

of analysis that emphasize society at more abstract levels, it places active human beings at the core of sociological inquiry.

Despite its insights, interpretative sociology often fails to provide a comprehensive analysis of social life. The tendency within this approach to focus on immediate social settings is more oriented to description than to explanation. This ahistorical emphasis makes it relatively unable to explain problems such as how it is possible for enduring social inequalities to persist or how broad social positions and expectations may change. In the analysis of education, for example, an emphasis on interactions within the classroom is often unconnected with social structures and practices that shape the organization of the classroom, the curriculum, and the forces that condition the opportunities and experiences of the educational participants. Similarly, an acknowledgement that particular social circumstances and definitions are socially constructed does not necessarily indicate whose definitions are employed or what barriers stand in the way of attempts to introduce new definitions and social constructions.

Critical Sociologies

Various forms of critical analysis have been posed as alternatives to the traditional variants of sociology represented by structural functionalism and interpretative analysis. Critical analysis, as the term suggests, engages in a critique of social structures and practices by probing beyond descriptions of the status quo. The social world, as opposed to something neutral or mutually beneficial to all its members, is characterized by fundamental structural inequalities constituted in part by oppression by dominant groups over subordinate social groups. Critical sociology, in this regard, is committed to social change as well as to social analysis. This does not mean that the approach is unscientific. Instead, in common with interpretative approaches, it argues that science is a necessary human activity uncovering aspects of social reality that tend to be hidden from us in our everyday lives.

These characteristics can be illustrated with reference to two main branches of critical analysis, Marxism and feminism. Marxist analysis emphasizes that class, defined according to ownership and control of productive resources, is the fundamental basis of social inequality and oppression. Feminist analysis sees patriarchy, or male domination of personal and institutional life, as the primary basis of social differentiation. From different starting points, both Marxist and feminist approaches share the view that extensive analysis is required to uncover the dynamics and roots of social oppression and structured inequalities. Both theoretical stances also share a common commitment to changing repressive social conditions, although each contains varying assessments of the nature of, and strategies to advance, social change.

Despite this common ground, there are important differences among particular forms of critical analysis. Even general orientations to analysis such as Marxism and feminism contain sharply divergent approaches. Whereas radical feminism and orthodox Marxism, for example, disagree fundamentally about the origins of social

they bring with them into educational settings, the structures and practices that constitute education on an ongoing basis, and the linkages between education and the socio-economic context within which it operates. More recent political economic analysis, informed by practices associated with globalization, has shifted its focus from education in specific national or regional settings in order to understand linkages with comparative and international dimensions of education.

CONCLUSION

The sociology of education, parallel to the educational realities it seeks to investigate and explain, is a multi-faceted and changing endeavour. It is essential to maintain sufficient scope and diversity in the analysis of education in order to capture the richness of education in its various forms. At the same time, because educational research and theory can be used to guide policy and practice, we must ensure that our understanding of educational matters develops in a comprehensive way, based as much as possible on complete and accurate information that is sensitive to its potential impact on people's lives.

The task to develop a socially meaningful understanding of education is especially daunting at a time when education faces serious challenges often considered to be of crisis proportions. Canada's growing integration into new global economic and political alignments is forcing a reassessment of how education should best be employed for competitive advantage. Significant changes occurring across institutional spheres of contemporary life are accompanied by transformations in how we engage with and make sense of our identities and our relations with social and natural environments. Educational reform and reorganization are further promoted through changing government priorities and operations, important demographic and economic transformations, and strategies developed in response to issues related to regional diversity, national unity, and shifting global relations. Media attention and public outcries periodically focused on real or imagined concerns such as declining educational standards, intolerable illiteracy and school dropout rates, lack of discipline and respect for authority, increasing crime rates among young offenders, and lack of moral guidance and focus among youth have drawn attention to the limitations of existing educational bureaucracies and to desires for accountability and choice in schooling. Changing gender relations, new patterns of immigration, and prospects for self-determination among First Nations have forced educational institutions to be increasingly responsive to issues of representation, cultural diversity, and equity. Shifting arrangements and tensions related to work, income, and family life, and transitions throughout the life course have carried over into schooling, creating pressures for increased flexibility and demands for new educational supports and services at the same time that budgetary needs for public education and social services must be justified in such a way as to ensure they do not fall behind other priorities.

In the chapters that follow, historical and contemporary dimensions of Canadian education, its structure and participants, and the challenges facing it are examined through critical sociological inquiry. Each chapter highlights a