

Education Policy and Realist Social Theory: Primary teachers, child-centred philosophy and the new managerialism, Robert Willmott, Routledge, London, 2002, 256pp.

The 1988 Education Reform Act signalled a seismic shift that had been building in education policy. Against a tradition of child-centred philosophy and practice in schooling, it embodied a belief in the virtue of 'market forces' and made economic models, managerialism and competitiveness the way forward. Despite a change of party in power, subsequent government education policy has only served to strengthen this trend towards knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. The poverty of imagination at policy level has been mirrored and underpinned by the prominence within educational research of approaches based (often tacitly) on variants of positivism and empiricism. This book aims to help rectify the latter while analysing the former. It forms part of a growing Routledge Studies in Critical Realism series edited *inter alia* by Margaret Archer. Theoretically, the book aims to demonstrate the utility of Margaret Archer's 'morphogenetic approach' for educational research; substantively, the focus is the way in which British primary schools have articulated the contradiction between their commitment to child-centredness and the recent marketisation of schooling.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I comprises a review of selected literature in organisational and educational sociology in terms of their approaches to the issue of structure / agency. Here Willmott takes this issue to be the central problematic of these fields and claims the 'structuration theory' of Tony Giddens as the most influential approach to the study of education. Chapters 1 and 2 provide useful summaries of the main arguments from Archer's *Realist Social Theory* and *Culture and Agency*, respectively, illustrated with examples from education. Willmott rehearses Archer's convincing arguments that by failing to understand how structure and agency can be analytically distinguished, structuration theory collapses them together, making analysis of their interrelations impossible, and that her own notion of morphogenesis, with its analytical dualism, overcomes this problem.

The next two parts of the book comprise an application of this approach to empirical research. Part II gives the historical background for recent policy development for primary schools. Three chapters describe the changing balance of power between teachers and governments in the formation and articulation of educational policy during three periods. The first traces the origins of child-centred philosophy and its impact on government policy-making in the period leading up to the Plowden Report (1967). The

way in which changes in the economy restructured relations between teachers and government during the 1970s is then traced, arguing that the former failed to make the most of its opportunities enabling the ascendance of a managerialist agenda. Part II concludes by documenting the coming of age of marketisation within the 1988 Education Reform Act. These three chapters are legitimated as following Archer's approach by providing analyses of socio-cultural conditioning, interaction and elaboration, respectively, and offer a historical account of how the weakening of the position of teachers has enabled the imposition of ideas and practices which are fundamentally opposed to their own beliefs and ways of working. Part III comprises contemporary case studies of two different schools: a 'successful' and a 'failing' school according to OFSTED. The focus here is on how each mediates the contradiction between its commitment to child-centredness and the new environment of managerialism. The book ends with a short conclusion of six pages which condenses the argument; in its own words (from the opening of the final paragraph):

This book has provided a transcendental realist argument that is, namely, the *ontological* propositions secreted by OFSTED that (*qua* CS [Cultural System] denizens) exist independently of agential awareness.
(p.226)

Taking the two aims of the book separately to begin with: substantively, its historical description of the rise of managerialism and case studies of how different schools negotiate their lived contradictions are insightful, interesting and timely. Anyone who works within school effectiveness or policy research should face the questions it raises about their assumptions and policy results. Theoretically, the morphogenetic approach deserves respect, particularly for its understanding of structure / agency and attention to the *sui generis* qualities of culture. Unlike many other approaches it does not sociologically reduce the cultural realm to the positions and practices of actors. The question, however, is whether the morphogenetic approach is a conceptual framework enabling empirical research in its own right or whether it transcendently establishes the *conditions* for such a framework. This distinction is crucial. Willmott takes the former route, a belief with a number of limiting effects.

First, it creates a disjuncture in the text between theoretical and empirical discussions. Theoretical discussion of how structure and agency are conflated within structuration theory and the need for non-reductive analysis of cultural systems establish the conditions for a social realist methodological framework. This represents a major achievement of Archer's morphogenesis theory. However, it is then taken here as also providing the conceptual means for meeting its own criteria. For example, its analytical dualism establishes that one must analyse the socio-cultural and cultural systems but is

not the means for analysing the underlying structuring principles of these systems so as to tell whether they have changed, varied or remained the same. The missing link is what the social realist methodological framework would provide: the means of translating between theoretical and empirical descriptions in a systematic and non-tautological manner. Thus, the study has insightful historical and ethnographic descriptions and interesting theoretical discussion, but the two remain at one remove from each other. Second, the belief that morphogenesis is sufficient unto itself means possible sources for building on its strengths and providing this missing link are occluded (anyone looking for *critical* discussion of Archer's approach will be disappointed). For example, two of the most theoretically sophisticated sociologists of education over the past three decades, Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, provide powerful analytical frameworks more or less compatible with a morphogenetic approach and which would provide tremendous insights into the object of study here. However, neither rate a mention (except for one aside in a quote from Tony Giddens). Such engagements, however, would have been extremely fruitful. For example, Bourdieu's field approach would enrich Willmott's account in Part II of shifting power relations between teachers and government, while his account of the argument that institutions have *sui generis* properties (chapter 1) would improve Bourdieu's tendency to analyse them by summing the properties of individuals.

This is not to argue for the inclusion of any *particular* methodological framework but to briefly illustrate that making morphogenesis both ontology and methodology overreaches and so limits its possibilities. In *Realist Social Theory*, Archer (1995) pithily wrote: 'An ontology without a methodology is deaf and dumb; a methodology without an ontology is blind' (p.28). This captures well the strengths and limitations here: it is only by recognising the nature of the approach - what it does and does not do - and building upon by reaching beyond itself that morphogenesis will become more insightful and influential; substituting itself for the framework whose conditions it establishes would impoverish both.

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