

Reflections on the application of the western reproduction theory in the research into the education of China

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Abstract: The “reproduction theory” was conceived and born in the research into educational inequalities in Western countries. Famous as the theory is, when it is to be applied in the research into education in China, a few factors must be taken into consideration: the subjects investigated must be educational inequalities that have come into being in the context of China; a shift in theoretical approach and expression is needed, with the Functional approach as the dominant research method; in terms of the standpoint of the researcher, whose academic mission and realization of social ideals should be closely and fully integrated; in terms of research method, the principle of combining both the macroscopic and microscopic approaches and analysis on the basis of actual facts should be adopted so as to effectively analyze and solve the problems plaguing the education of China and to promote the localization of the western reproduction theory in China.

Key words: reproduction theory; localization; educational research

The “reproduction theory” is a famous theoretical model that came into being during the research into educational inequalities carried out in some western developed countries, such as the UK, France and the USA, in the 1960s and 1970s. As it reveals scathingly the causes of inequalities in the western capitalist society from the perspective of education, this theory has been exerting a wide and far-reaching impact throughout the world. Major scholars of the reproduction school include Bowles, S. Giroux, H., Bernstein, B., Bourdieu, P., Apple, M. and Gintis, H. Today, in light of the increasing concern in China over the problem of inequalities in Chinese education, it is highly necessary for Chinese researchers to reflect on how to effectively draw from the Reproduction theory so as to analyze and solve the inequalities plaguing Chinese education.

As a theory born in the western world, this educational theory are shaped and molded by the reflections on educational issues unique to a given context; as a result, its standpoint and approaches to observe research problems are unique to itself. In view of this, when one tries to uproot the theory from its native land and transplant it, as it were, in another country in the hope that it may help to analyze and solve the problems there, comprehensive and thorough reflections on the research model of the theory and its adaptation to and integration with the new country should be done as a precondition; Otherwise, not only may the nature of the problems change, but also the very justification of the theory seems dubious. It is necessary for us, Chinese educational researchers, to pay attention to the following issues when we are trying to apply the western reproduction theory in China’s education.

1. The subjects investigated must be the inequalities in education which have come into existence in the context of China, i.e., such inequalities are distinctive in China

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A problem arose after the popularization and universalization of education in developed western countries: no matter how educational opportunities might increase, disparities in access to school and rate of academic success between people of different occupational, economic, gender and racial background would remain remarkable. Such educational inequalities would then entail further social inequalities in employment, income and social status. Faced with those inequalities, some scholars began to turn to the study of school education itself for answers, which then gave birth to the “reproduction theory”, sometimes called “reproduction model” or “reproduction theory model”. Researches done under the guidance of the theory revealed that education itself would not treat everyone equally, and educational systems helped to maintain and engrave social inequalities. The reproduction school can be subdivided into three branches on the basis of the focal points: economic reproduction model, cultural reproduction model and hegemonic state reproduction model.

Gintis, H. and Bowles, S., representatives of the Economic Reproduction Model, emphasize particularly on approaching the reproductive function of education from the perspective of the correspondence between educational structure and economic structure of a society, and highlighting the influence exerted by economic life on educational reform and the role played by education in the reproduction of capitalist economic and class relations; the cultural reproduction model, for its part, mainly focuses its research on how school education widens class disparities by propagating and through its curriculum, the culture which is in favor of the ruling class; the third branch of the Reproduction school, the Hegemonic State Reproduction Model, mainly studies the state interference in education and how schools help to realize the goals of the state. Reviewing the function of school education from the perspective of relation between state politics and school education, Apple, M., representative of this branch argues that education is a tool by which the ruling class realizes its cultural hegemony and the reproduction of the capitalist state.

As an important academic breakthrough, the reproduction theory has provided us Chinese researchers much food for thought. Yet, we should be aware that the educational inequalities that western scholars study are a far cry from the educational inequalities that have come about under the social system of China today. In light of this, if we apply this western theory directly and without necessary adaptations, trying to search for and interpreting Chinese educational problems through the eyes of western scholars, the perceived “problems” so discovered and so analyzed would be westernized and distorted and lose their pertinence, hence depriving the research of its true meaning.

Therefore, the subjects of our research should be the educational inequalities that have come into being in the context of China and we should spare no efforts to uncover them. In recent years, the educational inequalities in China, which manifested themselves in the form of unfair educational practices, have drawn the concern of people from all walks of life in China. Among them are the following:

(1) The disparity in education between urban and rural areas. While the education level in urban areas is rising day by day, and that of rural areas is dragging its feet, with many rural schools lacking not only basic teaching equipments, but also teaching staff and teaching premise;

(2) The disparity in education between different regions of China, such as that between Chinese relatively more developed eastern regions and its backwater western regions. For example, while the educational level in some eastern regions and big cities is approaching that of developed countries, some poverty-stricken areas in western China are yet to see the nine-year compulsory education realized;

(3) The disparity in education between different schools, such as that between key schools and non-key schools. While the former are given priority in government budgets, the latter generally have to take a back seat and as a result their teaching quality takes a toll.

(4) The disparity in education between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. For example, while compulsory education has been universalized among the normal kids, many of the exceptional children in China (such as children who are physically challenged) cannot attend school; this category also covers the disparity in education between women and men, and that between students from poverty-stricken families and those from more affluent families.

All the above unfair educational phenomena have come into existence in the very special context of China and are marked with clear Chinese characteristics. In light of this, only by clarifying the problems to be researched can we effectively apply the reproduction theory in China and demonstrate its academic significance.

2. A shift in theoretical approach and expression is needed and a mainly functional research approach should be adopted

The reproduction theory that is a educational breakthrough deeply influenced by Neo-Marxism, has its theoretical root in the Marxist Conflict Theory, which argues that social order, far from being built on the consensus over a set of common values, is founded on the basis of the dominance of the ruling class, which reproduces with the help of schools the ruling status that conforms to its privileges. Schools, then, are no longer a vehicle for progress and individual mobility, but institutions for social control and reproduction. What the social reproduction theory and cultural reproduction theory share is that they both try to analyze how the dominant power and culture secure the consent and submission of the ruled classes and groups. The primary function of schools is to maintain class differences by reproducing the class differences in economy, culture and rights and interests through education.

The conflict approach of the reproduction theory not only blasts the content of capitalist education, but its terminology is also marked by militancy and acridness, such as “cultural arbitrary”, “cultural capital”, “symbolic violence” and “hegemonic curriculum”. This theory, together with its terminology, is formed and shaped by researchers on the basis of their own standpoint and theoretical perspective. Hence though it may be applicable in specific capitalist social contexts on the one hand, it may seem to be rather limited or even inapplicable on the other, if the theory were to be applied in the research of school education under the special social system of China. Given the fundamental differences between the Chinese system and the capitalist system, the original theoretical perspective and expression should be adjusted by replacing the critical and militant with a moderate and constructive and adopting a Functional approach.

On the cultural transmission function of schools functional theory and conflict theory are literally poles away from each other: the former attaches greater importance to the maintenance or readjustment of existent structures and therefore a functional research approach entails the adaptation and interpretation of the reproduction theory in the context of China so as to transform the theory into one that can effectively serve education research in China. Take the “correspondence principle” by Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. for example, viewed from another perspective, the principle provides us with an important research framework through which we can survey the correspondence between educational systems and economic life; furthermore, it also provides us with a new angle of view in our studies of the reform of educational system of China. The reproduction theory, when viewed with a functional approach, has actually highlighted the social nature of schools with actual facts, and states clearly that schools are products of a given society and therefore they are shaped and molded by the economy, culture and politics of the society and are stamped with the prevailing ideology of the given society. If we study the inequalities in Chinese

education with the functional approach, we should then focus on analyzing in the objective social factors that have brought about such inequalities, and exploring the relationship between school education and inequalities in education, the objective laws of promoting the development of education and the realization of fair and equal education as well as how schools can promote democracy, mobility and equality in a given society so that the Chinese society can develop in a healthy and sound way.

3. Academic mission and realization of social ideals should be closely and fully integrated so as to promote the improvement of educational practice in China

The reproduction theory is closely associated with the “grassroots”, as scholars of this school are all Neo-Marxists who share similar standpoints and experiences and a large number of whom were actually born in working-class families. In terms of their academic thinking and concept, those scholars have inherited the logic of western Marxism and take upon themselves the role of the mouthpiece for the working classes. By taking that Marxist research standpoint, they have turned themselves from “teachers as intellectuals into reformative intellectuals who are against the capitalist society”. For example, among the scholars, Bourdieu, P. defined his academic mission as to fight against all symbolic rule and any form of inequalities that are hidden under the disguise of formal legality, to expose the reproduction system of grave inequalities that are hidden within the educational system; Apple, M. and Giroux, H. chose to fight for their academic dignity and mission on the margin of the academic world.

As a practice-oriented education research, reproduction theory in the west brings intellectuals onto the political arena, thus combining their academic mission with their political ideals. Due to the fact that their academic pursuits are imbued with too much politics, they, as the voice for the non-mainstream forces within the western world, have been elbowed to the edge of academics and politics.

Today in China, with educational inequalities becoming a grave issue concerning social justice and attracting the attention of people from all walks of life in China, Chinese researchers should also fully integrate their academic mission and social ideals so as to improve educational practice in China.

The issue of equality in education inevitably involves the education service for the disadvantaged in the Chinese society, which include mainly children from poverty stricken families, children from remote rural areas, children of the floating population (mainly migrant workers) and children who are discriminated against because of their gender, all of whom are in an unfavorable condition in terms of getting school admission, utilization of educational resources and social mobility. As public-minded intellectuals, we should see that our research standpoint is not only conducive to the realization of the disadvantaged of their right to existence and development, but also helpful to the government in its efforts to improve the livelihood for its citizens and to the realization of social fairness and justice on a greater scale and to a greater extent in China. Our research aims to achieve are the following two goals:

(1) Academically, to study and analyze the syndromes, characteristics, sticking points of educational inequalities in China and set out to establish a Chinese educational equality theory by drawing from relevant academic achievements from both home and abroad;

(2) In terms of educational practice, to actively promote reform in schools, assist the government in policy-making so as to facilitate the realization of educational equality through government policies and institutions.

In recent years, educational inequalities in China have attracted the attention of the Chinese government. Given its significance in solving educational inequalities, research in educational fairness has become popular and prominent and “educational fairness” has become a new buzzword among the mainstream of Chinese society. As a result, researchers in this domain have seen their academic status rising, the value of their research upgraded. They have more opportunities to go to the forefront of the social arena to demonstrate their academic achievements and assist in the government policymaking process, thus integrating their academic life with the development of the Chinese society.

4. In terms of research method, researchers should adopt the principle of combining both the macroscopic and microscopic approaches and analyzing on the basis of actual facts

The research approach of the reproduction theory is macroscopic in nature and it pays great attention to the study of society as a whole. It focuses on educational structure or system so as to expound how schools create inequalities, especially inequality in academic success and tries to explain what is going on within an educational system through the general function of schools. Researchers of the reproduction school conduct their researches through analyses of interactions between macro-social structures, education and other social structures. They make it a point to research education of a given society in the context of the society. Generally speaking, the approaches of the four branches of the Reproduction Theory are all structural-functional in nature and they all attach great importance to “objective” structural analysis. Besides, they also share a lot of similarities in terms of their views on the relationship between education on the one hand, and economy, culture and politics on the other hand

After the 1970s, the reproduction theory has been plagued with limitations, with some critics complaining that the theory is too rigid and is out of touch with the changing times. In response to the fact the reproduction theory, which is generally macroscopic in nature, ignores interaction, some researchers have set up a new theory to study the educational system on the basis of systematic interaction, ethno methodology and phenomenology. In the new theory, the focus is shifted from educational structure or system to practitioners of education and a lot of attention is given to educational situations, interaction and how such interaction actually takes place.

After all the reflections on the academic achievements of the western reproduction theory, we come to the conclusion that we should have a thorough review of all the research modes and draw from their strong points with a view to solve to the educational problems which are unique to China. The mainly structural approach of the reproduction theory school can serve as a valuable pattern in our study of school as an intermediary linking society, social strata and individuals, through which we can find out the social roots of educational inequalities in China today and proceed on to reform the educational system and structure. However, we must be on guard against getting entangled in the mesh of mechanical determinism. We should observe first-hand educational situations by going into classrooms and the daily life of students and survey the conditions of practitioners of education. Only by combining the structural approach of the Reproduction Theory with microscopic observation of educational practice can we get a true and lively understanding of education.

In view of the above, when we are reviewing school education as a whole, we should adopt a method that combines both the macroscopic and the microscopic approaches and analyze the general factors that constitute schools. On the one hand, we should study the system and institution of schools, the influence on school education exerted by the economy, culture and politics of China as well as their internal relations; on the other hand, we should also study the microscopic aspects of school education by conducting sociological or political studies of

the curriculum, teaching and daily operation of schools.

No matter what research mode is adopted in the research of Chinese education, the key point is that we should uphold the sociological principle of “analysis on the basis of actual facts” and conduct “sociological imagination”. Even when we are analyzing the social function of schools on the basis of the structural approach of Reproduction Theory, we should uphold the principle of analysis on the basis of actual facts and guard against subjective presumption and unfounded personal imaginations.

The reflections on the application of the reproduction theory in the research of Chinese education, then, is aimed at finding out how to best adapt this theory to the actual conditions of China’s education so as we can better analyze and solve the problems, facilitate the localization of the theory and ultimately integrating it into educational theory of China.

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