Reflections on the Field

The Rise of Class Culture Theory in Educational Anthropology

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This article chronicles how the ideas of neo-Weberians, Marxists, feminists, and critical race thinkers have merged to create a new cultural production or class culture paradigm of schooling. Reviews of recent ethnographic work illustrates how the articulations among class, race, gender, and sexual identity practices in schools are studied without privileging one standpoint over another. This paradigm shift signals the demise of earlier cultural transmissions and modernization paradigms in the field. [class culture theory, cultural production, articulations, cultural transmission]

Others have told the story of educational anthropology’s search for a culture concept that addresses power relations, social inequality, and exploitation (Levinson and Holland 1996). What follows is my version of how U.S. educational anthropologists are fusing cultural and class theory into a new interpretive paradigm. The story begins, however, with sociologists, who produced most of the early critical studies of class and schooling (Hollingshead 1949; Lynd and Lynd 1937; Vidich and Bensman 1968). They generally deployed a Weberian theory of social class and emphasized the superior resources and dominance of middle-class adults in civic affairs and their youth in the schools. During the post-1960s era, educational sociologists continued elaborating on these early studies. The exhaustive Coleman report (1966) and Jencks’s restudy (1972) demonstrated that a middle-class family background was the best predictor of academic achievement. A host of other studies documented the differential community tax bases and facilities expenditures that favored middle-class suburbs over tax-starved urban schools (Sexton 1961). Others emphasized institutional practices that reproduced class inequality in schools, such as elite school board composition (Johns and Kimborough 1968), business models of education (Callahan 1962), academic tracking (Oakes 2005), and class-biased curriculum and pedagogical practices (Anyon 1981).

In addition, many ex-teachers like Johnathan Kozol, Gerry Rosenfeld, George Denison, and Peter McLaren wrote passionate autobiographical accounts of shameful, neglected urban schools for the poor. I think of the aforementioned academic studies and autobiographies as a “stealth” form of class analysis. They do not cite Marxian preoccupations with class conflict and who controls the means of production and the state, but they do highlight the following “structural” economic and political practices: the superior resources and political networks of the privileged classes, elite control of educational decision making, and institutional practices that favor the well-to-do and punish the poor. All of these factors tend to reproduce, rather than reduce class inequality.

In the post-1960s era, two types of more openly Marxist educational critiques also became fashionable for a short time. The first was by Marxist economists like Bowles and Gintis (1976). They offered a sweeping critique of capitalist schooling that complemented the aforementioned “stealth” class critiques. The limits of these early Marxist critiques are well known. They were plagued with rather mechanical, structural Marxist views of
school socialization, which exaggerated the capacity of public schools to produce obedient workers and citizens. They rarely chronicled how teachers and students resisted such socialization. Worse still, they tended to overemphasize the primacy of economic factors over race, gender, and sexual identity practices.

The other Marxist critique of education that emerged in the 1970s was by Brazilian activist Paulo Freire (1970). He represents a much more politically activist brand of Marxism. He sought to organize and educate the rural peasantry in his country to resist a reactionary historical bloc. For Freire, making the peasantry “literate” was much more than being able to read and write. A citizenry that possessed “critical literacy” had the ability to “read the word and the world,” thus to understand their own history and why they were poor and oppressed. Freire’s critical pedagogy offered a way for educators to raise political consciousness through democratic dialogues in “cultural circles.” Like U.S. progressive educators John Dewey and George Counts (1969–22), Freire advocates using education to transform society. Two of the most outspoken U.S. Marxist educators, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, have produced an astonishing number of books that have advanced political activism through Freire’s pedagogy. These two scholars, among others, helped popularize his critical pedagogy as a way for educators to resist capitalist ideology and empower the disenfranchised. In short, class analysis of schooling was alive and well in the 1960s and 1970s in the sociology of education. None of the aforementioned class analysis of schooling tackled, however, the thorny theoretical problem of how to combine cultural and class theory.

During the 1960s–70s, few educational anthropologists were contributing to either stealth or Marxist class critiques of capitalist schools. Most were busy attacking “cultural and linguistic deficit” views of ethnic minority communities, child rearing, and students (Foley 1997). Anthropological studies of the linguistic and cultural mismatch between home and school were quite influential, and a few sociolinguists like Shirley Brice Heath (1983) did important studies of how race and class factors produced linguistic inequality (Collins 2009; Foley 1997). Jules Henry (1963) was the only anthropologist of that era who produced a sweeping critique of U.S. culture and school socialization. His Culture against Man zeroed in on what he called the “pecuniary logic” of advertising and sales that dominated everyday life in the United States. He showed how this logic filtered down into the schools and encouraged extreme forms of individualism and competition. Henry conceptualized U.S. capitalist culture and its schools as a ruthlessly competitive, consumer-oriented culture that, from cradle to grave, robbed people of their humanity.

Henry did not cite Weberian or Marxist class theorists, but I felt his study had strong affinities with the neo-Marxist German Frankfurt school of critical theory. Various Frankfurt theorists argued that modern capitalism’s media-driven “culture industry” was commercializing the arts and everyday consumption practices. I read both these critiques of capitalist culture as restatements of Marx’s alienation thesis. Henry’s work led me to conclude that the field of anthropology of education was saddled with a psychological, functionalist concept of culture that limited the questions one could ask. Most educational anthropologists of this era studied “culture” as the transmission of discrete cultural values and practices from one generation to another (Spindler 2000; Wax et al. 1971). This notion of culture tends to privilege the continuity of socialization and harmony, rather than discontinuity and conflict. In short, educational anthropologists of the 1960s–70s era were still not infusing cultural theory with class concepts of alienation, power, exploitation, and inequality.

Developments in U.S. anthropology would change that in short order. Sherry Ortner’s (1984) highly perceptive article chronicles these currents of change and highlights the rise of a more dynamic “practice” and “performance” oriented concept of culture, which begins addressing the problem of fusing cultural and class theory. A seminal text that
promoted a more politicized concept of culture was George Marcus and Michael Fischer’s *Anthropology of Cultural Critique* (1986). They entreated anthropology to do more socially, politically relevant, value-laden “cultural critiques” of modern capitalist cultural institutions. These authors provided a few suggestions on how to synthesize class and cultural theory, but the real breakthrough comes with the arrival of the “New European Sociology of Education” in the early 1980s.

**Enter the “New European Sociology”: Bourdieu and Gramsci**

These two authors eventually become the foundation of what U.S. educational anthropologists think of as the “cultural production,” “cultural Marxist,” or class culture perspective (Foley 2010; Levinson and Holland 1996). I tend to use these terms interchangeably, but the terms have different but complimentary connotations. The term *cultural Marxist* is a broad cover that suggests a new hybrid type of class theory. The term *cultural production* emphasizes actor agency and suggests a dynamic view of culture as process, performance, and practice. The term *class culture* highlights the importance of the class theory for cultural analysis. Of all class culture theorists, Pierre Bourdieu has most influenced how U.S. anthropologists do cultural analysis. Most readers will be familiar with his work, but considerable confusion remains about what kind of class theorist he is. Bourdieu is often mislabeled a “neo-Marxist,” but I think of him as a “neo-Weberian.” He seems Marxist because he entreats mainstream sociological stratification theorists to adopt Marxian political preoccupations with inequality, capital, ideology, and exploitation. His emphasis on “practice theory” (Bourdieu 1977) shifts inquiry toward how individual actors interact and intentionally challenge or acquiesce to normative sociocultural systems. Somewhat like Marxists, he emphasizes agency and change, but his notion of agency through status competition games is quite different from the agency of collective class struggles. Moreover, he has little interest in Marxian preoccupations with bourgeois–proletarian class struggle over who controls the state and the means of production. Methodologically, Bourdieu argued that both Marxist and mainstream sociologists were misguided in their attempts to model social science on the physical sciences. He preferred the less “positivistic” Weberian concept of interpretation, which is founded on continuous, critical self-reflection (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

In his grand opus, *Distinctions* (1984), Bourdieu outlines a sweeping model of how capitalist societies are stratified through two great and unequal “taste cultures.” The “habitus” (learned dispositions) of these two status lifestyle groups—the superior, more civilized bourgeois and the inferior, less refined working class—differ markedly in aesthetic and expressive cultural preferences for art, literature, music, language, and manners. Status (social class) identities are learned initially in the home and developed further through cultural institutions ranging from fashion, museums, and the mass media to the public schools. In effect, Bourdieu fuses the Weberian idea of social classes as status–identity groups to what anthropologists might call the “high” and “folk” concepts of culture. In anthropological terms, social classes have distinct, learned expressive cultural practices that mark each group’s status and cultural identity.

Individuals from these broad cultural identity groups compete to maintain or enhance their position in the society’s status hierarchy. Life in the status hierarchy boils down to a complex interactional game, which people conduct in various social “fields” or institutional settings. To play this game well an individual needs superior communication and networking skills, not an organized revolutionary movement, political party, or interest group lobby. People socialized into the allegedly superior habitus of the “bourgeois” taste culture are at a distinct advantage. Bourdieu argues that bourgeois taste culture practices are a form of “linguistic,” “cultural,” and “social” (networks, contacts) capital. Members of
the bourgeois taste culture know how to use their inherited or acquired taste culture capital of manners, language, dress, and preferences in dance, music, literature, and sports to get ahead in life. Individuals who possess cultural capital often convert their cultural capital into economic capital. One of the key social fields of status competition is over school credentials (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The parents of middle-class youth work hard to get their kids into the gifted programs and honors classes. These programs help their youth accumulate the school credentials (high test scores and good grades), which serve as a form of cultural and linguistic capital needed to gain admission and succeed in the best universities. Graduating from a “good university” certifies that these students are ready for postgraduate training and access into high-status professions that pay well.

Despite the fact that Bourdieu created an innovative, neo-Weberian stratification theory, feminist and critical race theorists are quick to point out his blind spots, which the second type of “new European sociology of education” addressed more adequately. Scholars at the Birmingham Center for Critical Cultural Studies (BCCS) like Stuart Hall (Morely and Chen 1996) and “post-Marxist” scholars like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) shifted class analysis toward “identity politics.” They advocated focusing on how cultural groups struggled against hegemonic discourses that stigmatized them as inferior “cultural others” (Foley and Moss 2001). These “post” or “cultural” Marxists were much more attentive to patriarchy, race, and queer theory than traditional Marxists and neo-Weberians like Bourdieu. The BCCS perspective is generally founded on Marxist historical materialism, not Weberian stratification theory. BCCS scholars valorized E. P. Thompson’s (1963) classic study of the English working-class movement and the seminal work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci was deeply involved in the Italian labor movement of the 1920s and, thus, was labeled a “syndicalist Marxist.” He spent years organizing and educating the working class to defeat the rise of Italian fascism. Like the Frankfurt neo-Marxist scholars, Gramsci was faced with explaining why the Italian working class embraced nationalism and fascism rather than communism. Unlike the Frankfurt school, Gramsci did not abandon the concept of class struggle for control of the state and economy. He retained Marx’s conception of social classes as historical blocs with conflicting interests and different access to political power. He emphasized that Italian elites use cultural institutions like the media, church, family, and public schools to produce ideological “hegemony” and consent to the state capitalism of fascism.

Gramsci also realized that Italian communism needed to build what he called a “counterhegemonic” revolutionary working-class culture. After building a united, self-confident working class, they would wage a cultural struggle against the ideological apparatus of the elite historical bloc. Like Paulo Freire, Gramsci spent a great deal of time in consciousness-raising activities with workers. His efforts included building working-class solidarity and community through the popular arts, sports, and critical journalism. His emphasis on working-class culture and cultural struggle opened up Marx’s narrower idea of an economic class struggle. As I note earlier, Stuart Hall (Morely and Chen 1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) popularized Gramsci’s version of class theory as a way of incorporating the cultural identity struggles of various oppressed groups. This new hybrid class culture theory is not reductionist, and, thus, does not privilege class as more fundamental than race and gender factors. How class, race, and gender practices articulate in particular historical situations is always an open question to be studied empirically. It is this openness to all forms of oppression and struggle that has attracted scholars of color and feminists to the Gramscian version of class culture theory (Brayboy and Bartlett 2005; Villenas in press).

The BCCS revival of Gramsci filters into progressive U.S. educational circles during the early 1980s through Paul Willis (1981) and Michael Apple (Weis et al. 2006). Neither of these scholars engaged in direct political activism to raise working-class consciousness,
but their scholarship pointed others toward a new class cultural critique of schooling. Willis helped popularize the view that the working class, contrary to much mainstream thinking, had a distinct, resilient, functioning culture. Apple produced a much more comprehensive Gramscian critique of class and the U.S. public school system. Apple zeroed in on the elites’ ideological control of school curricula (1979), the de-skilling of professional teachers (1986), the market-driven politics of textbook selection (1991), and ultimately, the rise of the Christian Right as a historical bloc (2006). His greatest contribution has been a sustained critique of the post-1960s U.S. conservative historical bloc and their neoliberal educational reform schemes, which include private charter schools, vouchers, and an “audit culture” of accountability. He shows how Christian conservatives have tried to infuse the public school curriculum with creation theory, antiabortion sex education, and the superiority of Western culture.

Two recent anthologies by educational sociologists on class and schooling contend that a revival of class analysis of schooling is needed (Van Galen and Noblit 2007; Weis 2008). These new anthologies note that contemporary educational sociologists now strive to do “intersectional” class analysis, which includes race and gender articulations. A number of contemporary educational scholars have followed Apple’s lead. Linda McNiel (2000) indicted the Texas business classes’ accountability schemes, and Lois Weis (1990, 2004) explored the impact of globalization on the working class and its gender relations. Others have critiqued urban school reform (Anyon 1997; Lipman 2004; Oakes 2005) and the corporatization of higher education (Shumar 1997; Shumar and Canaan 2008). A new group of activist educational anthropologists inspired by Freire are engaging directly in school reforms (Anthropology and Education Quarterly [AEQ] 2008b; Cammarota 2008; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008). What the new sociological anthologies do not chronicle is the role of anthropologists in producing a more “intersectional” class theory based on Bourdieu and Gramsci.

Recent Advances in the Study of Class Cultures and U.S. Schooling

Because I came out of the post-1960s era determined to infuse cultural theory with class theory, I developed my own version of the class culture and cultural production perspective. The new edition of Learning Capitalist Culture (LCC; Foley 2010) chronicles in detail how I fit into the development of class culture theory. It suffices to say here that I appropriated Gramsci’s notion of cultural identity struggles and Bourdieu’s notion of status competitions into Marx’s theory of political economy, class struggle, and alienation. What makes my perspective different from other class culture studies of schooling is (1) its extended, historical study of political economy, class formation, and ethnic politics (Foley et al. 1989), and (2) its use of contemporary communication theory to expand on Marx’s alienation thesis. Empirically, LCC portrays how high school students skilled at impression management navigated dating, sports, and classroom scenes. Teachers and parents willingly collaborated with students to produce upward mobility for the minority (Anglos) and a few middle-class Mexicanos, and social inequality for the majority (working-class Mexicanos). This status competition that the school stages and sanctions teaches students both their station in life, and more importantly, it naturalizes the commodity logic of capitalist culture.

In recent years, several exceptional new studies of class culture and schooling have appeared. Peter Demerath (2009) and Elaine Brantlinger (2003) take earlier critiques of “talent farms” (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963) and of status identity competitions (Foley 2010; Henry 1963) to new levels. They chronicle the lengths to which middle-class families and youth go to produce a school culture that sponsors their success. They show us how the privileged classes appropriate and use public schooling, and how teachers and adminis-
trators collude to preserve their class, racial, and gender privileges. Equally important, they provide a deeper portrait of the values and “psychological capital” and strategic moves it takes to be a winner, as well as the enormous psychological cost of such extreme competitive individualism. Two sociological studies are excellent applications of Bourdieu’s class culture perspective. Annette Lareau’s sustained research on families and parenting (2000, 2003) adds to these portraits of how the middle class maintains its class privilege. Middle-class parents have a value orientation that she calls “concerted cultivation,” which pushes their children to acquire the cultural and linguistic capital necessary to excel in the middle-class-inflected culture of schools. Julie Bettie’s (2003) feminist, poststructuralist discursive analysis of race, gender, and class articulations demonstrates how the school privileges a middle-class white “preppies” aesthetic style over the dress and make up style of working-class Mexicana and white girls. She shows how preppie girls perform “good girl” and “good student” images, which enhances their upwardly mobility. Conversely, working-class girls who use allegedly “vulgar, tasteless” dress and make up are less likely to receive school sponsorship. These fine microethnographic studies underscore the cultural–linguistic match–mismatch between the white middle-class culture of the public schools and its culturally diverse student bodies. These new studies show the various ways that school boards, administrators, and teachers continue to collude, wittingly or unwittingly, with the white middle class to preserve their privileged status.

The other side of the cultural production of privilege coin is what Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence” and Foucault calls “surveillance” of the students not fitting the imaginary ideal of the high-achieving “mainstream” student. Educational anthropologists have produced a much larger number of studies of this sort. Varenne and McDermott’s (1998) seminal study demonstrates how schools construct the failure of culturally and linguistically different students, who are stigmatized as “cultural others.” Their study uses the type of intensive interactional analysis that Boudieu advocates but rarely does. As I note elsewhere (Foley et al. 2001), the “new American anthropology of education” of the late 20th century now includes many scholars of color and feminists who are studying race, class, and gender articulations. This infusion of new talent and standpoints was initially dedicated to replacing deficit thinking with more positive perspectives on stigmatized cultural others. In recent years, the interpretive focus has shifted to specific “microtechnologies” of institutional control and agency such as disciplinary policies (Ferguson 2001; Lomawaima 1994; Schnyder 2009), tracking–detracking (Mehan 1996; Oakes 2005), pseudoscientific labeling practices (Mehan et al. 1986), the dominance of color blind–mute whiteness discourse (AEQ 2008a; Lee 2005; Moss 2003; Pollock 2004), agency through double consciousness (Fordham 1996), street culture (Akom 2003, 2008), popular culture (Lamont Hill 2009; Nespor 1997), ethnic movements (Foley 2010; McCarty 2002), networking (Valenzuela 1999), identity production (Pascoe 2008; Urrieta 2009), and class–race–gender articulations (Anderson 2009; Bettie 2003; López 2003). Not all of these authors would label themselves class culture theorists, but their work bears the influence of the post-1970s debates among feminist, critical race, and class theorists. These authors attend to race, class, and gender articulations much more that earlier educational anthropologists did. These developments are particularly true among educational anthropologists who study non-U.S. societies and schools.

Anthropologists Take Class Culture Theory Abroad

In the early 1970s, I wrote an extensive review of how anthropologists were studying non-U.S. schools (Foley 1976a). I argue that too many educational anthropologists of that era were under the spell of “modernization” theory, which idealized the U.S. public school
system. Most of the early studies of village schools were preoccupied with documenting whether the Western–U.S. model of mass education was a democratizing force that transmitted “modern” value orientations and created hard working, loyal “national citizens.” In contrast, I portray the U.S. colonial experiment with mass education in the Philippines as failed “modernization,” riddled with political corruption and social inequalities (Foley 1976b, 1977). What excites me about the new anthropological studies of non-U.S. schooling is how much more they focus on colonial, class, race, and gender inequalities (AEQ 2008c). Many of these new studies are deeply indebted to the debates surrounding Bourdieu and Gramsci. The cultural reproduction–production paradigm has definitely replaced the old cultural transmission–modernization paradigm. These new studies are more broadly conceived than many studies of inequity in the U.S. public schools. Consequently, they theorize how the state uses schools to create a national identity and cultural citizens from very diverse populations. More importantly, new generation of Latin American, Asian, and African educational anthropologists are producing their own postcolonial, non-Western critiques of mass education in newly industrializing countries (AEQ 2009).

Some educational anthropologists still deploy the modernization concept but in less ideological ways. For example, Amy Stambach’s (2000) analysis of schooling and gender in Kenya portrays the modernization process as a series of cultural continuities–discontinuities between local culture and the schools. Like a good cultural production theorist, she also highlights shifting gender roles, social mobility patterns, and the colonial legacy of Christian education. Cati Coe’s (2005) fine study of the Ghanaian government’s explicit attempts to institute multicultural education emphasizes an invented national cultural identity over local tribal identities. In effect, she revisits the modernization dilemma in a novel way. She contrasts the historical genealogy of state and church policy–philosophical discourses, with local visions of culture, in the textbooks and daily practices. Both of these studies provide complex portraits of modernization and nation-building and schooling without advocating idealized models of Western education.

Other recent studies deploy a cultural production perspective even more explicitly than Stambach and Coe do. For example, Aurolyn Luykx (1993) provides us with an in-depth portrait of how the Bolivian state, via its teacher training colleges, tries to inculcate indigenous Aymaran students into a hegemonic notion of a national Bolivian identity. She chronicles the ensuing cultural identity struggle that erupts between an assimilationist faculty and Aymaran students with strong racial and gender sensibilities. Her detailed microethnography of one normal school is situated in a historical account of social movements and the Bolivian state. Thus, we are presented with a “bottom up” view of the national identity struggle occurring in a racialized, patriarchal Bolivian social formation. Bradley Levinson’s (2001) meticulous account of student subcultures in one Mexican “secundaria” (junior high school) is also set in a historical account of national policy that uses the public schools for promoting the egalitarian ideals of the Mexican revolution. Building on Mexican scholars’ notions of state formation, Levinson contends that the local youth groups he studied did indeed subscribe to the “official” state ideology that “we are all equal”; thus, youth downplayed their racial, class, and gender differences. His study, which shows youths’ acquiescence to school and national ideologies, calls into question the generalizability of U.S. and European studies of antischool youth cultures to the Latin American context. Deborah Reed-Danahay’s (1996) ethnography of a rural French school also challenges the universality of U.S. and British studies of youth that emphasize oppositional, antischool cultures and forms of open, aggressive student “resistance.” She highlights more passive forms of youthful and community resistance to the heavy hand of the centralized, French national school system.

Two new studies of changing socialist educational systems in China (Fong 2004) and Cuba (Blum 2010) are also thought-provoking portraits of national government policies to
socialize youth into a globalizing world economy. Vanessa Fong provides a detailed cultural analysis of how the forced one-child policy and “quality” campaigns have created a new generation of “singleton” youth who are individualistic and materialistic, thus, in conflict with traditional Chinese family ideology and practice. Denise Blum portrays how the Cuban government attempts to create a “new socialist man” through organized collective experiences in the “pioneer place” and “schools of the countryside.” The government’s efforts to create a hegemonic socialist ideology clashes with the reemergence of markets and tourism. This clash produces youth with a complex, mixed political consciousness—loyal to the revolution but also budding entrepreneurs. Both studies provide a fascinating look at how these socialist states are trying to cope with reentry into the world capitalist system. Another study that looks at the politicization of state schooling is Lesley Bartlett’s (2009) study of Brazilian education. She provides a revealing portrait of how Brazilian teachers and students actually take up and use Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy in youth and adult literacy programs.

A strong critical cultural studies framing of the state–local school relationship is quite apparent in Kathleen Hall’s (2002) study of South Asian immigrant youth in Britain. Her multisited discourse analysis pays attention to hegemonic nationalism that racializes Britishness as white, and to the popular culture practices of immigrant youth adapting to capitalist commodity culture. She provides a touching portrait of Sikh youth navigating and negotiating family ethnic traditionalism and the lure of British youth culture. Hall also pays some attention to gender issues, but one sees this thematic more comprehensively in Janise Hurtig’s (2008) portrait of “negligent patriarchy” in a provincial Venezuelan secondary school. Hurtig situates her study in the region’s changing political economy, an oil boom, and the rise of commercial agriculture. These economic developments bring some prosperity and many visions of upward social mobility. Paradoxically, young women coming of age in this era have rising expectations at precisely the moment of diminishing male allegiance to the patriarchal role of family provider. Some of the young women become socially mobile through schooling credentials, but other promising students forsake their studies and resign themselves to finding a “good” male provider. Ritty Lukose’s (2009) study of Indian college students is another sharply drawn portrait of the educational struggles of young women. She chronicles how these youth navigate through the pressures of state-sponsored nationalism, family, and peer culture, and provides a complex portrait of these youth “becoming” upwardly mobile, modern “citizen consumers.” She highlights significant differences in the way male and female students experience the globalizing effects of being consumer citizens. Male privilege is alive and well and expressed through political activism, life style, dating, and marriage practices. Conversely, young Kerala women find interesting ways of creating a space for themselves to be “modern” middle-class women in dress, comportment, and romantic attachments, but they still honor “traditional” gendered cultural expectations.

Finally, studies by Gregory Starrett (1998), Sam Kaplan (2006), and Veronique Benei (2008) also explore the state-school relationship through the discourse approach that emerged from the “post-Marxist” critical cultural studies paradigm. There are significant differences in their approaches, but they generally analyze how religious discourses converge and compete with modern secularizing discourses of modernity and development in the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Turkey, and India. These studies focus on the wider cultural politics of creating a national political identity through a secular mass education system. The ethnographers spend time in local schools to illustrate how a nationalist hegemony is constructed, but none do a traditional ethnography of schools that focuses intensely on the agency of local actors. Consequently, they provide a less detailed portrait of the worldviews and interactions between teachers and students than the previously mentioned studies. For example, Benei’s novel use of the concept of “sensorium” and
embodied “structures of feeling” provides a compelling portrait of state ideologies that socialize through school texts, music, dance, folk stories, and rituals, but much less on how Hindu and Muslim actors react to the discursive regime of Hindu ideology. Nevertheless, these studies expand earlier notion of school ethnography in interesting ways. They are complex portraits of the competing macro religious and secular discourses that shape modern schooling.

A Concluding Note

I would like to conclude by characterizing the new class culture studies of schooling as more nuanced, less essentializing, less deterministic portraits of actors and schooling institutions. This new generation of anthropological studies of schooling has two main foci: (1) institutional microtechnologies of control and ideological socialization, and (2) group and individual identity struggles against such institutional control and socialization. These foci provide educational researchers and policymakers with more complex portraits both of how schools willfully and inadvertently reproduce class, race, and gender inequalities and of how groups and individuals consciously and strategically produce autonomy from institutional constraints. This new generation of educational anthropologists is tackling the ageless structure–agency debate and is dedicated to representing the negotiated, historical character of social change and social order. As a “tribal elder” nearing retirement, I am delighted to report that educational anthropologists are fulfilling the original promise of the “new European sociology of education.” I would urge other anthropologists, educational researchers, and educational sociologists, to catch up with this felicitous turn of events.

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