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Introduction to symposium: Where CHAT meets Bourdieu

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1. I take the sociology of Bourdieu to offer some tools for understanding the societal and social that might complement Vygotsky-Leontiev's social-psychology of education: in particular the function of the education system as reproduction, i.e. as a means for reproducing the conditions for capitalism to continue to function (Bourdieu & Passeron, Althusser). Especially, this sociology explains the power relations in the 'field', how class domination structures the field through 'culturally arbitrary' power relations, how these are misrecognised and thus allow 'symbolic violence', and how ideological reproduction produces a compliant new labouring class, in which 'educational failure' is as necessary as (some) educational 'successes'. Power in the educational field is associated with relative positions characterised by unequal educational 'capital', in which mathematics plays an increasingly significant part; dominant positions are given to those who 'pass', dominated positions to those who 'fail'. Eventually, educational capital becomes exchangeable for other forms of capital, including economic resources. Bourdieu's social analysis is, then, a way of understanding how capitalism makes use of the cultural fields such as education to keep reproducing its necessary conditions.

2. I take CHAT to offer a Marxist (cultural-historical, and dialectical materialist) 'educational psychology', or an educational 'social-psychology' that provides a structure for understanding what education might *ideally* offer to child/adolescent development. In the ideal case, children engage with others in joint activity of learning – or better teaching-learning - that provides a 'zone of proximal development'. Key examples of such activity include 'play', but also academic, scientific study (e.g. mathematics). This zone ideally allows the learner to develop what Vygotsky-Leontiev called their 'personality', or their social 'self', which means they come to acquire or understand the new social motives implied by these activities; that is, they come to experience the meaning of, or make new sense of, the joint activity. Thus, for instance, going to school may realise a ZPD if it allows learners to engage with the activity of 'theoretical thinking' (according to Davydov). This is not just formal engagement with 'academic concepts' – what Vygotsky refers to as 'verbalism' – however. Rather, true scientific 'theoretical thinking' necessitates ascending from 'formal conceptions' to the 'concrete', e.g. from mathematics and science to the concrete, lived world.

3. Clearly these two perspectives hold out different potentials; and maybe I am mad to look for a synthesis. I see the difference between them in the way educational outcome is conceived by the two perspectives, i.e. as being essentially about bourgeois relations and diverse 'capitals' – or perhaps 'exchange values' - in the case of Bourdieu, and as being essentially about human social development –in my terms educational 'use value' - in the case of CHAT. Characteristically, the former implies the *necessity* of failure, at least for the many, while the latter is about the possibility of success for all (Davydov for instance claims that more or less ALL learners can become 'gifted' mathematicians if they are educated properly to think theoretically).

4. Where then is the synthesis? I see the synthesis in the contradictory unity of 'use value' and 'exchange value' of the (unusual) commodity of 'labour power' (and hence of knowledge-enhanced labour power) under capitalism. Until such time as the education system breaks free of capitalism, there will be an inevitable contradiction in the education system which produces labour power as a commodity, leading to 'estrangement' or alienation of many from education. In this perspective education has emerged as if designed for the maintenance of the bourgeois order, the priority for education appearing to be to ideologically reproduce (and discipline) the classes, especially the working class. However, we should not forget the 'use value' of labour power in production, especially in a high-value knowledge economy that requires something akin to critical thinking in design and R&D.

5. I would argue that Bourdieu has underestimated the importance of this in his own analyses: one can hardly detect in his work for instance that a civil engineer must have more than status, a 'certificate', and a passport into a job, but must be able to actually engineer bridges, etc. On the other hand those of us who follow Vygotsky/CHAT are likely to be puzzled by the endlessly continuing failure of the system to learn from its so-called 'mistakes' and 'failures', being unable to see that the system is actually maintained by and even requires these failures. (In the British press, one observes that there are annual complaints that the tests must be too easy because more students are passing – the failure rate is not a problem.)

6. I propose to practitioners then that progressive critical educators should seek the 'ideal' in their work, should work to provide a zone of proximal development within their classes for their students; but that we should be aware that we act on contested territory, that in doing so we must expect to confront entrenched interests, face opposition, and so on. And not just from the usual suspects, but from our individual students too, insofar as they buy into 'enhancing their potential labour power'.

7. Ultimately then the policy question we must ask is, in whose interests is any proposed change in the system? Thus it comes about – if we did not know it before – that education is a key, contested arena for struggle. Increasing competition in all its forms, devaluing the arts and social sciences as against science and technology, and preparing the field for privatisation might all be seen from this perspective.

8. In the papers that follow, Bourdieu's work is put under scrutiny from the point of view of educational research, and CHAT. Ultimately, if the preceding analysis is right, his theoretical perspective may prove useful in providing some critical tools, but will be inadequate to formulating proposals and strategies for alternatives.

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