

The Closing of the Australian Mind?

*Alan Barcan, Sociological Theory and Educational Reality,
NSW University Press, Sydney, 1993*

Reviewed by Brian Crittenden

THE title might lead us to expect a contrast, but this is not the line of argument. The author, now an honorary associate in the Department of Education at the University of Newcastle, intertwines two stories: of sociology and its influence on educational theory and practice, and of changes in Australian schools and other educational institutions since about 1950. In effect, we have two books in one. The account of sociology in education runs through Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 9; the recent history of Australian education occupies Chapters 4, 5, 8 and 10. I followed the author's own suggestion and read each strand separately. In these comments I shall be mainly concerned with the treatment of sociology of education.

Although the book runs to about 400 pages, it attempts to cover far too much. Inevitably, complex issues, especially in the theoretical strand, tend to be treated very summarily, and the 'answers' emerge too neatly. Yet the book contains many interesting facts and sound critical comments. It also reflects the historian's temptation to package the flux of events in precisely defined periods. Everything falls into three neatly divided stages: the welfare state (1949-67); pluralist society (1967-87); contemporary Australia (1987 to the present). Did Australia as a welfare state come to an end in 1967? Did pluralism emerge in Australia as late as 1967? The pseudo-precision of the boundaries that mark historical changes in this book is misleading.

The chapters on sociology of education cover a vast territory. The first provides a brief survey of the major theorists (Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber et al.) who shaped sociology as a distinct field of inquiry. Durkheim is treated in two pages. His influence on Basil Bernstein is noted, but there is no reference to his sociology of knowledge and hardly anything on his significant work on moral education. On the beginnings of the study of education from a sociological perspective, Barcan briefly notes the work of Mannheim and Clarke in the UK, the influence of sociology on the role of the school as an agent of social reconstruction in the US, and some faltering steps in the field within Australia. He concludes that by about 1950 the stage was set, in several countries, for the development of sociology of education. However, as he points out, the general discipline was not established in any Australian university before 1959.

Barcan's sketch of the growth of sociology refers briefly to changes in its characteristic methods, particularly the move from an association with history to precisely quantified empirical inquiry (reflecting the influence of positivism). There is a passing reference to some use of qualitative methods. There is no comment on the

philosophical arguments about the nature and scope of sociology and the other social sciences. As Barcan points out, sociology of education, in its earlier phase, concentrated on the interaction of the school institution and the general society, in particular on the question whether the school could be a reforming agency or was bound to be an instrument of the status quo. Not much attention was given to the sociological issues at the micro-level of the individual school and classroom.

Barcan claims that, during his so-called 'welfare state' period, sociology of education and its parent discipline were only beginning to develop in Australia. Although this is probably an accurate enough generalisation, there is no mention of work in sociology of education at the University of Sydney (supervised by W. F. Connell, W. J. Campbell and others) in this period. As the era of the welfare state was (apparently) coming to an end around 1966, the 'old' sociological tradition (which had barely been established in Australia) was also in decline. Apart from mentioning the expansion of the white-collar class as one of the contributing factors, Barcan offers no explanation for this change. More curious, of course, is the claim that the welfare state was then drawing to a close, especially as Barcan himself claims that 'in the late 1980s the economic crisis of the welfare state transformed educational policy' (p.286).

Chapter 6 begins with the exaggerated precision to which I have referred: 'in 1971 a new sociology of education was proclaimed'. The chapter refers to the neo-Marxist version of sociology that drew heavily on the work of Louis Althusser. In sociology of education, the curriculum became a central issue (in particular, the relationship between socio-political power and what the school transmitted as knowledge). We are taken on a roller coaster ride through the theories of Gramsci, Althusser, Bourdieu, Bernstein, Young, Bowles and Gintis. One or two critics are mentioned, although there is no reference to the challenge by John White and other philosophical theorists of education (including some in Australia) during this time. By the mid-1980s, as Barcan notes, the neo-Marxist versions of sociology of education were being displaced by the fashions of postmodernism. (The shift to relativism has been much more severe than Barcan seems to recognise.) Despite the crush of theorists packed into this chapter, the author manages three paragraphs on the 'new' sociology in literature, including a note on Derrida.

The discussion of sociology of education in Australia over the past 25 years focuses mainly on those who followed, usually in a fairly naive way, the neo-Marxist line. More than passing attention is given to the work of Bob Connell, Kevin Harris and Rachel Sharp. Barcan makes the sound point that the neo-Marxist sociologists of knowledge were interested in formal schooling as an instrument of socio-political power rather than of education. He offers good criticisms of Connell's simplified division — useful for dramatic effects — between the ruling and the working class. However, he does not comment on Connell's curious advocacy of a distinct working-class curriculum. He raises the interesting question of how Harris managed to be an exception to the product that, in his theory, schools inevitably produce: a consciousness 'suited to the capitalist mode of production' (p.199). As Barcan points out, the pessimistic determinism of neo-Marxism led to its rejection

by many otherwise sympathetic teachers who believed that schools could be agents of reform. He also wryly notes that many former neo-Marxists joined what they had earlier regarded, following Althusser, as the Ideological State Apparatus.

In his account of the past decade, Barcan claims that, with the decline of both the neo-Marxists and neo-progressives, sociology of education has tended to fragment as exponents attempt to advance the cause of one or another of the increasing number of interest groups. The last he refers to as the phenomenon of pluralism, but there is no discussion of how it relates to the traditional theory of pluralism associated with liberal democracy. His general conclusion is that sociology of education has declined in significance and quality. But his judgment that 'by the beginning of the 1990s the desolation of educational theory throughout Western culture was obvious' (p.296) goes well beyond the scope of this ambitious book. Perhaps there are no stars (such as Dewey) around at present, but there are still many very competent theorists representing a variety of discipline perspectives.

In the second 'book', Barcan offers a large number of interesting factual details and challenging opinions about developments in, or affecting, the practice of Australian schools and other educational institutions over the past four decades. The account has a number of deficiencies. For example, Barcan claims that 'social justice in education' is a new movement. But the issues covered by the expression 'social justice' were placed firmly on the education policy agenda in the Karmel Report of 1973 — as Barcan's own few references to the report show. There is very little on the significant changes to the design of senior secondary schooling in Victoria and other States over the past decade; there is virtually no analysis of the enthusiasm in recent public reports for so-called generic key competencies (for employment) and the 'convergence' of general and vocational education; the Hobart Declaration in April 1989 is not mentioned; and there is scarcely any reference to the current efforts at comprehensive curriculum development that it initiated. Nor is there any mention of the substantial increase in retention rates to Year 12 and in tertiary education enrolments since the late 1980s.

While the restructuring of Australian higher education that began in 1988 is critically evaluated (the picture of John Dawkins on page 352 says it all), Barcan could have given more attention to the entrepreneurial and managerial approach that has gripped our universities (or credentialling factories), the undermining of the collegial model and the consequent decline in morale among academics.

A persistent theme throughout the book is Barcan's pessimism about the survival of liberal humanist values in education. In this, I believe, he is excessive, but not without some justification. Yet at the very end he strikes a note of high optimism. Challenged by the excesses of instrumentalism, some educators, he claims, are returning to the ideals of a liberal humanist education. After the long, sad story that he tells, such a happy ending seems incongruous. But, as the account he gives tends in many respects to exaggerate the negative features of our educational practices in recent decades, there are some grounds for cautiously endorsing his conclusion.

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