical needs of humans were met, they could focus on intellectual needs. These material needs are satisfied by direct productive activity. This line of thinking led to the formulation of the materialist perspective. Though Marx’s materialism is diametrically opposed to Hegel’s idealism, his materialistic conception of history strongly rests on the Hegel’s claim that history occurs through dialectic or a clash of opposing forces. But Marx claimed that his dialectic method is opposite to Hegel’s dialectic. Whereas Hegel had believed that the principles of development found in concepts such as contradiction, opposition and affirmation and negation were represented by ideas acting in history, Marx took the view that the central principles of change were manifested at the level of class formations and in the concrete historical development of economic production in society (Morrison 2006: 144).

Marx’s analysis of history is based on his distinction between the means of production, literally those things, like land and natural resources, and technology, that are necessary for the production of material goods, and the social relations of production, in other words, the social relationships people enter into as they acquire and use the means of production. Together these comprise the mode of production. Marx observed that within any given society the mode of production changes. This change in the mode of production, often a result of conflict between the forces of production and relations of production, leads to a new historical stage in society. Marx emphasised that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” In every society, there were always opposing interests between those who owned the means of production and those who did not. This conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed was present in every stage of history, except the first. In the stage of primitive communism, there was no private property, no classes and hence no exploitation on the basis of class. In course of time, however, slavery, the first system of exploitation emerged, when ownership of other human beings determined rank and position. Slavery was followed by feudalism wherein, the two classes, landowners and landless serfs represented opposing interests. Feudalism gave way to capitalism, in which capitalists hire proletariat, only if they generate profits. Marx believed that capitalism would grow like a giant octopus, spreading its tentacles, over the entire globe, until nearly every human activity became debased because it was a commodity subject to purchase (Turner *et al.* 2012: 161).
Marx opined that the contradictions inherent in capitalism, the tremendous sense of alienation it produced among the workers, would lead to its collapse. This would bring about a transitory phase of socialism which was characterised by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Eventually Marx predicted that communism would emerge, wherein there would be a classless society in which all would give according to their ability and take according to their need. In order for this utopian society to emerge, what was needed was a revolution that would hasten the collapse of capitalism. Marx's praxis was hence geared towards initiating and contributing to this revolution. For revolution to occur the status quo had to be changed. The capitalists, being small in number were a class for themselves, which meant that they were aware of their common interests. This awareness made them cooperate with each other in facilitating the exploitation of the workers. The workers, on the other hand, though living under common conditions, perhaps due to their large numbers, do not recognise their common interests. They remain a class-in-themselves.

For revolution to take place there must be the development of awareness among the workers of their common interests. They must move from being a class-in-themselves to a class-for-themselves. Marx predicted that this change in class consciousness would arise on account of two reasons: As they are cramped into factories, the physical proximity to each other makes them discuss and recognise their common interests. Secondly, some members of the bourgeoisie would break away and join the proletariat, thus hastening the inevitable revolution. The outcome of the revolution would be a communism which will come to be a fruition of the dialectical process that began at the end of the first stage of history.

While promulgating their theses on the exploitative capitalistic system and its eventual demise, Marx and Engels commented on the working of social institutions in modern societies. This unit is devoted to examine Marxist views on education.

**Marxian Perspectives on Education**

While discussing the Marxian perspectives on education, in the beginning, two observations are worth noting: the non-explicit attention given by Marx and Engels to education and also their recognition of education in fostering class consciousness among the workers. Consequently, the study of Marx with reference to education can have two main components: (1) A description of direct reference to education by Marx and Engels in some works and (2) An examination of the Marxist and Neo-Marxist positions on education.

The first component aims at showing the way in which Marx and Engels looked at the institution of education within their general interpretation of capitalist society and their aim of bringing about socialist transformation of society. Among the various works we will consider Engels "The Condition of the Working Class in England" (1845) first. We will then briefly cover a few other works of Marx and Engels.

Engels wrote on the abysmal living conditions and disorganised life of the workers of his time. The children of the working class were drawn to various temptations which according to him were due to the neglect of their education (Engels 1845: 67). The education arranged for the children was the education which the bourgeoisie thought was required for the children of the working class. Moreover, the bourgeoisie did not want educated workers. With regard to the pathetic school system and education available to the children of the workers, Engels concludes: "It cannot be otherwise; the bourgeoisie has little to hope and much to fear, from the education of the working-class" (Ibid: 71)

The references Marx and Engels make to education in the Manifesto of the Communist Party give us clues to grasp their idea on the role of education in the future
classless society. Waugh (2010) identifies three explicit references to education in the Manifesto. The first is when the rise of the bourgeoisie was discussed. When the bourgeoisie was constantly fighting with various categories of classes such as aristocrats, opponent bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie from the other countries, they sought the help of the proletariat by providing the necessary education to them regarding the usefulness of industrial capitalism and the factory system. Through education the bourgeoisie furnishes the weapons to fight for their cause. The industrial bourgeoisie attempts to construct a group of educated adults among the proletariat. The second direct reference to education in the Manifesto is made when Marx and Engels address the charges made against communism by the spokespersons of the ruling class:

But you will say, we destroy the most hallowed of relations, when we replace home education by social. And your education! Is it not that also social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention, direct or indirect, of the society, by means of schools etc.? The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education: they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention, and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class. \(\text{(Marx, Engels 1982: 50).}\)

In the context of abundant instances of child labour and control of formal education by the bourgeoisie, the Manifesto agenda for educational reformation in the future communist society states the Marxian perspective on schooling. The third explicit reference to education is made while charting out the public programmes of action (they are ten in numbers) in the future Communist State. Marx and Engels opine that the specific programmes of action in a Communist State will differ from one country to the other. Still they suggest ten such general programmes of action. Among them the tenth programme of action is about education.

Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc. \(\text{(Marx and Engels 1982: 53).}\)

In several of their works, Marx and Engels argue for expanded public education for the working class. They saw themselves as providing education and theoretical guidance to the working class and socialist movement. Marx and Engels did not write much on educational institutions in bourgeois society, or develop models of education in socialist societies. Yet their historical materialist theory of history has been used to theorize and critique educational institutions within bourgeois society and to develop alternative conceptions of education that are in accord with Marxian socialist principles. For example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976, 1981, and 2002) in their various works since 1976 have dealt with schooling in capitalist America in a critical perspective.

Several new dimensions have been added to the Marxian theory of education in the later part of the 20th century. Saha (2011) in his reference handbook on the sociology of education, while commenting on the conflict-oriented perspectives on education, mentions two Marxist inspired perspectives: Neo-Marxist approaches and the Critical theory of the Frankfurt school. Many writers within this perspective have proposed their own versions of how education is controlled by the elite and how it helps to maintain elite status. Some examples of these writers and their works are Carnoy\(\text{Education as Cultural Imperialism (1974),}\) Apple\(\text{Ideology and Curriculum (1979),}\) Giroux\(\text{Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling (1981),}\) and Bourdieu and Passeron\(\text{Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture (1977).}\)

Describing further, Saha (2011) mentions the critical theory of Frankfurt School as yet another version of Marxian approach to education. It must be noted here that in the
critical theory of the Frankfurt School we get a critique of various institutional arrangements and cultural patterns. Education is one among them. Critical theorists typified social life under capitalism with concepts such as the totally administered society, one-dimensional man, and communicative competence. This perspective applies to education and other social institutions. Critical theorists strive to both study and emancipate society from capitalist oppression. They seek to unmask the intrusion of this form of capitalism over social life, and therefore emancipate individuals from their false beliefs. In education, critical theory is relevant to the critical study of the curriculum (and the hidden curriculum), educational administration, and teacher education.

Another dimension of Marxian perspective on education is its practice in the erstwhile communist state of the USSR and the present communist state of Peoples' Republic of China. In both these nation-states, education has become a means to usher in and sustain a classless society. In both these states, education has been funded by the government. In such educational practices education is viewed in universal terms and not particularistic terms. In communist and socialist states the guiding educational motto is: Education for all through the state. In capitalistic states education is a private enterprise guided by some regulatory legislation. The State does not take the responsibility of ensuring education for all.

In India, where socialism is one of the guiding principles of statecraft, not only is free and compulsory education the responsibility of the state, but education at all levels is supervised by government agencies. Therefore, we can conclude that Indian educational practice is to some extent guided by the Marxian idea of egalitarian society.

**Concluding Remarks**

Marx and Engels did not develop a theory of education. Their main concern was to analyse the nature and functioning of capitalist societies through historical dialectic methodology. While doing so they did make ample reference to the role of education in maintaining the exploitative class system. They also hinted at the education of the working class in classless society to be established after communist revolutionary transformation. The later scholars of Marxian persuasion, especially, the critical theorists of Frankfurt School, delineated education as an important aspect of culture industry. It may be noted that in all endeavours of preparing the younger generation for equalitarian social order Marxian theory and guidelines for socio-political praxis are relevant.

**Note**

1. When we study Marx's contribution to knowledge, we have to acknowledge his intellectual companionship with Friedrich Engels (1820-18950), son of a Prussian manufacturer which started in September 1884 in Paris and remained life-long. Therefore, when we refer to Marx's ideas on education we have to acknowledge them as ideas of as Marx and Engels on education.
References


Web Resources


