

EDUCATION

IN A NEW

SOCIETY

Renewing the Sociology of Education

JAL MEHTA AND SCOTT DAVIES, EDITORS

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FOREWORD: A MUCH-NEEDED PROJECT

MICHÈLE LAMONT

Education in a New Society represents a timely pathbreaking effort to renew and recalibrate the sociology of education so that it is better equipped to understand education as it exists today. In this book, Jal Mehta and Scott Davies have invited a number of talented researchers to take stock of the field and think through its current limitations and the challenges ahead. They have also written an informative introduction that draws on a detailed empirical study of the field of education as it has manifested itself in the leading sociology journals over the last five decades. This contribution in and of itself is worth the price of admission. Their analysis reveals some of the blind spots of the field as it has grown around the seminal contributions of a handful of leading theorists: James Coleman, Randall Collins, John Meyer, Pierre Bourdieu, and others. Without downplaying the importance of these experts' work, Mehta and Davies show that the scholarship has left important stones unturned. They point to paths for future development that can be pursued by approaching the study of education through the prisms of culture, institutions, politics, knowledge, comparative education, and values. They want sociologists of education to build on their disciplinary strengths to develop a perspective on education that is different, but complementary, to that of economists of education. The latter remain too often unaware of many of the questions that our multimethod intellectual field is particularly well equipped to answer. Sociology should mobilize its unique analytical tools to flesh out a multidimensional framework for capturing the institution of education in all of its manifestations. This volume takes a huge step in showing the way forward.

Concretely, what does this mean? From the perspective of knowledge production, it means looking at education as it is pursued and achieved not only in school and college settings, but also in other contexts: family,

daycare, religious organizations, leisure activities, and so on. It also means focusing not only on the inequalities produced in educational settings, but also on inequalities that result from other outcomes, whether the selection of partners or the development of moral worldviews. It also means developing a more finely grained understanding of the cultural processes involved in the production of inequality by connecting with relevant literatures not yet considered by the field of education (e.g., the literature on omnivorousness referenced by Davies and Mehta in chapter 3). Finally, it means taking on the challenge of thinking bigger and differently about the place of education in larger society; reconsidering the theoretical notions that sociologists of education most often use to make sense of phenomena; inventing a novel approach outside well-traveled paths; and choosing not to spend time writing papers that add additional bricks to an already well established paradigmatic wall, or papers whose conclusions utterly lack surprise.

Against this background, the contributors to *Education in a New Society* are responding to a call to arms from the coeditors to demonstrate the likely heuristic payoff from a broadening of the sociology of education. For this particular volume, the main anchors for creating new analytical bridges come out of neo-institutional analysis, cultural sociology, the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of professions, and the sociology of morality. The contributors to this book are acutely aware of the many ways in which their own research agendas have been enriched by considering questions that lie beyond the traditional terrain of the sociology of education. They make the gamble that the field as a whole would be strengthened by debalkanization and a greater engagement with the surrounding subfields. I find their arguments most convincing, especially given that each chapter makes the case for a specific area of empirical inquiry. But the devil is in the details; it falls to the reader to determine whether the authors deliver on their promises, and to evaluate where this new gamble is likely to lead.

In bringing these authors together, Mehta and Davies pursue one more objective: they crystallize a movement that has been building over the last decade as a number of important books and articles have laid the groundwork for an intellectual agenda for a renewal of the sociology of education. Here I have in mind award-winning books such as *Paying for the Party* by Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton, *Becoming Right* by Amy Binder and Kate Wood, *The Best of the Best* by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, and *Creating a Class* by Mitchell Stevens, to name only a few. Such books have fed not only the sociology of education but also other research areas such as the sociology of evaluation, gender and sexuality, organizations, political socialization, and social movements. They have also looked backward

and sideways, and have been in conversation with a growing American literature on race and class cultures: books such as Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods*, Karyn Lacy's *Blue-Chip Black*, Lauren Rivera's *Pedigree*, and my own *Money, Morals, and Manners*, *The Dignity of Working Men*, and *How Professors Think*. It should be remembered that it is precisely when a subfield becomes generative—a point of reference—for other subfields that its status increases. While the sociology of education has been viewed as being a bit inward-looking or even insular at times, it may now be in a position to act as a point of reference for researchers who are working far afield. This is all for the best.

It is without hesitation that I put my money on *Education in a New Society* and on the set of creative minds who have contributed to the book. Together, they propose a welcome intellectual renewal of our thinking concerning one of the most important social institutions. This is a significant achievement, which could well become a crucial impetus for strengthening sociology as a distinct contributor to the broader enterprise of the study of education.