

Marxist Sociology of Education and the Problem of Naturalism: An Historical Sketch

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Introduction: Marxism, Education and the Problem of Naturalism

History itself is a *real* part of *natural history* and nature's becoming man. Natural science will in time subsume the science of man just as the science of man will subsume natural science: there will be *one* science. (Marx, 1975/1844, p. 355)

These brief sentences succinctly express Marx's commitment to philosophical and scientific naturalism. In the first sentence, Marx stresses an ontological naturalism that clearly identifies Marxism as a species of naturalism where human beings exist in continuity with nature: history encompasses both the social and the natural worlds. Marxism, as Alex Callinicos has put it, "is best understood as a species of naturalism that conceives human beings as continuous with the rest of nature rather than as irreducibly different from the physical world" (1987, p. xix). The second sentence reveals Marx's scientific naturalist credentials. If history 'is a real part of natural history and nature's becoming man,' then the social and the natural are to be studied under a common method of scientific enquiry.¹ Furthermore, the mutual subsumption of 'natural science' and 'the science of man' implies a non-reductive, i.e. dialectical, approach to science and critique. Given Marx's naturalism is of a materialist kind (i.e. the material, objective conditions of existence predominate the ideational and subjective realities of life), his method is most aptly described as 'dialectical historical materialism' or simply 'historical materialism'.²

Amongst philosophers of science, it is well known that naturalism evokes two problems: the tendencies to reductionism (in philosophical naturalism), and to scientism or positivism (in scientific naturalism) (see Bhaskar, 1998, 2008). The history of Marxist thought has not been immune to these problems. Indeed, the rise of Western Marxism (Anderson, 1976) has been on the back of tensions around Marx's naturalism – generally couched in terms of a 'crisis in

¹ It must be noted that in Marx's terms 'science' did not, as it does in some quarters today, equate with 'positivism' or refer exclusively to empirical, 'evidence-based' methodology. Rather, science for Marx was critique. One just has to recall the subtitle to the pinnacle of his scientific work – *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* – to appreciate this.

² However, it is well known and documented that Marx never used the terms 'dialectical historical materialism' or 'historical materialism'. He consistently described his theory as the 'materialist conception of history.' With this in mind, 'historical materialism' will be used throughout this paper.



historical materialism' (see Anderson, 1976, 1983; Aronowitz, 1990). It is around the theme of a crisis in historical materialism (as a particular Marxian development of the broader problem of naturalism) that this paper is directed. The paper addresses this crisis in the service of bringing clarity to various persistent and debilitating tensions within the field of Marxist Sociology of Education. It is argued that these tensions have their origins in the broader problems of naturalism – especially the tendency to reductionism. To this end, the paper is directed to presenting an explanatory sketch of the field's pre-history to illuminate Marxist Sociology of Education as a concrete expression of particular ideas, social movements and events that express long histories of contest and struggle. While necessarily selective, this account will situate the field within a variety of theoretical trajectories coming from both within and outside Marxism. In the context of the rise of Western Marxism in the 1920s and the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s, specific consideration is given to the influence Lukács, Gramsci, and Althusser (and, to a lesser extent, Weber and Durkheim) have had on the formation of Marxist Sociology of Education.

Western Marxism: Marxism after Marx and Engels

With Marx's death in 1883, European worker organisations increasingly looked to Engels for leadership in the theoretical elaboration of historical materialism and its practical articulation to the socialist project. It was a point in history, as Gareth Stedman Jones observes, that "marked the transition... from Marx to Marxism" (1973, p. 19).

From the late 1870s, Marx's work was beginning to become known in the European labour movement. It was already acknowledged as the correct socialist theory, although barely understood by... the leaders of the German Social-Democratic party. In the course of the next dozen years, groups and embryonic parties modelling themselves on the German Social-Democratic Party, and basing themselves on what they took to be the ideas of Marx, sprang up in every major European country – the Parti Ouvrier Français in 1879, the Russian Group of the Emancipation of Labour and the English Social-Democratic Federation in 1883, the Parti Ouvrier Beige in 1885, the Austrian and Swiss Social Democratic Parties in 1888 and the Italian Socialist Party in 1892. The task of systematizing historical materialism and deducing its implications had become politically urgent. That task fell to Engels. (Stedman Jones, 1973, pp. 18-19)

While Engels had worked closely with Marx and had been significant in the popularization of his work, it was in the years immediately after Marx's death that Engels "reached the apex of his intellectual career, consciously speaking as the foremost authority on a comprehensive socialist worldview that bore the birthmarks of his own interpretive spin but [which he] mostly ascribed to his dead friend" (Steger & Carver, 1999a, p. 4). It was also a time when Marx's materialist view of history came increasingly to be interpreted as a deterministic philosophy that called for, and served to, justify political reformism. The extent to which Engel's own 'interpretive spin' contributed to this 'revision' of historical materialism is a matter of intense debate amongst Marxist scholars (see Steger & Carver, 1999b). However, despite the various scholarly conclusions, it is generally recognized that, at least on occasions, Engels did gesture to mechanical determinism. For example, in 1886, he wrote that while

... historical events [might] appear on the whole to be... governed by chance [and that] surface accident holds sway, [history is] actually... always governed by

inner, hidden laws; and it is only a matter of discovering these laws. (Engels, 1946/1886, p. 48)

According to Alex Callinicos, it is understandable that pronouncements by Engels are open to mechanistic and reductionist interpretations, given “the absence of an articulated scientific theory of the superstructure” (1976, p. 15) in either Marx’ or Engels’ work. However, in addition to the theoretical re-visions of Marxism at the time, these have to be placed in the context of the nineteenth-century class struggle in Europe. As Marxist scholars like Chris Harman (2008) have stressed, this requires an appreciation of the significant influence that the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) had on European socialist theory and practice of the time.

With the expansion of industrial capitalism in nineteenth-century Europe and the subsequent growth in working class numbers, Europe witnessed a growth in socialist organizations and class-consciousness amongst the working class. However, with the defeats in the 1848 and 1871 revolutions fresh in the minds of workers, there was little will for a direct challenge to capital (see Harman, 2008). Rather, the agitation of European workers came to be directed to taking advantage of concessions won from capital in order to further opportunities to build worker organizations and to advance (male) working class suffrage. This was the strategy of the SDP. Chris Harman chronicles the SDP’s success:

Its vote grew from election to election and was bigger than that of either the big landowners’ party or the industrialists’ party. It survived a 12-year period of illegality under ‘anti-socialist’ laws, achieved a membership of a million and ran 90 local daily papers. Its network of ancillary organisations (unions, welfare societies and so on) became part of the fabric of people’s lives in many industrial districts. It managed to do all this despite the repeated arrest of its newspaper editors, organisers and parliamentary deputies. It seemed to show that capitalist democracy could be turned against capitalism.... (Harman, 2008, p. 391)

The accomplishments of the SDP in building a mass base of working-class support appeared to point to a qualitatively different route to socialism than that offered by revolutionary Marxism. The success of the SDP’s strategies in garnering mass working-class support to *reform* capitalism saw socialist parties and labor organizations across Europe taking the lead.

In 1889, four years after the death of Engels, the SDP – along with other socialist parties and worker organisations from across Europe – met at the Paris International Workers’ Conference. Out of this meeting, the Second International (1889-1914) was formed. From its inception, the weight of the Second International’s theoretical and political anchors rested solidly not only in German social democracy (Johnstone, 1991), but also in a deep suspicion of Hegelian dialectics. With Engels’ absence, the leading theoreticians of the Second International were SDP members Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky. In emphasizing that the “great things which Marx and Engels achieved [were] accomplished in spite of, not because of, Hegel’s dialectic” (in Gay, 1952, p. 131), Bernstein gave impetus to the Second International’s drift towards positivist science. On the other hand, Kautsky’s Darwinian³ suspicion of Hegel fostered a belief in

³ In comparing his intellectual roots with those of Marx and Engels, Kautsky is known to have remarked: “They started with Hegel, I started with Darwin” (from Callinicos, 1999, p. 112).

parliamentary reformism over social revolution. From both Bernstein and Kautsky, the Second International took the idea of an evolutionary path to socialism (see Salvadori, 1990; Steger, 1997).

The *evolutionary* naturalism of the Second International constructed Marxism as an economically reductivist, and positivist, science. Armed with the surety of laws akin to those of nature, Marxist theory was seen to point to the inevitability of a transition from capitalism to socialism. Furthermore, the Second International moved away – both theoretically and strategically – from with the idea of the proletariat as a revolutionary, or *transformative*, agent. The working class was constructed as more of a collective *reformative* agent that was to either refashion capitalist structures to hasten historical inevitability or stand aside to allow those structures to evolve and do their historical work. Its dominant themes of reformism and economic reductionism stood in contrast to the revolutionary and the dialectically materialist impulses of classical Marxism.

As is well-known amongst Marxist scholars, events were to soon unfold that would challenge socialist evolutionism. The 1917-Bolshevik Revolution seemed to defy evolutionary laws insisting that socialism could only be achieved through the ballot box. Kautsky, for example, strongly condemned the Bolsheviks for ignoring the fact that socialist revolution in a country that had not gone through its capitalist phase was doomed to fail. Thus, for Kautsky, Bolshevism “represented a voluntarist regression from Marxism, a disastrous assertion of will in defiance of material circumstances” (Callinicos, 1999, p. 114). It is against such positivist evolutionism that Gramsci’s remarks that the October Revolution was a ‘revolution against Marx’s *Capital*’ can be understood. In an article published soon after October 1917, Gramsci wrote:

In Russia, Marx’s *Capital* was more the book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat. It stood as the critical demonstration of how events should follow a pre-determined course: how in Russia a bourgeoisie had to develop, and a capitalist era had to open, with the setting-up of a Western-type civilization, before the proletariat could even think in terms of its own revolt, its own class demands, its own revolution. But events have overcome ideologies. Events have exploded the critical schema determining how the history of Russia would unfold according to the canons of historical materialism. The Bolsheviks reject Karl Marx, and their explicit actions and conquests bear witness that the canons of historical materialism are not so rigid as might have been and has been thought. (Gramsci, 1977/1917, p. 34)

The outbreak of the First World War saw the collapse of the Second International amid tensions between nationalism and working-class internationalism. The SDP and the other leading parties of the Second International lent support to their own warring nationalist governments. In direct opposition to Lenin’s theory of imperialism (Lenin, 1973/1916)⁴ and Marx’s urgings in the *Communist Manifesto*, Kautsky gave the rallying call: “capitalists of the world, unite!” (in

⁴ Lenin described Kautsky as a “dangerous defender” of imperialism. To Lenin, Kautsky “flagrantly [deceived] the workers by repeating the selfish lie of the bourgeoisie of all countries, which is striving with all its might to depict this imperialist and predatory war for colonies as a people’s war” (Lenin, 1969/1949, pp. 7-9).

Callinicos, 1999, p. 114). To Kautsky, war was a destructive impediment to capitalist production and, as such, completely at odds with economic progress. Just as it was irrational for capitalists to support war, Kautsky saw the power to end wars lying in the hands of capitalists. He asserted in 1927 that “the movement in the direction of eternal peace through world commerce must finally become irresistible” (in Callinicos, 1999, p. 113). Whatever the theoretical inadequacies and the political limits of the Second International may have been, its “ignominious collapse,” as Johnstone put it, was part of, and contributed to, a “period of capitalist expansion [that saw] the national integration of the labor movement” (1991, p. 264). In its development and ultimate demise, the Second International had sown the seeds of ‘Western Marxism.’

In his historiography of Western Marxist analyses of the Soviet Union, Marcel van der Linden (2007) usefully identifies two broad meanings attached to the concept of ‘Western Marxism.’ One refers to approaches to Marxist theory that emphasise the cultural and ideological dimensions of social life; the other turns to issues of political and economic geography. Here, van der Linden defines Western Marxism in terms of its political and conceptual positioning in relation to the Soviet Union or, more specifically, the ‘Russian Question.’⁵ He identifies two critical stances within Western Marxist analysis and describes them as ‘non-Soviet’ and ‘non-Soviet-like.’ While the former takes a view of Marxist thought, “not conforming to official Soviet ideology,” the latter does not regard “the social structure of the Soviet Union either as socialist, or as developing towards socialism” (van der Linden, 2007, p. 4).

The value of van der Linden’s conceptual framing to this discussion is two-fold. Firstly, in pointing to the historico-political origins of Western Marxism, it shows that the various (and often competing) forms of Western Marxism have their roots in class struggle – the origins of which have a history reaching back into the early decades of the last century. This reveals that an intellectual field like Marxist Sociology of Education is the product of a class history that long precedes it. For the life of the field, not only does its history need to be grasped, but it also has to be understood in the context of its own geo-temporal class struggles. Secondly, van der Linden’s framing points to a common theme within Western Marxism: its rejection of ‘orthodoxy’ in the form of a fatalistic and positivist Marxism. The general path taken by Western Marxists in their efforts to avoid ‘orthodoxy’ has been to return to Hegel (see Agger, 1979; Jacoby, 1991; Merquior, 2003).

Return to Hegel: Lukàcs and Gramsci

Hegel’s gift to Marx was the dialectic: the ‘algebra of revolution,’ as Lukács (1971/1923, p. 27) put it. In distinguishing between Hegel’s dialectical method and idealist system, Marx was able to extract general laws – or tendencies – understood to govern nature, society *and* their inter-relations. Standing Hegel on his head, Marx revealed and developed a dialectical – and methodologically naturalist – materialism. Significantly, however, the ‘Western’ Marxist return

⁵ The ‘Russian Question’ here refers to debates around the nature of the Soviet Republic and the USSR since the 1917 October Revolution. In particular, it points to the class nature of the USSR and the extent to which it is a representation of socialism and socialist practice. As van der Linden (2007) shows, there is much controversy amongst Marxist historians around the ‘Russian Question.’ Even from the early formation of the Russian Republic, there were contestations over its class nature. To Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Russia was a workers’ state. To social democrats like Kautsky, the Bolsheviks had succeeded only in establishing a form of state capitalism.

to Hegel – while representing moves against the anti-dialectical materialism of Stalinist orthodoxy and the mechanical evolutionism of the Second International – has ushered in forms of Marxism that, as Roy Bhaskar emphasizes, are “anti-naturalist, anti-causalist, as well as, anti-determinist” (1991a, p. 141). This Hegelian Marxism has served as a push away from Marxism as a socio-naturalist science to an exclusively materialist theory of society.

Central to the early development of Western Marxist thought was Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*. In 1967, reflecting on the theoretical and political influence of this work, Lukács noted:

... the revival of Hegel’s dialectics struck a hard blow at the revisionist tradition. Already, Bernstein had wished to eliminate everything reminiscent of Hegel’s dialectics in the name of ‘science.’ And nothing was further from the mind of his philosophical opponents, and above all Kautsky, than the wish to undertake the defence of this tradition. For anyone wishing to return to the revolutionary traditions of Marxism, the revival of the Hegelian traditions was obligatory. *History and Class Consciousness* represents what was perhaps the most radical attempt to restore the revolutionary nature of Marx’s theories by renovating and extending Hegel’s dialectics and method. (1971/1923, p. xxi)

In his renovation and extension of Hegel for revolutionary Marxism, Lukács cast a critical eye on Engels’ scientific naturalism. Indeed, Lukács believed that, in *History and Class Consciousness*, he was “defending orthodox Marxism against Engels himself” (1971/1923: xlii).⁶ For Lukács, the danger of extending dialectics to considerations of the natural world was the erasure of those dimensions unique to history: human agency, subjectivity and consciousness. In Engels, Lukács insisted, the dialectic is “incomplete or even flawed... [In presenting] “a one-sided and rigid causality... [Engels] does not even mention the most vital interaction, namely, the *dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process*, let alone give it the prominence it deserves” (1971/1923, p. 3). As Vogel puts it: “With this apparently simple remark... Lukács founds Western Marxism” (1996, p. 15). In the place of ontological naturalism, Lukács proposes a “new ontological modesty” that limits dialectics to epistemology and emphasizes “the interconnection between subject and object in the process of knowledge-production” (Vogel, 1996, pp. 15-16).

Lukács explains, in the Preface to his *History and Class Consciousness*, that he first read Marx when he was at school. He recalls it was a reading “through the spectacles tinged by Simmel and Max Weber” (Lukács, 1971/1923, p. ix). As Callinicos notes, Lukács’ “most striking intellectual achievement was to take over [Simmel and Weber’s] interpretations of modernity... and integrate them into the Marxist critique of the capitalist mode of production” (1999, 205). The influence of German anti-naturalism was to remain with Lukács. It wasn’t until the First World War that Lukács picked up Marx again. This time, it was “under the influence of Hegel” (Lukács, 1971/1923, p. ix). Lukács remembers at the time being “repelled by social-democratic theory (and especially Kautsky’s version of it)” (1971/1923, p. ix). Working against the impulse of economistic evolutionary socialism, Lukács’ was to elaborate a theory of

⁶ It must be emphasised that Lukács employed the term ‘orthodox’ in an approving manner to “refer exclusively to *method*” (1971/1923, p. 1), i.e. Marx’s materialist dialectic applied exclusively to the social world.

alienation (through the concept of reification) that anticipated the yet-to-be-published early philosophical works of Marx (see Marx, 1975). In doing so, Lukács paved the way for understanding Western Marxism as representing a philosophical turn towards the ‘young’ Marx and a move to a theoretical elaboration of the superstructure. As Lukács comments, one won’t find in his work any “assessment of the economic content of the theory of accumulation, nor of Marx’s economic theories” (1971/1923, p. xlii). While Lukács’ anti-naturalist Marxism asserts that the source of human estrangement under capitalism rests in the ‘natural laws of society,’ those origins cannot be reduced to the powers of economic structures. In terms of the division of labor, Lukács explains:

... the division of labor disrupts every organically unified process of work and life and breaks it down into its components. This enables the artificially isolated partial functions to be performed in the most radical manner by ‘specialists’ who are specially adapted mentally and physically for the purpose. This has the effect of making these partial functions autonomous and so they tend to develop through their own momentum and in accordance with their own special laws, independently of other partial functions of society (or that part of the society to which they belong). (Lukács, 1971/1923, p. 103)

Here, Lukács provides not only a superstructural move against economic reductionism but also the beginnings of a theoretical explanation as to how class consciousness might be shaped in the concrete workings of capitalist society. However, the precise contribution of *History and Class Consciousness* to Marxist thought is contested amongst Marxist scholars. Views span from it being a masterly anticipation of the belated publication of the ‘young’ Marx’s philosophical works to an unwelcome importation of bourgeois romanticism into Marxism. In relation to the latter, for example, Stedman Jones describes the history of historical materialism as squeezed between the ‘twin dangers’ of romanticism and positivism. According to Stedman Jones: “If the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* represents Scylla, Kautsky, Bukharin and a whole tradition of a positivist Marxism represent Charybdis” (1978, p. 59). Whatever weight is given to Stedman Jones’ assessment, it is clear that Lukács gave no place to naturalist ontology within Marxist dialectics. According to Lukács:

For the Marxist as an historical dialectician, both *nature* and all the forms in which it is mastered in theory and practice are *social categories*; and to believe that one can detect anything supra-historical or supra-social in this context is to disqualify oneself as a Marxist. (in Mészáros, 1984, p. 116)

In confining dialectics to history, Lukács jettisons nature and condemns it “to a kind of residual status [where it is]... abandoned to a positivist ideology” (Mészáros, 1984: 116). The association of naturalism with positivism has been strong within Western Marxism since Lukács. However, another figure central to the development of Western Marxism, Antonio Gramsci, was not so dismissive of a nature/society dialectic. He was particularly critical of Lukács in this respect:

It would appear that Lukács maintains that one can speak for the dialectic only for the history of men and not for nature. ... If his assertion presupposes a dualism between nature and man he is wrong because he is falling into a conception of nature proper to religion and to Graeco-Christian philosophy and also to idealism which does not in reality succeed in unifying and relating man and nature to each

other except verbally. But if human history should be conceived also as the history of nature (also by the means of the history of science) how can the dialectic be separated from nature? Perhaps Lukács, in reaction to the baroque theories of the *Popular Manual*, has fallen into the opposite error, into a form of idealism.⁷ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 448)

Like Lukács, Gramsci was critical of the mechanistic reformism of the Second International. It is through the concept of hegemony that Gramsci attempted to hold to both socio-structural circumstances and creative human praxis. In doing so, he stressed the importance of the economy while emphasizing the significance of politics, culture and ideology. In doing so, Gramsci questioned the topography of the base/superstructure metaphor: the idea that base and superstructure exist in a definite spatial relation to each other. As Raymond Williams put it,

It is Gramsci's great contribution to have emphasized hegemony.... For hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any notions derived from the formula of base and superstructure. (Williams, 1973, p. 8)

In his references to the base/superstructure relationship, Gramsci continually emphasized movement and dynamism, the immediate and the relatively permanent, and the 'conjunctural' and the 'organic' (see esp. 1971, pp. 175-185). He described the material economic structures and the politico-cultural superstructures as forming an 'historical bloc' where "the complex, contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 366). It is the historical bloc that unites base-structure and super-structure such that hegemony is not to be taken to refer simply to powers derived from the economic domain or from class location. Rather, it is to indicate the saturation, as Williams (above) put it, of structured and practiced power through a society. It is in this way that the Gramscian conception of hegemony draws attention to not only 'hegemonic projects' but also the deeper structural arrangements from which such projects emerge. For Gramsci, capitalist hegemony was not won simply through coercion. It also required consent, i.e. the working class coming to identify their interests with those of the bourgeoisie. In Gramsci's hands, superstructural relations were not epiphenomenal to economic relations. The reproduction, and historical persistence, of capitalist relations of production requires cultural consensus and the agential contribution of those classes whose objective interests do not lie in those relations. As such, hegemony is understood to operate in and through conflicting bourgeois and working-class conceptions of the world. This can lead to ideological impasse and preservation of the status quo where contradictory consciousness is seen as the natural state of affairs. At a more concrete level, Gramsci identifies different forms of consciousness for the 'active man-in-the-mass' who has

⁷ Throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, the *Popular Manual* refers to Bukharin's *Theory of Historical Materialism: Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology* that Gramsci identifies and critiques as a prime example of 'vulgar Marxism' (see Gramsci, 1971, pp. 419-472).

... no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, with varying efficacy but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333)

However, Gramsci stresses that such passivity is not pre-determined. Practical consciousness and theoretical consciousness are brought together in praxis; unified in a political consciousness that “is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness... [and the] real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world” (Gramsci, 1971). As a process, class-consciousness moves the man-in-the-mass from fragmented understandings and experiences of class solidarity to deep knowledge of not only their objective class interests but also their collective agential powers to realise those interests. This development requires the working class to develop its own hegemonic program its own ideology.

The philosophy of an historical epoch is... nothing other than the history of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading groups [*sic*] has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality. History and philosophy are in this sense indivisible: they form a bloc. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 345)

For the working class to form a historical bloc requires the development and dissemination of a world-view that comes to be accepted as true: a *Weltanschauung*. In turn, this requires self-organisation, self-consciousness and intellectual leadership:

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an *élite*⁸ of intellectuals. A human mass does not “distinguish” itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is, without organizers and leaders; in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people “specialized” in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas (Gramsci, 1971, p. 334).

Gramsci considered the capacity for self-conscious reflection to be an essential, i.e. *natural*, feature of human beings. “All men are intellectuals,” Gramsci wrote. “There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: *homo faber*

⁸ As the editors of the *Prison Notebooks* make clear, in using the term ‘*élite*,’ Gramsci refers to “the revolutionary vanguard of a social class in constant contact with its political and intellectual base” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 334). His use of the term is not intended to express the ideas of separateness or superiority.

cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*” (1971, p. 9). However, while such powers are of human species being, not all people are assigned or fulfill the social role of ‘intellectual’:

... every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also the social and political fields. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5)

Gramsci’s point here is that the production and organisation of culture is organic: emergent from ‘the world of economic production’ but not reducible to it. Furthermore, central to cultural production are the intellectuals of a class. As Gramsci notes, the “capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system etc” (1971: 5). It is therefore necessary that the working class develop ‘organic’ intellectuals of its own. In opposition to capitalist hegemony, the role of such intellectuals is to assist in the building of class alliances and the raising of class-consciousness by formulating and transmitting working class ideology. In this light, the role of education in socialist revolution takes on considerable import (see esp. Gramsci, 1971, pp. 24-43). It also brings into focus Gramsci’s theory of knowledge.

To be clear, Gramsci understood knowledge to be historically and contextually-bound. In firmly rejecting the Kantian idea of the ‘thing-in-itself’ as a religious – Graeco-Christian – hangover (see Gramsci, 1971, pp. 367-368; pp. 419-472), Gramsci takes the ‘reality’ of things to be decided through consensus played out against the backdrop of – and the struggle over – the *Weltanschauung*. In a seemingly anti-naturalist and empiricist mood, Gramsci insists that it “is certainly correct” that “the whole reality is phenomena and that beyond phenomena there is nothing.” He subsequently adds: “our knowledge of things is nothing other than ourselves, our needs and our interests... knowledge is superstructure” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 368). This includes scientific knowledge:

According to the theory of praxis, it is evident that it is not atomic theory that explains human history but the other way about: in other words, that atomic theory and all scientific hypotheses and opinions are superstructures. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 468)

If, as Gramsci seems to suggest, all phenomena and knowledge are superstructural, then little room is left for considering the nature of those phenomena and the species being capacities of humans to produce knowledge about (and engage with) the world. It is one thing to emphasize the transient (and fallible) *nature* of human knowledge and the process of knowledge production; it is quite another matter to consign the nature of things to the realm of mystery. Is Gramsci’s epistemology at odds with his insistence on a *homo faber/homo sapiens* unity and his criticism of the anti-naturalist Lukács? Indeed, in his study of Gramsci’s use of the concept of nature, Benedetto Fontana observes that, for Gramsci, “nature is an empty category, without value, purpose, or direction; [and that to] acquire meaning and content nature can only be – or must become – history” (2002, p. 65). In Gramsci’s historicised anthropomorphic conception of nature,

... nature exists purely as an object of human and social activity, and humanity exists – or comes to be such – only as a subject acting in and through nature. Humanity is understood historically as the unfolding of the conflict and

opposition between necessity and liberty – a dialectic which is inseparably linked to nature, and liberty is understood in part as the overcoming of the dull and brute resistance of nature. (Fontana, 2002, pp. 77-78)

While Fontana notes that Gramsci does not present a fully elaborated theory of nature, he stresses that this is not due to any dismissal of its significance on the part of Gramsci. Rather, Fontana stresses, “this is due more to his method of analysis and mode of presentation” (2002: 63). Indeed, it must be appreciated, for example, that in producing his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci was working against the *Weltanschauung* of the Second International and the weight of the mechanistic positivism of Bukharin’s *Popular Manual*. It is in this context that the following assertion from Gramsci must be understood. Gramsci proposes

... that the truth lies outside us, existing in and for itself, and is not our own creation; that ‘nature’ and the ‘world’ are aspects of an intangible reality, is doubted by no one, and to affirm the opposite is to be taken as a madman. (Gramsci in Fontana, 2002, p. 63)

It is in Gramsci’s recognition of an ‘intangible’ objective reality that Fontana sees Gramsci’s naturalism. According to Fontana, this draws attention to the potential of Gramsci’s work “to elaborate a new and superior awareness of the relationship between society and nature” (2002, p. 77). In Gramsci’s assumed but unannounced naturalism, it is significant that the realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar sees similar possibilities:

The historicity of our knowledge (as well as the distinct historicity of its objects) on which Gramsci quite properly wishes to insist does not refute, but actually depends upon, the idea of the otherness of its objects (and their historicity). (Bhaskar, 1991b, p. 290)

Rejecting Hegel: Althusser’s Anti-Humanism

Today we see that the question of Hegel is, for the bourgeoisie, merely a matter of impugning Marx. This Great Return to Hegel is simply a desperate attempt to combat Marx, cast in the specific form that revisionism takes in imperialism’s final crisis: *a revisionism of a fascist type*. (Althusser, 1997/1950)

Althusser’s Marxism diverges considerably from that of Lukács and Gramsci. Althusser sought to expel Hegel and all traces of idealism from Marxist theory to reveal a ‘scientific’ Marx. History, as Althusser famously put it, “is a process without a subject” (1972b, p. 183). In direct opposition to the humanism of Lukács and Gramsci, agents of history are not people. Indeed, people were mere ‘supports’ for the ‘true subjects’ of history: the prevailing relations of production in a society. In Althusser’s structuralism, relations of production are described as the drivers of history. Human ‘agents’ are positioned as merely bearers (*Träger*) of such relations. Immediately, this raises the problem of the nature of the relation between agents and structures: specifically, in this instance, the seeming dissolution of the former into the latter. However, on this matter, it is important to note that Althusser’s project was a rejection of mechanical determinism as much as it was a denial of humanism. In his move against mechanistic structural determinism, Althusser theorized social formations as complex, structured totalities consisting in the co-determining interaction of relatively distinct ‘instances.’ He stressed that the causal relations between, for example, economic, political and ideological instances are not to be taken as linear. In other words, there is no *direct* determining relation between base and superstructure.

However, while “History ‘asserts itself’ through the multiform world of the superstructures... the economy is determinant... *in the last instance*” (Althusser, 1996, p. 112). Here the superstructure is to be understood to stand in a relatively autonomous position to that of the base. Here, they form a totality of (relatively) co-determining relations in which people are ‘interpellated’ as subjects. Althusser insists people are ‘hailed’ by ideology to their role as structural supports. His anti-humanism jettisons any conception of human *nature* in favour of a ‘human subject’ that is merely a socio-historical, or ideological, construction: “the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology... in so far as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.” As such, human beings are “*always already* [ideologically constituted] subjects” (Althusser, 1972a, pp. 270-271).

Althusser’s justification for his scientific anti-humanism came from a ‘symptomatic reading’ of Marx, i.e. one that “divulges the undivulged” (Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 28). This revealed, according to Althusser, an epistemological break in Marx’s works that occurred around 1845. Indeed, Marx notes “in the spring of 1845 [Engels and I] decided to... settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience. The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy” (Marx, 1970/1859, p. 22). To Althusser, this meant that it was possible to identify a ‘young’ humanist Marx and a ‘mature’ scientific Marx. In contrast to Marx’s early philosophical works where emphasis was given to human alienation, his (and Engels’) later work represented a radical theoretical reformulation:

This ‘epistemological break’ concerns conjointly *two distinct theoretical disciplines*. By founding the theory of history (historical materialism), Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established a new philosophy (dialectical materialism). (Althusser, 1996, p. 33)

Dialectical materialism, as a materialist philosophy for Marxist science, was to usurp the idealist metaphysics propounded by the ‘young’ Marx. Delineating “the true theoretical bases” of scientific Marxism from the voluntarism, historicism and empiricism of “pre-Marxist” idealism (Althusser, 1996, p. 13) was politically important to Althusser. In the strained relationship between the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Française, or PCF) and the Soviet state, post-World-War-II French Marxism sat uneasily between Soviet Stalinism and Marxist humanism (see Poster, 1975). The PCF “found itself in a unique situation, trying to balance Moscow’s demands for revolutionary discipline with its position as a political power in a ‘bourgeois republic’” (Lewis, 2005, p. 11). This was the political ground of Althusser’s philosophical intervention. He saw both Stalinism (or ‘economism’) and humanism embracing a teleology whereby all parts of a totality are conceived as expressions of that totality. According to Callinicos, Althusser understood that the

... former [i.e. economism] consists in the reduction of all other instances of the social formation to epiphenomena of the economy, and, consequently, in a politics which relies upon an economic *deus ex machina* to produce the proletarian revolution. Humanism interprets history as the drama of the Subject, man, his alienation and necessary reconciliation, thus suppressing the reality of history as a process whose motor is the class struggle, and obscuring the lines that have to be drawn between classes with different interests in the political struggle if the proletariat is to take power... Humanism has been a dominant characteristic of those tendencies in the Communist camp which have championed de-

Stalinisation... Economism, on the other hand, was, according to Althusser, the chief feature of what he calls the Stalinist 'deviation'. (Callinicos, 1976, p. 92)

Althusser's contribution to the intellectual development of Western Marxism and to that of Marxist sociology of education is significant. In broad terms, his project can be seen as a resistance to the culturalist impulse of the New Left in post-WWII Britain (Dworkin, 1997) and, more particularly, in France (Lewis, 2005). Althusser's scientific Marxism was a move against those Marxists who, as Callinicos put it, "substituted humanism for class struggle" (1976, p. 108). To Althusser, "to forget about class struggle is *humanism*" (1976, p. 14). The response from those in the culturalist left was swift and incisive – perhaps most famously expressed in Edward Thompson's vigorous critique (E. P. Thompson, 1978). However, some Marxist scholars have interpreted subsequent New Left critiques as simply climbing aboard, what Rée (1982) called an 'anti-Althusser band-wagon' (see also Elliot, 2006). They consider that this momentum has not served Marxism well, rolling it towards a voluntarism that has, according to Callinicos, "tended to counterpose human agency to structures of capitalism" (2004, p. xvii).

While what Althusser has called his 'flirt with structuralism' (as Althusser (1976) himself referred to it) is generally considered to have been a failure (see Elliot, 2006), it has been significant in shaping both structural and cultural variants of Western Marxism (see Sarup, 1983). In relation to the former, Althusser opened the door to post-structural interventions (see Callari & Ruccio, 1996). In the end, according to Rees, these "incursions" pushed Althusserianism "to such extremes that it eradicated its sponsor. Where Althusser had insisted on the "relative autonomy" of theory [from the real world], the postmodernists went a step further and argued its complete autonomy" (1998, p. 295). If Althusser ushered in the 'post'-ing of Marxism, he stimulated its 'neo'-ing. For it was always Althusser's intent to resist the rising tide of the New Left (see Chun, 1993; Dworkin, 1997; Katsiaficas, 1987; D. Thompson, 1996). Coming to particular prominence in the late 1950s, the New Left sought to challenge the 'orthodoxy' of the 'Old Left.' Intellectually, the focus of the New Left was on the 'young' Marx. Politically, its roots were in social movements. In introducing the first edition of the *New Left Review*, its editor, Stuart Hall described the new politics of Western socialism in the following way:

The last refuge of scoundrels today is no longer the appeal for "patriotism," but the cry that we must sink our differences in the interests of Party Unity. Socialists should cease to squander their energies upon scoundrels, and should cease to allow them to betray the enthusiasm of the young. They should give or withhold [sic] their support by their own choice and according to socialist priorities. They should vote with their feet – in both directions: the protest march or the boycott. (Hall, 1960, p. 2)

It was within the social and cultural ferment of the 1960s and from the generative tensions between the 'Old Left' and a 'New Revisionism' (Miliband, 1985) – or what Ellen Meiksins Wood pointedly refers to as the 'New "True" Socialism' (Wood, 1986)⁹ – that Marxist Sociology of Education arose.

⁹ Wood refers here to Marx's critique of the 'true' socialists of his day. This formed part of Marx's argument in *The German Ideology* against the idealist tendency to ground socialism and revolutionary practice in an abstracted, (Continues on next page.)

The New Left and the Anti-Naturalist Challenge to 'Old' Sociology

The New Left, as it emerged on the verge of the 1960s, can be understood as a Western Marxist movement located in new social movements and identity politics (see Chun, 1993; Dworkin, 1997; D. Thompson, 1996). This is in contrast to the 'Old' Left, that has its roots in party organisation and working-class activism. The New Left is generally understood to have arisen in the aftermath of two events in 1956 that, as Stuart Hall chronicles, "unmasked the underlying violence and aggression in the two systems that dominated political life at the time – Western Imperialism and Stalinism" (2010, p. 177). The events to which Hall refers are the British and French invasion of the Suez Canal, and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. Counter-posing these events exposed twin realities. On the one hand, behind the façade of the welfare state lurked capitalist imperialism. On the other, it reminded socialists of the extent of the Stalinist deformation of the Proletarian Revolution. According to Hall, it was a "coming to terms with the depressing experiences of both 'actual existing socialism' and 'actual existing social democracy'" (2010, p. 185).

Politically and intellectually, the New Left represented the merging of two traditions: the 'communist humanism' of E. P. Thompson that had its expression in the journal *The New Reasoner* (see E. P. Thompson, 1957) and what Hall (2010) describes as an 'independent socialist' tradition of the 1950s-student politics that published in the *Universities and Left Review*. In 1960, the journals merged to form the *New Left Review* and elaborated a revisionist, humanist Marxism that departed from the politics and theory of orthodox Marxism (see Hall, 1960). The New Left arose within and against the efforts of Keynesian welfarism to engineer a post-World-War-II labor-capital settlement to simultaneously secure the system loyalty of the former and guarantee profits for the latter. However, by the mid-1970s, under the weight of its unfulfilled promises in the face of growing capitalist crises of accumulation, Keynesianism was exhausted. The turn to neo-liberalism and the reassertion of the dominance of capital over labor that was to unfold in the coming decades was underway (Harvey, 2005). In this light, the political agitation and social unrest of the post-1968 world were both causes for and consequences of the Keynesian demise. Indeed, the Keynesian expansion of education itself contributed to a fuelling of dissatisfaction. Not only was education to serve economic ends but also, simultaneously, to satisfy the liberal demands for individual fulfilment and personal intellectual growth. This led to new, and sometimes radical, ideas infiltrating educational policy and practice – in part made possible by the arrival of a new sociology (see Best, 1975; Bryson, 2005; Bulmer, 1985; Connell, 2005; Germov & McGee, 2005; Halsey, 2004) and a new sociology of education (see Barcan, 1993; Bates, 1980; Warwick & Williams, 1980). The newly emerging sociology, however, did not completely sever its ties from the 'old' sociology that drew largely on the structuralism of Durkheim. As Randall Collins (1985) notes, the Durkheimian tradition has two 'wings': the first emphasizes the macro-social and the second the micro-cultural (see Alexander, 1990). While the former, perhaps best expressed in Durkheim's

bourgeois, conception of human beings (see Marx & Engels, 1976/1845-6, pp. 481-611). For Wood, the new 'true' socialism (NTS), in rejecting "Marxist 'economism' and 'class-reductionism,' has virtually excised class and class struggle from the socialist project." With the "most distinctive feature" being the (relatively) autonomous relation of ideology from any social, or class, foundation, NTS displaces class struggle by emphasising "cleavages of ideology or 'discourse'" (1986, p. 2).

classic study on suicide (Durkheim, 1952/1897), was adopted “as a methodological guidepost for statistical sociology in the 1950s,” the latter was “taken up by British and French anthropologists” inspired by Durkheim’s later works (Collins, 1985, p. 136).

Durkheim always saw his work as laying the foundations for a science of society (Collins, 1985, p. 132) that was methodologically collectivist: “social facts are things and must be treated as such” (Durkheim, 1982/1895, p. 35). Against methodological individualism, he saw society not as “the mere sum of individuals, but the system formed by their association [representing] a specific reality which has its own characteristics” (Durkheim, 1982/1895, p. 80). In terms of the macro sociological interpretation of Durkheim’s methodological collectivism, its **principal** exponents have been Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons (see Merton, 1968; Parsons, 1951). The Durkheimian micro-tradition was developed, for example, in Irving Goffman’s symbolic interactionism and Levi-Strauss’ social anthropology (see Goffman, 1969; Levi-Strauss, 1969).

The turn to the micro in sociology opened the discipline to a sociology of consciousness and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1971/1954) who emphasized that knowledge and understanding are founded on tacit pre-understandings, or, a shared ‘lifeworld.’ Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology distinguishes, ontologically, between objects of consciousness and the conscious experience of them in ‘wakeful life.’ On this basis, Husserl rejected empiricism as inadequate as a scientific method because it conflated objects with immediate experience. The suspension, or ‘bracketing,’ of judgment was vital to the study of phenomena. This was a direct anti-naturalist challenge to the old sociology. If a science of society was possible, it had to be one with its own method – and phenomenology provided one. Husserl’s ideas were influential in the development of Alfred Schütz’s (1972) interpretivist social phenomenology, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1966) sociology of knowledge and Howard Garfinkel’s (1984) ethnomethodology. As Collins notes, these were ‘epistemological radicals’ and “not necessarily revolutionary in the political sense; for most of them Marxism was just as much part of the old way of thinking that had to be overthrown (1985, p. 205).

The new micro-sociology was strongly anti-naturalist, eschewed political radicalism for epistemological radicalism and tended towards methodological individualism. These developments were reinforced with the uptake of the Weberian interpretivism through, for example, Schütz, Berger, and Luckmann. As Callinicos succinctly details, the sociology of Max Weber draws on Kantian and Nietzschean traditions (see Callinicos, 1999, pp. 153-159). From Kant, Weber developed an anti-naturalism and a commitment to methodological individualism: “When reference is made in a sociological context to a state, a nation, a corporation, a family, or an army corps, or to similar collectives, what is meant is... only a certain kind of development or possible actions of individual persons” (Weber, 1978/1922, p. 14). From Nietzsche, Weber adopts an understanding of power as essentially the struggle over ideas and values. This pushes Weberian sociology to pluralism and perspectivism. As Weber put it: “domination has played a decisive role... in the most important social structures of the past... the manor on the one hand, and large scale capitalist enterprise on the other” (Weber, 1978/1922, p. 941). *Verstehen* [interpretivist] ontology posits reality as “infinitely diverse [where] our theories simply pick out those aspects whose study is relevant to our values” (Callinicos, 1987, p. 162). With explanation grounded in pluralism, the nature of causal relations between, for example, base-structures and super-structures express only an “elective affinity between concrete structures of social action and concrete forms of economic organization” (Weber, 1978/1922, p. 341). The implications for

the conceptualizing of the nature of class are significant. Unlike Marx, who saw class relations as the basic driver of human history, Weber separates ‘class,’ ‘status’ and ‘party,’ and posits them as reflecting a more generalized distribution of power through social forms. Social change for Weber is a process of power struggles between different ‘interest groups.’ He put it this way:

In spite of their continued competition against one another, the jointly acting competitors now form an “interest group” towards outsiders; there is a growing tendency to set up some kind of association with rational regulations; if the monopolistic interests persist, the time comes when the competitors, or another group whom they can influence (for example, a political community), establish a legal order that limits competition through formal monopolies; from then on certain persons are available as “organs” to protect the monopolistic practices, if need be, by force. (Weber, 1978/1922, p. 342)

It is to be stressed that the new sociology was not a unified, homogenous, intellectual movement. It consisted in assumptions and approaches to social problems that had their wellsprings in diverse and often opposing traditions. The new sociology and the New Left were co-determining conditions for the arrival of Marxist Sociology of Education and provided partial grounding from which its Western (i.e. ‘neo’ and ‘post’) and Classical forms were to develop. Together, they were to forge a shift in thinking from what Dawe (1970) famously referred to as a ‘problem of order’ to a ‘problem of control’: a shift from a focus on human behavior to human action. In an important sense, Dawe’s insight echoes Marx’s assertion that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please” (1966/1852, p. 398). Both beg the question of naturalism. They push the issues of the relational continuity of humans with nature (including their own species beings and that of social forms), how we can come to (scientifically) know those relations, and how (as well as why) injurious and unjust relations can (and must) be transcended. These are issues that are foundational to not only Marxism but also to any purported transformative social science. However, in Marx, there is a radical naturalist method: the materialist view of history. As I have argued elsewhere (Banfield, 2010), when historical materialism – expressed in the base/superstructure model – is underlabored by critical naturalism, its indispensability to socialist pedagogy is revealed. It has been the purpose of this paper to provide a context to that argument.

Conclusion

In the mid-1990s, British Marxist, Glenn Rikowski, declared (1996) the ‘end time’ for the ‘old’ Marxist Sociology of Education. Rikowski believed that the field was so theoretically moribund that nothing short of a ‘scorched-earth’ approach to it would suffice: Marxist Sociology of Education “had run its course” (1996, p. 415). He identified the terminal degeneration of the field as consisting in a number of ‘debilitating problematics’ of which “a determinist rendering of the base/superstructure metaphor” (Rikowski, 1997, p. 552) was central. The popularization of the metaphor, through Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis’ correspondence thesis presented in their *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), meant that the metaphor had become associated with economically determinist and reductionist approaches to Marxist educational theory. Rikowski argued that all subsequent developments in the field carried Bowles and Gintis’ legacy. More specifically, *Schooling in Capitalist America* served to entrench New Left suspicion of classical Marxism and its emphasis on historical materialism. Rikowski concluded that Marxist educational theory had terminally strayed from its Marxian roots. By association, the irretrievable problem of the field rested with the base/superstructure

model. As such,

... attempts to forge a Marxist theory of capitalist schooling on the basis of the B/SM [base-superstructure model] are cast within a determinism which leaves no theoretical space for class struggle. The B/SM [base-superstructure metaphor] is a debilitating force within Marxist theory as it engenders fatalism and is open to easy critique. It is best left alone. (Rikowski, 1997, p. 556)

It should be clear at this point that I do not wholeheartedly share Rikowski's rejection of the base/superstructure metaphor. If it is a 'debilitating force' it is because the model has not been set on its naturalist feet. However, I agree with what I take as Rikowski's broader point: the extent of the New Left neo-ing and post-ing of Marxist Sociology of Education (and a Marxist theory of education more generally) has rendered the field almost unrecognizable as Marxian. Indeed, when one picks up a recent book on Marx and education written from within the field (Anyon, 2011) and discovers it to have little or scant attention given to historical materialism, one is entitled to ask: where is Marx (Banfield, 2011) and, indeed, what is Marxian education? Such an omission would seem to be symbolic of the dilapidated state of Marxist educational theory which Rikowski describes. If Marx's naturalism and his materialist view of history are jettisoned, what remains of Marxist educational theory to distinguish it from any other 'Leftist' educational theory? Indeed, does this matter? After all, as this paper has shown, the history of Marxist thought has been, and remains, a history of struggle in, and around, the problem of naturalism.

My answer to the above questions is that it certainly does matter – but not in the sense of searching for, and following, the 'correct' Marx. Like any other scientific theory and practice, Marx's historical materialism must stand or fall on the depth of its explanatory power and its ability to generate empirical evidence that contributes to such explanation. Furthermore, the theory and practice must remain true to its original purpose. In the case of Marxism, this means the transcendence of capitalism and the realization of a truly human, socialist society. Simply put, this is the theory, practice and axiology of revolution. In education, as in all fields of human struggle, the struggle is messy and contested. But it matters.

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