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Education

Are teachers the (new) proletarians?

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In his latest book, ‘Enseignants, les nouveaux prolétaires’ (‘Teachers, the new proletarians’), Frédéric Grimaud gives a convincing demonstration of how the Macron reforms have profoundly transformed the teaching profession in France. [1] The subtitle of the book is apt: ‘Taylorism in schools’. But is that enough to link teachers to the proletariat? The question merits debate.

Grimaud recalls Taylor's intentions in 1927: ‘[to] convince us that there is a science for each of the elementary acts that constitute trades’. This brings to mind France's minister of education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, and his desire to ‘build a method for objectifying [the teaching profession]’ and the way in which he insisted that ‘cognitive sciences must feed into practice’. The aim of Blanquer's reforms is above all to turn the profession into a repetitive, standardised job, where the teacher can be replaced by anyone (or even by videos or artificial intelligence). This echoes the current reforms to teacher training. The government wants to rename the training institutes to become Ecole Normale Supérieure du Professeurs (ENSP). [2]

This is not just a change of name. The ENSPs will not have the support of higher education and academic freedom, but will simply provide training under the control of the French education system. In this respect, it is significant that Macron has proposed (unconsciously, we hope) that ‘the teacher training colleges of the 21st century’ should have the same acronym as the police academy. [3]

Teachers as artisan-educators

But are the reforms introduced since 2017 enough to say that teachers are new proletarians? As Grimaud himself acknowledges, ‘the formula is risky’. On the one hand, Marx established that a proletarian has a precise place in the process of creating or realising value. The creation of value is understood in two senses: a concrete sense which refers to the actual transformation of material by a technique - the worker produces something - and an abstract sense which refers to the fetishisation of the product as a commodity. On the other hand, within the framework of commodity fetishism that Marx specifies ‘what the worker sells is not his labour directly, but his labour-power, the momentary disposal of which he cedes to the capitalist’. [4] Labour power is a commodity like any other, whose price is determined by the employer. It is customary to identify the role of education with increasing the value of labour power: it is in this sense that public education can be seen as the means of ensuring the existence of a skilled workforce. It is in this sense that teachers can be seen as workers: they ‘add’ value to a material in the form of the pupil, a workforce in the making.

Productive labour

However, it's not so obvious to say that the teacher is a ‘producer’, and therefore a ‘worker’ in Marx's sense. From the point of view of abstract labour, it is in part (and in part only) that the price of labour is determined by the skills and knowledge of the employee. This is where the problem lies for the teacher: while we can see that the presence of teachers has an impact on the value of the labour power of future workers, it seems impossible to measure it. To put it another way: the same teaching does not lead to the same increase in the value of the workforce for those who follow it. To use the formula of the educational think tank, the Groupe français d'éducation nouvelle (GFEN): in the final analysis, it's the young person who learns, in other words, etymologically: they take what they can when they

can. And even worse: there is no way of establishing whether the knowledge transmitted will be retained over the long term.

It cannot be said that teachers have actually produced anything: they profess, declare and state the knowledge that they are supposed to have mastered and 'teach' it, i.e. they ensure that this discourse is not simply declamation, but that it is prehensible and that the interlocutors can acquire it. Their actual acquisition depends on their reception, which can never be merely passive. If there is indeed an 'addition of concrete value', this is entirely dependent on the active consent of the student, even though the latter is not the initiator of this contribution.

Objectivising tasks?

This fraternal criticism of the title of Grimaud's book does not detract from the accuracy of his intuition. The structural reforms undertaken by Macron and his epigones seek to 'convince people that there is a science of each of the elementary acts that make up a profession' and that the teaching profession can hence be divided into elementary tasks, themselves scientifically optimised. [5] But this is a pipe dream. Not because teachers are impervious to liberal theses, but because the work of the teacher is not identified with production. Production is not simply the result of the perfect execution of a task or the appropriate use of a technique. Imagination is required in production and in the contribution of value: it is not distinct from labour, it is the foundation of human labour. Marx opposes the idealism that makes imagination a real force, but he also asserts that labour cannot be reduced to visible operations. Materialism is not crude objectivism. To define labour, Marx points out that 'what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality [what] distinguishes the worst architect from the most expert bee from the outset is that he has built the cell in his head before he builds it in the street. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. [6]

It is to this 'humanising' component of work that the teacher addresses themselves: they strive to extend what makes work possible, and their work is entirely encompassed in this task prior to the pupil's production and ability to produce. [7] They don't produce, they make it possible.

Pedagogy and the interpersonal link

In a way, the teacher bears a resemblance to the artisan. The increase in the student's knowledge, skills and know-how is specific to the teacher and is linked to the student's current attitude in their interaction (or lack of it) with the teacher. You can only learn what you don't know. The act of learning begins with the recognition that we don't know and implies a desire to fill the void that has just been created. The teaching profession is a precarious and special combination of managing to interest pupils in unknown content that they have not chosen a priori, and giving them the means to fill this intimate absence that has just been created. This is what is at stake in pedagogy, which corresponds to the teacher's non-reproducible know-how: it cannot simply be a matter of technique, because the subject, the student, is not a material whose properties are always identical. A hard head is not a wooden head. Although certain tasks in the teaching profession are reproducible and, after more than a century of educational research, methods have emerged that are more effective than others, they all depend on the interpersonal relationship that teachers establish with their learners. To put it more clearly, whatever happens, the scientific division of the teaching profession into elementary tasks is doomed to failure, precisely because it is based on the relationship between two free and conscious living beings, capable of working, and not between a worker and inert

matter.

Are teachers in the camp of the proletariat?

Classifying teachers in the ranks of the proletariat is a socio-historical construct that cannot be detached from the massification of this body, following the Ferry law of 1882 on compulsory education. This was based on the ideological desire of 'class defectors' at the turn of the century to be attached to their class of origin, as underlined by the manifesto of the syndicalist teachers in 1905. But there was nothing obvious about this primitive attachment, and other teachers preferred a peer organisation, autonomous from the proletariat, which was reflected in the bipolarity between trade union organisations and professional associations. As Samuel Joshua reminds us, in the 1970s, Marxists classified teachers as 'the new petty-bourgeoisie'. [8]

Even if this economist characterisation is debatable, it is certain that teachers do not belong to the class per se, but the question of the class per se is debatable. Schools have a collective dimension, like primitive factories. Operating collectively within the same structure induces habitus and group reflexes. The numerical importance of teacher unionism in France places a significant proportion of teachers in the ranks of the proletariat.

Functionaries in the service of the state

However, this categorisation overlooks the fact that teachers are mainly functionaries. At the very least, they represent, as Bourdieu puts it, 'the left hand of the state'. This dimension is absent from Grimaud's book. And yet it is a fundamental contradiction. Ultimately, they assume the contradiction between liberating knowledge and confining scholasticism (minds and bodies). In this sense, teachers are the daily representatives of the training (and formatting) of the proletariat to the needs dictated by the state. This is precisely one of the issues that has been at stake since compulsory schooling began at the end of the 19th century, through the mass schooling of the post World War 2 era to the Blanquer reforms: the school is a tool of the state to serve the interests of employers. It is this ideological contradiction that explains, for example, the debates between teachers on the 2004 law on religious symbols, which is seen as alienating teachers from the Islamophobic decisions of governments, under the guise of a so-called 'republican' discourse. Macron's school reforms, designed to meet the current needs of French capital, are leading to a profound change in the teaching profession, and this is what Grimaud points out. He rightly speaks of the proletarianisation of the profession.

Cognitive capitalism

The convergence of teaching work with the situation of the proletariat can be thought of in a more structural way, under the hypothesis of a partial evolution of capitalism into 'cognitive' capitalism and no longer just industrial capitalism. Yann Moulier Boutang writes: 'By cognitive capitalism, we mean a form of accumulation in which the object of accumulation is principally knowledge, which becomes the principal resource of value as well as the principal locus of the process of valorisation': the subordination of the humanisation of teaching work to liberal imperatives aims to assimilate the creative process to capitalism, in the same way that 'emancipatory' demands were integrated into the logic of liberal management after 1968. [[Y. Moulier Boutang, 'Le capitalisme cognitif: la

From this perspective, if teachers can be said to be proletarianised, it is because they are aware of the degradation involved in translating imagination into an abstract resource for capital. In this sense, the integration of teachers into

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the proletariat's 'class for itself' is essential.

The state's efforts, which make use of the teaching profession's ideological affinity with republican discourse, are aimed at forcing this institution into generalised proletarianisation. By making teachers the defenders of the Republic, the state is creating an abstract divide between teachers and students by opposing them on the basis of 'ideological values', whereas teachers are opposed by their professional practice to the commodification of humanising faculties. That's why the fight against the alienation of teachers is the fight of our social camp.

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[1] F. Grimaud, *Enseignants les nouveaux prolétaires*, 2024, Esf Science humaine. The quotes from Taylor and Blanquer are taken from this book.

[2] The University Institutes for Teacher Training (IUFM) were created in 1990 as a successor to the teacher training colleges (écoles normales) created in 1808. They were replaced by the écoles supérieures du professorat et de l'éducation (ESPE) in 2013, then by the instituts nationaux supérieurs du professorat et de l'éducation (INSPE) in 2019.

[3] ENSP refers to either the École Nationale Supérieure de la Police or the École Normale Supérieure du Professeurs.

[4] Karl Marx, "Wages, Prices and Profits", 1865.

[5] F. W. Taylor, 'Principles of Scientific Organisation', 1927, quoted by F. Grimaud, op. cit.

[6] Karl Marx, 'Capital', Book I, Chapter VII, 1867.

[7] For Marx, work is humanity's 'generic' activity. It keeps us alive and is essential to us. It has the singularity of being conscious (through the imagination) in humans - whereas in the animal, the maintenance of life would be the result of instinct. This is what capitalist alienation dispossesses humans of, by prescribing the way to work.

[8] S. Joshua, "Enseignants, les nouveaux prolétaires?" *Contretemps*, 20 April 2024.