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Ghetto Schooling and a Theme of Three Theories: Functionalism,
Conflict and Interactionist

David W. Boles

NJIT/Rutgers-Newark/UMDNJ

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Ghetto Schooling is a provocative book that emphasizes the social stratification between the culturally nourished and the socially famished in Newark's "Marcy School" while grinding a point to the argument that the inequities in urban cities are nested in ghetto economies (Anyon, 1997) where the everyday thinking concerns only survival from breath to breath and not long term planning for how to get up and out. This paper will examine the strengths and weaknesses Anyon's book from three sociological perspectives: Functionalism, Conflict and Interactionist and how together those three theories conceptualize a theme of how to begin to cure the ills of ghetto schools.

Three Theories

Functionalism

Durkheim's theory of anomie (Ballantine & Spade, 2004) bleeds throughout Anyon's book like a witness to the normless disenchantment of faculty, staff and student population in the Marcy school and even Anyon herself is taken over by the breakdown of social solidarity and cohesion in the slow unraveling of her early distant field notes that, in the end, enrapture her within dysfunction and anomie (Anyon, 1997). A Durkheimian sociologist would wonder why Anyon doesn't more closely investigate the status of the humanity in Marcy school since the people and not the building frame Anyon's mission for salvation.

Anyon mentions, en passant, that she interviewed children and staff and the principal but the reader isn't deeply privy to those conversations – likely because Anyon is not really interested in the individual – she prefers to castigate society as a whole instead and seeks to target outside factors for failures that control the fate of the Marcy School. Using the

foundations approach Anyon investigates the historic, political and economic forces that created the mess in the Newark school system but one is left wondering about the aftereffects of the spirit wounds and psychic poundings that macro forces press into the bodies of those who attend and work at Marcy. Anyon's response to those criticisms might be that Functionalists view individuals as marionettes who are simply acted upon because of their predictable role in the social strata and that introspection has made them selfishly blind to the larger scope of outside influences controlling their lives. Functionalists might retort that Anyon's view of the Newark school system is myopic itself and only views the awful and the bad while not even beginning to suggest there could be a ghetto school that has found a pearl of success.

Functionalists know there must be good schools in Newark and that there must be at least a few excellent students and faculty inside Marcy but Anyon fails to mention them. Anyon offers no solution to ghetto schooling by working within the confines of the current station. She instead wants to change the system from the outside in and that philosophy marginalizes the power of individuals to right a listing ship on their own without blaming the shipyard. The seminal Dr. Alan Sadovnik and the ovaric Dr. Susan Semel inquire in their classic review of Anyon's book "To what extent do low-income, children of color require a different curricular approach and pedagogical approach?" (Sadovnik & Semel, 2001) That inequity begs an answer that Anyon never asks.

The principal of Marcy school said "We may have problems, but we're no way the worst" (Anyon, 1997) and one is curious why Anyon didn't press the principal for more explanation or for empirical proof to back up his statement. By refusing to enlighten or critique or expand on the principal's statement but including it nonetheless as the powerful end of a paragraph suggests Anyon has no argument with his statement.

Anyon's book is engaging for Functionalists but she tends to over generalize and she doesn't begin to dig deep enough into existing policies to plan a solution that can be implemented without seeking large scale change on the macro level.

Conflict

Conflict theorists celebrate Anyon's book as a revelation of a system that punishes the poor and disenchanting while lofting the wealthy and the connected at the expense of the public good. A great deal of the book effectively makes the case that economic political thievery results in oppression that creates inequities in the Newark school system. Those who control the political power in the state steal resources from the people in order to privately purple their own pockets. There is a master/slave and proletariat/bourgeois mentality suggested in Anyon's book. She seems to claim the only way out of the oppression is not for the oppressed to rise up but rather that the bounty of the wealthy and the power of the Federal government be shared and redistributed back into the community to improve training, infrastructure and leadership.

Anyon believes schools replicate economic repression found in everyday society and if the schools can be changed to be fairer to the poor student then the entire ship will rise as all strata of society better with the lifting tide. Bowles and Gintis support Anyon's view by claiming schools are solely influenced by economic ties but they then do not then address what happens inside the schools when economics are unbound (Ballantine & Spade, 2004). Anyon claims poverty can be eliminated by revitalizing the city and if the system is unable to create workers who can get good jobs then the state must step in and change the economy and if the state fails then the Federal government needs to take control. If Anyon then went on to provide more emphasis on how the schools interact with each other within the system and then explored the process of how schools interact with the students and the staff it would make her argument

stronger. Her call for more Federal taxation on businesses that forces reinvestment back into local communities is a macro level approach to the problem that misses micro level interactive solutions that might begin to immediately improve schools. Anyon also completely ignores the political impossibility of getting a higher taxation solution passed through a legislative body.

Anyon argues that getting to the root of the ghetto schooling problem in Newark takes a radical macro approach but one must consider all schools in Newark and not just the Marcy school extreme. The middling schools in Newark would have made a much stronger case for investigation and resolution if Anyon had bothered to include them in the problem set.

Interactionist

The Interactionist theory – which is an interesting critique of Functionalism and Conflict perspectives – concentrates on the roles people play in society and why and how they are cast in that drama of living. Erving Goffman saw the world as a stage and as a Functionalist Interactionist he studied the characters and personas people put on in order to maintain the story of society through an unspoken social organization on the micro level (Ballantine & Spade, 2004). Interactionists try to look at a variety of influences and codes that create systems. Interactionists don't look solely at class status but they try to wonder why places like the Marcy School were enabled to happen. In order to understand ghetto schools one must first understand the neighborhoods and the politics and economics and history and everything else that interacts with the schools. Interactionists would support Anyon's effort to look at a variety of causes for the problems in Newark but they would want more information on the micro level before making a final determination on causality and solution.

Interactionists would enjoy Anyon's book as a starting point, but they would claim she did not go far enough in the end to make her argument effective. Interactionists might delight in

Anyon's anecdotes but would wonder if hearsay and second hand information is a fair representation of all ghetto schooling in Newark. Interactionists would want additional sections of the book written to include interrogation of students and their parents in order to flesh out the script of the improvisational role everyone plays in forming the crises Anyon outlines.

Interactionists would also point out that Anyon's book has its roots as a staff development project and not as a concentrated and scholarly effort to solve the ghetto schooling dilemma.

Anyon's book, they might propose, is nothing more than an exploitative field work afterthought that ultimately suffers from a lack of foresight and perspective because it is a half-hearted human subjects project gone awry under the cover of Conflict theory.

A Personal Perspective

I was born and raised a Functionalist in Lincoln, Nebraska. Everyone in my family is a teacher and my mother taught the fourth grade for 40 years in the same room in the same school right across the street from the only house in which she has ever lived since 1961 after leaving her hometown village of North Loup, Nebraska. The Midwestern mindset is to be tough, unbending to temptation, self-sufficient, independent and one is taught only hard work wins the wonder. After I removed myself from the Midwest and settled in Washington, D.C. and later New York City and Jersey City I began to realize there were factors beyond simple wishing and wanting and working that affect a person's ability to create a better life. In Nebraska the world is black and white and on the East Coast the world is cast in greys.

Five years ago I bumped headlong into the Age of Credentialism (Ballantine & Spade, 2004) when I was seeking to find a permanent teaching position at a major university. The job descriptions started with "advanced degree preferred" and six months later that changed to "M.A. or M.F.A. required." A year later the bar was raised to "M.F.A. or Ph.D. preferred" and a

year after that the job descriptions had finally become “Ph.D. required.” I fully expect in another few years the descriptions will read “both M.F.A. and Ph.D. required” and by that time I should have finally closed the ridiculous circle of Credentialism.

After teaching for seven years as an adjunct on the East Coast and witnessing the inequities in opportunity for my students while standing safely behind a lectern at New York University and The College of New Rochelle and Fordham University and Columbia University and Saint Peter’s College and NJIT and UMDNJ and Rutgers-Newark I now understand there is an evil underflow in society that influences educational perceptions and the ability to learn. It is impossible to fight that undertow alone but en masse it can be battled student by student and the only requirement for helping is that the students seek out the help.

I am now an Interactive Functionalist. We can play the role of helper or hinderer and we get back only what we personally invest into the goodness of our students. I don’t put much heft in Conflict theory because that idea is pressing a point about the human condition that is universally understood and acquiesced but it can never be resolved in the real world so why use it as a cudgel for correcting behavior that can never be fixed? In a Hegelian world one would call Conflict Theory the perfect Tragedy: The fact that both sides are eternally right but ultimately irreconcilable means the viciousness will never end. Move over, Sisyphus, there are two lines forming to roll that rock and the shoving will begin from both sides! Anyon’s book is provocative and well-researched and I found the information on the historical political taxation issues fascinating. I wish she had spent more time talking to the students and she set up a straw man argument by choosing a single a single school as a universal example for the deep and wide problem of ghetto schooling.

I find great comfort in the theme of these three theories – or the theme of these Three Caskets – because together they create an interesting sort of One-Way ANOVA. There is a concerted effort in these theories to divine and inspect causes for inequities in society and, in the Anyon particular, the contempt for ghetto schools. Finding a solution in whatever sociological cover it takes is a necessary process for those who seek change – especially for those still toiling in the pitch of poverty and interactive disdain.

References

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