Discussion Contributions on:

A Culture of Deprivation

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Maurice Levitas' timely article "A Culture of Deprivation" contains some valuable arguments against and insights into some contemporary educational theories.1

He succeeds effectively in demolishing the pretensions of those like Nell Keddie and Neil Postman2 who seek to justify from a 'leftist' stance the neglect of illiteracy, on the grounds that literacy is irrelevant to those groups in capitalist society who are subject to illiteracy. Unfortunately he does a disservice to his own position and to our understanding of the issues by giving an inadequate treatment of the work of William Labov, and by not explaining clearly the work of Basil Bernstein and the other 'linguistic deprivation' theorists.

These deficiencies allow Levitas to get away with a characterisation of those who object to the theories of Bernstein et al., as playing into the hands of reaction, while those who support the linguistic deprivation hypothesis are portrayed as fighters for the educational rights of the working class. In fact, as I hope to show, matters are not as simple as that; the cultural deprivation/linguistic deprivation hypotheses are not only wrong but have very reactionary implications themselves.

First of all I would like to reinforce some of Maurice Levitas' points about 'cultural deprivation' and then show where he is wrong in supposing that the associated concept of verbal deprivation can be enlisted in support of progressive educational policies.

**Capitalist Hegemony**

In advanced capitalist societies like Britain the great majority of the population belong to the working class. The forces of production of the dominant capitalist mode of production in our society require that large sections of the working class are engaged in technical, clerical, administrative, educational and scientific employment. For all these strata literacy is a prerequisite of their work, and for some a high degree of literacy and numeracy is essential. For the strata of the working class not part of this 'intelligentsia', in most cases some degree of literacy and numeracy (but not a very high degree) is necessary for them to act as producers under capitalism. The capitalist mode of production then, in a society like Britain, has an interest in maintaining a certain degree of literacy (but a fairly low one at that) among the industrial working class.

Another important feature of advanced capitalist society is one most ably described by Gramsci, that capitalist dominance of the Stale and the means of production is secured not only by coercion but by active consent.

Coercion is available when active consent is threatened, and consent can be called upon too when coercion has failed. This means that large sections of the working class adhere to the values

1 "A Culture of Deprivation, Maurice Levitas Marxism Today, April 1976.


3 "Selections from the Prison Notebooks", Antonio Gramsci, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, especially the section 'State and civil society'.

of the ruling class and share its conception of the economy as natural and more efficient and just than any other system. No doubt consent is fractured during economic struggle but unless it is seriously breached at the national and international level by an organised working class conscious of and prepared to fight for socialism, capitalist hegemony is not seriously threatened.

The ruling class does not receive this hegemony automatically; it has to work for it. By using the considerable means of persuasion at its disposal it is able to mask the real features of the capitalist economy from the working class, and also the real nature of the working class itself.

It follows as a necessary part of the class struggle, and of the struggle for socialism, that the self-education of the working class must take place, developing a critique of capitalist economics, politics and values, capable of challenging and overcoming capitalism at the level of consent. To accomplish this task the revolutionary movement needs to strive for the development of intellectuals among all sections of the working class; it needs to draw all strata of the working class into this project in order to give it the breadth and depth of persuasive power needed for success. The struggle for the general raising of educational standards is part of this wider struggle.

"Cultural Differences"

Apart from the orientation to literacy there are other features of differentiation among the working class, and especially the industrial working class, pertaining to occupation and region (see Rosen: "Language and Class"). Within different regions and different occupations, different traditions, dialects and values have developed: in a fairly commonsense use of the term 'cultural' we can call these cultural differences. But now we are in a position to see the falsity of Nell Keddie's assimilation of this sort of cultural difference, to that between a Harvard educated American say, and a Nomad living in the Asiatic steppes.

Maurice Levitas is quite right to point out that for instance a Durham miner and a Dagenham car worker have something in common that the former pair do not: namely being members of a working class of a particular nation state, and as such subject to a common system of exploitation. There is of course much more that unites them, a common language and a common history. What they have in common far outweighs the importance of the cultural differences, and one can say this without wishing to devalue the autonomous cultural traditions of the working class in this country.

Sections of the working class cannot 'drop out' of the capitalist system and develop their own cultural autonomy, they are influenced by and are dependent for their livelihood on a capitalist class. They are influenced by the ideas of other sections of the working class, and they share a great deal with them. Once this illusion of autonomy is exposed, it is easy to see that a section of the working class who opted for it, or had the choice made for them, would be condemning itself to greater exploitation or impoverishment or both.

Role of Basil Bernstein

But of course the truth of the preceding does not make the theories of cultural and linguistic deprivation correct. In fact, as I hope to show, these theories reinforce divisions within the working class and, since they cannot provide a cure for, provide a rationale of, educational failure. These theories rest on an elementary ignorance of the verbal behaviour of human beings, and a reliance on confused and incoherent research methodology.

It is therefore unfortunate that Maurice Levitas did not direct our attention to the doyen of linguistic deprivation theorists, Basil Bernstein. Bernstein has the distinction, first, for formulating this theory for sections of the working class in this country; second, for being the progenitor of more drastic versions of the theory in the United States, and thirdly of being the author of what is the conventional wisdom on educational failure in this country in Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of education, and last but not least, schools.

The influence of Bernstein and his disciples far outweighs that of the Keddie/Postman/Fuchs school of thought and is responsible for a systematic undervaluing of the intellectual abilities of large sections of the British working class, and, notably in the United States, the Urban Negro working class. (Bernstein contents himself in his research papers with the crude taxonomy skilled/unskilled (working class.)

The Linguistic Deprivation Theory

The theory of linguistic deprivation first put forward by Bernstein postulates the existence of two codes of speech, a 'restricted code' and an 'elaborated code'. The distinction between the two is made in a number of ways; in terms of lexicon, grammar, logic and performance, but what it amounts to basically is this: the elabor-
ated code is the vehicle of rationality. In the elaborated code one can reason, plan ahead, take account of the views of other people, have access to scientific and literary concepts. Reason and argument need the resources of the elaborated code.

The restricted code on the other hand embodies authority, group solidarity and coercion. It is the antithesis of the elaborated code. Bernstein and his associates claim to have shown both the existence of these two codes, and their location among different sections of the population. The restricted code is most commonly used by the "unskilled working class", and since its powers of expression do not fit its users for success in activities involving the use of reason, they achieve poorly in the educational system, unless they are able to switch to an 'elaborated code'.

Bernstein does not actually bring evidence that some sections of the working class cannot put forward an argument, cannot give reasons, cannot take account of another person's point of view, cannot plan ahead, or discuss topics of other than immediate concern. He and his associates content themselves with irrelevant quantitative data giving comparisons between 'middle class' and 'working class' speakers on such items as pause between speech, frequency of occurrence of pronouns, adjectives, and auxiliary expressions, in speech. He does not succeed in showing that at any fundamental level there exist the two codes claimed to exist. Space forbids me to show on detail just how weak Bernstein's evidence is and how misconceived his criteria are (but see Labov, Rosen4,5).

Illiteracy and "Verbal Deprivations"

This is what 'verbal deprivation' or 'linguistic deprivation' mean in the literature, and Maurice Levitas is quite wrong to equate the concept with that of illiteracy (Marxism Today, p. 110); I don't condone illiteracy but I do deny that it is 'verbal deprivation' in the sense understood by educators and sociologists. To ascribe 'verbal deprivation' to a group of people is to ascribe a limited ability to think and reason to them, and as Maurice Levitas himself points out there are people who have not done well in our educational system who are nevertheless able to do this. The ability to reason and the ability to read and write are by no means the same.

Indeed linguistic research suggests that all languages have the same degree of complexity, and that there is no such existing thing as a 'primitive language'. Maurice Levitas is wrong therefore to assert that William Labov fails to demonstrate the fallacies of the verbal deprivation theory. He does just that, and very effectively. To show that Negro Non-Standard English like any other dialect is a separate sub-system in which every level of conceptual thought is possible (Marxism Today, p. 110) is just to demolish the verbal deprivation theory as applied to one of its supposedly paradigm examples! Furthermore Labov demonstrates that there is a high correlation between participation in the verbal culture of the streets and failure at school.

Nell Keddie is quite muddled in her assessment of the importance of Labov's work; fascinated by the idea that different cultures have different logics, she chides Labov for showing the identity of logical form between argumentation in Standard and in Non-Standard English. Incidentally she seems to be unaware of what an 'Aristotelian syllogism' is (Keddie, p. 10). But Labov quite properly shows the logical form of Larry's arguments (they are not syllogistic) to demonstrate that despite differences in surface grammar the rules of valid argumentation remain the same, in both forms of the English language.

We cannot ignore and condone educational failure, indeed part of the struggle for a politically active and revolutionary working class is the struggle for the raising of educational standards throughout it. We do this cause no service by appealing to spurious ideas as explanations for failure. Attitude to literacy has something to do with the achievement of literacy—Postman is at least right about that. We do ourselves a dis-service if we ignore the facts, even if they are sometimes uncomfortable.

The theory of linguistic deprivation and cultural deprivation is untenable. It postulates a spurious division between two groups in society, the rational and the non-rational. In the conventional educational wisdom this distinction far overshadows the fundamental one for us—that between working class and bourgeoisie.

CORRECTION

In the September 1977 issue of Marxism Today, page 260, in the article 'Single Gigantic Flood' by Jack Woddis, the footnote reference to "840" businesses in retail trade in Italy should have read "840,000".