An allegory on the importance of social class in education, organisations and society

Prologue

The basis of Marx’ religious criticism was that religion does not make people but is instead the self-consciousness and self-esteem of people who have either not yet found themselves or have already lost themselves again. As Marx stated, people are not abstract beings who are encamped outside the world. They are the world. They are the world of the state and of society.

As Marx wrote, this state, this society, which is the people, produces religion as an inverted world-consciousness, because they are in an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of that world, its compendium, its logic, its point of honor, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of a human essence that has no true reality. It is a spiritual aroma, the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people and the illusory happiness of the people. So to abolish religion, which is the illusory happiness of the people, is to demand their real happiness. By giving up illusions about the existing state of affairs as affairs which need illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the state of tears, the halo of which is religion.

These comments on religion were made by Karl Marx in his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. As they applied to religion then they apply to education today. Education then and religion now work and worked ideologically in the normalisation of a state affairs in certain interests; those of the 'in power' and empowered. For these reasons, and some other reasons, they have been termed part of the ideological state apparatuses by the French philosopher Louis Althusser. My work has been about the workings of one of these state apparatuses, the School. The following presentation concerns this work and some of the characteristics of education within the context of highly differentiated societies. It has been written on the basis of a number of ethnographic projects, particularly from the fields of educational policy ethnography and policy sociology. Drawing on the notion of allegory and using an allegoric representation it attempts to press the imagination to extrapolate beyond restricted individualistic understandings of learning and education as principally cognitive activities so we may begin to break free from a functionalist tradition with respect to the societal organisation of education today, including education for the professions.

The functionalist tradition separates cognition from action within the organisation of education in places like schools. This has negative consequences particularly in a class-based society, particularly for members of the lower social classes.

The presentation is in 5 parts. These are the present short introduction followed by sections on:

- Allegory (what it is)
- An allegorical account about a child and a struggle over her upbringing
- A discussion linked to an interpretation of the possible meaning of the story
- Some brief conclusions about the social organisation of education and learning and the significance of social class in this. These conclusions are linked to messages in the story.

On allegory

Allegory is a figurative mode of representation conveying a meaning other than the literal. There is an intended message. This message is communicated by means of symbolic figures as in a work of fiction, through a narrative format that tends to be shorter and a little more pointed than a typical story.

Allegory has its roots in the oral story-telling tradition. An allegory is fictional but it has a basis in actual social relations, actual events and actual material conditions that it also attempts to in some way address.

One of the most famous examples of allegory is probably Plato's story of the cave, in which the problem of the reliance on common sense knowledge is discussed and illustrated by reference to men who are
prisoners in a dark cave and whose backs have been turned to the entrance of this cave since birth, so that they cannot see the outside world.

These men believe that the shadows that are cast on the wall of the cave are of people on the outside, as are the voices that they associate with these shadows.
And it is first when one of these prisoners manages to escape that this falsehood is uncovered.

My own allegory bears the title “The Child and the Struggle”. It is a fictive representation of a struggle for control over the upbringing of a beautiful child. This struggle is one between two social fractions. These are represented in the allegory by two tribes.

The allegory of the child and the struggle
A female child was born unto the world. She was extremely beautiful and very desired of two tribes who already lived there. These were known as the eyes and the hands of the world. They each had special qualities and a special place of their own.

The two tribes were very different from each-other in several respects. The eyes were the all-seeing beings of the earth. They came from a dark cave that was believed to hold the solutions to all the secrets of the world behind its many cracks and crevices.

This was their place, and although others were sometimes allowed there, whenever they were in the cave most of them became compelled to follow the eyes, almost mechanically, and could never become free of them there or of their rules. This was valued by the eyes, who felt appreciated and in power, even though—as many of them often said when they were out of earshot of others—‘they weren’t really stimulated in their work with these beings because they often had such a vulgar understanding of the subtleties of the cave and a peculiar view that its secrets should speak directly to their own mundane lives, to be of worth to them’.

The hands, in contrast to the eyes, were ‘basically workers not thinkers’, as they and also the eyes put it. They generally did physical work and carried out tasks that were given to them. Their special place was a bright and open field. It was a place of work, play and learning: a field of production and reproduction in which important and valuable artefacts were made, worked with and developed through use and in action.

The two tribes stuck very much to their own places. For instance, the eyes didn’t come to the field very often, and when they did it was not to work in it but to study and describe it in terms of different theories in the hope of helping to make it more effective. But they had little success.

The eyes were not dextrous beings. They couldn’t do any of the work of the field well, nor join in the activities there without the hands making ironic comments that made them feel uncomfortable and incompetent.

The field was so strange to them. Coming from the dark and quiet cave, they were not used to its light or bustling temperament and they had problems really seeing, understanding and communicating about what was going on there until these things had been reduced to the shadows and sounds of their own symbolic language.
This made communication back to the field-dwellers themselves very complicated.
And this made the eyes feel even more inadequate.

The eyes did not like the inadequacy they felt in relation to the field. Because of what the myths and legends of the earth defined as the great source of knowledge in the cave, the eyes were, both in their own mind and also even more broadly in the minds of others, regarded as superior to the hands.

This superiority was reflected in several different ways. It was reflected structurally in terms of economic wealth and positions of control and authority. But it was also recognised in history, in the stories of the magnificent feasts of some of the great eyes of the past as well as in terms of how the eyes were often
invited to comment on important national decisions as individuals—whilst the hands weren’t. If the hands
got to speak at all, it was through group representatives, many of whom had also spent a lot of time in the
cave so they could see things more clearly and communicate them more effectively, as they put it. These
differences were also reflected in great annual ceremonies where all that was glorious was formally
celebrated, where the hands served and the eyes received formal gifts, social recognition and economic
prizes to help them continue their valuable work by.

Many years passed and during this time through their specialised lives in their special places the eyes and
the hands became increasingly different from each other but, through their love for the love and devotion
of the child, also ever more involved each in their own way, in her upbringing. This was an activity that
they each became highly accomplished in such that finally the other beings at last entirely entrusted them
with the task of raising her alone.

At this point she grew even more beautiful in their conceptions of her. And they each desired her greatly.
To win her more the eyes said, ‘come to us and we will help you learn techniques by which to master the
mining of your own knowledge in the cave. And we will also give you words to communicate it by’.
Whilst the hands said: ‘come to us to learn to run and play in the fields. You cannot live by words alone.
There is much more to life than that. Do let us show you’.

According to parliament ‘time with the child was to be shared as fairly as possible’: with some
reservation given to ‘the need to illuminate all things in the light of the value to all beings of the
knowledge mined in the cave’, as a parliamentary spokesperson put it, and the needs of the child to
master its mining styles in preparation for her creative role in society.

‘But there should also be cooperation’, the spokesperson added. ‘Sometimes the eyes and hands should
work separately with the child, sometimes together, but they should always work cohesively in the spirit
of a common recognition of the generality and transferability of the skills and knowledge that were
developed in the cave and applied in practice’, the speech ran on.

Parliament was the national organisation for running the country and its institutions. Officially it
represented everyone but it was, as you may have already guessed, mainly run by people who had spent a
lot of time in the cave or who supported the actions there and drew direct benefit from them.

Working together and in the same spirit proved to be far from easy, as the two tribes did not have a shared
vision of what working with the child should be like, or what it should lead to. Indeed they did not even
have the same values or desires or the same conceptions of what a good life entailed. In fact so different
had the basic knowledge, skills and values of the two become, that although they could outwardly agree,
secretly most of their respective members felt that their tribe was the one that was right for the child, and
that the role of the other was only to give it things which complimented their own, and which showed
their particular value from another perspective.

Indeed the only thing they really shared with each other was a burning desire for the child’s love and
affection and the almost insurmountable feeling that they must win her over to help her see the true
beauty of the world from their perspective. Over the years, the desire of the eyes and the hands for the
upbringing, love and devotion of the child became an obsession almost, and the struggle over her became
so intense, that when with the eyes, the child was no longer whole, because they, their language and the
existence they had created for her in the cave, denied her recognition of anything else.

Similar things happened in the field. There, the hands made other communication forms than those of the
cave a priority, ‘The language of the body is far more telling than the crude and restrictive concepts of the
cave’ they said, ‘you learn by doing not by words’.

The child was caught up in the struggle between the two tribes throughout her entire upbringing. But what
was she to do. She loved them both so dearly for the devotion they showed her and the help they gave.
And she loved too the places they came from. She enjoyed groping through the cave and coming across what were to her exciting new bends and crevices in it.

The eyes were kind to her there too she felt. They showed her many things and smiled approvingly when she came to them with what, to her, were new stones and crystals of knowledge from the cave floor. This confirmed the value of the cave they said, and also how great their gift was that allowed her to remake their discoveries at her own pace and level.

However, the child also loved to work in the field with the hands, and she always joined in the activities there with great enthusiasm. Indeed she even said that this was what satisfied her most, most of the time. And she longed to be as effortlessly skilled in the work there as the hands that she admired so much.

If only the eyes and hands could be more appreciative of each other, she felt. Things would be really ideal. But this didn’t happen. Indeed, the more time she spent with them and the more she came to know them both, the greater the differences between them seemed to become. And in the almost consuming longing for which she felt each expressed, it was as if she was being ripped apart by their desire to show only the exclusive beauty and ultimate value of their own skills, knowledge and practices. They each pulled so hard at her that she could barely stand the pain of the struggle anymore and all her efforts seemed to be to no avail.

She tried as well as she had learnt to, to speak with the eyes of her fight to come to terms with both the cave and the field, and how she felt about both, and the relations between them. But she could not be heard. For although they tried to help her communicate, as they had promised, the eyes had not learned how to listen to others in the cave. It was their cave and only they knew it well enough to speak in it. ‘When she was older, maybe then she could begin to say what things were really like and what their values really were, and they would listen’. For now though, they said, ‘it was better for her to continue the voyages of rediscovery in projects that they had planned and that they monitored and controlled’.

This would be of great value to her they added ‘as it was now fully recognised by all, that because of its general value and transferability’, study in the cave was the way forward. ‘Performances on cave tests have now become signifiers of the general worthiness and investment value of all individuals’, they pointed out.

When in the field, the child put transferability to the test. She tried to show her need for both hands and eyes, and all that experiences in both field and cave gave her.
But in the field, she was unable to use concepts from the cave, ‘because these were so insensitive and misrepresented what went on there’, according to the hands.
They were only words and words are not deeds, ‘which are the things we deal with, they added’.

Yet without these concepts, the child could not help the hands to even begin feel her meaning. Moreover, when she spoke of how the words of the cave also gave beauty to the activities of the field, the hands derided her. At this point she came quite literally apart.

Both eyes and hands leapt hungrily at the different parts, each dragging away what they claimed was theirs. ‘We own the head. We have made it knowledgeable and can care for it in the cave’, said the eyes. ‘The arms and legs are trained by us. We have run and played with them and they will be ours forever’, said the hands.

The eyes took the head into the cave and fed it all the nutritious things that they knew would make it grow into a fully, all-seeing and all-knowing being, as they themselves had become. And they also trained it to eat things in the correct way and in the right order.

At the same time the hands took the legs and arms to the field to work and play with them more and to train them even further in the practical skills she had begun to master so well. Their hope was that the
arms and legs would become fully competent in these areas one day. ‘Only in this way can you develop in
our likeness of care-ful-practice’, they would often say.

There was a great deal of irony in the developments that had ensued. For instance, although the child had
her head torn from her body, arms and legs, the eyes actually felt that things would work much better for
her in the cave now. With the arms and legs gone, the eyes would articulate the movements of the head
themselves -- ‘without interference from those fidgety parts, which had previously been so distracting’, as
they put it. They didn’t feel they missed the hands either. Because ‘although they were useful in doing
menial things too much time went to telling them how to do these properly in the cave, and in correcting
their mistakes and misunderstandings’, they added.

The hands certainly didn’t feel they needed the head on the child in the field either.
‘There was always so much chatter and so many questions when the head was there’, they said. The arms
and legs of the child would learn their challenging tasks far better without the head.

Moreover, they were particularly happy now that the eyes no longer came to the field. It felt so much more
comfortable without the eyes staring at them, judging them and making everyone nervous. And they said
this even though some of them actually secretly missed showing the eyes things that they could do that
the eyes couldn’t.

After the separation of the parts of the child, the torso, and in it the child’s heart, were left in a part of the
dirt between the cave and the field.

Both eyes and hands visited the torso and were concerned about it, but they didn’t really know what to do
with it, or even what it really was. Indeed they actually thought it strange that such a large part of the
beautiful child had no obvious value, ‘except in holding the legs, arms and head together’, as they put it.
‘Perhaps we can put them together again one day’, they both said. ‘But only when the arms and legs are
ready to sit still and listen, and only if the head is put in charge’, added the eyes.

The child’s now dismembered body was unable to either move or see. It was disabled and unable to
explore the space around it and grasp its meaning. And the eyes often came to think about this and what
could be done about it.

To help put things to rights, they hatched a special experiment. This experiment mimicked the cave as it
involved covering things around the torso in dark cloth and placing rocks there.

They did this because they were convinced that all beings needed the darkness of the cave in order to
really see things properly, and they felt that if they could control the parts of the earth where the child’s
remains lay, and could develop them in the cave’s likeness, maybe the remains could be influenced
positively by this. Indeed with the correct training, maybe they could one day be made ready to reunite
with the head again, when the time was right.

‘Oh how mighty that would be’, they rejoiced! Eventually perhaps the entire earth could be put under the
law of the cave and run by them and the child in the best interests of all.

This, the eyes said, would be their new project, now that they had begun to get full control over the head
without interference from the hands, arms and legs.

The hands, not only because they suspected some kind of plot by the eyes, but certainly in part because of
this, began in their turn to sow grass and flower seeds into the earth where the child’s remains lay. They
wanted this place to be productive, useful and full of beauty, they said, ‘like the field was’. And they also
tried to get the legs and arms to jump and play there, as they did in the field.

Their hope was that the remains might be stimulated by this and may even join in with them.
Indeed they hoped that then unturned by the chattering, interrogating head, the child could learn the fullness of practice, before returning to claim the rest of the earth in the field’s likeness, together with them. ‘Oh what a great deed that would be!’ they said. Who knows they added. ‘Maybe one day we could even caste some light inside that gloomy old cave and reclaim the head from those pernicious eyes’.

As far as I know both these two projects are still going on - but without much success. Indeed thus far all that has happened is that the earth where the torso lays, has become a dark place from the cloths which hide out the light, and that the false and unnatural stones which have been laid by the side of the child’s remains, and that don’t have the natural crevices and exciting surprises of the cave, are usually experienced as dull and uninteresting. They are just barren false stones into which the seeds sown by the hands are beginning to rot and become slippery, treacherous and even dangerous – particularly for the arms and legs. They are the ruins of what was once a place of hope for the life of a beautiful golden child.

In these ruins now lie the remains of the greater part of this child. And these remains dying into the ground and are taking with them the heart of the child.

This is a harsh reality for everyone. But the head is saved from its horror by being kept locked in the cave, to only know its true darkness. And, thus saved from the cruelty of this life of horror the darkness has to the head become a thing of value.

The arms and legs are saved from the horror in another way. Blinded by the light in the field and totally preoccupied in keeping up with its practices they rarely think of things outside their immediate activities.

In a sense then the story of the child and the struggle tells of the death of a child and how the earth has been caste under shadows set in motion by the eyes’ interest in things to do with the knowledge of the cave alone, the hands’ preoccupation with physical work, and the darkness of two colonizing experiments. However, there is another side to this. Some of the eyes actually secretly blame themselves for what has come to pass. They feel that they should, with their knowledge and skills from mining the cave, have both foreseen the problems that evolved and stopped them. And some of them have even inscribed a theory for this into the wall of the cave. They would prefer to have undone what has ensued.

But this is not so for most of them, particularly their leaders. When they see any problems in the turn of events at all, they blame these on the ignorance and foolishness of the hands and the stubborn incompetence of the parts of the child they felt they failed to reach successfully: the arms and the legs.

The hands - in their turn - and particularly their leaders, blame the eyes for what has happened. And they have built what they call a revolutionary jihad, together with the arms and legs as their most vociferous supporters, to counter the dominant world view of the cave. And what they say is the ungodly power of a destructive and dominant tribe. They do this though in their own private interests, by fastidiously reasserting the most conservative values of their own tradition and by reaffirming cultural identity only in the most fundamentalist of terms.

At the end of the story then, it would be easy to blame the eyes and the hands - and even the separated parts of the child herself - for the death of the possibility of a fuller life for the child as a whole and the destruction of the place of hope and beauty. However, among the first of these constituencies were parties who thought both twice and more, and although nothing became of this, something might have, in another story.

Furthermore, it must always be remembered that the problem of the passage of events written on was not one of the intentional devastation of the life of a child by her carers, but something that was caused by competition over the shaping of that child by these carers once they had become her captors, and an unwillingness on their part to sanctify or beautify the work and values of another, and accept that the world can be seen and acted towards with equal value and grace from a perspective and position different to their own.
The above knowledge is available directly from the narrative. But beyond this knowledge is also something else that can reach out to us.

For instance, we might ask who mined the cave and tended the field before the eyes and the hands, and of what prior movement did such incomplete being as separated and severed eye and hand come from? Furthermore, to what purpose does such alienation exist and who really benefits from it, when it is so obviously destructive to those it concerns and touches the most, the places in which it exists and the things and projects that coexist with it? If we could answer these questions, maybe we could start to build afresh. Who knows, perhaps the child could even live again, this time in harmony and freedom.

This is the end of the story, at least for now. It is an ending that has a new beginning and a bright message. It has been chosen for a reason. And that reason is the hope of change.

**Discussion**

In formalized education discourse, theory and practice are often described as two fundamentally different forms of knowledge.

Theoretical studies are said to be formed through objective and systematic investigations that provide descriptions of complex relationships that portray, but are not identical with the ‘realities’ they pertain to, in that they represent abstract explanations, models and generalizations that are learned through various forms of symbolic manipulation.

Practical knowledge on the other hand is said to be ‘subjective’ and more concrete in that it lacks generalization possibilities. It relates instead directly to specific activities that are communicated through experience and the ‘exercise’ of physical abilities and skills in particular and restricted contexts.

However, when we look at the ways of ‘doing theory’ in schools, colleges and universities, what we actually see are contextual practices such as reading, talking, counting, drawing, discussing and writing things, such that the ‘distinctions’ that are most often drawn up between theoretical and practical knowledge (and then perhaps also between doing theory and doing practice) are somewhat questionable, arbitrary and suspect.

The allegory of the child and the struggle is based on this conception and on the notion that all knowledge has its origins in social situations and interactions and is at the bottom line contextual, practical and embodied, and that the division of knowledge into theoretical and practical actually represents arbitrary distinctions based on the separation of cognition from context in learning theory, that cement social relations of production and stabilise the formation of a class society, where privatized efforts to gain a secure identity take precedence over collective efforts to understand, communicate about and also transform historical circumstances.

The technique of deconstruction has been an important precursor to the composition of this message, which is now one about a social-class-relationship and the distinction of theory and practice in relation to it.

Deconstruction is Derrida’s term for the unravelling of the ideological bases of truth claims through a method of literary criticism that undermines arguments by uncovering their un-stated assumptions. The intention is to expose binary determinations and call into question taken for granted, socially constructed and naturalized meanings.

Deconstruction has been of great value in the present instance, as it shows how current education forms crackle on the basis of a deep division of labour that obstructs the development of shared aims, and that always inevitably reappears as a seemingly avoidable product of divisive cultural circumstances, particularly when they have obtained a reified meaning and twisted justification through their meetings with strictly conditioned life forms.
This issue and its consequences are fully present in the story and also hopefully graphically portrayed, in that although the child saw the limitations of division and reduction, and aspired toward a broadly meaningful relationship with everything in the world, this did not stop her missing this opportunity and finally even coming apart through the circumstances of a prior differentiation process that neither she nor her superintendents were able to stop, and to which both she - and they - finally - in their alienation, also acquiesced and even valued.

This is the power of hegemony of course, to invert values and distort meanings. Deconstruction seeks to aid counter-hegemonic forces by unravelling the unspoken assumptions and ideological articulations upon which hegemony is itself developed.

What I am suggesting here is that for its realization, any thought requires both the principle of reason and what lies beyond it, and that small differences can decide any outcome in the displaced passages of one form of identity to another within our present class-cultural locations. Because in any situation of choice, we are only ever able to do or think something according to the available lines of possibility for making sense of experiences and are only able to act on the basis of this sense-making as understanding.

And this is I think, pretty much the size of the current problem regarding the theory–practice issue and rationalized practices for socially organizing education. Like the prisoners in Plato's Cave, we are being severely limited by our everyday experiences, commonsense understandings and acceptances and predominant media articulations of value. And we are through this unable to see that the system we have grown up within is founded on a culturally arbitrary fragmentation of theory and practice and a notion of cognition that has become hegemonic through its relation to the perpetuation of a system that thrives on the creation of separate classes and the symbolic and material exploitation of one class by the others.

This is a third text that stands behind the presentation. It is both latent and manifest in this sense and is a critique of the way ideologies can work at both the rudimentary level of psychic identity and drives, the level of discursive formation and the level of the formation of practices that ultimately help to constitute a social field, and support a particular social order -- no matter how destructive that order may be to those who live under it.

This idea supports something expressed first over 100 years ago by Carl Marx, that whilst we may be the makers of our own history, we do not make this history just as we please or under circumstances chosen by us, but under conditions and circumstances given and transmitted from the past that can at times weigh like a nightmare on all our efforts to transform the world and make history move in desired directions.

Conclusions
The dawn of the enlightenment and the birth of science are said in the mainstream history of science to mark the victory of rationalism over powers that were based on the enforced acceptance of traditional values. However, as critical theorists, feminists and postmodernists have pointed out, the modernizing project of enlightenment science has been unable to sustain these aims, as it too is built on an ambiguous authority, the sedimentation of mythical values and beliefs and the use of forms of symbolic violence that create and bear up privilege.

There is, quite simply, a dark side to enlightenment science and the modern project, which the critical theorists, feminists and postmodernists have shown to favour the domination of the world by an empowered group and a normalization of their right to exploit its resources in a manner that lies behind the destruction of the environment, alienation, and the uprooting and extermination of indigenous peoples and species across the globe for purposes of profit. Science has been more of an ally than opponent in these processes.

Epilogue
The story of the child and the struggle is thus a story of how empowerment is enabled at particular sites and along certain vectors in a way that is not reducible to epistemological positions of subjectivity or the ontological questions of determinate structure alone, but which incorporates both with/in an ideological
and political process. And its message is that the development of education today - and developments
from this education - will always depend in the final instance on at least - and in principle - four things.
These are:

- The material state of the history of society
- The state of the education system that is in place
- How it is talked about and understood socially, and
- The dispositions of the individuals in it

These things form the repertory of actual and virtual possibilities that are offered at any given moment by
the particular space of cultural positions that discourses, previous social relations and material events and
the current ideologies and politics that are related to them, have made available and recognizable, to each
and all of us, as social agents. For as also Bourdieu (1996) notes, agents will (and do) usually use the
powers at their disposal to activate what seems to be in accord with their specific interests in civilizations
like ours and they are in this sense positioned agents who inherit rather than create the traditions and
categories that are immediate in any given social-cultural context.

And this is important regarding the subject positions, identities and practices that become apparent to and
taken up by them,
which are in their turn
at present in our society,
currently almost always primarily issues of social class.

Thankyou for listening