

CAN SCHOOLS BE THE GREAT EQUALIZERS OF AMERICA?

Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life, by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. New York: Basic Books, 1976, \$13.95.

Reviewed by Peter Gibbon

Haight-Ashbury is dead. Proms are popular. The establishment is back in Washington. It is a tribute to the sincerity and tenacity of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis that in these inauspicious times they can summon the energy to flay America and sniff the possibilities of revolution. Perhaps they are buoyed up by the knowledge that communist revolutions have always occurred in the wrong places at the wrong times. For their new book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, is clearly a Marxist tract.

The book does four things: It criticizes capitalism; it tries to link the present ills of education to this unsatisfactory system; it tries to show that the history of U.S. education has been determined by a ruling elite; it offers alternatives.

In capitalism some control resources and give orders, others receive wages and take orders. In schools there are also hierarchies. Students have no power and are encouraged to be docile. In capitalism work is not satisfying. It is fragmented, routine and meaningless. In capitalist schools, students are sorted out, pressured, and disciplined. Their work is as "joyless" as that of the corporation and the assembly line. In capitalism there is almost no redistribution of income or social mobility. Capitalist schools perpetuate this inequality by spending more on the rich, socializing them in a different manner, and by tranquilizing the masses through the fiction of a meritocracy.

The growth of mass education and higher education reflect the needs of the ruling elite. The common schools provided minimal skills and a rationale for inequality. Higher education is multi-tiered. Each level feeds workers into a certain sector of the economy. The Ivy League colleges produce leaders; the community colleges, technicians.

The remedy for all this is a democratic-socialist revolution which will lead to economic equality and personal fulfillment. The enemy is not technology or human nature but rather an irrational, evil economic system. When the system is overthrown, only then can the schools become humane. In order to achieve their goals, Bowles and Gintis counsel political activism but do not exclude violence.

Of what use is this book to the teacher? If you are a Marxist or thinking of becoming one it might convert you. If you have Utopian tendencies — if you believe work can be fun, human beings equal and teenagers wise — then the book may make you indignant. However, school boards don't like incendiaries and schools don't encourage Don Quixotes. So most

of us give a grudging obeisance to capitalism, probably echoing Winston Churchill's famous conclusion about democracy: It is the worst system — except for all those other systems that have been tried and failed. What does the book have to say to us?

The book does raise a crucial question that has been with us throughout this decade: Do teachers merely oppress students and certify them for pre-determined economic position? Jonathan Kozol and Herbert Kohl claim the former; Christopher Jencks the latter. Bowles and Gintis give support to both, claiming in effect that we run a combination penal institution and credentials factory. The first accusation is not documented or convincing; the authors merely cry out against hierarchies and call for humaneness and equalitarianism. They betray no acquaintance with the day-to-day problems of schools or the psychology of adolescents. In fact the whole question of human nature is *never* discussed in this book and yet ultimately your view, despite the statistics and monographs, is determined by whether you lean towards Freud or Rousseau.

The second accusation is documented and is disturbing. Drawing on a variety of economic, sociological and educational studies, the authors try to demonstrate the overwhelming importance of class and family in charting our economic destinies. Schools are relatively impotent to overcome these powerful determinants. Horace Mann, John Dewey and Lyndon Johnson hoped that schools could be the great "equalizers." Bowles and Gintis say they never can be.

Schooling in Capitalist America is the work of radicals but not dilettantes. The authors are economists at the University of Massachusetts and have tried to digest a vast amount of material. It bristles with studies, charts and statistics. One comes across occasional arresting insights about how our economy and educational system function. *Schooling in Capitalist America*, however, is abstract and discursive. It is written in the best tradition of impenetrable, leaden social science prose. It is perhaps one of those books better read about than read itself. There is much rhetoric and indignation and little sense of the possible or the realities of life. Yet one leaves with the suspicion that the authors are partially correct: that in America, despite our democratic talk, classes are well-defined, powerful and static. The forces of family, race and sex are overwhelming compared to the influence of schools. The teacher, if more than a prison guard, is hardly a missionary.

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