

# **Bridging Gulfs Within and Between East and West: A Reply to Attila Horvath**

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# Bridging Gulfs Within and Between East and West

Replies to Attila Horvath

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There is, of course, much to agree with in Attila Horvath's discussion of the different traditions of philosophy of education in Anglo and Marxist positions or, as he is actually discussing, between East and West.<sup>1</sup> While his presentation is unavoidably stereotypical given the limitations of space, there is enough truth in the criticisms it levels at both sides to warrant taking it very seriously. In my own brief comments, I want to extend a few of his points and then direct our attention to other bridges that need to be built if his claims are to be taken further.

It may be unfortunate, but not entirely an overstatement, to say that, by and large, philosophy of education in many western capitalist nations has become nearly irrelevant. So caught up has it become in technical issues that it has reached a point where the connections between it and the concerns and activity of the educational community in general are tenuous at best and nearly invisible at worst. At exactly the time when public confusion over political, ethical, and cultural matters is at its highest, it has become relatively arcane in style and in the issues it has chosen to focus upon. This is a distinct pity since questions such as What knowledge is of most worth?, What are appropriate relations between citizens and the state?, How can society and its educational system be made more equal?, and similar issues cry out for clarification and analysis. When Wittgenstein suggested that the task of philosophy was to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle,<sup>2</sup> little did he know that many philosophers of education would create a new bottle, one that all but ignored the relations of power that organized daily economic, political, and cultural life.

This is unfortunate not only conceptually, but politically as well. The conservative restoration now so advanced in many capitalist nations has brought with it major changes in our ideas about legitimate knowledge, equality, person rights versus property rights, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Each of these alterations requires us to understand what is being lost and/or transformed conceptually and politically. And each provides fertile soil for the analysis that is increasingly necessary. Yet, as long as philosophers of education tend to

gaze from the sidelines, so to speak, as society and education are reconstructed by the Right, they will have little influence in assisting all of us in countering such a reconstruction. The idea of the philosopher as a member of the community, with a stake in assisting all of us in our collective search for the conditions of the common good, has withered.

Of course, too close a relationship with issues of power and with the "collectivity" has its dangers as well. One can lose the critical function of the philosophical enterprise and too closely embrace an existing, and sometimes repressive, political and conceptual apparatus. Attila Horvath rightly urges us to see these dangers in his discussion of the logic of philosophy of education in some state socialist countries. Because of this, he urges both sides to embrace what both now reject--relativism. I agree with the spirit behind his claims, but perhaps would extend it beyond what Dr. Horvath intended. Here, I am talking about the tendencies to use reductive and mechanistic logics in some Marxist approaches to explanation in both East and West.

The call for a more relativistic position may not be entirely satisfactory in strictly logical terms to some of the readers of this journal. But I find it considerably more satisfying in political terms, especially given the class and economic reductionism that has become constitutive in parts of the Marxist tradition.<sup>4</sup> As I have argued at considerable length elsewhere, we should not automatically assume the primacy of class relations over those of gender and race. These latter two dynamics, and the immensely complex and contradictory inter-connections among all three, must be given equal weight before any one is rejected. Of course, we may find that class has primacy in a situation, but it would have to be proven, not assumed at the outset. This less reductionist stance--what has been called the parallelist position--also has the effect of increasing the visibility of cultural and political processes, not only economic ones, in the description and explanation of how education functions in all its contradictions.<sup>5</sup>

None of this embodies a uni-causal theory such as the one which dominates a good deal of orthodox Marxist work, in which all social and educational dynamics are ultimately reduced to their roots in economic and class relations. Rather, it requires a more flexible (Attila Horvath might say a more "relative") theory of over-determination. These points are not unimportant given my earlier argument that all too many philosophers of education, in the West especially, have all but ignored issues of power and collective commitment. To overcome this and in the process turn to, say, the neo-Marxist conceptual tradition for assistance on these issues (as I believe it would be wise to do), we must do so in a manner that is

not only self-critical and reflexive, but in a way that appropriates the most subtle and least mechanistic positions of that tradition (unlike the ones discarded nearly a decade ago<sup>6</sup>.) Similar movements are occurring not only in the West but in the East as well.

Thus, the problem is not only to bridge the gap between East and West, but also to bridge the gap within each area. Much of the most creative "leftist" conceptual work is currently going on within the Western socialist and feminist communities. Perhaps it might be equally as wise for philosophers of education in the West to focus just as much of their attention on those theories that have arisen out of the unequal circumstances within their own nations as they do on the theories and perspectives developed in the East.

Do not misconstrue my points in these brief comments. I applaud Attila Horvath's important attempts to find a way to lessen the divide between Anglo and Marxist work. I do believe that it is essential for scholars in education from both "blocs" to build bridges and to come to understand the qualities of each others' traditions and conceptual apparatus. To the extent that this can be accomplished, it will no doubt enrich both sides. Yet, it must not be done in such a way that assumes that creative and critical work is not already being done within each of these blocs, work that has already made substantial contributions to a more adequate understanding of the process of education. Internal bridges may be just as important as external ones.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup>I say this because Marxist philosophy of education in the West is often very different than that found in the East, especially in its appropriation of the analytic tradition and in the topics it wishes to focus upon. See, for example, Colin Lankshear and Moira Lawler, *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution* (London: Falmer Press, 1988) and Daniel Liston, *Capitalist Schools* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 103.

<sup>3</sup>See Michael W. Apple, "Redefining Equality," *Teachers College Record*, 20, (Winter) 1988, 167-184.

<sup>4</sup>I stress the word parts here because, as many of you will know, real gains have been made in making this tradition less reductionist and more subtle. For further discussion, see Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power* (New York and London: Routledge, revised ARK edition, 1985).

<sup>5</sup>Apple, *Education and Power* and Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>I refer here to the correspondence theories standing behind important but seriously flawed work such as Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).