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Class, Education and Social Change: A Study of Brian Simon's Historiography of Education

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Abstract: Brian Simon was one of the most influential British educational historians of the twentieth century, and he developed a new type of research in British educational history based on a Marxist school of thought. From 1780 to 1990, in his Studies in the History of Education, he systematically examined the institutional development of British education and used the theme of class struggle to show the dialectical relationship between schooling and broader changes in society. Simon's educational historiography has been systematically studied in the three areas of its formation conditions, basic features and research methods; this paper seeks to reveal the internal relations among class, education and social change in his ideas. Simon's system of historical writing offers a new path for the research of educational history and may provide some inspiration for tackling problems of educational equity and reform at present.

Keywords: Brian Simon; Marxism; Studies in the history of education; Historiography of education

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1. Introduction

Brian Simon is widely regarded as the most influential British educational historian of the 20th century, and he has changed the direction of research in the field through his own Marxist perspective. From 1780 to 1990, in his great work *Studies in the History of Education*, he has systematically rebuilt the institutional development of the British educational system and, at the core of his analysis, drawn lessons from class struggle to explore the interaction between education and social change. Simon's contribution is to break away from the old idea that educational history has always gone smoothly and, at the same time, provide a tool to study inequality in society through history. As Gary McCulloch pointed out, Simon's work "provided a theoretical rationale for the history of education and proposed that it should be based on the relationship between education and social change" [1]; Simon believed that this relationship was essentially a conflict over class interests. According to Simon's educational historiography, this paper will explore the origins, main characteristics and research methods of Simon. In doing so, it hopes to reveal the internal factors among class, education and social change that have driven his thought, grasp the main features of his intellectual

inheritance, and offer a reference for current research in educational history.

2. Factors shaping Simon's educational historiography

Brian Simon's historiography of education did not appear spontaneously; instead, it is the result of the combination of his family background, early education, formative years at Trinity College, Cambridge, and the existing scholarly tradition. The above reasons led him to put forward the main idea that "the history of education is the history of class struggle" and set a new standard for twentieth-century British educational historical research.

2.1. Family and early education background

Simon's family life and early education provided the foundation for his thinking, and at the same time, he developed a strong sense of social justice and independence. He was born into a well-known family of British liberal thinkers. His father, Ernest Simon, was a well-known industrialist who later became the Lord Mayor of Manchester; before establishing the Association for Education in Citizenship in 1934, he was also a Liberal MP. His mother, Shena Simon, was a well-known feminist and an influential member of the Board of Education's Consultative Committee. The home environment taught Simon to be a good citizen and valued equality among all people; thus, from an early age, he was aware that education should serve society. Although Simon's family was from an upper-class background and enjoyed all the advantages and power of the ruling class, they fostered liberal values and active participation in society, believing that privilege should be used to serve the common good; thus, this ideal later inspired his opposition to the class system.

Simon gained a critical consciousness as a result of his schooling at that time. Gresham's School was a good school with a modern spirit, but he still felt that it was too dull and restrictive. In 1933, he was at Kurt Hahn's Schule Schloss Salem for several months. There he saw Hitler rise to power and Hahn be arrested shortly after. Living directly under the new fascist government made him even more determined to fight fascism and live freely and independently. An early habit of questioning authority and a keen sense of social inequality provided the psychological foundation for his later adoption of Marxism.

2.2. The crucible of Trinity College, Cambridge

Simon was at Trinity College, Cambridge, and then he was introduced to Marxism. Through his participation in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), he created a lasting integration of politics and education in his own work. In 1935, while studying at Trinity, Simon was an undergraduate who joined the CPGB due to the strong left-wing sentiment of the time. Cambridge was a lively place for British Marxist thinkers at the time, and through people like Donald Maclean and James Klugmann, Simon was exposed to dialectical materialism and the theory of class struggle. At the same time, in the face of the 1930s capitalist crisis and the frightening rise of European fascism, he came to believe that "communism was the best and most honest choice to oppose capitalism, fascism and war" [2].

From then on, Simon was still a member of the Communist Party. Even after the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, and as a result of the departure of many other intellectuals from the party, he chose to remain and eventually served on the Executive Committee and led ideological work across culture and education. As the party's top educational official, Simon began to view the history of education through the lens of the overall ideological struggle. He hoped to show that the Communist Party was the rightful successor to the radical

traditions of Britain by discovering the forgotten history of working-class educational struggles. In addition, given his position on the party's Cultural Committee, he knew that educational history needed to be examined in light of Marxist theory and applied to the practical task of leading educational reform at that time.

2.3. Intellectual lineage and historiographical nourishment

Simon's educational historiography also drew on the ideas of some important thinkers in the West, such as Sir Fred Clarke. Simon was studying for his teaching diploma at the University of London Institute of Education and was under the guidance of Clarke. In Education and Social Change, Clarke was the first to suggest that the historical study of education should focus on the "social and historical forces that have shaped schools and curricula", rather than merely listing "statutes, regulations and the doctrines of famous educators" [3]. This view had a profound effect on Simon; he began to understand that the history of education was closely connected to the development of society. Simon later recognised Clarke as a forerunner of the modern social history school and credited him with the method of anchoring educational institutions in social changes.

At the same time, the intellectual culture of the Communist Party Historians' Group also provided some theoretical support for Simon. Coalescence of scholars such as Maurice Dobb and A. L. Morton, for one, wished that the focus of historical research be the class struggle and popular uprising. Morton's *A People's History of England* showed how to reconstruct national history from below, and Dobb's classic *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* offered an application model for historical materialism to structural changes in the economy and society. Assimilating these influences, Simon brought the spirit of "people's history" into educational research and expanded its scope to include educational initiatives, self-organisation and resistance by the working class from the margins to the centre.

3. Main features of Simon's educational historiography

Brian Simon was one of the first to break free from the traditional framework of British Marxist educational history and its exclusive circle of students. Based on the explicit Marxist position, the dialectical system of analysis and the orientation towards the "people's history" were used to construct a new theoretical system in this area. In Simon's system of thought, schooling is not independent of society and has not always followed an ideal path set by the educated class. Instead, it is a contested area of history deeply rooted in class structure, in continuous change with society, and shaped by the will and collective struggle of the working class. The following sections will present the three parts of this historical school.

3.1. A Marxist perspective on class struggle

Simon developed the Marxist theory of class conflict as the foundation for his research and saw institutional education primarily as a site of conflict among different classes. Simon's task as the educational historian is to uncover the underlying logic of class struggle that drives institutional development; "The modern educational system is a place of conflict among different social interests and aims, and various class groups are constantly meeting and clashing here..." Given these circumstances, as the historical record clearly shows, alternative solutions are possible, and depending on the balance of forces at any given time, some will be realised [4].

Far from being an abstract theoretical deduction, this conflictual dynamic can be seen in the actual situations of British schools. Simon did not consider the Elementary Education Act of 1870 to be an

unqualified achievement of democratization and thus did not address it. Instead, he described it as the consolidation of a class-bound school system: working-class children were grouped at the end of elementary school, and the growing middle class enjoyed better education to maintain their economic and political dominance. Similarly, he revealed the class nature of the mid-20th-century tripartite secondary school system (grammar, technical and secondary modern schools). By directing the privileged few to the academically excellent Grammar Schools and leaving most of the students at the under-resourced secondary moderns with limited opportunities, stratification was thus created. Therefore, Simon promoted the all-round school movement as an important working-class counter-attack against inherited educational privilege.

3.2. The dialectical interaction of education and social change

Simon believed that the main content of serious educational history should be the interaction between schooling and social change, so this will serve as the basis for his study. As early as the 1950s, he changed the task of the educational historian to uncover the powerful social and historical forces that shape school organisations and curricula, and more importantly, to distinguish between genuine educational theories and retroactive rationalisations that aimed to explain away rather than illuminate reality [2]. This way of expression broke free from the isolated, Whiggish idea of treating schools separately and firmly reintegrated educational history into the general course of social history.

Based on the foundation of historical materialism, Simon did not endorse the mechanical economic determinism of the time but believed that education, as a material phenomenon, would affect the superstructure accordingly. Cause and effect are dialectical and interrelated [1]. He traced the impact of social change on schooling through the three links of the mode of production, changes in class relations and evolution in ideology. Changes in production have altered class relations, and together they have created ideological readjustments that have been the direct cause of educational reform [1].

At the same time, Simon also mentioned the counter-effects of schooling on society. Education is not merely the reflection of the social structure; it changes the consciousness of individuals and groups, and this modified consciousness then has a deep impact on historical development [4]. Although the first British state system was designed by the ruling class to support the existing social and economic order, it was later challenged. Organised educational demands have expanded the political consciousness of the working class and gradually promoted reforms in society. Yet Simon was also acutely aware of the structural limits to pedagogical work, and he did not hold the naive hope that institutional schooling under capitalism would spontaneously achieve socialist transformation. Therefore, it was neither the idealistic dream of education nor a hopeless resignation to reality.

3.3. A Commitment to "People's History"

The third characteristic of Simon's historiography is that he has focused on the "people's history" of schooling. He directly rejected the bourgeois-individualist idea that institutional development was due to the good deeds of middle-class philanthropists and instead proposed making working-class educational activism the focus of historical change. As Raphael Samuel noted, Simon's additions have increased the scope of vision, expanded the subject of study, introduced new materials and improved the presentation of historical knowledge [5].

Simon released a fierce criticism of the old aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie. Reviewing A. V. Judges' edited work *Pioneers of English Education* (1951), Simon mainly attributed the new educational

achievements to middle-class visionaries, and Simon wrote: “The real reasons for the development of education are not shown in these famous lectures...”. The working class was the one that fought for half a century against the bourgeoisie and achieved the victory that allowed for working-class education. Their strong, continuous fight for the rights of the people led to the founding of universal mass education [1].

He thought that working-class leaders, such as the Chartist William Lovett, who clearly stated the educational needs of the working class, were the true pioneers of English schooling. This revision was not merely a way of speaking; it was based on serious archival research at the University of London Institute of Education and elsewhere. By bringing the Chartist Manifestos, trade union minutes and grassroots labour pamphlets into the academic spotlight, Simon has rediscovered an authentic archive of the popular education movement and restored the agency of the working class in history.

4. The historiographical practice: A four-volume magnum opus

The first four volumes of Simon’s *Studies in the History of Education* are his most representative works. Tracing the course of British schooling from 1780 to 1990, this paper has broken down the Whiggish orthodoxy of gradual and linear development and established a Marxist-informed research system for the subject.

In Volume I, Simon took the restructuring of class relations due to the Industrial Revolution as his starting point to examine the character of educational reform. He proposed that after achieving economic and political leadership in the middle of the 19th century, the industrial bourgeoisie used the Elementary Education Act of 1870 to create a stratified school system, confining working-class children to basic elementary education and keeping the elite secondary school system for the middle class. Departing from the traditional historiography that regarded the Act as primarily a sign of universal literacy, Simon studied the current factory legislation and parliamentary discussions to find that the state’s intervention mainly served to protect and legitimize the power of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, he also regained the agency of the working class and formed its own education plan. Laboring communities began to see education as a way to achieve political liberation; imbued with rising class consciousness, they deliberately rejected bourgeois political economy and educational orthodoxy to develop their own theories and counter-hegemonic practices [6]. Based on working-class archives and grassroots materials, Simon had uncovered these repressed struggles and informed the public.

Volume II moved on to discuss the increase in educational class conflict. Moving beyond the abstract idea of “educational democratization”, Simon placed the Education Act of 1902 within the context of class conflict and pointed out that it was one of the main areas of contention in that period.[1] Through analysis of fiscal allocation, school board restructuring and institutional division before and after the Act, he found that the state’s main purpose was to curb the development of socialist consciousness and political mobilisation among the working class. Despite this, the continuing labour movement forced the government to make some concessions on secularisation and free education. As Simon observed, the history of education in this period is not a straightforward story of continuous enlightenment and charity, but rather a space for conflict and change, and from it we can learn important lessons about the labour movement [7]. He also pointed out the rise of organised socialism in the mid-1880s and showed how working-class demands evolved from local, defensive reactions into a unified, politically conscious movement led by trade unions and socialist organizations; thus, he demonstrated the interaction between the economic foundation and the ideological

system.

Simon analysed the period between the wars in Volume III according to the concept of "social control" and expanded his Marxist criticism of educational functions. He put forward that the educational environment in the interwar period had become "crystalised", and various levels of schooling had been rigidified to match and reproduce the existing division of labour and occupational hierarchy. By scrutinizing the secondary school admission regulations, curriculum differentiation and administrative reports, he found that the official policy assumed that elite culture was for a select few, and the working masses were merely tools for the production of capital and maintenance of the capitalist system [8]. Simon examined the celebrated Education Act of 1944 and, although it promised "secondary education for all", pointed out that the system was based on class distinctions; thus, considerable disparities in funding, teaching staff and other living standards at the three levels of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools remained. Simon did document the resilience of labour organisations, and although there were wars, working-class movements kept organising according to their own needs; thus, a cycle of struggle, tactical compromise and renewed resistance continued.

Simon reviewed the changes in education over the past 50 years in Volume IV and incorporated new political developments with an evolving historical materialism. Although he had left academia and was no longer active in the party, he still applied class analysis to argue that the changes after the war could only be understood by observing how educational opportunities and occupational class structures had changed. He pointed out that the main goal of the Education Reform Act of 1988 by the Thatcher government was to break up the all-through school system. Analyzing the provisions on the National Curriculum, local financial management and school autonomy, he showed that the market-driven agenda was an attempt to restore bourgeois cultural and institutional hegemony. Drawing on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Pierre Bourdieu, Simon pointed out that elite hegemony also functions in adult education and mass media, so a multi-front ideological response is needed [9]. His balanced assessment of the all-round school movement—praising it as the peak of working-class educational agitation and frankly addressing the political compromises of successive Labour governments—shows that he had strong dialectical skills.

5. Conclusion

Brian Simon was one of the leading educational historians in 20th-century Britain, and he changed the direction of the field with his Marxist historiographical system. Scholarly research has shown that structural problems in education are linked to the roles of the ruling class, individuals and centralisation of the state. Simon's historical tetralogy has shown the disappointments and failures of the past two centuries of educational reform, but it has also given eternal hope for democratic renewal. As Simon pointed out, although there are many intentional blockages or institutional compromises for educational progress at present, in the long run, we will build a truly common and all-encompassing national education system that meets the needs of all people [10]. Rigorous, thematic and persuasive, Simon's work remains a great work of British and world educational history.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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