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Book Review:
Understanding Education: a Sociological Perspective by Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009

Understanding Education: a Sociological Perspective by Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb published by Polity Press in 2009 deserves attention of academic teachers and sociology students for several reasons. One of them is the importance of questions raised by the authors and the other is the scope of a discussion attempting to find answers to those questions. While examining professional biographies of the authors, we may assume that such experienced researchers who emphasise the significance of values in social studies will meet that difficult challenge.

Sharon Gewirtz is a Professor of Education at King's College London. She has conducted research on a range of topics, including ESRC-funded studies of market forces and parental choice in education. Her latest "Changing Teacher Professionalism: international trends, challenges and ways forward", RoutledgeFalmer (with Pat Mahony, Ian Hextall and Alan Cribb) was published in 2009. She is a co-convenor of the Policy Studies and Politics of Education Network of the European Educational Research Association and she is a member of the European Commission's network of experts on the social aspects of education and training (NESSE).

Alan Cribb is a Professor of Education at King's College London. He has a particular interest in developing interdisciplinary scholarship that links philosophical, social science and professional concerns, and has pursued this interest through writing about health care ethics, health promotion, psychosocial oncology, health economics and medical education.

Some of key questions raised in the book include the following: What purposes should education serve? Why does education matter? and What should be done about education? These are basic issues pertaining to values which are not always considered important for the sociology of education. The publication reveals several major differences between opinions of the most reputable scholars in this field of social sciences. Solving major issues concerning the potential impact of sociology in creating the education policy aims at building a bridge between scientists, politicians and educators who directly and indirectly create the image of educational systems in the world.

The issue of the status of contemporary sociology related to its functions, which becomes increasingly intensive with every page of the book, is a part of the

discussion. The authors affirm the attitude of a dedicated sociologist, while highlighting the importance of a normative function in this field of social sciences. Set of arguments supporting the main theses is clear and consequent. For this reason the book has educational advantages. Arguments have a transparent structure, cohesive regarding its content and form, and are written in a clear language. Examples of research projects included in the book facilitate understanding and help remembering basic notions discussed by the authors. The first examination of chapters gives an impression that the book is friendly to sophisticated researchers and readers interested in theoretical intricacies of social studies. The book methodically introduces readers to major categories for analysing basic issues of the educational sociology. These categories are easier to understand being presented in various contexts. This, however, does not mean that all of them have been treated equally thoroughly. An example is 'reflexivity', referred to in the majority of conclusions by Gewirtz and Cribb. While providing arguments for their position, the authors limited the discussion to several selected theoretical issues. It is regrettable that they have disregarded texts by Anthony Giddens (2003, 2009) pertaining to 'reflexivity', probably because of so many experts criticised texts by that author. The sociologist defined the nature of an entity that may proceed along the 'third path' thanks to its 'reflexivity'. The cooperation between Giddens and Tony Blair focusing on defining political rules for the third path did not produce expected results. However, from the point of view of the book, the above could reveal further contexts of the relationship between science and politics, as well as applicable revaluation. It is even more intriguing since *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), so much concentrated on sociological and political issues, is frequently not considered to be a book on sociology.

As regards theory and educational sociology, the authors do not find a space for those examples in the Part I *Approaching Education Sociologically*. The authors themselves did not claim to develop a complete typology, but rather marked the need to group alternative approaches and ways of their interpretation into specific sets. Thus, they highlighted the impact of sociology on understanding educational values and ways they are built, allocated and perceived.

An idea of building a discussion on the central political and ethical dimension of the sociology of education deserves words of appreciation. This has been done with reference to five rightly juxtaposed examples of contemporary research in Chapter 1 *Understanding Education: the Role of Sociology*. This enables the reader to enter smoothly into a review of the most influential theories of sociology and classical texts in Chapter 2 *Understanding Structure and Agency*. The chapter includes references to Talcott Parsons' 'The school class as a social system' (1961), Howard S. Becker's 'The teacher in the authority system of the public school' (1953), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' 'Schooling in Capitalist America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life' (1976), Paul E. Willis' 'Learning to Labour: how working class kids get working class jobs' (1977), and Robert Dale's 'Education and the capitalist state: contributions and contradictions' (1982). At the end of the chapter, readers find a short presentation of opinions expressed by Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, representatives of the 'new sociology of education', included in their flagship publications of the 1980s.

Chapter 3 *Varieties of Critique* returns to issues discussed in previous chapters but in a different fashion. The chapter provides a comprehensive presentation of critical approaches: feminism (Byrne 1978; Spender, Sarah 1988), critical race theory (Ladson-Bilings, Tate 1995) and poststructuralism (Walkerdine 1981).

Almost by definition, critical trends, with their strong normative image, provide a variety of arguments for a normative dimension of sociology, which is meticulously used by the authors. They emphasised that the normative dimension is frequently considered to be a background or a side effect of the descriptive and explanatory function in sociology and sociologists themselves are sceptical about judgemental opinions. In their opinion, excessive sociological generalisation and changing the profile of research objects (sociology as field for contesting many contemporary social phenomena) promotes qualitative changes in sociology. It becomes a science which increasingly often examines challenges which are directly described as 'socially important' topics.

It is regrettable that the conclusion at the end of the chapter does not refer to later works by authors quoted. It is worth highlighting the consequence with which Bourdieu (1992) accuses social sciences of being immersed in a form of instrumental legitimisation, even more so that he also analyses relations between 'reflexivity' and 'reflectivity' in sociology. He emphasises the issue recurring in 'Understanding Education': reflectivity enables transfer of knowledge from one area of inquiry into another, since it covers multiple consideration of an issue as an expression of 'feedback'. Reflectivity usually enables revealing the 'substantive nature' of the world.

In Part 2 *Key Themes*, after collating competing approaches to the sociology of education (structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, Marxism, feminism, critical race theory and poststructuralism), the authors mark their applicability in relation to such themes as social reproduction, politics of knowledge, multicultural education, identity and teachers' work. Each of the issues may be considered an introduction to another sphere of values. A framework for all themes is the issue of social inequality which dynamically presents the quality of sociologists' struggle against the normative dimension of research projects and theoretical studies.

A short and selective review of theoretical opinions developed over several decades, extending far beyond radical leftist theories, is presented in Chapter 4 *Social Reproduction*. The Chapter shows evolution of opinions expressed by sociologists on social reproduction. The choice of examples and publications for the sake of the deeper discussion in this part of the book imposes a specific pattern of analysis, which links social reproduction with issues of cultural reproduction, while including a stress on gender studies. The described research findings are produced by Amanda Keddie and Martin Mills (2007), Louise Archer (2008), Shereen Benjamin (2003) and Agnes van Zanten (2004).

The issue of equalising educational opportunities as one of major social problems, frequently discussed in the context of the sociology of education, is clearly linked with the need of continuous examination of social reproduction mechanisms. While encouraging to penetrate the problem, Cribb and Gewirtz suggest to be particularly cautious, since relations between sociological theory and political intervention are far from being unequivocal. The implementation of the equal opportunities principle in education is an indispensible element for building a society without strict social divisions and determination of man's future depending on gender, place of birth, social background, parents' wealth and education, and ethnic and religious origin. It is hard to disagree with the authors that such a broad subject of research involves epistemological challenges. Moreover, from the point of view of thesis articulated at the beginning, the chapter unveils the scale of neglect in the context of a normative function implemented by sociologists. A telling example of a need to assess the social reality fitted in the role of a researcher is the determining of a subject of research. Even a simple decision on selecting phenomena to be examined needs to be preceded by determining which of them are important.

Chapter 5 *Knowledge and the Curriculum* provides arguments confirming the contribution made by the sociology of education into researching the relation between objectives of education and social values. The main thesis included in this part of the book is the following: knowledge may produce various disparities. In three sections comprising that chapter, the authors consider Knowledge and the Curriculum from the point of view of the critical theory, poststructuralism, and social realism. Examples indicate two competing positions regarding knowledge, which remain in conflict due to a different hierarchy of underlying values. The first one refers to an identity of a student, and the second one shows the cognitive power of science, which leads to emphasising the cognitive interest. Potential threats are linked with each of the options. While preparing the reader to a discussion on the justification of both analytical perspectives and prioritising them, the authors highlight the need to understand differences underlying the two approaches.

In my opinion, the chapter, which is of key significance for the challenge of understanding education defined in the title, is rather superficial. Until that moment, a large number of examples of research and theoretical perspectives was justified considering the type of issues discussed, however in this particular case the discussion seems incomplete. Knowledge and the Curriculum clearly shifts the stress on the analysis of the Curriculum.

Below are some examples justifying the accusation. The analysis is limited to one issue only. Hidden curricula, which are the core of the critical theory, are merely mentioned without referring to classic works by Robert Merton, Roland Meighan and Philip Jackson. Theories of the hidden curricula change the design of research which, while analysing various contexts, looks for an answer to one of key education issues, namely: What does the school teach? or What does it not teach?

A very telling statement was once expressed by Herbert Kohl (1970: 116): *schools, which cannot cope with the issue of the hidden curricula teach students to remain quiet about what they think and feel. Moreover, they teach students to pretend what they think and feel.* Jackson (1990: 4) described such characteristics in a similar manner: *the school is a place in which students sit, listen, wait and raise hands, talk, cooperate and queue.* According to sociologists, reasons for that include disintegration of knowledge provided in contemporary schools, mismanagement of teaching time by teachers or shortage of motivation to learn among students. The conclusion to that chapter postulates that authors of curricula should reflect on both hierarchies of values which define the relationship between knowledge and the curriculum.

Introduction to Chapter 6 *Identity* reminds us about a clear difference between the sociology of education and sociology developed for education. In fact, the authors remind us about the aim of the book, namely defining the relationship between sociological research and creating a social policy, based on a conviction that much can be achieved through cooperation between sociologists and those who create the education policy. At the same time, the authors list reasons for which sociological writings do not contain too many recommendations addressed to practitioners, educators, and scholars who are interested in improving the institutional process of teaching and educating. It is because sociologists who develop ideas for reforms believe in fact that their active involvement in changing the order remains beyond their competencies. On the other side of the spectrum, we may find a conviction that those who research educational processes frequently remain under an apparent impression that recommendations for the education policy can be easily expressed and they frequently base their believes on faulty concepts of political origin. Therefore, it is a waste of time to research them. Since understanding of the

education policy is difficult, sociologists devote little time for it. Cribb and Gewirtz with their concerns focus on the third type of arguments.

In the introduction to the chapter, the authors express their opinion on the category of Identity, while referring to Manuel Castells' opinions (2004). Defining the identity of a man requires answering two questions: who do I think I am? and Who do I want to be? Peter Weinreich (1983 :159) wrote *that identity is a notion which promises a lot and causes much disappointment.* The authors have a different opinion since they believe that the notion, through its indefinite nature and capacity, is capable of opening many doors in science.

The largest section of the chapter focuses on intercultural education, chiefly in the context of developing the identity of students (Waters 1994; Harris 2006). An example of Asian girls living in Great Britain is very telling. Girls do their best to avoid the prevailing discourse of Asian femininity subordinated to a man. This reveals oppressive cultural practices they are subjected to, whereas at school they can feel a sense of freedom (Shain 2003).

A dynamic nature of human communities and identity of particular people is particularly vivid in the case of mandatory schooling. It is where we can observe an interface between individual identities and different ethnic identities. Such frequent contacts require continuous adjusting and building a space of common reality. A school is an area of numerous conflicts and a space of competition between various groups. It is an area of confrontation of values, aspirations, and interests. Creating an appropriate pattern for the contact with Otherness and due respect to it seems particularly important. The authors emphasise that educators, who may improve or diminish the meaning of Otherness through an education policy that influences the identity of students, are entangled in dilemmas of redistribution of recognition.

The difference between a sociologist and an educator is based on the fact that a sociologist makes the social world meaningful, and a practicing educator makes choices regarding things that should be done. Such dilemmas are unavoidable.

Chapter 7 *Teachers' Work* presents and compares tasks implemented by teachers in various countries and the autonomy they have while implementing them. The authors emphasise that in the past thirty years of the education policy in the world, the policy concentrated on improving the quality of education frequently accompanied by strengthening solutions which increased professional preparedness of teachers (Robertson 2000; Ball 2003). This has resulted in establishing increasingly higher requirements for teachers to match growing responsibilities. Such changes were followed by major development of the sociology of education.

The first part of the chapter focuses on source texts discussing consequences of neoliberal reforms for the autonomy of a teacher. It also includes a thesis that neoliberal methods of teaching create social inequality, as illustrated by an example of schools in Chicago (Lipman 2009).

A further part of the chapter focuses on mechanisms, scopes and issues of allocating, maintaining and reducing the autonomy of a teacher. Several examples are used to discuss methods for defining the content of curricula and teaching objectives as well as the role played by teachers in adjusting objectives. Further, the discussion focuses on freedom teachers have based on examples of defining mandatory and facultative subjects, as well as selecting textbooks and teaching methods.

The authors naturally resorted to examples of countries which followed the opposite direction. Reducing the autonomy and increasing teachers' responsibilities can be observed in countries where education has been decentralised, such as

Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The best example is France where education policy aims at building social solidarity and by definition opposes neoliberal projects.

Summarising, major changes, which clearly increased the scope of teachers' responsibilities, result from several factors, including school autonomy, ways of increasing quality of education and new social responsibilities vested in schools. In some countries, these factors complement each other. For instance, the autonomy of schools and increased freedom in teaching related to it frequently resulted in improved education levels. This does not mean, however, that the issue of 'teaching for tests' and consequently the de-professionalization of teachers knowledge became the past. Some questions still remain valid: what should the autonomy of this professional group include? Who should exercise control and how the control is to be exercised?

Increased autonomy is usually matched with higher responsibility; a responsibility which does not involve merely following procedures by teachers in a given institution but also the assessment of results of their own work. This leads us to another question: What is the value of the autonomy for each teacher separately?

Part 3 *Conclusion* occupies one full Chapter 8 *Extending Reflexivity in Sociology of Education*. An excellent Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski frequently accused intellectualists of ignorance which expressed a passive attitude towards serious matters, which is ultimately the tragedy of science. In response to that, a question was raised: Is it worth focusing on matters which are so strictly linked with politics, power and positions, in other words factors of temporary nature?

When we apply this measure to the book, we may state that Cribb and Gewirtz fit into a vivid contemporary tendency to perceive sociologists as active creators of a social change. In this particular sense, it is a valuable book, although it is not of innovative nature when it comes to its main message. Great theoretical schemata in sociology of the 1950s left a sense of threat. When they proved to be neither neutral nor socially innocent as intended, the sociology resigned from a claim of neutrality. It was perhaps one of the most important signs of inevitable criticism of any form of sociological reflection.

Nevertheless, the relationship between science and politics, as history shows, may question the autonomy of the former. In this spirit, in final pages of the book, the authors assessed the position of Martyn Hammersley. The polemic text of *Reflexivity for what? A response to Gewirtz and Cribb on the role of values in the sociology of education* refers in general to the role played by the contemporary sociology while emphasising the individual understanding of reflexivity. The author stressed that formulating an objective and undertaking to build new knowledge are ethical in nature. Each further step of a scholar should be free from valuation (Hammersley 2008: 549-558).

Chapter 8 comes back to the main line of arguments by broader presentation of ethical reflexivity in the sociology of education. In the opinion of the authors, the reflexivity deepens the perception of sociology aimed at building and supporting the education policy, and thus reveals the potential to be used in theory and practice.

After reading Part 3, in my opinion, the publication should include an additional chapter on reflexivity and its relation to a similar analytical category of 'reflectivity'. The sociological and also philosophical literature distinguishes between those categories. Despite that fact, various publications on social sciences treat the terms as synonymous. Reflexivity is usually supported by those who promote constructivist concepts in which the observer of reflections play an important role. In this sphere of reflexivity, subjects observe themselves and their thinking process as expressed by

Michael Fleischer (2005). The act of reflection also has a minor dimension and becomes an act of analysis in result of the transformation.

Therefore, reflexivity is more complex, multi-dimensional, and reflective. In other words, reflexivity, referred to in the final part of the book by Cribb and Gewirtz, applies to contents which appear in a reflection and which are frequently placed in different contexts by collating them in various theoretical frameworks. This would mean that reflexivity is brought down to the epistemic level, and reflectivity is ontological.

Reflexivity enables people realising their own dependence on meanings fitted into the culture. Thus, they are less dependent on systems, organisations and institutions in which they function. Overcoming them frequently requires a struggle against all limitations. At the same time, the awareness of being involved depends on the depth of reflexivity, and this can be measured by self-understanding resulting from self-reflectivity.

My impression is that the longing for 'reflexivity' or 'reflectivity' shows the status of contemporary changes in the field of social sciences, changes which lead to the social transformation. Almost in an instance, they give raise to questions about the desired direction and measurable effect. The book contains many such important questions.

The understanding of 'reflexivity' is clearly less important in the publication than confirming its role in creating further visions for education systems. It is going to be significant as long as we are finally saturated with texts affirming its indispensible nature. From that point of view, it is justified to assume that the way reflexivity strengthens social life and fills social research is important. In a sense, its level shows who we are and what we achieve in our work. However, educational sociologists rarely become politicians who create education systems and thus reflexive creation may remain a sphere of research only.

The vision of 'engaged sociology' will certainly find many supporters among representatives of education sciences who will face the following dilemmas: Can sociology of education speak on behalf of educators? and What does that really mean? While exposing its normative function, does sociology express interests of specific stakeholders of educational processes? If yes, than whose interests, students or teachers?

The culture in its nature has become increasingly common. Challenges are many, and educators frequently express their will to cooperate with representatives of other disciplines as regards re-organising the education practice. The vision of the normative function of the sociology of education presented in the book fits into such needs. A success will only be achieved when the scientific practice makes reflexivity a driving force for changes in education systems in the world. Otherwise we are left with the following sarcastic conclusion: Why bother about winter, when there is no snow!

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