

# John Porter's Sociology: A Theoretical Basis for Canadian Education\*

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Le sociologue canadien le plus souvent cité est John Porter de Carleton University, comme l'est son livre *The Vertical Mosaic*, lorsqu'on réfère à une analyse de la société canadienne. L'ouvrage contient implicitement une sociologie de l'éducation portant à la fois sur les rapports idéaux et réels entre l'éducation et la société canadienne. Depuis 1965, Porter a précisé ses conceptions sur l'éducation et la place qu'elle occupe dans le développement du Canada, mais son oeuvre n'a pas fait l'objet de cette critique approfondie qu'exigent les travaux académiques pour dépasser les ébauches de quelque auteur que ce soit. James Heap, Edwin Black et Harvey Rich, parmi d'autres, ont amorcé la critique de Porter. Cet article apporte de l'eau au même moulin en s'attachant spécifiquement aux analyses de Porter sur l'éducation, et conclut que les écrits de Porter dans ce domaine portent l'empreinte d'un fonctionnalisme élémentaire et ne devraient par conséquent servir d'assise à la compréhension des rapports entre la société canadienne et l'éducation.

The most frequently cited Canadian sociologist is John Porter of Carleton University, and the most frequently cited analysis of Canadian society is his 1965 book *The Vertical Mosaic*. Simply to indicate the extent to which this has been and continues to be the case, the 1970 *Social Science Citation Index*<sup>1</sup> shows Porter cited 20 times, Harold Innes once, and Irving Zeitlin 8 times. In 1976 the figures are Porter 44, Innes 6 and Zeitlin 12; in each case over three-quarters of the Porter citations are to *The Vertical Mosaic*.

The focus of Porter's work, both in *The Vertical Mosaic* and in published articles, could be described as an interest in social stratification and the formation and maintenance of elite groups in Canadian society. However, these interests were coupled with the notion of equality of opportunity specifically as equal opportunity for social mobility (rather than equality of condition). The education system was seen as the key to that equal opportunity so Porter was led to an implicit sociology of education, a theory about the relationship between societies and formal education. As a result of his emphasis on education, Porter also makes a number of statements about the nature of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and society or societal development.

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To date, in spite of the central place of education in Porter's work, his conceptual framework and/or his theory about the relation between education and society has not been criticized. Edwin Black (1974), a political scientist, has criticized particularly Porter's analysis of power and the methodological weaknesses in his study. Harvey Rich (1976) focuses on the model of Canadian society used by Porter, a model Rich considers inadequate in 1965 and even less adequate today. Both these writers comment on Porter's dismissal of the external elite, his inaccurate and unreflective comparisons to the United States, and his distaste for regional cultures in Quebec or elsewhere in Canada. James Heap (1972) and Wallace Clement (1975) are others who have contributed to this growing critical analysis of Porter's work.

It is the goal of this paper to add to that literature by analyzing Porter's sociology of education and his theory<sup>2</sup> of the relationships between knowledge and society. The analysis will begin by summarizing his image of Canadian society and his position on education and knowledge, for his comments are widely dispersed in his writings and it is difficult to clearly understand his orientation until his statements are placed in juxtaposition. Following that summary the implications of his statements will be derived, and contradictions noted.

#### SUMMARY OF PORTER'S POSITION

Porter's description of Canadian society consists of a portrait of the Canadian social structure, including power relations, statements about Canadian values, and statements about the nature of knowledge. The functions which he assigns to the educational system are those of transmission of values and the sorting and allocating of talent. Each of these aspects of Porter's position will be described briefly.

His overall image of Canadian society is that it is, or is rapidly evolving towards, a "post-industrial society" as that term is used by Daniel Bell (Porter, 1965, 1971; Bell, 1973). Such a society is one "... based on the culture of science and technology" (Porter, 1971, p. 30). It is a society in which service occupations (tertiary levels of economic activity) predominate and a greater proportion of the occupations in the society require skilled workers (Porter, 1965, p. 148). It is finally a society in which the technical and professional classes dominate, and knowledge is central to the organization of the society (Porter, 1971, p. 30; 1965, p. 148). To the extent that Canada exhibits characteristics which are not appropriate to a post-industrial society such characteristics are treated as cultural lags or evidence of inadequate adaptation to the post-industrial world of technology and universalistic knowledge.

If Canada is a post-industrial society in economic terms, in organizational terms it is first of all a society with a class structure, or more accurately a society which consists of persons organized into hierarchically

arranged strata. Persons with higher levels of education, higher incomes, and higher occupations are at the top of this stratification system.

The concept of power is analytically separated from the stratification system in Porter's work, and Canada is, in this context, not so much a stratified social system as a country of elites and non-elites. Power is defined as "... the recognized right to make effective decisions on behalf of a group of people" (Porter, 1965, p. 201), and as such it is close to Weber's definition of authority. The elites of six subsystems dominate contemporary Canada: the economic, labour, political, bureaucratic, educational, and mass media elites.<sup>3</sup> These elites act as countervailing forces in relation to each other, distinguishing them as a western rather than a totalitarian political system.

The ideas held by Canadians, as actors within the above social system, are described primarily as values. Porter argues that Canada is a country which accepts "... general western values of liberty, equality and opportunity for people to find their own social level" (Porter, 1965, p. 11). It is a society with "low mobility values" (Porter, 1965, p. 65), and one which places a low valuation on education, but it believes in assigning tasks on the basis of ability. Porter does not indicate a source for these Canadian values and his introduction leaves the impression that some are his personal values attributed to the society, and others explain why the society does not achieve Porter's personal values.

In addition to such values, there are other ideas categorized by Porter as knowledge. This knowledge is of two types: scientific or expert knowledge which is empirical and which enables the society to adapt, and ideological knowledge which assists in maintaining the social order by legitimizing social arrangements.

Expert knowledge is especially important in bureaucracies in which knowledge is power, and Porter expresses some concern that Canadian academics tend to make their knowledge available to government bureaucracies rather than political parties. This upsets the balance of countervailing forces between the political and bureaucratic elites. Expert (or scientific/empirical) knowledge is also extremely important in bringing Canadian society into its post-industrial stage.

The distribution of knowledge (or more accurately of ignorance) is used by Porter to justify elite dominance, for the masses of the population are too ignorant to participate effectively in decision-making (Porter, 1965, p. 371). The possibility of culturally different knowledge systems is treated as absurd, for all societies of the future will have the technological culture of the post-industrial stage of societal development.

Ideological knowledge, in contrast to scientific knowledge, is the provenance of the mass media, the arts and humanities departments of universities, and churches. Although sociology and economics are more empirical than political science and history, all tend toward the ideological

side of the spectrum, supporting and interpreting broad values in the society to ensure its cohesiveness.

Education systems in general, not just universities, have two main functions in society: the supporting of the social order by transmitting values to the young, and the sorting and allocating of talent. For example, Porter (1965, p. 64) states, "modern educational systems and the mass media of communication share with the older institution of the church the important function of articulating and disseminating those values and ideals which support a particular social order." Clearly the functions of schooling are not, in Weber's terms, "disenchantment" (1946, p. 139), but rather what Talcott Parsons has called "pattern-maintenance" (Parsons, 1970, p. 279; Rocher, 1974, pp. 44-46).

The sorting and allocating of "talent" as the second function of educational systems includes both allocation to the different strata of society and allocation to elite or non-elite status. Allocation to different strata is primarily a matter of allocation to occupations and Porter's over-all image of Canada as a developing post-industrial society implies an occupational structure with greater and greater skill requirements. In Porter's terms, "a dynamic society . . . anticipating industrial growth will invest heavily in its training facilities and make them open to all in a general search for talent" (1965, p. 46). Open to all refers to the notion that socio-economic and other ascribed statuses of the student will be unimportant in his selection of (or allocation to) an occupation, and this Porter refers to as democratized education. Then, "higher education becomes for the individual the key to upward mobility as it becomes for the society the key to allocation of roles on the basis of ability" (1965, p. 293).

But those with ability should also, through open educational systems, be allocated to elite roles. A society's "... main problem is to discover that higher ability which is something less than genius and allocate it to elite roles. [This] serves both the principle of equality . . . and the principle of efficiency which is an instrumental value in social development and survival" (1965, p. 218).

Thus, although Porter criticizes functionalism, education is clearly analyzed as functional for both the individual and the society. High levels of skill and knowledge are essential for further development of society, and education is a facility for individual mobility in a stratified social system. Education also selects the most able for elite positions, ensuring social development. But to accomplish these tasks, education must be "democratic," available equally to all Canadians.

His fundamental criticism of the Canadian educational system is that it does not perform these functions; social class of parents, region of residence, and ethnic and religious origins, among other factors, act as filters in educational recruitment in Canada. Equally seriously, governmental reliance on immigration rather than the development of educational and training facilities has meant that education has been unable to

perform its even more basic task of preparing a labor force for the post-industrial society.

#### ANALYSIS OF PORTER'S POSITION

As a theory explaining the relation between the educational system and society there are a multitude of problems with Porter's work. The most significant of these problems relate to his definition of class and the acceptance of a post-industrial model for analysis of Canadian society, his uncritical acceptance of elite theories of power distribution and his particular linkage of that to the educational system, his insistence that education is intrinsically ideological in nature, and his conception of the nature of knowledge. Each of these problems will be analyzed in the following section.

In his analysis of class relations in Canada, Porter defines class as strata based on income, education, and occupation.<sup>4</sup> From this definition of class it is apparent that if each member of the population adds an equal number of years to his schooling but the available occupations do not change, upward mobility will consist only of an increase in the average number of years of schooling. This "social mobility" of the total population would then be an artifact of the statistics, not an indication of higher incomes or "higher" occupations. Further, if there is not a change in the occupational structure and/or the distribution of incomes, upward mobility of one can only occur with downward mobility of another.

Porter does not explicitly recognize these problems, but implicitly he deals with them in three ways. In the first place in post-industrial societies it is believed that the stratification system becomes broader at higher levels, as more occupations develop which demand more knowledge and skill. Porter refers to the structure of such a class system as "... more beehive than pyramidal" (1965, p. 163). Therefore if all Canadians acquire additional schooling it will enable them to fill higher-level jobs which already exist in the society or are rapidly coming into existence.

In the second place, these skill-demanding jobs or "higher-level jobs" are now filled by immigrants. By implication, if Canada improved her educational system, immigration could be reduced.

In the third place, the most talented should get the higher-level jobs. If everyone has an equal opportunity to acquire schooling the school can more efficiently sort the talented from the untalented in society, and allocate each to their proper level.

If one accepts the belief that Canada is or is becoming a "post-industrial society" there is a certain logic in at least part of Porter's argument, for basic to this model of society is the need for more skilled and knowledgeable people. Expressed somewhat more formally, if the society is developing a greater complement of occupations which demand the kind of knowledge one acquires in school, and if progress in school is

an indicator of the ability of the individual to learn school-type knowledge, it follows that schools sort persons according to ability and benefit the society by allocating persons appropriately to occupations. "High" occupations demand persons with "high" ability and so on down to the lowest occupation.

There is nothing in this logic which demands that so-called high occupations be occupations with greater prestige, greater income, or otherwise highly rewarded in society, but if a Davis and Moore<sup>5</sup> type functionalist argument in relation to stratification is accepted then the rewards must be so distributed. Then "equality of opportunity" will inevitably lead to "inequality of condition" based on ability (or IQ?) and to Michael Young's anti-Utopia.

Nor is there anything in the formal structure of this argument which implies that schooling must be schooling of nationals within the nation-state, that an educated immigrant population would not equally well meet the needs of Canada as a developing post-industrial society. On the contrary, in a post-industrial world in which all share the culture of science and technology, precisely what is implied is that the labor force is totally interchangeable from one country to another and from one educational system to another.

The key then to the analysis of this part of Porter's sociology of education is to recognize that his theoretical model of Canadian society is primarily that of a post-industrial state. As a consequence the criticisms which are levelled at this overall orientation become appropriate to Porter's work. For example, do changes in the occupational structure "really" represent increasing levels of skill, or demand a general upgrading of the labor force? Harry Braverman (1974, pp. 424-436) convincingly demonstrates that this has not been the case in the United States, and that the apparent increase in the number of semi-skilled workers since 1930 is an artifact of changes in the census categories and the increasing use of machines.

But once Porter's theory is explicit it is possible to do more than challenge the adequacy of his post-industrial model as general social theory. It is also possible to ask if other theoretical orientations would better explain observations on Canadian education and Canadian society. As one example, some version of dependency theory which focuses on Canada's earlier relation to Great Britain and contemporary relation to the United States would enable the analyst to draw on Carnoy's (1974) notion of *Education as Cultural Imperialism* to determine if educational changes in Canada reflected changes in international economic relations. Likewise, drawing on the concepts of indigenous, comprador, and parasitic elites as used in Clement (1974, p. 17) would enable one to identify the relation of education, if any, to increasing foreign control of certain sectors of the Canadian economy. Alternatively, Bowles and Gintis (1976) could provide a basic framework for analyzing Canadian educa-

tion in somewhat Marxist terms as an extension of the developing Canadian economy. The work of Rush (1977) and Schechter (1977) may be considered as examples of such orientations to Canadian education.

But Porter's theoretical model is not simply one of a stratified social system, it is also a model of an elite-dominated social system. As a consequence he does not confine the selection and allocation role of schools to selecting the most able for knowledge-demanding occupations in Canadian society; he also demands that education should "democratically" select the most talented for elite positions. "To allocate these power roles on the basis of ability serves both the principle of equality, a normative value, and the principle of efficiency, an instrumental value in social development and survival" (1965, p. 218).

This is a quite different statement about the role of schools in society. If we take Porter's theory of knowledge and incorporate it into the above demand, the following set of propositions results: the function of schools is to sort people on the basis of their ability to learn school-type knowledge, the most able to learn (acquire knowledge) should be allocated to positions of power, knowledge is power, and the persons allocated to positions of power are the most able to incorporate knowledge. It follows that those people will become increasingly powerful through time.

If we add to this set of statements the concept of IQ (as hypothetically a measure of ability) the implications of Porter's statements become clearer. Persons in positions of power should be persons with high IQs. Although the converse does not, of course, follow (that persons with high IQs need necessarily be allocated to elite positions) Porter's concentration on schools as mechanisms for sorting ability would almost seem to imply that.

Viewing Porter's concept of ability as equivalent to the general concept of IQ in the educational literature also makes it possible to relate that literature critically to Porter's work. For example, Bowles and Gintis' (1972) discussion of IQ as an ideology which contributes to the legitimation of the U.S. class structure, applied to Porter's work, would suggest that he uses the term "ability" in the same way (i.e., to legitimate the Canadian class structure). Similarly Gilbert's (1977) and Singh's (1977) work, among others, on self-concept of ability and related variables provided basic challenges to Porter's implicit position that ability is identified rather than created in the social situation.

Porter himself wholeheartedly accepts the view that elites are essential in any society,<sup>6</sup> but he incorporates into that view a particularly important role for schools simply by adding the notion of a knowledge-based post-industrial society. He further magnifies the importance of the educational system by seeing knowledge as the key to the functioning of powerful elites in society.

But schools and intellectuals have one more important role in Porter's complex society: to act as ideologists, to perform their "... proper func-

tion of legitimating the existing social structure." The values and beliefs related to this are simply "... acquired through indoctrination, so any argument about their origins is irrelevant" (1965, p. 458). Porter is not totally consistent in this regard, for he dismisses biculturalism in Canada as we must prepare for the universal culture of science and technology, and this would imply an idea system which originates with changes in the technological system.

But education treated as intrinsically ideological raises questions about the real consequences of Porter's call for "more schooling for all Canadians." As noted previously, even assuming that schooling has an independent effect upon mobility, if everyone spends additional time in school it will not improve the mobility or life chances of any one individual. It will, however, increase his exposure to value systems, to the ideology proffered which supports the status quo. Schooling then not only legitimizes the individual's place in the hierarchical structure of society (because school success or failure is a measure of ability and is the "reason" for societal placement), but it legitimizes the nature of the social order itself by transmitting specific ideologies. Strangely, Porter does not identify a certain kind of critical role for social science, a demythologizing role which challenges ideologies on the basis of evidence, even though some parts of his own work could be classified that way.

One final comment should be made about Porter's view of knowledge. "Real" knowledge is not ideological but empirical. As such it is universalistic and transnational. The world-wide McLuhanite village will have a culture of technology. Because of this notion of knowledge and because education must serve manpower needs of the total society, schooling should be a central, federal responsibility in Canada. Objective, scientific knowledge made available to elites will enable them to more effectively steer the society into its next stage of development.

In the guise of manpower needs, schools and universities become agencies collecting knowledge "about" various sectors of Canadian society. Porter suggests that some central university might specialize in Indians, another in Northern Canada. Indeed, we should not be surprised if some specialize in Quebec and others in Western Canada, for the elites must have the knowledge to make and carry out decisions. The criticism of British social anthropology as a discipline which enabled Britain to control her colonies comes to mind; knowledge can be used in many ways.

## CONCLUSION

The consequence of education and society having the relationship which Porter considers necessary for a post-industrial society of technology and science is now apparent. The nature of schools should be determined by the centre (Ottawa?) and they should all transmit a similar set of ideas; these ideas are universalistic and technologically valuable "knowledge,"

and "ideologies" which support the status quo. Hegemony achieved, there would be no confederation crisis, no Parti Québécois, no Dené movement, no social movements of any kind which challenge the Canadian political system or social order. The social sphere, the sphere of interacting and communicating human beings, would be subject to the same kind of knowledge, technology, and manipulation as other spheres of human activity. The definition of the situation would be that of those who live at the centre, in Ottawa and/or close to the state apparatus.

Perhaps in sociology of knowledge terms such theoretical formulations are more likely to come from an academic who participates in the Ottawa milieu, but Jurgen Habermas' criticisms of such theory seem more significant. In "Theory and Practice in Scientific Civilization," in 1976, and "Technology and Science as Ideology," in 1972, he points out that science and technology may themselves be ideological, as the associated idea systems may legitimize a certain kind of social structure and a certain kind of manipulative orientation to human beings. Habermas' position would seem to be exemplified in Porter's work on education and society. Perhaps it is just as well that the Canadian educational system does not work as Porter thinks it ought to work.

Thus, although Porter might be viewed in some respects as a positivist and in a certain sense as a critical writer, at the theoretical level in his study of education we get the worst of positivism combined with a simple pre-Mertonian functionalism. At least within logical-positivism there must be a careful working out of the nature of and relation between concepts, as well as an empirical test of theory. Porter uses his empirical venture to demonstrate that what he believes either Canadians believe about education and/or what should be the case about education is not the case. He pragmatically demands then that changes should be made in education so that either what Canadians believe or what he believes will become the case, and Canadian education will be more appropriate to the post-industrial world.

None of the above articles, cited as alternatives to Porter's orientation, were available to him when he wrote in 1965. Thus the above criticism is not so much a criticism of Porter as it is of those who cite him uncritically today. But the significant point is that treating Porter's propositions as theoretical rather than factual at least enables the analyst clearly to see them as one of a number of explanatory possibilities. The fact that his "theory" formed the core of the ideology which legitimized the expansion of the educational system in Canada in the late 1950s and 1960s only makes it more interesting.

The implication is that using Porter as a theoretical base for Canadian sociology of education would be a serious mistake. The theoretical problems of Canadian sociologists of education remain largely untouched by his work, although the data which he presents may partially answer the

question of how the Canadian education system relates to the social structure.

This does not, of course, imply that Porter's work should be ignored, avoided, or forgotten any more than it implies that it should not have been done. Rather it implies that it should be treated as the major work of that time period, to be fully analyzed and understood in historical context. It then should be cited as a historical production, not a factual account, in our attempts to understand and explain societal-educational relationships in Canada.

#### NOTES

The author would like to express appreciation to reviewers of an earlier draft of this paper, Gordon West, Marvin Lazerson, and Pat Duffy-Hutcheon. The paper is considerably improved as a result of their comments. The author, of course, remains responsible for weaknesses that are still present in the paper.

<sup>1</sup> *The Social Science Citation Index* is published by an American firm in Philadelphia. Although it does cite a great many Canadian sources it is strictly an English language publication; it is thus heavily biased against someone who publishes primarily in French and in favor of someone who publishes within the American intellectual hegemony.

<sup>2</sup> In order to analyze Porter as a social theorist, it has been necessary to do some extrapolation, for he writes within two rather atheoretical traditions. He writes descriptively somewhat within the tradition of American empiricism, and many of his concepts seem to be drawn uncritically from American educational ideology (see Bernard Bailyn, 1960). He also writes in a prescriptive or policy-mode, somewhat in the manner of "Fabian Socialists" or social reformers of British tradition. (See John Rex and Ian Taylor in Stehr et al. (in press) for discussion of this in British sociology; also see Hurn (1976) for the distinction between working in a policy-oriented vs. a theoretically-oriented mode in the sociology of education.)

<sup>3</sup> The bureaucratic is treated strictly as the bureaucracy of the federal government, and the political also is heavily biased towards the federal political structure. See Black (1974) for criticism of this centralist bias in Porter's work.

<sup>4</sup> This component of Porter's work would have been more effectively developed as an analysis of the Canadian occupational structure. Porter, for example, is confounded by the occupational category "farmer," but nevertheless makes a number of poorly supported statements about its relationship to education and other occupations. As Blau and Duncan (1967) found, farming as an occupation is anything but uni-dimensional.

<sup>5</sup> The reference to Davis and Moore is intended to remind the reader of this major functionalist debate. See, for example, the exchange of papers published in Bendix and Lipset (1966).

<sup>6</sup> The view that elites are an inevitable and essential aspect of societies is generally associated with the Italian social theorists Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. Both produced most of their writings at the end of the last century and the first part of this century. For an introduction to their work see James Meisal, *Pareto and Mosca* (1965).

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