

THEORIES OF SCHOOLING AND SOCIETY: THE FUNCTIONAL AND CONFLICT PARADIGMS

CHRISTOPHER J. HURN

THE FUNCTIONAL PARADIGM OF SCHOOLING

The functional paradigm of schooling is not the work of any one individual theorist, nor does it consist exclusively of the ideas of sociologists. In its most general form the functional paradigm has long been part of the conventional wisdom of liberal intellectuals in Western society and, to a large extent, part of the working assumptions of the great majority of all who have thought and written about schooling in Western societies until quite recently. Many of its assumptions are found in commencement addresses and political speeches on the benefits of education, as well as in textbooks on the sociology of education.¹

MODERN SOCIETY—THE FUNCTIONAL VIEW

At the heart of the functional paradigm is an analysis of what adherents to the model see as the unique character of the modern Western world and the crucial functions that schooling plays in that world. The paradigm sees modern Western societies differing from most previous societies in at least three crucial respects.

THE MERITOCRATIC SOCIETY In modern societies occupational roles are (and should be) achieved rather than ascribed. Contemporary intellectuals have long regarded the inheritance of occupational roles, and more broadly the inheritance of social status, as anathema. People be-

lieve high-status positions should be achieved on the basis of merit rather than passed on from parent to child. The children of the poor should have equal opportunity to achieve high status with more privileged children. And in all Western societies, particularly since World War II, governments have responded to this belief by trying to increase equality of opportunity: by expanding higher education, introducing universalistic rules for employment intended to discourage nepotism, and legislating elimination of discrimination on the basis of religion, race, and sex. The functional paradigm, therefore, sees modern society as *meritocratic*: a society where ability and effort count for more than privilege and inherited status. Although there is disagreement about just how far along this road to a perfectly meritocratic social order we have traveled, there is agreement that modern society is at least more meritocratic than most societies of the past.²

In part, this contention is a moral argument. It is simply wrong, we believe, that doctors or members of elite groups should enjoy overwhelming advantages in passing on inherited status to their children. Besides the moral argument, however, underlying the meritocratic thesis is a

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conviction that achievement is a far more rational way of allocating status than ascription. The theory maintains that modern society demands and requires far larger percentages of highly skilled people than ever before. The percentage of professionals in the United States labor force, for example, has multiplied about ten times since 1900. It is essential, therefore, that the most talented individuals be recruited for these demanding occupations. The health and the economic well-being of a society depend on the degree to which it can find and place its most talented individuals in the most demanding occupations. An increasingly meritocratic society is not only morally justified, but it is also a more rational and efficient society.

THE EXPERT SOCIETY A second distinctive feature of the contemporary social order is closely related to these ideas about talent, efficiency, and rationality. The functional paradigm sees modern society as an expert society:³ one that depends preeminently on rational knowledge for economic growth, requiring more and more highly trained individuals to fill the majority of occupational positions. Schools perform two crucial functions in this view. First, the research activities of universities and colleges produce the new knowledge that underpins economic growth and social progress. Second, extensive schooling both equips individuals with specialized skills and provides a general foundation of cognitive knowledge and intellectual sophistication to permit the acquisition of more specialized knowledge. Extensive education, therefore, becomes an increasingly necessary feature of any modern society. Skills that were primarily acquired on the job must now be acquired in specialized educational institutions. If schools cannot always teach the highly specific knowledge and skills required by an increasing number of jobs, they do provide a foundation of general cognitive skills that alone permits effective learning of more specialized knowledge. Since occupational skills change or rapidly become obsolete in contemporary society, individuals need an extensive general education as a foundation to learn new skills. They may also require later retooling educational programs

long after adolescence. Some progressive accounts of this argument, indeed, see schooling as lifelong learning and the whole society as a learning society. The crucial function of schools is not so much to teach specific useful vocational skills, but to teach people how to learn.

THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY The functional paradigm portrays contemporary society as a democratic society moving gradually toward the achievement of humane goals: toward social justice, a more fulfilling life for all citizens, and the acceptance of diversity. Implicit in the functional paradigm, therefore, is a particular kind of political liberalism—a view that does not deny the evils and inequities of the present society, but does believe that progress has been made and will continue to be made. Increasing levels of education are at the core of this conception of progress. An educated citizenry is an informed citizenry, less likely to be manipulated by demagogues, and more likely to make responsible and informed political decisions and be actively involved in the political process. Education reduces intolerance and prejudice, and increases support for civil liberties; it is, in other words, an essential bulwark of a democratic society dedicated to freedom and justice. Finally, a more educated society will be a better society in another sense: a society dedicated not only to economic growth and material wealth, but also to the pursuit of social justice. The educated society is concerned with the quality of life and the conditions that make individual fulfillment possible.

SCHOOLING AND SOCIETY

The heart of the functional paradigm, therefore, can be seen as an explanation of why schooling is of such crucial importance in modern society. This explanation stresses the multiple functions that schools perform in modern society—the production of cognitive skills, the sorting and selection of talents, the creation of an informed citizenry—and it maintains that these functions could not be adequately performed without extensive and elaborate formal schooling. Thus the

functional paradigm views the close relationship between schooling and future status in contemporary society as an essentially rational process of adaptation: a process where the needs of the increasingly complex society for talented and expert personnel are met by outputs from the educational system in the form of cognitive skills and the selection of talented individuals. And if only the most uncritical supporters of the paradigm would assert that such a process of social selection in schools is *perfectly* meritocratic or that disadvantaged groups have *identical* opportunities to those afforded to more privileged students, there is some general confidence that the direction of educational change has been in a meritocratic direction. From this perspective, the net effect of the expansion of schooling has been to increase the percentage of poor but talented students who reach high-status positions, with the assumption that further expansion of schooling will move us closer toward a society of equal opportunity. What schools teach is also, although imperfectly, a functional adaptation to the needs of the social order. As the nature of the modern economy increasingly demands (even in middle- or lower-status occupations) more sophisticated cognitive skills and flexibility and adaptability in the work force, so pedagogical techniques and curricula shift away from rote memorization and moral indoctrination to concern with cognitive development and intellectual flexibility. In this respect, the functional paradigm is by no means necessarily conservative in its implications for school practice, as its critics sometimes allege. Indeed, the argument that the new complex skills needed by modern society in turn require the transformation of traditional pedagogy and the traditional curriculum were virtually an article of faith among many functional theorists during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴

If the functional paradigm is not necessarily politically conservative, it certainly does portray the major features of contemporary society in fundamentally benign terms. Inequality, for example, is often seen as a necessary device for motivating talented individuals to achieve high-status positions. Although it is recognized by most observers

that the correlation between ability and high status is far from perfect, they see the problem of inequality in contemporary society as one of erasing barriers to the mobility of talent rather than as a problem of redistributing wealth from high-status positions to low-status positions. That talent in turn tends to be conceived as one dimensional, underlying both success in school and success in life. And while liberals within this tradition argue there are vast reserves of untapped talent among disadvantaged groups, others more pessimistically conclude that such talent is inherently scarce. . . .

DIFFICULTIES IN THE FUNCTIONAL PARADIGM

The set of assumptions I have described is still influential among social scientists, policy makers, and educators, but it has lost some of the taken-for-granted character of a decade or more ago. The rate of educational expansion has declined; past projections of the need for college graduates have been confounded by a surplus of unemployed or underemployed degree holders. In the face of these developments it becomes more difficult to argue that industrial societies require ever-increasing percentages of highly educated individuals. But the difficulties of the functional paradigm are more fundamental than those posed by the current (and possibly temporary) imbalance between educational outputs and the supply of high-status jobs. In the past two decades a substantial body of research has developed that poses a challenge to almost all the main assertions of the paradigm—to the link between schooling and jobs, the assumption of an increasingly meritocratic society, and arguments about increasing opportunities for the mobility of talented, but underprivileged youth.

SCHOOLING, SKILLS, AND JOBS

In the functional paradigm, cognitive skills provide the crucial link between education and jobs. This is not to say that the major function of schools is to teach vocational skills that are di-

rectly relevant to job performance. The functional paradigm does assert, however, that the general cognitive skills and intellectual sophistication that schools develop have positive functions for the performance of adult occupations, and that, indeed, they are indispensable for the performance of growing numbers of middle- and high-status occupations.

To the extent that we can test such very general ideas, some evidence from United States research does not support them. Consider first the relationship between college grades and occupational status and future earnings. College grades are a rough and ready measure of the success with which an individual has learned the things that colleges attempt to teach. What should happen, therefore, according to the functional paradigm, is that college grades should predict occupational status and relative earnings. Those who do well in college should, other things being equal, obtain better jobs and make more money than those who did less well. Research on the relationship between college grades and occupational status and future earnings, however, has not been able to demonstrate such a relationship. In comparing bachelors degree recipients, grade point average in college does not predict either occupational status or future earnings with any degree of consistency.⁵

Direct measures of cognitive skills provide a second test of the hypothesis. Individuals whose test scores in school indicate high cognitive skills do indeed obtain better jobs and make more money in later life than individuals with lower cognitive skills. However, this relationship largely disappears when researchers control for educational attainment and family background. Christopher Jencks summarizes: "If we compare two men whose test scores differed by 15 points, their occupational status would typically differ by about 12.5 points. If they have the same amount of education and the same family background, their status will differ by only about 2.5 points."⁶

If the effect of cognitive skills on occupational status is problematic, studies of performance on the job provide little support for the functional paradigm. Even among teachers, the

correlation between grades in college and observer ratings of job performance average only between 0.2 and 0.3.⁷ Among physicians, grades in medical school predict ratings of job performance only weakly in the early years of medical practice and not at all in later years.⁸ How well people do in a particular job, as Ivar Berg has shown, can rarely be predicted by measures of how well they have learned what they were taught in school.⁹

These findings pose a challenge to the functional paradigm. If increasing levels of education are somehow necessary for the performance of increasingly complex jobs, then there should be a relationship between cognitive skills (which schools presumably teach) and occupational status, earnings, and job performance. A large part of the explanation for the well-known correlation between educational attainment and occupational status should be that such educational qualifications reflect the possession of cognitive skills necessary or useful for effective role performance. But the evidence we have suggests that it is educational *credentials* as well as cognitive skills that predict future status and earnings. We know that employers prefer to employ college graduates, but there is no solid evidence that they make great efforts to hire people with the highest levels of cognitive skills. Nor is there evidence that once on the job those who have the highest skills perform better than those with lower skills.

These findings, therefore, suggest a different picture of the relationship between schooling and jobs than that provided by the functional paradigm. Instead of saying that educational institutions teach the skills that are necessary for the performance of complex occupations, it can be argued that educational credentials are used to ration access to high-status occupations. Employers who are faced with many potential applicants for a few jobs can use educational credentials as a convenient screening device that appears to be quite impersonal and fair. They can say that only college graduates or only holders of the M.A. degree are qualified to do the job. And, of course, as the percentage of the population with high levels of education credentials rises, so the standards

for admission to a particular occupation rise also, not in response to any increasing complexity of the job itself, but as a reflection of the rise in average education levels in the population and the shifting supply and demand for particular jobs.

There is other evidence that supports this interpretation. There are, for example, great differences in the amount of education credentials required for entry into professional occupations in different Western societies. In Great Britain, for example, physicians qualify with three years less formal education than their U.S. counterparts. In much of Europe, only very recently have engineers and lawyers had to obtain college degrees before practicing their professions. In the United States, furthermore, entry requirements for many occupations—pharmacy, police work, physical therapy—have increased dramatically over the last twenty years. There are perhaps some grounds for asserting that new recruits to these jobs must know more than in the past, but it is also plausible that any occupation has much prestige to gain by attempting to raise its admission requirements. Police departments around the country may argue that the complex nature of modern police work demands at least two years of college as a preparation. Such arguments, however, seem self-serving. Raised standards increase the status of people already in the job and are crucial for claiming the high status of the occupation within the community at large. It is entirely understandable that police, pharmacists, physical therapists, and social workers (to name but a few occupations where educational requirements for admission have escalated in recent years) should argue that these occupations now require far more credentials than they did in the past. However, it is dangerous to confuse what may be self-serving justifications for new admission standards with an objective necessity for new recruits to have much higher levels of cognitive skills.

The link between schooling and jobs, therefore, is a good deal more problematic than the simple model implied by the functional paradigm. We cannot see rapidly escalating educational requirements as an obvious reflection of the increasing complexity of contemporary occu-

pations. Do people need a college degree to be efficient secretaries or to sell insurance? The need to ask the question suggests that the functional paradigm does not provide a satisfactory account. Those who have high levels of education do, of course, generally obtain higher-status jobs than those who have less education. But this does not seem to be because of the cognitive skills educated people learned in school. It is the possession of educational credentials, rather than the acquisition of the cognitive skills that those credentials denote, that seems to predict future status. The relationship between education and occupational status, then, is a good deal more complex and perhaps less rational than suggested by the functional paradigm.

SCHOOLING AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

A second argument of the functional paradigm is that educational institutions sort and select talented people in a way, however imperfect, that is greatly superior to selection on the basis of such ascribed characteristics as parental social status, religion, or race. To tie occupational status closely to educational attainment, the paradigm suggests, will maximize society's chances of discovering its most talented individuals and placing them in the most important occupations. Implicit in this paradigm, therefore, is the idea that the expansion of education—more and more access to higher education for lower-class and minority students—will have the effect of increasing the chances of those individuals to gain access to high-status occupations. Educational expansion is not only morally justified, it is also a rational policy because it increases the discovery of talented individuals.

Research has challenged these arguments, too. It is true that measures of IQ are quite good predictors of school achievement. It is also true that IQ scores and occupational status and income are positively correlated.¹⁰ But what prevents such findings constituting valid evidence for the meritocratic thesis is the strong relationship between all these variables and socioeco-

conomic status. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, for example, show that when socioeconomic status is controlled, IQ exerts an only slight effect on earnings.¹¹ Controlling for IQ, by contrast, still leaves very large associations between socioeconomic status of parents and the incomes of their children. Bowles and Gintis show that those with the lowest socioeconomic status scores, but average IQ scores, have a 6 percent chance of being in the top one-fifth of all wage earners. Those with the same IQ scores, but from the highest decile of socioeconomic background have a 41 percent chance of being in the top one-fifth of all wage earners.¹² Jencks reports evidence supporting this general interpretation. He shows that much of the relationship between IQ and occupational status and future earnings disappears when we control for school attainment and for socioeconomic background.

Our society, then, is far from a pure form of meritocracy where intelligence or talent largely determine success in school, and where employers in turn use schooling as a rational way of sorting out the most talented from the least talented individuals. Socioeconomic status of the parents is a better predictor of future economic success than measured IQ. In part, this is because socioeconomic status predicts school achievement even when IQ is controlled; it is also because socioeconomic status predicts future adult status even after we take schooling and IQ into account.¹³

The evidence also raises questions about the argument that educational expansion increases meritocratic selection. If the expansion of schooling in the last fifty years has increased the relative chances of underprivileged youth to gain access to high-status jobs, we would expect a gradual decline in the relationship between parent's status and that of their children. What should happen, the meritocratic argument implies, is that high-status parents should experience increasing difficulty in passing on their high status to their children, and that more and more low-status children of high intelligence should be able to take their rightful places in prestigious occupations that demand unusual talent. Unless in-

telligence is inherited to a very high degree, it would follow that increasing educational expansion will increase the mobility chances of the underprivileged. Detailed treatment of this complicated issue will be postponed until Chapter 4, but the evidence for the United States indicates that the relationship between parent and child status has not declined in the last four decades. Parent social status remains about as good a predictor of a child's future status today as it was in the 1920s, despite enormous educational expansion and great efforts to ensure fairness and universality in selection procedures.¹⁴

Again, we are confronted with empirical evidence that is difficult to reconcile with the functional paradigm. No one would say, of course, that our society is perfectly open to talent or that IQ alone is the main determinant of income and status. But what should happen, according to the functional paradigm, is that we should be able to observe some reduction in the ability of privileged parents to pass on their advantages to their children. The fact that we do not observe this suggests that contemporary U.S. society is not a great deal more meritocratic than several decades ago.

QUALITY OF SCHOOLING AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Implicit in virtually all thought about education in the early 1960s was the theory that the quality of schooling available to different students was crucial to their future chances of occupational mobility. Poor students were severely handicapped by inferior schools, black students by the fact that most of the schools they attended were, quite simply, bad schools. Black students attended, for the most part, segregated institutions. Poor white students went to schools that hardly compared in facilities and resources with the schools attended by more privileged students. Inferior schooling compounded the initial handicaps of these students and led directly to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality in the next generation. In such books as Patricia Sexton's *Education and Income*, a direct line was drawn between inferior

schools, reduced opportunities to learn, low prospects for higher education, and the persistence of inequality.¹⁵ This vicious circle could be broken only by equalizing school resources for all students.

A great deal of empirical research has challenged this argument. A series of large-scale studies of schooling and its effects shows that student test scores are only weakly associated with measures of school quality, but powerfully associated with measures of student characteristics: socioeconomic background and IQ. Measures of teacher experience, pupil/teacher ratios, and the amounts of money expended per pupil all constituted some indications of what people meant when they talked about school quality. Yet none of these variables has proven to be of much help in predicting how well students will perform on particular tests.¹⁶

In research on school effects in a number of different countries, indicators of school quality have shown only a very weak or insignificant relationship with student performance on tests designed to measure cognitive learning.¹⁷ And while such research has important shortcomings, which I shall discuss in later chapters, it does show that we can in no sense solve the problem of the unequal school achievement of different groups of students by equalizing school resources. Every study indicates that students from low-status families do less well on tests of cognitive achievement than more well-to-do students, but no study demonstrates that the gap can be substantially closed by providing what amounts to middle-class schooling for lower-class students.¹⁸ Indeed, the history of research on school effects in the last ten years is a history of failure to confirm the proposition that eliminating differences in school quality can significantly close the gap in school achievement between students from different social origins. Results of research on school integration have provided, at best, equivocal positive findings. Most early studies tended to show mildly positive effects on black student performance. Although more recent studies do not necessarily contradict this assertion, a number of them indicate some negative effects of integration on

black self-esteem, and even on white achievement in majority black schools.¹⁹

No study has demonstrated that integrated schools reduce most of the gap between black and white school achievement. Nor has research on the effects of compensatory preschool education demonstrated the kind of clear-cut and lasting effects on later school achievement that its proponents hoped for. Although evaluation of such programs is exceedingly difficult, the most judicious conclusion is that strong positive effects on later school performance have not yet been demonstrated.²⁰

While I shall have a great deal more to say about this research later in this book, this initial examination of the findings of large-scale research on school effects indicates serious difficulties for the orthodox interpretation of school reform and its effects on inequality. One assertion of the functional paradigm is that the expansion of schooling in modern society brings about an increasingly meritocratic social order. A closely related assertion is that better or higher quality schooling will reduce the advantages of privileged parents in passing on their high status to the next generation and increase the chances of underprivileged children to close the gap between themselves and more privileged students. Much of what we have learned in the last twenty years casts doubt on both of these assertions.

THE CONFLICT PARADIGM

I have shown that the model of schooling and society that dominated much thought about education until quite recently is beset with serious difficulties. Schools do undoubtedly teach cognitive skills and increase the intellectual sophistication of their students, but it is not clear that it is these skills that explain the relationship between schooling, occupational status, and earnings. The available evidence does not suggest that U.S. society is substantially more meritocratic than in the past. Nor is there much evidence to indicate that increased resources devoted to schooling have resulted in more favorable opportunities for the talented children of disadvantaged parents to obtain

high-status positions. Simply put, the expansion of schooling does not seem to have worked in the way the functional paradigm suggests it should work.

The conflict paradigm offers a very different interpretation of schooling in its relationship to society. Like the functional paradigm, the conflict paradigm sees schools and society as closely linked—and, I shall argue, too closely linked—but it stresses the links between schools and the demands of elites rather than the needs of the whole society. It also stresses the connection between schooling and the learning of docility and compliance rather than the acquisition of cognitive skills. If the functional paradigm sees schools as more or less efficient mechanisms for sorting and selecting talented people and for producing cognitive skills, the conflict paradigm sees schools as serving the interests of elites, as reinforcing existing inequalities, and as producing attitudes that foster acceptance of this status quo.

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

The functional paradigm took shape at a time when the climate of intellectual opinion was predominantly optimistic about the main features of contemporary society and its likely future evolution. Modern society was viewed as increasingly rational and meritocratic, a society where prejudice, racism, intolerance, and the ignorance that fostered these evils would gradually disappear. Schools taught, sustained, and nurtured essentially modern cosmopolitan values and attitudes. Schools, at least the best schools, worked to emancipate children from parochialism, from an unreflecting respect for the traditions of the past, and from ignorance and prejudice. The new mathematics of the late 1960s, with its stress on understanding the principles of logic rather than the mere acquisition of immediately useful skills, and the new English curriculum, with its use of modern novels that invited frank discussion of contemporary moral issues, both symbolized a commitment to modern, liberal, and cosmopolitan ideals. The best schools taught rationality; they developed the ability to handle moral com-

plexity and to tolerate ambiguity. If the prisons of ignorance, prejudice and unthinking respect for the past prevented many parents from entering this new world, schools were agencies of emancipation for the next generation. In the modern world, schools do not merely reproduce the values, attitudes, and skills of the past, they are active agents in creating a more liberal, a more rational, and a more humane society.²¹

The attack on these ideas in the later 1960s and 1970s reflected a broader critique of their view of society, a disenchantment with the liberal vision of the modern world, and a rejection of the optimism of that world view. The ten years from 1965 to 1975 were a time of increasing skepticism about the benefits of science and technology and an increasing cynicism about the good intentions and moral purposes of established authority. The liberal model of modern society—a world admittedly full of serious imperfection, but nevertheless moving in a fundamentally progressive direction—was replaced, for more and more intellectuals, by a model of society requiring urgent and wholesale surgery to avoid disaster. The new, more skeptical vision saw greedy business corporations intent on destroying the environment, cynical and corrupt politicians concerned with their own power and privilege, and entrenched racism and sexism in virtually every social institution. Instead of a model of society where authority was based on expertise and competence, this radical vision defined a society where powerful elites manipulate public opinion to preserve their own entrenched position. Such elites might make symbolic or token concessions to pressures for reform, but such evils as racism, poverty, and sexism could only be eliminated by changing the distribution of power in the society.

Such were the new skeptical ideas that began to gain ground on the older liberal orthodoxy at the end of the 1960s. Although it would be misleading to claim that ideas like these became more popular than the liberal and optimistic ideas that underly the functional paradigm, they were hardly confined to those who considered themselves educational or political radicals. By the mid to late seventies, disillusionment with the

liberal interpretations of schooling became quite widespread among educators and intellectuals. Large numbers of people were aware, for example, that major differences in school achievement by race and by social class persisted even after educational reforms designed to eliminate them. There was also emerging awareness of the large number of highly educated young people who could not find jobs commensurate with their qualifications. In other words, the system did not seem to work in the way that liberal common sense (and the functional paradigm) said it should work. The climate of opinion was ready for an alternative interpretation.

The conflict paradigm, even less than the functional paradigm, is not a unitary set of unambiguous propositions about the relationship between school and society. Indeed, disputes within the conflict paradigm, between Marxists and non-Marxists, or even between rival Marxists, are often more heated than arguments between functionalists and conflict theorists.²² But we can nevertheless distinguish a set of broad assumptions to which most conflict theorists would subscribe, whatever their other differences, and with which few functional theorists would agree.

First, conflict theorists assert that we live in a divided and conflict-ridden society where groups compete for the control of the educational system. To argue that schooling reflects societal needs, therefore (as functional theorists maintain), is to miss this essential fact. Groups who compete for control of schooling use the rhetoric of societal needs to conceal the fact that it is *their* interests and *their* demands they are trying to advance. These elites may succeed in manufacturing consensus about the purposes and organization of schooling, but beneath the apparent consensus, conflict theorists believe, is always a struggle for power and status: *whose* values and ideals will be taught to the young, and *whose* children will obtain the most desirable jobs. Second, conflict theorists see this struggle between groups as unequal. Existing elites, though they must make compromises and bargains with other groups, almost always have the upper hand because of their superior resources and their con-

trol over the means of communication. Because of this, equality of opportunity has not been and is unlikely to be a reality within the confines of the present social order. The *rhetoric* of equality of opportunity conceals the fact that schools are organized in such a way as to make it inevitable that children of privileged groups will have great advantages over children of disadvantaged groups.

Finally, conflict theorists are skeptical of the view that the schools are linked to jobs in modern society primarily through the cognitive skills they teach. Rejecting the view that most work in modern society is intellectually highly demanding, conflict theorists emphasize instead that employers are more concerned with the attitudes and values of their future employees, particularly their loyalty, compliance, and docility, rather than their cognitive sophistication. From this perspective, therefore, while the *manifest* concern of schools is primarily with the teaching of cognitive skills, their fundamental business is to shore up the present social order by teaching appropriate attitudes and values. Again, the rhetoric of the official orthodoxy conceals the real nature of the relationships between schools and society.

These, then, are the ideas with which most, if not all, conflict theorists would agree. To understand the conflict paradigm more fully, however, we need to consider in some detail more specific theories, one neo-Marxist and the other non-Marxist.

THE NEO-MARXIST THEORIES OF BOWLES AND GINTIS

Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's 1977 book *Schooling in Capitalist America* is probably the best known and most coherently argued statement of a specifically Marxist interpretation of schooling in modern society.²³ Published at a time when disillusionment with the liberal interpretation of schooling was beginning to be widespread, its radical interpretation of schooling has had a great deal of impact and stimulated extensive debate. That thesis is supported, furthermore, by a good deal of empirical evidence and

closely reasoned argument—qualities that have not always characterized radical critiques of the functional paradigm.

Bowles and Gintis's central thesis is that schools serve the interests of the capitalist order in modern society. Schools reproduce the values and personality characteristics necessary in a repressive capitalist society. Although all schools must repress and coerce students to secure a compliant and efficient adult labor force, different schools accomplish this function in different ways. The values and qualities required by an efficient manual worker on the production line are different from the values and qualities needed by an executive of a large corporation. While the manual worker must be taught punctuality, the ability to follow instructions, and some degree of respect for superiors, the executive needs some degree of flexibility, an ability to tolerate ambiguity, and favorable attitudes toward change and innovation.

Therefore, schools whose graduates enter predominantly low-status occupations stress rule following, provide minimal discretion in choice of tasks, and teach obedience to constituted authority. Schools and universities that prepare students for elite positions, by contrast, encourage students to develop some capacity for sustained independent work, to make intelligent choices among many alternatives, and to internalize norms rather than to follow external behavioral rules. If we compare junior colleges with elite universities, for example, or the college preparatory tracks of a suburban high school with the vocational curriculum, we will find not only differences in curriculum, but also differences in the social organization of instruction. In junior colleges and in the lower tracks of a high school, students will be given more frequent assignments, have less choice in how to carry out those assignments, and will be subject to more detailed supervision by the teaching staff. By contrast, the college preparatory tracks of many suburban high schools and elite universities have a great deal more open and flexible educational environment. Such dissimilarities mirror both different class values (the preference of working-class parents for

stricter educational methods and the preference of professional parents for schooling that encourages initiative and independence) and the different kinds of qualities of personality needed for good performance in high- and low-status occupations. The social organization of particular schools—the methods of instruction and evaluation, the amount of choice and discretion permitted the students—reflects the demands of the particular occupations that their graduates will eventually obtain.²⁴

REINFORCING INEQUALITY Bowles and Gintis's major argument is that the educational system reinforces class inequalities in contemporary society. Different social classes in the United States usually attend different neighborhood schools. Both the value preferences of parents and the different financial resources available to different communities mean that schools catering to working-class students will teach different values and different personal qualities than schools serving higher-status populations. These latter schools are not better or freer in any absolute sense, but high-status schools communicate to their students the distinctive values and attitudes required by high-status occupations in modern capitalist societies. The great majority of occupations in contemporary society, Bowles and Gintis believe, require a loyal and compliant work force to perform tasks with little responsibility and discretion. Most schools, therefore, teach their students to follow orders reliably, to take explicit directions, to be punctual, and to respect the authority of the teacher and the school. Such schools, which satisfy the preference of most parents for discipline and good manners in their children, channel students to manual and lower-level white-collar occupations. But schools serving more elite groups are only superficially less repressive. Such schools encourage students to work at their own pace without continuous supervision, to work for the sake of long-term future rewards, and to internalize rules of behavior rather than depend on specific and frequent instructions. These qualities are essential to effective performance in middle- or high-status posi-

tions in large organizations. However, work in such organizations permits only limited freedom and autonomy. Workers may question specific procedures, but not the purpose of the organization; employees may be flexible and innovative, but they must be loyal. The capitalist society requires that all schools teach the values of individual achievement, material consumption, and the inevitability of the present social order. Free schools are therefore impossible in a repressive society.²⁵

Bowles and Gintis decisively reject the meritocratic hypothesis, with its assumption that schools are efficient ways of selecting talented people. Instead, schools work to *convince* people that selection is meritocratic. It is essential for the legitimacy of the capitalist order that the population be convinced that people in high-status positions do deserve these positions, that they are more talented and harder workers than others. Schools are an essential prop of this legitimacy. Selection for particular tracks within a school must *appear* to be made on the basis of ability and intelligence, and such purportedly objective criteria as IQ and grades serve this function. But these criteria mask the fact that success in schooling, and of course success in later life, is strongly related to social class and shows no indication of becoming less closely related over time. The correlation between college graduation and social class in the last twenty years, they report, has remained unchanged despite the rapid expansion of higher education. Schools remain institutions that reproduce and legitimate existing inequalities between social classes. This state of affairs will continue indefinitely in capitalist societies unless capitalism itself is abolished. Reforms in the educational system alone cannot reduce inequalities in the life chances of different social classes. The premise of liberal educational reform—that educational expansion and improved schooling can create equality of opportunity—is false. Schools that liberate, diminishing rather than reinforcing the handicaps of inequality, can only be achieved after a revolution in the distribution of power and the ownership of the means of production in contemporary capitalist society. . . .

CONCLUSION

. . . In the modern world, it is agreed by both paradigms, schooling plays a much more important role than in any previous societies; in social mobility, in preparation for work, and in moulding common values and attitudes. But how are we to interpret this transformation? For functional theorists, the key to the explanation of this heightened importance of formal schooling lies in the distinctive needs of modern society. They see the expansion of schooling as an essentially rational adaptation to these needs. Not everything that schools teach is indispensable or even useful, of course, nor are schools ideally efficient in teaching cognitive skills, but the expansion of schooling is nevertheless best viewed as a response to new needs for sophisticated cognitive skills and cultural consensus. The world in general and the world of work in particular are more complex than in the past. It is therefore rational for public opinion to recognize that investments in education will equip the young for effective performance in that world.

For the conflict paradigm, such an interpretation misconstrues the relationship between schools and society and the nature of what schools primarily teach. It is the demands of elites, and not the needs of a society as a whole, that propel changes in schooling, and it is these demands for compliance and control over the mass of the population that shape the character of schools. In the Marxist version of the conflict paradigm, the changing character of capitalism and the struggle between capitalist elites and masses explains both the expansion of schooling and (from this point of view) its repressive character. Certainly employees need some levels of cognitive skills, but they also need a labor force willing to submit to the discipline of the work place, or, in the case of high-status jobs, employees who are willing to make the goals of corporate capitalism their own. Thus the primary link between schools and work is in the compliant and conforming values and attitudes schools convey rather than in the cognitive skills they teach. The hierarchical organization of schools, with their restrictive controls over student behavior, correspond to and reproduce the

hierarchical organization of work. And although non-Marxist conflict theorists are less explicit about the correspondence of the organization of schooling with the organization of work, they too share its emphasis on elite control over the content of schooling and the irrational character of the escalation of educational credentials in recent decades. . . .

ENDNOTES

1. The clearest statement remains in Clark, *Educating the Expert Society*. For an account of the theoretical foundations of these ideas, see Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (New York: Free Press, 1960).
2. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.
3. Clark, *Educating the Expert Society*.
4. Talcott Parsons, "The School Class as a Social System," *Harvard Educational Review* 29 (1959): 297-318.
5. Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 187.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
8. Ivar Berg, *Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 85-104.
9. *Ibid.*
10. See Otis Dudley Duncan, David Featherstone, and Beverly Duncan, *Socioeconomic Background and Achievement* (New York: Academic Press, 1972).
11. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, pp. 111-113.
12. *Ibid.* See also Christopher Jencks, *Who Gets Ahead?* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), pp. 115-121.
13. Jencks, *Who Gets Ahead?*, Chapter 3.
14. Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: Wiley, 1967), pp. 81-113.
15. Patricia Sexton, *Education and Income* (New York: Viking, 1961).
16. The literature on this subject is vast. Perhaps the original Coleman Report itself, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, and the reanalysis of the data in Jencks are the best sources. For a different interpretation of the evidence, see James Guthrie, et al., *Schools and Inequality* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1971).
17. Alan Purves, *Literature Education in Ten Countries* (New York: Wiley, 1973); Robert L. Thorndike, *Reading Comprehension in Fifteen Countries* (New York: Wiley, 1973); and L. C. Comber and John P. Keeves, *Science Education in Nineteen Countries* (New York: Wiley, 1973).
18. None of these data implies that if poor students attended schools that spent, for example, four times as much money as present-day schools, they would not do better. In this sense the research is dealing with questions of practical policy as much as with theory. See Philip Green, "Race and I.Q.: Fallacy of Heritability," *Dissent* (Spring 1976): 181-196.
19. Nancy St. John, *School Desegregation* (New York: Wiley, 1975).
20. Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Evaluation and Reform: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1975).
21. The phrase *active agent* comes from Clark, *Educating the Expert Society*.
22. As the Marxist paradigm has lost popularity in recent years these disputes have assumed an increasingly doctrinal character.
23. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.
24. *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.
25. Unless that is, the new revolutionary consciousness produced by free schools transforms the society. See their ambivalent comments on free schools, *ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR PART 2

1. Durkheim, a Frenchman, wrote over a century ago about the need for education to create homogeneity among students and prescribed methodical socialization as the duty of educators. Is this perspective valid today? Why? Why not?
2. What is the role of the state and nation in education? As we move toward a more global society and an electronically shrinking world, is it important that the United States develop a *national* curriculum for our schools? What would you see as the advantages and disadvantages of such a system? Who would benefit; why?
3. Functionalists believe that formal education has the ability to equalize and level out other life conditions (poverty, ethnicity, gender, social class, etc.) and that by educating all citizens and giving everyone an equal opportunity to go to school, everyone will get a fair chance to achieve that of which they are capable. Do you believe that this is a reasonable premise and that it is working for the majority of children? Why?
4. What is the difference between achieved and ascribed status? Give three examples. What counts in schools? Why do you feel this way? What is the evidence to which you can point to support your view?
5. Should education be the act of giving out information and facts or should it try to influence what and how students think and believe? Many argue for clear content/subject standards. Do you agree with this stance? What is the reasoning behind your view?
6. Although children often are eager for more information, knowledge, and ideas, teachers often don't encourage this sort of inquisitiveness among poor children. Do you agree with this? Why?
7. What are the greatest areas of weakness (strength) of the functionalist perspective? Explain your thinking about this.
8. Is a high school degree today worth what it was 25 years ago? What contributes to the value of education in our society?
9. Does public schooling actually reinforce social inequality in our country? Explain the reasoning behind your answer to this question.
10. What would a functionalist or a conflict theorist have to say about the charter school movement? Do you agree with their assessment? Why?