Chapter 1

Culture, Class, and Curriculum: A Reflective Essay

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Introduction: The Complexity of Culture and Class

Any attempt to review the use of the term culture in education is asking for trouble. Raymond Williams, in Keywords (1976: 87), claims that culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” As part of this complexity, it can refer to “high” art, to artistic practices more broadly including popular arts, and to the whole way of life of a people or period. Williams traces the history and multiplicity of denotation and connotation of the word culture not in order to arrive at a singular meaning, but to enable us to hold in tension these differences of meaning or emphasis. Terry Eagleton goes even further in this rejection of attempts to pin it down, referring to the concept culture both as “an historical and philosophical text” and as “the site of a political conflict” (2000: 19). Rather a lot for one word to carry.

Even more perilous, then, is it to trace the extent of Marxist influence. There is the rather obvious difficulty that Marx himself hardly ever uses the word. Yet, as I will attempt to show, it is not surprising that, through those working within the Marxist heritage, the concept has acquired enormous resonance, providing us with rich resources for understanding education, its processes, and outcomes. I deliberately say “working within the Marxist heritage” rather than the shorter “Marxists,” to include those such as Freire or Bourdieu who, for various reasons, preferred to avoid the suggestion of club membership.

It is not simply that both these writers and others understand that culture is deeply affected by social structures, specifically class, and by material production. Their link to Marxism goes all the way down, to...
an ontology that rejects the Cartesian dualism of a mind-matter split, in favor of a dynamic and dialectical materialism in which spirit (intellect, ideas, "Geist") thoroughly inhabits and springs forth from the world we touch and see. Of course, one cannot call all nondualists “Marxists”—think, for example, of Spinoza or Dewey—but it is essential to recognize, in Williams’s and Eagleton’s discussion, the significance of the origins of the “culture” word: it is fundamentally nondualist.

One of its original meanings is “husbandry,” or the tending of natural growth… The word “coulter,” which is a cognate of “culture,” means the blade of a ploughshare. We derive our word for the finest of human activities from labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation. Francis Bacon writes of “the culture and manurance of minds,” in a suggestive hesitancy between dung and mental distinction. “Culture” here means an activity, and it was a long time before the word came to denote an entity. (Eagleton, 2000: 1)

It is somewhat paradoxical therefore (though historically understandable, given Stalinist distortions) that Marxism has been accused of subordinating culture to vulgar material reality—poetry to pig iron production—a dualist and nondialectical division into mind and matter. In this model, culture is crudely equated to “the superstructure” that is “determined” by the “material base.” As Williams (1980[1973]: 31–3) argues, this shows a limited grasp of both ends of the relationship as well as the link verb determines to convey the connection between them. He regards the architectural metaphor of base/superstructure as unhelpful, preferring Marx’s earlier terminology of social being and consciousness. Williams rightly insists that “base” involves both the forces of production (the technology, materials, and so on) and the relations of production (especially class divisions), themselves often in deep contradiction with one another:

When these forces are considered, as Marx always considers them, as the specific activities and relationships of real men, they mean something very much more active, more complicated and more contradictory than the developed metaphorical notion of “the base” could possibly allow us to realize. So we have to say that when we talk of “the base,” we are talking of a process and not a state. (Ibid: 34)

Eagleton (2000: 1–2) goes further in opposing a simplistic and dualistic opposition between culture and the material world (production, society, etc.): “In Marxist parlance, it [culture] brings together both base and superstructure in a single word.” Culture (seen as a “whole