

Marxism and Educational Theory: An E-Interview with Mike Cole

Professor Mike Cole (Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln, UK) has written extensively on equality issues, in particular, equality and education. In recent years he has engaged in critiques of postmodernism, poststructuralism, transmodernism, critical race theory, the new US Empire, and globalisation and education policy. Mike edited *Bowles and Gintis Revisited* (Falmer Press, 1988), *The Social Contexts of Schooling* (Falmer Press, 1989), *Education for Equality* (Routledge, 1990), *Professional Issues for Teachers and Student Teachers* (David Fulton, 1999), and *Education, Equality and Human Rights* (Falmer Press, 2000; new edition, Routledge, 2006). With Gareth Dale, he edited *Migrant Labour in the European Union* (Berg, 1999) and with Dave Hill and Sharanjeet Shan, *Promoting Equality in Primary Schools* (Cassell, 1997). With Dave Hill, he edited *Promoting Equality in Secondary Schools* (Cassell, 1999) and *Schooling and Equality: Fact, Concept and Policy* (Kogan Page, 2001). He is also the editor of *Professional Value and Practice: Meeting the Standards* (David Fulton, 2005). Professor Cole's latest book, *Marxism and Educational Theory: Origins and Issues* will be published by Routledge in 2007. In 1989, Mike was a co-founder of the Hillcole Group of Radical Left Educators with Dave Hill.

Here he is interviewed by **Glenn Rikowski**. The interview took place by email during August and September 2006

Glenn: It's great to be interviewing you here Mike, and at such an auspicious moment, when your new book is on the horizon. Perhaps you could start off by telling us something about the key issues and ideas in *Marxism and Educational Theory: Origins and Issues* (Cole, forthcoming, 2007).

Mike: Well, the book started off as a critique of postmodernism in educational theory, but has grown much bigger. It now encompasses poststructuralism, transmodernism, and critical race theory, in addition to postmodernism. The book begins with some personal reflections on my life, which I relate to political events from my birth in 1946 up to the present. In Part 1 of the book, there are chapters looking at utopian and scientific socialism, and Nietzsche and the origins of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Part 2 addresses poststructuralism and postmodernism in educational theory, and their claims for promoting social change and social justice. I then look at transmodernism in educational theory. After that I sketch the all-pervasive concept of globalisation, and then after that, I address the issue of environmental

destruction, looking at the *Destruction of Resources, Unhealthy Food, Genetic Modification* and at *Climate Change*, all in the context of global neo-liberal capitalism.

The next chapter is about the 'New Imperialism' from postmodern, transmodern and Marxist approaches respectively. In the final chapter of the book, I begin with some brief comments on education in contemporary capitalist societies, focusing on the commodification of knowledge, and the business agendas *for* and *in* education. Next I make some detailed suggestions on the possibilities within education of creating an arena where real global and local issues may be addressed. In the Conclusion, I address some of the common objections to Marxism, and attempt to respond to them.

Glenn: Thanks Mike, very detailed. I guess most readers would be thereabouts with postmodernism and maybe poststructuralism, Mike. But what is this transmodernism?

Mike: As I understand those that call themselves transmodernists, its defining features are: Rejection of totalising synthesis; Critique of Modernity; Anti-Eurocentrism; Critique of Postmodernism; Analogic Reasoning: reasoning from 'OUTSIDE' the system of global domination; Reverence for (indigenous and ancient) traditions of religion, culture, philosophy and morality; Analectic Interaction which is not so much a way of thinking as a new way of living in relation to Others; and Critique of (US) Imperialism. I deal with each issue in the book, critiquing them from a Marxist perspective. The founding figure of transmodernism is the prolific writer on Karl Marx, Enrique Dussel, but it's recently been lauded in educational theory by David Geoffrey Smith (Smith, 2003). Smith's article won The Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies award for 'The Most Outstanding Publication in Curriculum Studies in Canada in 2003'. So it needs to be taken seriously. Moreover, transmodernism has recently been adopted by Paul Gilroy (2004), described by *The Independent* as 'one of the most incisive thinkers of his generation'.

Glenn: I know you have travelled widely, to Vietnam, South Africa and the United States amongst other places. How have these travels informed your writing and politics? What events and instances particularly stand out?

Mike: Yes, I've had the fortune to travel to most of the world. During these trips, the multifarious manifestations and experiences of global capitalism (apartheid in the United States, and in 'post-apartheid' South Africa; the barrios in Brazil; the grinding poverty in

India are particularly unforgettable) all solidified my Marxist perspective on life.

Glenn: I know that Cuba is dear to your heart; perhaps you could explain to readers why you think Cuba is so significant in these times.

Mike: I've been to Cuba three times, twice as a tourist, and the last time presenting a paper at a conference. Fidel was there and I was very impressed with his honesty. I made notes on his interventions, getting a glimpse of the less public side of the man. Cuba is not perfect socialism, but it gives us a glimpse of how things could be. Fidel stated: 'I defy you to find one malnourished baby in the whole island', and having travelled extensively in Cuba, I can vouch for that. Outside the tourist areas, people are genuinely socialist in their outlook on life. In societies which encourage selfishness, greed and competitiveness (Thatcherism in Britain of the 1980s is a perfect example), people will tend to act in self-centred ways. However, in societies which discourage these values and promote communal values people will tend to act in ways that consider the collective as well as their own selves. As Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology*: 'It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness' (1846, p.42).

Glenn: Yes, and I guess that these communal values are something that are being undermined by New Labour's education policy, especially in the higher education sector, where policy seeks to transform students into educational consumers, or at least to take on a consumerist mentality, as Neil Gross argued in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* this week (in Marcus, 2006). Yet are there any signs that some students and teachers in higher education are resisting this marketisation, consumerism and commodification in higher education in the UK, Mike? Will we all be forced to dance to the tune of the new higher education market? Is there any hope for the university in the most developed contemporary capitalist societies such as the UK, do you think?

Mike: Well, it's the old question of structure and agency. The structures of capitalist society promoting neo-liberalism, consumerism and the commodification of education at all levels are firmly in place, and have been intensified under New Labour. On the other hand, there will always be resistance. And we gave a good model in current developments in Venezuela. As I argue in the book, under the leadership of Hugo Chávez, the government is committed to 'economic, political, social and cultural transformation towards a "Socialism of the 21st Century"' (Muhr and Verger, 2006, p.1). With respect to HE, where policy is firmly embedded in other

socialist projects, such as land and income redistribution, free health, and state-subsidised food (Ibid., p.12), the government has introduced *Municipalización*, a distinct, two-dimensional form of decentralisation, concerned with the democratisation of HE as it geographically de-concentrates the traditional university infrastructure and takes the university to where the people are, including factories and prisons (Ibid., p. 8). Students are encouraged to 'learn through doing' and to 'support their neighbourhood in resolving real community problems'. In this way the university is at the service of the people, rather than being an 'elite institution divorce from society' (Ibid., p. 9). I'm not saying we can institute this in Britain tomorrow, but it's a good thing to strive for in the longer term. I'm going to Venezuela in October, teaching at the Bolivarian University in Caracas, so perhaps I can update you then?

Glenn: Wow! This makes conceptions of 'lifelong learning' and 'community education' currently on offer here in dear old England sound rather limited, insipid and, well – boring. I like in particular the idea of bringing labour, community and education together, which Marx advocated (see Rikowski, 2004). Another main area of your work, Mike, over many years, has been 'race' in education. Critical Race Theory appears to be gaining ground in terms of academics re-thinking 'race' in education. What's your view of Critical Race Theory? To what extent does it have something to offer regarding anti-racist policies and practices in education, Mike?

Mike: CRT is grounded in the uncompromising insistence that 'race' should occupy the central position in any legal, educational, or social policy analysis (Darder and Torres, 2004, p.98). Given this centrality, 'racial' liberation is embraced as not only the primary but as the most significant objective of any emancipatory vision of education in the larger society. While CRT theorists overwhelmingly are concerned with US issues, and CRT is virtually unknown outside of the USA, aspects of it have recently been adopted *in toto* by arguably the most influential 'race' theorist within education in Britain, David Gillborn, so it's important that Marxists address it. For Marxists, while recognising the crucial significance of identities other than social class, class exploitation and class struggle is constitutive of capitalism, and 'race' and racism need to be understood in terms of the role that racialization plays in the retention and enhancement of capitalism by capitalists. The problem with CRT is that it does not connect with modes of production – a major strength of Marxism is that it does make these connections. This does not mean that CRT cannot provide insights into racism in capitalist societies. For example, its stress that 'people of color' speak from a unique experience framed by racism, and, therefore, need to be listened to,

is important. Such insights are particularly illuminating for white people

Glenn: Of course, Mike, as well as 'race' you have also been involved in exploring other dimensions of inequality and injustice in capitalist society and education and looking at these in relation to the notion of human rights. I was thinking of your recently published Second Edition of *Education, Equality and Human Rights*. Now, in relation to Marx and Marxism, the concept of human rights has a rather chequered history. How might Marxist educators productively use the concept of human rights today, Mike?

Mike: Well, the Introduction deals with human rights legislation, internationally and nationally and looks briefly at the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) that will come into being in October 2007. But the book is not about human rights in the specific sense of the term. It is more about rights associated with gender, 'race', sexuality, disability and social class, hence the subtitle of the book. I think it is important for Marxist educators and Marxists in general, to address these issues. Long gone are the days when socialists could talk freely about the 'rights of the working man' (clearly male, but assumed to be white, straight and able-bodied). While, for Marxists, capitalism is underpinned by the fundamental struggle between the two social classes, other issues are important too. As far as the relationship between Marxism and morality is concerned, there is a debate about this: 'did Marx have a theory of morality or not'. My view, following Callinicos (2000), is that he did. I deal with this in the new book (Cole, forthcoming, 2007).

Glenn: Why do you think education is so important for radical educational and social change? What can educators do to bring about progressive social change today?

Mike: I think education is an important arena of struggle. Like other aspects of life under contemporary global neo-liberal capitalism, education is being commodified marketised and consumerised (you mentioned this earlier). However, education also has great potential for change. In Chapter 10 of the book (Cole, forthcoming, 2007), I deal with both the constraints and the possibilities of education under capitalism. With respect to the latter, I make some detailed suggestions on the possibilities within education of creating an arena where real global and local issues may be addressed; where students may link up with oppressed communities; and where they may critically develop their awareness of pressing issues concerning our current capitalist world. As priorities, I focus on the need for a critical analysis of the

media and on the need for a serious consideration of the differing theoretical perspectives and explanations examined in the book. There are precedents for this. To take just one example, though not based on conventional capitalist schooling, on holiday recently in Bosnia I was chatting to two waiters, both Marxists. They told me that, in the former Yugoslavia, the Labour Theory of Value was a compulsory element of the secondary school curriculum.

Glenn: Amazing! If only the labour theory of value was taught in our schools! Of course people would say it is too dull, boring and difficult. But this example from the former Yugoslavia suggests this might be wishful thinking on their part. Getting on to the final question, Mike, *Information for Social Change* is, of course, principally for radical information and library workers. What are your views on the contribution that libraries can make towards progressive social change?

Mike: Libraries are not my field, but I think their role in global capitalism, actual and potential, is huge. Of course, your partner Ruth (Rikowski, 2005) deals at length with these issues, but I think I can say something generally about the significance of libraries and information work. Information is one of the key resources for progressive struggles: absolutely essential. It is not only vital for countering the official discourse, half-truths – and sometimes downright untruths – of governments and their backers, but also necessary for adding to or critiquing accounts given in mainstream media – on wars, economic developments, education policy and other issues. Librarians and information workers provide activists for progressive social change with advice, guidance, expertise and support in putting this stuff together. If these resources in public libraries were ever tendered out to private companies, or if, say, university libraries were run by private operators I am not convinced that education activists and those critical of how education is run in society today would get the kind of service or resources they need – for a number of reasons: costs, censorship, surveillance (the Patriot Act in the US might just be the beginning as far as libraries are concerned). Libraries and free access to information about how our society operates within neo-liberal global capitalism are a vital resource for those wishing to make a better society. They should be defended, enhanced and cherished.

Glenn: Thanks Mike.

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