

treating the subject in a largely conventional, unimaginative fashion.

Roger Magnuson
McGill University

Kevin Harris.

TEACHERS AND CLASSES: A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE.

London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

182 pp. \$11.95.

Writing on the eve of mankind's most tragic and devastating human conflict, the legendary American historian Charles A. Beard argued that:

If we are to overcome the stresses and strains of our civilization by democratic processes rather than by the sword then the foundations must be laid by the front-line teachers. If we are to widen the civilization of the people, as distinguished from the culture of an elite, teachers must be advance-guards.

Many people would uphold the tenet that educators are the *sine qua non* of material progress and social betterment. Beyond these general truisms which applaud the positive contribution offered by the teaching profession, however, lies the more sophisticated philosophical question that seeks to ask how this worthy goal can best be implemented to serve contemporary needs. In other words, is education, as we know it today in the western world, an energetic driving force progressively responsible for the upwardly fluid and mobile advancement of society as a whole or is it time to re-evaluate this premise on the basis of radically new interpretations? According to this latter view, the present educational outlook, far from providing equal avenues of opportunity for all children, rolls over, or at the very least seriously obstructs, those who find themselves at the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Stated another way, does education serve as the great liberating force that breaks the bonds of class differentiation or is this view a hollow myth shrouded to conceal serious defects and abuses?

In *Teachers and Classes: A Marxist Analysis*, Kevin Harris provides us with ample food for thought with his provocative and controversial gadfly approach. The author is of the opinion that "the function of education is conservative, being directed towards integrating new generations into the prevailing culture, and providing knowledge and skills geared toward ensuring social stability and perpetuation of the *status quo*" (p. 8). There is every reason to believe, contends Harris, that the edifice of public instruction not only mirrors the pillars of capitalist society in microcosm, but to a very considerable extent strengthens them

as well. Paradoxically, the process of education thus buttresses what it solemnly, albeit implicitly, professes to demolish - an inflexible class structure which fosters a lingering spiral of inequality among significant sectors of its population. Resting his case on an impressive wealth of empirical evidence, Harris asserts that this intolerable situation "largely reproduces class membership across generations, such that children of controllers become controllers, while children of the controlled become controlled."

In this way, schools serve the political function of maintaining, reinforcing, and reproducing existing class relations; or, more technically, they perform the task of reproducing the relations of production. (p.88)

Because education and teacher training come under direct state control (which has a vested economic and ideological interest in assuring the continued good health of the capitalist scheme of things), educators are legally assigned a curriculum which consciously strives to advance a hierarchical pyramid of social relations. In the final analysis, according to this view instructors end up as unsolicited spokesmen (and apologists) for the capitalist order. "Teachers are employed by the State," writes Harris, "which has the general ideological function of establishing hegemony, or obtaining voluntary submission on the part of labor to the forms and processes of capitalist production."

Teachers are employed in schools, which have the **primary** ideological function of constituting biological individuals into individual ideological subjects who will freely enter the labor market as willing bearers of labor power. In so far as teachers assist in, or are the agents of these processes, which they perform through the very function of transmitting content within the context of the schooling process... then to that degree are they agents of capital (almost certainly unwitting ones) serving the ideological function of capital by contributing to the formation of consciousness conducive to maintaining and reproducing capitalist social relations. (p.124, emphasis added)

Teachers and Classes is best seen as grist for the intellectual mill. The book was not intended as a rigid theoretical exercise whereby only the materialist dialectic approach is extolled and deemed indispensable. It would, therefore be a grave injustice to accuse Harris of proposing dogmatic paradigms as a way of solving complicated educational issues. The author raises a number of salient issues which cannot be easily dismissed. On this fact alone **Teachers and Classes** deserves reading and further thought.

Andre Koczewski
McGill University